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## **Fan Readings of Sex and Violence on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***



"Part of me believes real love and passion have to go hand and hand with pain and fighting."

Buffy, *Something Blue* (4009)

(1) In her article, "I'm Buffy and You're . . . History," Patricia Pender discusses the postmodern politics of *Buffy*. Pender argues that the question of whether *Buffy* is "feminist" or not is less useful than viewing the series as "a site of intense cultural negotiation in which competing definitions of the central terms in the debate . . . can be tested and refined." Among one of the central issues in feminist debate is female sexuality and the depiction of female desire. *Buffy's* representation of female sexuality and desire is complex and often contradictory, and serves as a strong example of the way the series invites negotiation over meaning (Heinecken, *Warrior*).

(2) Created by Joss Whedon as an antidote to the defenseless, sexualized female victim of countless horror films, *Buffy* nonetheless has a long history of situating its heroine in a world full of monstrous men and in which sex is consistently linked to death and violence (Reid-Walsh, Braun). While the dangerous nature of female sexual desire has always played a part in *Buffy*, in the series' sixth season, this theme was foregrounded in the story of Buffy's sexual relationship with Spike. The depiction of their explosive, violent and graphically sexual affair generated a great deal of press. Clips of Buffy/ Spike sex scenes were featured in a Fox News Special titled "The Corruption of American Youth" and the relationship was discussed in such stories as "Buffy Relationship Tips into Domestic Violence" (O'Hare).

(3) In the series, the Buffy/Spike relationship is presented in an ambiguous fashion. In many ways it replicates stereotypical notions of passive female and aggressive male sexuality. Spike is the verbal aggressor, who is able to speak his desire for Buffy. An evil vampire, he pursues her unrelentingly. Buffy repeatedly denies her desire for Spike, but is repeatedly shown giving in to it. At the same time, *Buffy* demonstrates female sexual aggression and male vulnerability. Buffy takes the superior position in their sexual scenes and even beats Spike into unconsciousness in one episode, while Spike takes the "feminine" role in his emotional openness to Buffy. In addition, the relationship draws upon the idea of natural antagonism between men and women. The two first come together in the midst of a fist fight. Throughout the season, they alternate between taunting or punching one another and having sex. The relationship culminates with Spike's attempt to rape Buffy.

(4) The contradictory storyline launched a hot debate among fans, who generally reacted to the relationship either with ecstatic delight or horror. Fan readings of the representation of sexuality and desire within *Buffy's* sixth season are interesting because they tie to how fans understand and discuss the show as promoting messages of female empowerment. For example, many fans are critical of the episodes "Smashed," "Wrecked" and "Gone," in which Buffy first denies, then gives in to, her desire for Spike. They see the episodes as reflecting traditional notions of female passivity and male sexual aggression which do not jibe with viewers' understanding of the series as a "feminist" text. Mrs. Poet, for example, writes that "As a feminist I have a big problem with the way Buffy's sexuality has been portrayed in series six . . . [that] has Buffy saying 'no'. 'stop it' etc (to sex) over and over again when she clearly means the opposite."<sup>1</sup> Chris L is dismayed how when Buffy says no, Spike is portrayed as "intentionally disregarding Buffy's expressed wishes."<sup>2</sup>

Other fans find the violence in the relationship distasteful.

(5) However, the Buffy/Spike storyline was very popular among a particular group of on-line fans, known as the B/S "shippers" (Buffy/Spike relationshipers). These fans are devoted to the relationship and discuss it on numerous websites and list serves. In a *TV Guide* on-line poll Buffy and Spike won "favorite TV couple," with 35% of the votes, ahead of *Friends'* Chandler and Monica (19%).<sup>3</sup> Spike also won 83% of the votes in Zapt2it's ranking of Buffy's boyfriends.<sup>4</sup> The unofficial fan website for the actor who plays Spike, [www.jamesmarsters.com](http://www.jamesmarsters.com), crashed because of too much traffic after the airing of "Smashed" and "Wrecked," the episodes which depict Buffy and Spike's first sexual encounter and the morning after. If some fans were critical of the depiction of the relationship because it reinforced ideas of female sexual passivity and antagonism between the sexes, does this mean that the B/S shippers subscribe to these stereotypes?

