

Im/Material Girl: Abjection, Penetration, and the Postmodern Body on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
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My original idea for this paper came from considering a central conflict in the roles that Buffy plays in two kinds of narratives, the Epic and the Romance. The epic encompasses the general idea of the show: Buffy battles to establish the border line between human and vampire. In the romance narrative, though, Buffy as heroine "turns" vampires through the power of love. What is troubling about the latter storyline is the way it plays out in clichés of female sexuality. Buffy only remains a transformative force as long as her vampire romances remain asexual.

A simple and crude way to summarize this conflict is that as hero, Buffy stakes the body of the Other, as heroine, it's her body that gets staked. But in a consideration of the role the body plays in both these traditional narratives, it is crucial to keep the show's undercutting of tradition in mind. So while maintaining the idea of this opposition and the problem of gender it highlights, I want to also suggest that it may not completely hold once we look more closely at the show's version of body politics—its use of the postmodern body.

In the epic, the body of the Other is violated while the hero's body is given an idealized impermeability. According to Kristeva's theory of "abjection" this story originates in the moment when the infant first forms a concept of individuality. A fictive concept of the body is an integral part of this identity as the body is imagined as a complete barrier between inside and outside. Any

reminder that this is a fiction, as in bodily wastes or blood, is a source of horror and is projected onto the Other (Kristeva 65).

As classic monsters, vampires are particularly well-suited for a reenactment of abjection as they embody so many seeming oppositions. They are the living dead, their sexuality is presented in a phallic orifice, they reproduce without regard to gender distinction and their attacks are a perversion of infancy. As they are the monsters who most look like us, it becomes paramount to reestablish the difference between vampire and human through the blood-spurting scenes of staking and beheading which cast the horror of the abject back onto the vampire body.

But on *BtVS*, the corporeality of the vampire is deemphasized as they disappear in a cloud of dust. Commenting on this difference, Joss Whedon states that “It shows that they’re monsters; I didn’t really want to have a high school girl killing people every week” (qtd. in Wilcox 13). The intended effect is to distinguish the hero from the villains, just as abjection does, but, ironically, it has the opposite effect--connecting Buffy to those she slays. The moment that they are staked reveals that the vampires only appear to have substance. They are a simulacrum, a costume. But this is not a costume that hides the real; the costume is the self—when it is removed the creature disappears. This quality is best represented by Spike who has remade himself several times since being turned. A Victorian, his most recent incarnation is as a punk rocker. The merging of different time periods, the shifts in identity, the body as fashion accessory, the infectiousness of “turning” others, all point to the vampire as the

threat of a postmodern consumer culture.¹ But if this is the threat, it is also the source of the Slayer's power. In "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1), the first sign that Buffy is the Chosen One is her ability to spot the vampire in the crowd as fashion victim: "Trust me, only someone living underground for ten years would think that was still the look." So Buffy's power is tied to being a teenage girl, the type of girl rather more like Cordelia than Willow, who knows what's hot/what's not.

In fact it is her power to mock the Other, rather than any physical power, that is emphasized as her true strength; and much of that mockery is directed at her enemy's appearance. She is a mall-rat: a female hero whose strength lies not in an idealized pre-Symbolic order, but squarely within it, with the important proviso that all of her mocking, punning, and verbal deflation of others, draws attention to itself as Symbolic rather than authentic or real, just as the immaterial nature of the vampire body and Buffy's positioning as fashion-conscious/action hero does. *BtVS* does not change the association of women with fictiveness, but inverts the value system that sees the figural as inferior or perverse. As postmodernism does generally, the show celebrates ornament and transience and rejects stability and the essential.

But it is the very instability of Buffy's postmodern heroism which paradoxically plays into some very traditional gender roles. In Romance narratives the hero's individuality is threatened as he moves toward a complete union with the heroine. What usually serves to reestablish his identity is gender division. The desire to lose oneself in another becomes the responsibility of the

object of desire. Once possessed the female body is redefined as abject while the male body, in contrast, is imagined as the impenetrable housing of the self. If instead the woman remains virginal, there is a continued deferral of desire with her chastity acting as a physical emblem for the hero's identity.

The show's undercutting of gender would seem at first to subvert this traditional use of the female body. Why then do clichéd meanings of sexuality and virginity, emerge? I believe the answer lies in the conflict among three elements: the postmodern play of identity, the threat of dissolution in the romance, and the need to maintain a central heroic character. If we look at the way in which the gendered body attaches itself to different characters in the slayer/vampire romances, this conflict becomes clear.

