

## **The Problem of Romance and the Representation of Gender in *Buffy* and *Angel*:**

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Joss Whedon identifies himself as a “feminist” yet Michael Levine and Steven Schneider state that *Buffy* “does not challenge sexual and gender stereotypes (except superficially), or those about romance and true love, but instead reinforces them” (2003: 300). So...

### **What’s the problem with romance?**

Because romance, love and sex are generally seen as “personal” or “private” parts of our lives, they are relatively easy to detach from social context. This tends to obscure the relationship between heterosexuality, romance and patriarchy, that is, the domination of men and the subordination of women. From one point of view heterosexuality “is a patriarchal narrative told about bodies and desires which polices women’s and men’s adherence to proper gender and erotic behaviours and makes women’s liberation unimaginable” (Wilton 1996: 127). Because of this, heterosexual romance in *Buffy* and *Angel* highlights what might seem to be contradictions in the shows’ representation of gender. Romance appears to undercut the shows’ ability to re-vision gender but it *must* be included in such a revision because these are gendered relationships.

Romance also affects and is affected by form in the two shows. Like other serial dramas, *Buffy* and *Angel* valorise heterosocial friendship and an alternative family over the more individualist pleasures of romance. The inclusion of romance thus produces tensions between desire and responsibility, individuality and “family”. The emphasis on development and group co-operation also means that romance is presented as something that makes characters “less than what they were”, paraphrasing Groo’s words to Cordelia (in “Couplet” *Angel* 3014) because it can cut them off from larger responsibilities. Yet at the same time, one of the things *Buffy* uses romance for is to integrate characters into the ‘family’ group through a romance relationship with a core member.

Romance on *Buffy* and *Angel* never lasts. In serial television there are obvious reasons for this – romantic fulfilment tends to signal closure (the “ends on a kiss” scenario). Whedon has also commented: “No one’s going to see the story of Othello going to get a peaceful divorce. People want the tragedy. They need things to go wrong” (in Nazzaro, 2002: 226). In this way romance is not used to “reward” the hero at the end, rather it introduces disruption and conflict and drives the plot forward. To quote Lorne in “Couplet” (*Angel* 3014) romance on *Buffy* and *Angel* generally has “arms like steel cables and a deeply ironic sense of timing”.

Melissa Milavec and Sharon Kaye suggest that *Buffy* “owes much of its popularity to making erotic love a dominant theme” (2003: 174) and romance offers the comfort of a familiar narrative. For all the characters, romance indicates their desirability, while its “failure” keeps desire open for the viewer; the character is always available. For example, Angel has a history of romance in *Buffy* yet his different position as the hero in his own show requires that these romances are never current. Angel’s romantic relationships from Darla to Buffy to Cordelia become progressively more impossible and idealised. This maintains Angel’s position as object of desire both within and without the text (the “Mmm, Angel” factor).

David Greenwalt has said that “*Buffy* is about how hard it is to be a woman, and *Angel* is about how hard it is to be a man” (in Nazzaro, 2002: 158) and here I discuss some of the ways romance and femininity interact in *Buffy* and romance and masculinity in *Angel*. The inclusion of romance demonstrates how heterosexual love,

romance and sex can be a site of simultaneous complicity in and resistance to traditional gender roles (Jackson 1999: 114).

### **Romance and Femininity in *Buffy***

Buffy's desire to be "a normal girl" seems to include having a "normal" (i.e. heterosexual romance) relationship. This is almost always a problem because the conventions of traditional ("normal") romance are based on somewhat outdated gender roles. Nearly ten years ago Angela McRobbie observed that feminism has effected some changes in how romance is presented, so that for example, in girls' magazines "the conventionally coded meta-narratives of romance which... could only create a neurotically dependent female subject, have gone for good" while there "is more of the self in this new vocabulary of femininity, much more self-esteem, more autonomy" (1994: 164, 165). In *Buffy* the teen characters still desire romance relationships but they also demonstrate this shift.

Romantic and sexual histories establish gendered identities for characters but these are not always straightforward. Buffy cannot be a hero and a "girlfriend" and her partners are placed in a subordinate position because of her central role. Angel functioned in early seasons of *Buffy* as the love interest and gets to be the hero only when he leaves Buffy and her show<sup>1</sup>. Riley also had "issues" with Buffy being a hero and the consequences for his own role. In one episode Graham points out, "You used to have a mission and now you're what? The mission's boyfriend, the mission's true love?" ("Out of My Mind" 5004).

I have decided to focus in this part of the paper on Cordelia and Anya. Both are assimilated into the core group through romance relationships with Xander<sup>2</sup> though these work to present the characters in different ways<sup>3</sup>.