(6) This paper examines the various interpretive strategies employed by shippers in their readings of the episodes "Smashed" through "Dead Things," based on their online-comments, discussions and fan fiction. Two major developments in the series have since occurred: Spike's attempt to rape Buffy and his winning of a soul. While readings of Buffy/Spike relationship will undoubtedly change based on these developments, fan readings from this particular period are nonetheless of interest. They not only reveal the way fans respond to specific textual cues but highlight fan desires and expectations based on these cues and textual information available at the time.

(7) Although "feminism" is a term rarely used, shipper comments demonstrate a sensibility that may easily be as feminist in that their readings reflect a concern with female agency and aggression, a desire for egalitarian relationships, and a desire to see expressions of an unchained female sexuality. Shipper readings are consistent with ways that fans have read other texts such as contemporary romances. Understanding *Buffy* as a popular romance helps explain readers' pleasure in dangerous men as a sign of female power and aggression. B/S Shippers also show an understanding that the dangerous sexuality presented is a method of developing the identity of the heroine. Finally, shipper readings see the relationship as potentially representing a shift in the series' epistemology and political message.

(8) In the world of *Buffy* sex is dangerous and to be a real man is to be a monster. Buffy sleeps with her first vampire lover Angel and causes him to lose his soul. He then goes on a murderous rampage. Spike is likewise monstrous. A vampire without a soul, he is sexually and morally deviant. For example, in the fifth season, Spike stalked Buffy. He stole her panties, built an altar for her, chained her up and even had a robot built in her image to use as a sex toy.

(9) Spike has been described as "impotent" for the last three years after he was captured by a government agency that implanted a chip in his brain that prevents him from harming humans. However, as he says, he gets his "rocks" back in Season Six when he discovers that he is able to hit Buffy. Not coincidentally, it is that moment that he and Buffy begin their sexual relationship. The dangerous nature of their union is underscored by Spike, who tells Buffy, "I knew the only thing better than killing a Slayer would be fuc-...," before being silenced by her.

(10) Shippers are quite cognizant and critical of the link the series makes between sex and violence. They acknowledge the fact that the aggression in the B/S dynamic is not a "good" thing, but still find themselves aroused or emotionally sucked into the text. Indeed, in some cases, the sexual scenes between Buffy and Spike seem to have functioned as a marital aide for some couples: Midnightdancer writes, "My husband caught me watching the end scene of "Smashed" for the tenth time and kinda got jealous of Spike. Since then, the passion has returned to our relationship and things have never been better (I even had to find a turtleneck to wear to hide the bite marks!)"

(11) The effectiveness of these episodes and their ability to suck viewers in despite themselves is perhaps due to the fact that sexual violence is inherent to our cultural mythologies about love and male/female relations. Spike is presented as the "bad boy" who may be bad but who is ultimately desirable. The text makes it clear that his appeal to Buffy is at least partly based on his darkness. As Spike tells Buffy, "I may be dirt, but you're the one who likes to role in it, Slayer." A number of fans likewise view danger (if

only in fantasy) as part of Spike's sexual appeal. One poster, for example, describes Spike as a "wonderful, sensitive, sweet guy and a dangerous impulsive killer all at once. . . . A guy you'd love to fall in love with and mary (sic) but wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley."

(12) Given this interpretation of Spike's character, why do shippers see him as a valid love interest for Buffy? It is important to note that readers tend to read texts based on a horizon of expectations formed by familiarity with other texts (Jauss). The Buffy/Spike storyline replicates imagery and codes drawn from other stories about female maturation, such as contemporary romance novels. Two of the most obvious codes are the combative relationship between lovers and a mysterious, dangerous man as a love interest. Shippers use interpretative strategies similar to those of romance fans in the way they read the violent hero.