Both senses of the body, as erotic object and idealized container, are primarily represented in the first romance not by Buffy but by Angel: "Angel is arguably the most sexualized and eroticized of all the characters in the series . . . His body invites the constructed consumer gaze of romance novel covers, soft-core pornography, and mass circulation advertising" (Owen 27). Angel's body also acts as a seamless container for dangerous male sexual forces which are a particular threat on the show. This is clear in the episode "The Dark Age" (2.8) in which a demon, conjured by Giles in his "Ripper" period, possesses Jenny Calendar. The demon is foiled by tricking it into jumping into Angel's body where it is destroyed by his more powerful vampire demon.

A wilder (and implicitly sexier) Giles emerges from the bad old days of the past threatening the destruction of female identity. The mind/body split is played

upon, but here with mind associated with the woman (Jenny's consciousness and loss of consciousness) and body with the male (Giles's sexual desires). And it is Angel as the virginal body who can recontain those desires, allying him with other virginal figures from the quest romance tradition.

So in some sense it is Angel who loses his virginity when he and Buffy have sex for the first time. The sexual act penetrates his body allowing for the release of the pent up Angelus. From this point his body is represented as false appearance, again much like the fallen women of romance narratives.

Buffy is threatened by loss of self just as the male hero is in his desire for the heroine. Having given in to desire, her identity continues to be threatened as Angelus stalks the Scooby Gang, ironically killing Jenny. This narrative ends with Buffy forced to kill the newly ensouled Angel--the abjection of his body drawn attention to by the fact that his blood is necessary to seal the Hell gate which Angelus has opened. And, as Angelus's body is already violated, he must be returned to his earlier Angelic self in order to make the violation of the body meaningful.

However, Buffy also plays the stereotypical female victim in this narrative. First, before she loses her virginity, Angel gives her a ring and explains that by wearing it "you belong to somebody" (5.13). The theme of possession continues when Angelus emerges and redefines the night together not as romantic and meaningful, but as a sexual encounter—she is only a body. She remains the body in her role as stalking victim. Angelus is constantly gazing at her without her knowledge and invading her private places.

In narratives of desire, the hero is effeminized because he is controlled by the body. In *BtVS*, because Buffy already is female there is no counterbalance of gender division to distinguish her from that body and its stereotypical role. The effect of romance is a kind of inversion of inversion in which the female hero returns to “the dark ages” of woman as chaste/penetrated object.²

The problem of maintaining Buffy’s tenuous position as hero becomes even greater in her relationship with Spike, primarily because he is a more postmodern character than Angel, and more of a mirror image of Buffy. Though I have pointed to the ways in which Angel’s gender positioning changes, his moral position is always clear. But, from the very beginning, Spike’s love for Drusilla has made his moral position hard to define. He’s a very bad man, but a very devoted boyfriend. And, unlike other villains on the show, he has no grand scheme of bringing the narrative to closure in an apocalypse. When Angelus attempts to destroy the world at the end of season 2, Spike, in fact, joins forces with Buffy to defeat him. In this way he is more like Buffy: he finds a local meaning and identity, rather than an overarching one. Again, like Buffy, he uses language to mock both his opponents and the traditions of his own kind: “If every vampire who said he was at the crucifixion was actually there, it would have been like Woodstock” (2.3). Some of Spike’s funniest barbs are directed at Angel, who, lacking Buffy and Spike’s verbal skills and being a much more “pure” character, makes an easy target. In a scene from *Angel*’s first season, Spike mimics both Angel and a “damsel in distress” character:

How can I thank you, you mysterious black clad hunk of a night thing? -
No need, little lady. Your tears of gratitude are enough for me. You see, I
was once a badass vampire but love and a pesky curse defanged me.
And now, I'm just a biiig fluffy puppy with baaad teeth. . . . Helping those
in need's my job...and working up a load of sexual tension and prancing
away like a magnificent poof is truly thanks enough. . . . Quickly, to the
Angemobile...away! (1.3)

Not only is Angel's heroism mocked in a parodic connection to Batman, but also
the whole Buffy/Angel dynamic and the way in which it worked to construct Angel
as a main character with his own show. In fact, the writers have used Spike
several times to parody their own Buffy/Angel narrative, first in "Something Blue"
(4.9), and then most recently in "Tabula Rasa" (6.8) in which Spike assumes he
is a "vampire with a soul" to which Buffy replies "How lame is that?"

In addition to being a character who mocks tradition and creates his own
meaning, Spike is connected to Buffy as the character most able to read and
interpret her feelings. These similarities and the ability to "get inside" Buffy once
again point to a romantic relationship—one that the writers were able to create in
an ironic mode in some of the ways outlined above. One other important way
that Spike and Buffy are alike, specifically has to do with the relation of body to
identity. Unlike Angel, Spike becomes a regular on the show, not by gaining a
soul, but through an artificial moral constraint—the chip. What is important about
the contrast is that Spike does not change essentially; he changes morally and
emotionally because of a change made to his body. A change of costume results

in a change of heart. And the romance that develops through that change of heart is at first very much presented as artificial—love with a robot, love under a temporary spell, love presented as a parody of an MGM musical or love as a parody of the earlier romance between Buffy and Angel.