Farah Mendlesohn offers an initially convincing description of Cordelia as someone "whose friendships with women are constructed around status seeking and competition in a game in which points are scored through the attraction of the male gaze" (2002: 53). Yet I would argue that Cordelia's representation encompasses the awareness that this *is* a game and that she succeeds by playing the role men want. Cordelia moves from consciously playing the game of romance, to being more emotionally involved and less concerned about status acquired through dating. She also moves from being a self-involved individualist to a perhaps reluctant, but still responsible member of the team.

Cordelia initially rejects Xander because of his lack of social status but eventually she casts off peer pressure. "I'm way cooler than you are because I'm not a sheep," she declares to Harmony and the other Cordettes, "I do what I want to do and I wear what I want to wear and you know what, I'll date whoever the hell I want to date," adding characteristically, "no matter how lame he is" ("Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" 2016). One possible interpretation of this is that Cordelia cannot resist "real" love that goes beyond image and status. A more critical reading might note that Cordelia's "choice" and assertion of independence is actually an affirmation of (heterosexuality and) the myths of romance. Xander's subsequent betrayal of

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<sup>1</sup> The end of "Sanctuary" (*Angel* 10??) is perhaps the first time Angel talks back to Buffy and he takes an attitude here that would never have fitted his role in the other show. I remember watching this with my mouth hanging open and although Angel's anger is nominally about Buffy's vendetta against Faith, the exchange is eventually about their failed romance.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Alice Money suggests that Anya too is "rehabilitated" through her relationship with Xander (2002: 104).

<sup>3</sup> Faith is also redeemed by the promise of a real romance with Wood.

Cordelia with Willow (“Lover’s Walk”) is designed to award Cordy sympathy yet it simultaneously presents her as passive and not in control. Given their relative positions in the Scooby Gang, there is inevitably more emphasis on Xander and Willow. But while Willow and Oz are eventually reunited (only to split up again, of course), Cordelia never returns to Xander, regaining her autonomy and finally leaving the show altogether.

For Anya especially, romance complicates the ability to construct an independent identity. Power and heterosexual romance seem to be incompatible in Anya but are intimately related through her character’s storylines. Anya became a demon and thus acquired supernatural power because of the failure of one romance. When she loses that power, she begins a romance with Xander and, after that breaks down, she becomes a demon again. Early on Anya embodies the tension between “feminist” principles and teen romance. During “The Prom” she tells Xander, “I have witnessed a millennium of treachery and oppression from the male of the species and I have nothing but contempt for the whole libidinous lot of them,” but she finishes, “I don’t have a date for the Prom.”

Anya and Xander’s engagement and wedding provides further contradictions. On the one hand it is presented traditionally: Xander proposes, Anya has a ring, she reads bridal magazines (under cover of research books in “Wrecked” 6010) and makes wedding plans, exhibiting “feminine” excitement. On the other, Anya includes “feminist” lines in her draft wedding vows like, “but not to obey you, of course, because that’s anachronistic and misogynistic,” (“Hell’s Bells” 6016). This chimes with the awareness of a heterosexual feminist viewer like myself that while compulsory heterosexuality is a way of maintaining control over women, and the myths of romance make this palatable, this does not necessarily negate the desire for a(n equal) sexual and companionate relationship.

Anya’s song in “Selfless” (*Buffy* 7005) is all about romance and marriage. [CLIP] On the surface Anya is presented as willing to carry out domestic tasks “for” Xander while daydreaming about being “Mrs. Anya Harris”. The 1950s sitcom ambience (Anya’s retro-style dress and the kitchen set) underlines this vision of domestic bliss. Yet this is simultaneously undercut by several elements, not least lines like “Mrs. Lameass Made-up Maiden Name Harris”. The positioning of this scene as a flashback when regular viewers already know that the wedding never happened influences our reception of this celebration of romance as ironic rather than sincere. That it comes in an episode documenting Anya’s life as human and demon seems to position it as a problem, or at least as a difficult turning point. Finally, the startling cut from flashback to “present” subverts romantic expectation as effectively as any other scene in *Buffy*. The reward of believing in romance on this show, as Angel knows, may be a sword through the chest.

The attempted rape by Spike further challenged the myths of romance, especially the construction of romance as a grand passion. By the end of seven seasons, Buffy herself has rejected romance twice: once after Riley’s departure and her encounter with April the robot-girlfriend (“I Was Made to Love You” 5015), and again at the end of the series when she tells Angel that she is not “ready” for another romance because she has not yet discovered who she is – the cookie dough analogy (“Chosen”). The subject positions offered by all these characters recognise the complex negotiation involved in romance by women trying to retain independence

and agency<sup>4</sup>. One message might be that heterosexual romance is so problematic that it is incompatible with feminist ideals: Cordy leaves, Anya dies, Buffy is left without a partner.