(13) As Tania Modleski explains, the plot of contemporary gothic romances is basically this: a young girl, isolated from friends and family, comes to a strange, threatening space full of ambiguous characters. Her survival is dependent upon her ability to interpret and define the emotions of a mysterious and dangerous male. Does he want to kill her or kiss her? The ambiguous nature of men is at the heart of these stories; their violence is ever present, but the heroine saves herself by learning to reinterpret his apparently violent actions as a sign act his love (168). The hero is effectively tamed by novel's end.

(14) *Buffy* describes a similar journey for its heroine. Although Buffy has friends, in the sixth season, she is isolated from them and is even an orphan. Throughout the series she has had to navigate dangerous spaces while dealing with the question of the "truth" about identity—particularly men. Men in *Buffy* are unpredictable, depicted as dangerous at heart and their surface appearances are often misleading (see Heinecken, *Warrior*). The "truth" of Spike's character and his love for Buffy (is he evil or good; is his love really lust?) was a hot debate between shippers and other fans during Season Six.

(15) Textual analyses of romances would suggest that romance readers' pleasure in the domineering and dangerous hero is masochistic. However, in her groundbreaking study of romance fans, Janice Radway found readers were often selective in terms of the character traits on which they chose to focus. Radway, for example, found that the hero's appeal to readers was not based on his domineering or violent qualities. Instead, readers interpreted the hero as someone who is strong and masculine but "equally capable of unusual tenderness, gentleness and concern for her pleasure" (81).

(16) Shippers seem to be performing the same kind of selective reading of Spike. Although Spike is clearly a violent character who tries to bite a girl in the very same episode he consummates his relationship with Buffy, shippers tend to focus their discussions around his nurturing qualities. Even though many shippers acknowledge Spike's dark side, they repeatedly stress all the things that he has done to care for Buffy. These include taking care of her sister Dawn even after Buffy's death, serving as Buffy's confidant when she first returns from the dead, and saving her from dancing herself to death under the influence of a dancing demon. They interpret Spike's interaction with the Buffybot, his robot sex toy, as evidence of his concern for Buffy's pleasure, since his first act with it is to perform cunnilingus.

(17) While some on-line fans are insistent that the soulless Spike is irredeemably evil and cannot change (this is based on the mythology of the *Buffyverse* in which a soul distinguishes good characters from evil characters), almost all shippers agree that Spike's love for Buffy has changed him—his behavior if not his inner self. Mace writes, "Spike will always be bad, but he can control himself for love of Buffy."<sup>5</sup> One group of shippers, called the "redemptionists" believe that Spike will make a complete transition to the side of good.

(18) The focus on the change in Spike's character replicates one of the central themes of many romances: the dangerous man tamed by the love of a woman. His appeal lies in his power, but a power that is harnessed. As "PWAC" says, "Spike is smoldering and sexy . . . and that is the fantasy that we all want. We want the mysterious, bad guy with the heart of gold to fall in love with the girl and save the day." Modleski sees the popularity of romances as based on the fact that they speak to the fears of women who

have literally had to depend upon their ability to “read” the true nature of men in order to survive (34). The idea of a violent hero tamed by the heroine is seductive because it is a way of conquering fears about the real-world potential of men to harm women (Radway 169).

(19) This kind of reframing of male violence certainly has the effect of masking and maintaining unequal power relations between the sexes. However, it also expresses women’s desire for power. Many romances feature heroes who are emotionally wounded and suffer for love of the heroine. Modleski sees such texts, in which the hero is reduced to “internally groveling” as a female revenge fantasy (45). Even if revenge is not the motive, wielding such excessive emotional control over a man is a potential form of power for women. In addition, Radway concludes that the individual qualities of the hero are less important to romance readers than the role he performs vis-à-vis the heroine. The romance is finally about readers desire to be cared for, loved and validated in particular ways (83).