At the same time, in season 6, Buffy returns from the dead also physically changed. As a result, Buffy is metaphorically (and sometimes literally) pulled into the dark by Spike. So both characters are shown going through a moral transition not because of a “real” transformation but because of physical change.

Why, though, did the romance again turn dark once it became sexual, and why did the tone in which it was represented similarly change from the lighter, mocking one of “Tabula Rasa” to the stark and realistic strain that culminated in the attempted rape episode “Seeing Red” (6.19)? The answer again lies here with the kind of ambiguity that postmodernism introduces in the line between self and other, between hero and villain. When Spike was chipped, even though he was not “genuinely” good, fans increasingly began to read him this way. And though his romantic feelings for Buffy were presented parodically, fans reacted by writing hundreds of stories in which the two live happily ever after. As her archnemesis (or should it be her arch archnemesis) began to take on the look of a hero, Buffy’s identity moved in the other direction, ironically because she is following in the footsteps of traditional heroes who, having reached the low point of their stories, emerge from hell/death needing the love of the virginal woman. Having no anchor of “the Real” to maintain their moral identities, the characters’ main dividing line again came down to gender, and so the writers seem to have

made the decision that the audience needed to be reminded of who Spike “really” is by connecting evil to male sexuality, constructing him as the violent and abusive boyfriend. Because the signs of evil (the murder spree that he relates to Dawn, for example) are undercut by the ironic mode in which they are cast (he tells Dawn this story when he is taking care of her), the audience needed to be reminded of his otherness through the body. The episode “Dead Things” from season 6 emphasizes this by paralleling the episode’s main story line in which Warren kills his ex-girlfriend with Buffy’s sexual relationship with Spike. When Buffy tries to turn herself in for the murder, Spike does not understand the guilt that drives her actions:

Buffy: A girl is dead because of me.

Spike: And how many people are alive because of you? One dead girl doesn’t tip the scale.

Buffy: That’s all it is to you, isn’t it? Just another body!

Buffy’s sense of morality is reestablished by paralleling Spike’s attitude about Katerina’s dead body to his sexual relation to Buffy’s body. Just as there is no moral meaning in Katerina’s body for Spike, it is implied that he is robbing Buffy’s body of its meaning. As she explicitly states: “You can’t understand why this is killing me, can you?” Her description and rejection of Spike’s body in this scene begins to right the situation, defining his body as the one without meaning: “You don’t have a soul! There is nothing good or clean in you. You are dead inside! You can’t feel anything real! I could never be your girl!”

So it is Spike's body that is paralleled with Katerina's in Buffy's definition of him as one of the "Dead Things" of the title. By being the living dead, Spike functions as female body to Buffy's reasserted conscience. What is odd, though, is the way in which standard gender roles are reintroduced by her final denial, "I could never be your girl!" This suggests that if Spike were a real boy, Buffy would return to the traditional female role of being "his girl." And it is just this Pinocchio story of transformation that was set in motion by the attempted rape scene in "Seeing Red."

In her essay "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," Frances Ferguson draws attention to the way in which the question of consent in determining rape determines "who or what counts as a person" (88) with person defined as one who can intend or not intend to commit an act, and one who can consent or deny consent. Both intention and consent become difficult to ascertain when language is the only evidence, and so rape laws have relied on the woman's body as text. This is exactly what transpires in the attempted rape scene. Buffy is generally shown as physically equal to if not stronger than Spike. Immediately prior to the scene, she is shown injuring her back, and it is this injury that is meant to establish her nonconsent, as does a bruise she receives on her leg during their struggle.³ The extent to which this injury weakened her, and whether or not Spike intended rape, remained ambiguous, however, and erupted in controversy over most of the Buffy websites with discussion sounding much like the classic arguments in a rape trial.

The added complication in interpreting meaning here is that if Spike is seen as a body without a soul, then he cannot in fact be held morally responsible. It is Buffy's sexuality that drives her to a relationship with a creature who is only an eroticized object. However, the result of the attempted rape led to a different emphasis in the representation of Spike, not as the "evil, soulless thing" (6.8) but half-way between monster and man, in the midst of an inner struggle to decide which will dominate. So far from proving that "Spike is evil," the attempted rape scene established an inner conflict in his character emphasizing the construction of him as a subject in his own right.⁴ In either case, deciding who is responsible for the act leads to interpretations that read Buffy's body as text (did her earlier physical response to him negate her verbal protest, or do the injuries displayed on her body show that "no means no"?), and concentrate not on Spike's body, but on what lies within (Is the chip the equivalent of a soul? Does the fact that he goes in search of a soul show that he doesn't need one?).