### **Romance and masculinity in *Angel***

Again I would argue that the ways in which male characters on *Angel* negotiate romance are an indication of the post-feminist context of the show, in that it demonstrates very clearly how feminist influences affect the representation of masculinity as well. In particular the male characters' negotiation of romance and desire is used to develop a range of masculinities. Almost all the regular male characters offer the opportunity for what Lynn Thomas described as "a transformed power relationship between hero and heroine, based on textual evidence of his vulnerability" (1997: 202), and I would add, his sensitivity. For example, Doyle's ex-wife Harry tells Cordelia that "Francis" was a schoolteacher ("Doyle taught third grade? The kind with children?"), highlighting his nurturing qualities ("Bachelor Party" 1007).

Gunn, despite being described as the "brawn" of the group ("Fredless" 3005), has little hesitation entering a relationship with a strong female character whose intellect and achievements are in fields traditionally dominated by men. In "Billy" (3006) Wesley threatens Fred with physical violence while Gunn avoids doing so. During "Supersymmetry" (4005) Gunn feels left out as Fred revives her career in physics research but he remains committed to her independence. When the team find out that Professor Siedel was responsible for sending Fred to Pylea, Gunn tries to persuade her not to kill him, saying, "Fred, you idolised him but don't let him be defining what you are now." Of course, their relationship finally comes under strain when Gunn kills Siedel to prevent Fred from carrying it on her conscience – a removal of her agency.

Wesley is re-masculinised through romance and sex, transformed from the effete wimp of *Buffy* season three into the stubble-jawed adventurer of *Angel* season four who pines after Fred but keeps a woman locked up in his apartment ("Deep Down" 4001) and has a love/hate all-lust relationship with Lilah that rivals Spike and Buffy's. This is a different kind of being redeemed through romance than in *Buffy* (and it neatly divides romance and sex).

*Angel* is also gendered and sexualised in particular ways through romance. Buffy is generally accepted by characters as being the love of Angel's life and his relationship with her is what begins his redemption. But Angelus spent nearly 100 years with Darla – probably the longest-lasting relationship on either show – they split up only because Angel is (literally) no longer the person he was. This relationship has lasting effects; the past on the present and into the future. Arguably, in *Angel* this relationship is at least as important if not more so, than that between Angel and Buffy.

As with Buffy, Angel and Darla are apparently contrasts: fair against dark, small against large, female against male. This superficially maintains the idea of

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<sup>4</sup> The contradictory genderings of Willow and her magical power highlight the difficulty she has in negotiating a way to be a powerful young woman. Willow's sexual difference is generally identified (named) as "gay" rather than "lesbian." She is never identified as bisexual and her sexual identity is constructed within and upholds the binary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality and thus between the gender categories male and female. Given that the sexual element of this identity is largely removed, romanticised, I am almost tempted to suggest that Willow is a political lesbian. Arguably she is "removed" from complicity in patriarchal relations when she becomes a lesbian and both Willow and Tara as lesbians become more female rather than more hybrid in gender terms. The conflation of sexual activity and Wiccan magic merely reinforces this feminisation.

heterosexual romance as a conjunction of opposites. Angelus and Darla are sometimes distinguished from other vampire couples such as Spike and Dru or James and Elizabeth (“Heartthrob” 3001): their relationship is *not* romantic love. From her first appearance in *Buffy*, Darla plays the traditional vampire role of sexual predator and subsequent episodes of *Angel* reveal that the human Darla was “a whore” dying of syphilis (“Darla” 2007, “The Trial” 2009). Darla’s “bad” sexuality is all one with the S/M aspects of the relationship, usually referred to by Angel as pleasure and pain. Again, oppositions, contrasts.

Yet there is also an implication that Darla loves Angel. Darla is simultaneously strong and weak, independent and dependent and the development of the relationship across the two shows shifts Angel’s presentation too. In the relationship with Angelus, especially in *Buffy*, Darla appears to have the upper hand. When she sires Angel (“Becoming Part 1” *Buffy* 2021), her taunt, “Are you certain you’re up to the challenge?” emphasises her greater age and experience<sup>5</sup>. Yet even in *Buffy*, Darla is unwilling to let Angel go, so that the relationship (going back to Gunn’s words) “defines what she is”. When Darla returns in *Angel*, this emotional (“feminine”) weakness is very apparent and she is much more vulnerable (partly because she spends some time as a human). The “1760/ London” flashback during “Darla” starts to shift our perception of the balance of power in the relationship. Here Darla brings Angelus to the Master’s court. Angelus insults the Master but wins the lady after telling her: “This is no place for you, bound to the likes of him... You belong by my side, out in the world, feeding as we like, taking what we need. I’ll give you that view you crave, darling, I’ll give you everything.” This speech offers a measure of equality (compared to the hierarchy of the Order of Aurelius) but Darla chooses, in the Master’s words, “to leave with the stallion”, the blushing female swept off her feet by the myth of romance and a traditional version of masculinity.