(20) The episodes “Intervention” and “Dead Things” highlight Spike’s willingness to suffer for Buffy. In one he allows himself to be tortured by an evil god to save Buffy’s sister, because “I’d couldn’t live, her [Buffy] being in that much pain.” In “Dead Things” Buffy believes she has killed an innocent girl and attempts to turn herself into the police. Spike tries to stop her. When she explodes in rage at him he tells her to “put it all on him,” and allows her to beat him almost to unconsciousness, absorbing her emotional pain into his body. Spike’s willingness to love Buffy unconditionally appeals to the shippers. After “Dead Things” Reia wrote: “Spike still loves her so strongly, is able to forgive her and understand, still want to be with her . . . sigh!!”6

(21) In addition, shipper comments make clear that at least part of the attraction of Buffy/Spike relationship is that his strength and aggression serves as a way of expressing Buffy’s power and desire. Most shippers assert that Buffy is physically stronger than Spike and the violence between them is consensual. Shippers react negatively to other fans’ suggestion that the “Smashed” sex scene, in which the two punch and pummel each other as a form of foreplay, implied that Buffy was being forced. One fan writes, “Forced? I will keep that in mind the next time I watch that scene and watch how Buffy mounts Spike like a steed, and then ends up on top of him in the final scene. Oh my, the submission.”7 Fans of the relationship clearly see this kind of representation of female sexuality and desire as empowering. After watching “Smashed” one fan wrote: “I don’t know about you guys but that sex was great and wow it is even better when both are in powered (sic) buy (sic) it. It shows that not only guys want true hot and passion filled sex but us women too.”8

(22) The fact that Buffy and Spike come together only after he learns he can hit her implies that, in order to be sexually viable, men need to be violent and able to dominate their women. However, B/S shippers see this as a necessary move to imply equality between the two. Aurelio writes that “As long as he couldn’t physically hurt her, he was for all intents and purposes, “impotent.” And now he’s not anymore. . . . Buffy can enter into a relationship of equals with him.”9 Shade says that “There really is only one person equal to Buffy . . . (how crucial was that getting back of the rocks deal? Very. Buffy can’t have love for a doormat).10

(23) One reason that these fans feel the need for Spike to be seen as Buffy’s equal is because it supports the notion of Buffy as a powerful woman. Tora says, “I’d like to see them develop things between Spike and Buffy as a relationship of equals . . . I really don’t want them to play into the “strong woman emasculates the men around her” cliché. . . . they’re putting her in a position where she can’t look down on Spike,” 11 A.Zael writes, “ever since “Smashed,” it seems like they want both him and Buffy to be equals. . . . In too many shows, writers think the only way to make a strong female protagonist is to surround her with weaker males or only females. I believe the fact that they allow a strong male lead, shows the faith the creators have in the power of their female character.”12

(24) Shippers want to see a powerful woman who is loved, not in spite of, but because of her power. As Cumbayaya says, “to have her find someone she is compatible with only to lose him to the complications that comes with the slayer package is getting old. I would love it if she could find a relationship with Spike who accepts (sic) and in a warped way loves who she is and stick with it.” 13 Latestake says that “Buffy is all about

the feminist paradigm shift so that would be an interesting play on that theme. . . . A man reveling in the power of a woman without losing his own power. Spike and Buffy are quite evenly matched, and as they are worthy opponents for each other, so should they be worthy of each other as lovers."<sup>14</sup>

(25) Shippers also seem to enjoy the way the Buffy/ Spike dynamic foregrounds what reviewer Stephanie Zacharek calls the "messiness and potential danger" of sex. In her *Salon.com* review of "Smashed" and "Wrecked," Zacharek wrote that "I can't think of a recent movie that dealt with the emotional risks and dangers of sex in such a startling and affecting way. . . . they've so straightforwardly defined the usually blurry meridian between aggression and sex." On-line fan Haunt similarly writes: "Well I LOVE sensuality, more than the wild animal abandon that we saw in *Smashed*, but to limit one's view of sex that way is well, limiting. . . . it's unhealthy to assume that anger and passion are never a part of sex." <sup>15</sup> Slyvie agrees, saying that "the genius of Joss is not writing sex for sex."<sup>16</sup>

(26) These readings suggest that fans enjoy the break from the traditional media representation of sex as a sort of liminal space, set outside of time, in which all tensions and conflicts between partners are resolved. As I have written elsewhere, the depiction of such "messy" sex displays a kind of feminist consciousness because it "problematizes the conceptions of sex as a context-free, natural act," politicizing sex by revealing the way power relations are constructed and contested within a relationship (Heinecken, "Changing," 169).