Many see the subversion of western meta-narratives and the transcendent subject by postmodernism as part of the same project undertaken by feminism. As Louise Speed points out, it is clear that the crises in the subject and in the symbolic order that postmodernism emphasizes are crises that "refer at their ideological root to the phallic order and the patriarchal I" (126). Other critics have been wary of postmodernism's moral relativism and undermining of identity as they see female identity as a necessary foundation for political agency.⁵

In this debate, I would place myself and the reading I've presented here in the first camp. I agree with Patricia Pender that to criticize Buffy because her body is too coded by patriarchal consumer standards is to imagine a female subjectivity that impossibly transcends our social symbolic order. However, I think that readings that celebrate the subversive aspects of postmodernism may sometimes gloss over the power that the symbolic order holds even in a parodic rendering, especially as such readings tend to emphasize the subversive value of the text on its own, rather than considering its audience or the way it is received.

So, for example, in the story of Buffy's romance with Angel, while gender is certainly more fluid than in a typical narrative, it can also be read as a standard cautionary tale directed at young women regarding the dangers of sleeping with the wrong sort of man. The power that this story holds for a contemporary audience is itself a testament to the strength of the classic romance narrative in which the female body's virginity is what determines morality. And when the writers sought to construct Angel as a hero, they returned to that classic narrative, showing that Angel was first set on the road to redemption by a distant view of the fourteen-year old Buffy, an event revealed in flashback in the penultimate episode before Angel went on to his own show.

BtVS has over the course of its seven seasons become increasingly postmodern in its storylines and in its construction of characters. But one audience reaction to the fluidity of postmodern identities on the show is to begin to read Spike as the heroic main character, latching back on to gender as a way of determining meaning. When the writers then tried to redraw those lines of

separation by equating evil with male sexuality, the narrative they created had the exact opposite effect, associating the female body—its penetration or purity—with morality, and placing moral conflict within the male character, defining him as the subject.

Veronica Hollinger describes vampires as the “monster-of-choice” for the postmodern text as their very existence brings into question the kinds of boundaries that postmodernism also renders ambiguous (201). But these boundaries do not disappear, and when they reassert themselves, as we have seen above, it is most often along the line of gender division.⁶ If the vampire is the living dead that represents one swing of the postmodern pendulum, the gendered body is the other. Even in a show that exults in mocking tradition, it seems that it is this body which is the undead of our symbolic order.

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¹ The connection between consumerism and vampires has been made by several critics in reference to *Dracula*. See for example, my essay, "Solicitors Soliciting" and Jennifer Wicke's "Vampiric Typewriting."

² This same interplay between gender inversion and the question of who will play the chaste/penetrated object can be seen in the episode "I Only Have Eyes for You" in which Angelus and Buffy are taken over by the dead spirits of a murdered woman and her male lover/killer, with each playing the role of the opposite sex. The dead body plays the same role that it did in "The Dark Ages." It is able to recontain the dangerous penetrating sexuality of the murderer (the bullet used to kill the woman) because it is already dead. However, the fact that the episode takes place on Sadie Hawkins Day implies that the gender inversion may only be temporary. And in fact, after the possession is over, the stalker narrative continues.

³ Buffy's association with the body is highlighted by the fact that she never speaks of the attempted rape to anyone. The only sign of its lasting impact on her is a frisson of horror and a flashback to the scene when she touches him in the episode "Beneath You" (7.2).

⁴ Coppeliá Kahn points out that this is a classic means of establishing male subjectivity in her discussion of Tarquin's rape of Lucrece (147).

⁵ For one of the most extensive critiques of postmodernism from a feminist perspective, see Somer Brodribb's book *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*.

⁶ One episode which is outside the romance narratives discussed here, but which makes classic use of the female body as abject in order to create the subject, is "The Body" (5.16). The entire episode deals with the death of Buffy's mother and includes uncomfortably frequent shots of her staring, unresponsive body. The episode begins with a flashback to a Christmas dinner in which all the younger characters complain that Joyce has overfed them to the point of nausea—one of the primal associations with abjecting the mother and establishing a separate sense of self. The power of abjection, especially the visual representation of the mother's body on this episode, is so great that many viewers report that it stands

out as the saddest episode and the one most difficult to rewatch. I would add that I couldn't bring myself to rewatch it for the purpose of writing this paper.