(27) It must also be noted that in addition to presenting Buffy as the sexual aggressor, the sixth season sex scenes provided another role reversal in their presentation of the male body as visual object. While Buffy is covered or clothed in each scene in "Wrecked" for example, Spike is nude. Whatever artistic decisions influence this, by the vast number of delighted posts about "nekkid Spike," and discussions about the body sock worn by the actor, it is clear that many fans are taking extreme pleasure in the opportunity to gaze at the male body.

(28) Furthermore, while it is possible to assume that viewers identify primarily with the character of Buffy, processes of identification are mobile.<sup>17</sup> It is useful to consider what female viewer's identification with *Spike* means. Importantly, at the same time Spike is depicted as excessively hard and masculine and an object of erotic desire, he is also feminized, possessing feminine traits like emotional openness, a willingness to love unconditionally, and a desire to talk about the relationship. He is "love's bitch," endlessly suffering for love. Despite his physical strength, Spike is revealed to have little power in the relationship. As he tearfully tells Buffy "All you've ever done is play me. And keep playing with rules you make up as you like." Spike's emotional powerlessness and internal pain are emphasized to the point of excess within fan fiction, indicating that Spike embodies what Ien Ang calls "a tragic structure of feeling" for fans. He functions similarly to *Dallas'* Sue Ellen, allowing fans to take pleasure in his excessive emotions and melodramatic suffering (78-79).

(29) Viewers' pleasure in the way Spike suffers for love is particularly interesting considering the maternal function of romance heroes noted by Radway (139-40). In much shipper fiction, Spike is depicted as a long-suffering mother. His love holds Buffy and her Scooby family together, but his efforts are never appreciated. As Gwyneth writes, "Everyone else except her mother had conditions for their love. . . . Spike had never asked for conditions. He wanted all of her, but took whatever she would give."<sup>18</sup> Spike's unconditional love simultaneously allows female viewers to identify with the experience of being loved intensely and expresses many women's experience of under-appreciation.

(30) However, Spike is not read only as a "whipping boy." As Kinsale argues, "the oft-derided happy ending" of romances in which the violent hero and heroine are joined, "is a dramatization of the integration of the inner self" (39). The acceptance of the hero is thus a way for women to acknowledge impulses such as aggression, anger, and sexuality that are unacceptable for women even in today's world (Botts 69). Similarly, in her article "Every Night I Save You," Rhonda Wilcox has demonstrated that Spike functions as Buffy's shadow within the text. Shippers also see Spike as Buffy's shadow. Shade writes "Spike . . . seems to be almost the other half of Buffy."<sup>19</sup> While Scarlettfish writes that "Maybe we will discover that slayers and vampires are two halves of a whole—that could tie into her

and Spike's relationship rather nicely."20

(31) The episode "Dead Things" is at pains to point out that Spike is Buffy's shadow. The episode has several sequences which show this, particularly one scene in which a guilt-ridden Buffy beats Spike, telling him "There is nothing good or clean in you. You are dead inside." She is clearly talking to herself and sees herself in him. Reia writes of the scene "suddenly Buffy is the monster, beating up on someone innocent."21 While "Dead Things" does not resolve whether Buffy's feelings for Spike are "good" or not, it is clear that, at this point in the series, she feels bad for having them. A possible reading is that Buffy is confronting the depths of her sexual desire. Can she be a good girl if she likes sex? What does it say about her that she desires an evil creature? The series is thus presenting a heroine who is actively grappling with the ramifications of acknowledging her own sexuality, aggression and anger.

(32) The appeal to shippers may be due to how the B/S relationship dramatizes feelings and impulses which women are still supposed to keep hidden. For example, Slayer Chica writes, "[Buffy's] had a taste of what it feels like to . . . well not be miss perfect. And she loves it!"22 Annalore writes, "I think Buffy's really acknowledging that she's drawn to the darkness, that she wants it. Thinking that she came back wrong, and that these desires weren't really hers has allowed her to explore them in depth. But they've always been there. It's always been her . . . Now that she knows that she's herself, she again feels the need to adhere to her moral code, and she doesn't know if she can. Because now she doesn't only want it, she's had it. She knows what it's like. And it's obvious she was loving it."23

(33) B/S shipper fan fiction likewise articulates fans' desire to see a hero who accepts her anger and sexuality. Fan fiction make it clear that many fans believe soulless Spike is already worthy of Buffy's love, not despite, but because of his aggressive and dangerous qualities. For example, in Annie Sewell-Jennings' *Waking the Dead*, Buffy yearns for Spike and "the fierce fury of him, the maelstrom made of muscle and malignance."24 Dangerous Spike is necessary, because he makes room for dangerous Buffy. Many fan writers depict anger and aggression as essential components of Buffy's character and linked to her desire for Spike. Gwyneth writes, "Buffy wants him so bad her chest aches. . . . Wants to know the thrill of darkness as it overtakes her, when it's all right to feel full only of hate and bleakness and ugliness. He lets her be whatever she wants to be."25

(34) As shipper comments highlight, the representation of sex in *Buffy* expresses what is going on inside characters as well as the series' world view. Seeing Spike as the "other half of Buffy" implicates Buffy in darkness and Spike in light. This move actually makes a dramatic change in the series' overall philosophy in which the separation between good and evil has been clearly marked, at least between vampires and humans. While the show has shown a great deal of moral complexity in terms of human relations, Buffy's right to kill demons and vampires without guilt has never been questioned. Whedon has said that he made his vampires explode into dust when staked because "it shows they're monsters. I didn't really want to have a high school girl killing people."26 This Othering of the vampires means that there has been little relativism, no blurring between right and wrong in the series' overall world view. As Kent A. Ono has pointed out, among the results of such Othering is to convey "debilitating images of and about people of color" (163).

(35) Fans are quite aware of the political implications of such binary thinking as a way of justifying relations of dominance. Haunt says, "If the show had stayed as straight forward and simplistic as it tried to make us think it was in Season One I wouldn't be here right now."27 RomanceLady writes, "In the beginning it was no soul=evil, and now . . . maybe we are all meant to re-evaluate our racism. . . . Maybe all 'soulless' creatures aren't bad and need to be killed."28 Many shippers are quite critical of what they see as the series' simplistic worldview. Scarlettfish sees the B/S relationship as part of the "'oh grow up' lesson that is going to be taught this year—things aren't as simple as black and white"29

(36) Buffy's acceptance of Spike as a lover is linked to a complex morality in which the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, human and nonhuman, is unclear. Newly risen writes, "I think it's pretty convenient for humans to think of demons and vamps as not having souls. . . . As long as they are thought of as not having souls, the Slayer can go stake them (or the Initiative can experiment on them) without compunction.

. . . If vamps have souls, then Buffy is no different from Faith when she staked the mayor's aid. She's not a Slayer. She's a murderer."<sup>30</sup> SockPuppet argues that "being able to see her former mortal enemy as a human being . . . adds so many shades of grey to slaying. What if Spike isn't unique? What if others are capable of change?"<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, shippers see the Buffy/Spike romance as calling into question the morality of the function of the Slayer.

(37) While part of the appeal of the B/S relationship is undoubtedly based on the erotic appeal of the actors, shipper readings demonstrate fans' ability to read metaphorically. They do not read the sexualized violence of Season Six as simply representative of or promoting abusive relationships and/or female passivity. Instead, Spike's "badness" is read in ways that are consistent with the way romance fans read the hero: he is appealing because of his nurturing, "feminine" qualities and because his strength reflects Buffy's power. These fans want to see a female hero who both integrates and accepts her aggressive tendencies as well as acknowledges her desires in all their messy complexity. They read Buffy as a powerful figure and want her to find love with an equal. B/S shipper readings suggest that the series' rejection of a worldview based on binary opposites and Buffy's acceptance of her own sexuality and capacity for anger are reflected in her acceptance of Spike as a lover.

(38) Shipper comments during this period demonstrate how textual producers and textual receivers may diverge in their reading of a text. In contrast to fans, *Buffy's* producers repeatedly described the relationship as "unhealthy" and as a sign that Buffy was straying from her true self.<sup>32</sup> Co-executive producer Marti Noxon has stated that Spike's attempted rape of Buffy in "Seeing Red" was constructed as a corrective to fans who read Spike as worthy of Buffy's love (Gottlieb). The rape was intended to demonstrate that Spike was, in essence, evil. Buffy's rejection of Spike is ultimately framed by the show's creators as a positive move because her attraction to an evil being was "killing her." Spike seeks a soul to become "what Buffy deserves." Fan fiction written during the series' summer hiatus indicates that there continues to be a discrepancy, however, between what fans want to see and what producers wish to show.

(39) Jenkins has observed that when texts "fail to satisfy," fans try to recover them for their own interests (23). Fan fiction often serves as a way for fans to repair the text. It is therefore significant that a large percentage of recent fiction dealing with Spike's return to Sunnydale features Buffy acknowledging her love for Spike prior to learning he has a soul, a seeming dismissal of his crime.

(40) Fan reaction to the attempted rape and Spike's winning of a soul deserves far more attention than it can be given here, but several points are notable. Some fans are disappointed by Spike obtaining a soul because they read it as reaffirming notions of essential identity.<sup>33</sup> In addition, some fans criticize the ways that the rape was used to retroactively justify Buffy's emotional abuse of Spike.<sup>34</sup> Despite these critiques, it is important to observe that shippers do not condone the attempted rape or note that Buffy deserved it. In fact, most recent B/S shipper fiction accepts the text's presentation of the soul as necessary for Spike to change for the better. This acceptance reveals that whoever the perpetrator, they find uncontrolled masculine sexual aggression intolerable.

(41) While Spike's behavior is condemned, fans' repeated depictions of Buffy loving what she thinks is a soulless being reiterate their desire to see Buffy acknowledge her own aggression. In many of these fictions, Buffy realizes she is not morally superior to Spike and accepts responsibility for her behavior. She finds love and happiness through loving her shadow and recognizing her own capacity for anger and aggression as well as from the intensity and depth of her sexual desire. In this way, many fan representations of female aggression and sexuality stand in contrast to the text.

(42) Elyce Rae Helford has observed that *Buffy* works to contain female anger in various ways. Unless properly channeled through wit and indirection, female anger is often depicted as destructive and tied to insanity and perverse sexuality. Female power and sexuality are likewise linked and depicted as dangerous (Heinecken, *Warrior*). This trend continues into the series' seventh season, in which Buffy and Spike's relationship is discussed as a sign of Buffy's self-loathing, from which she has now recovered. This "healthy" Buffy is distanced from the violent impulses which drove her to sleep with Spike, saying "I don't hate like that. . . . Not anymore." The aggressive sexuality of the sixth

season (which we are told in "Wrecked" is the best sex she has ever had) is thus framed by the current text as pathological, an outcome of Buffy's urge to self-destruction. In addition, Buffy continues to deny her own sexual agency, referring to the sexual aspect of their relationship as something Spike did to her and as Spike "tak[ing] me over completely." Midway through the series' seventh season, Buffy's sexuality continues to be framed by the series' creators as overwhelming and out of her control. It remains to be seen whether *Buffy* will eventually satisfy shippers' desire for the text to acknowledge the reality of women's anger and sexual aggression.

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