Darla’s pregnancy further develops perceptions of the relationship and its gendering. When the team discover that she is pregnant, Angel and Darla’s positions are articulated by Cordelia in gendered, even feminist terms. [CLIP] Yet Cordelia later confesses, “I felt sorry for her. She looked so helpless. *Like a mother*” (“Offspring” 3006; my emphasis). This interpretation of “feminine” weakness is itself undercut when Cordelia is attacked and bitten by Darla because her feelings of female solidarity make her vulnerable; she “forgot what [Darla] really was”. And in the same episode we are told that Darla is “stronger than all of [them] right now because of what’s in her” (“Offspring”).

In the same way that characters in *Buffy* were transformed, Darla is redeemed in *Angel* through romance. By having Angel’s child (and Connor is almost always called Angel’s child, rarely their or hers), Darla literally becomes part of the family. That a vampire birth is “impossible” indicates that this can never be a traditional family. But at the same time, Darla is gendered (“feminised”) by her pregnancy and it redeems her. She is eventually willing to give up her life to save her baby. Later she appears to Connor as the martyred mother, offering advice and him, “You brought light to my shadow, filled my heart with joy and love... You were the one good thing I ever did” (“Inside Out” 4017)<sup>6</sup>. Angel’s role as a father is both the ultimate proof of

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<sup>5</sup> Tania Modleski suggests that with a typical villainess, “the spectator has the satisfaction of seeing men suffer the same anxieties and guilt that women usually experience and seeing them receive similar kinds of punishment for their transgressions” (1997: 42). Parts of Darla’s relationship with Angel can be read in a similar fashion, as when she manipulates him or runs out on him.

<sup>6</sup> “You shared your soul with me once when you were growing inside of me when I’d lost my own. You brought light to my shadow, filled my heart with joy and love... You were the one good thing I ever

masculinity but also a way of developing his caring, nurturing side. Darla's death ensures that the show can return to the alternative family group and that Angel gets the benefits of the romance, his "real" family is exclusively masculine, father and son. Given Holtz's involvement it could even be argued that Connor, like Chris Taylor in *Platoon* (1986), is the son of two fathers.

Angel as single dad is not quite as obvious in gendering as earlier versions from film and television. Susan Jeffords has argued, for example, that male-parenting movies of the 1980s were simply an appropriation of women's roles, "an instance of a wider tendency to convert traditionally feminine attributes into an additional index of masculine superiority, thus reconfiguring gender polarity rather than transcending it" (in Traube 1992: 24). Very often these father figures were presented as good in contrast to bad, usually ambitious, professional mothers. But Angel is not just a nurturing father, he is also an action hero, a leader, an object of desire, a vampire – he embodies different types of masculinity. He is not always good and he is not always a good father.

Angel's romance with Darla gives him a murky sexual past, masculinising him as the dangerous lover, and establishing him (at least superficially) as heterosexual. His transformation from Angelus to Angel suggests that he will not return to his wicked ways, and that Angel's relationships with women are informed by post-feminist sensitivity. This all exists in the past, keeping him largely free from romantic or sexual entanglements. Eventually the longest-lasting romance of his days enables him to have a son, a further index of his hybrid masculinity.

### **So is romance a problem?**

Whedon has argued, "[i]f I made 'Buffy the Lesbian Separatist,' a series of lectures on PBS on why there should be more feminism, no one would be coming to the party, and it would be boring" (in Lavery 2002: 15). Producer Fran Rubel Kuzui has said, "You can educate your daughters to be Slayers, but you have to educate your sons to be Xanders" (in Golden and Holder 1998: 248). To me, both of these comments demonstrate the close links between gender, sexuality and romance.

*Buffy* and *Angel* never mediate a definitive representation of gender. This complexity and contradiction is partly articulated through the inclusion of romance. How can a kick-ass-but-girlie action hero or a brooding-but-sensitive stud-with-a-past find happiness in heterosexual romance? If we knew the answer to that we wouldn't find *Buffy* and *Angel* so funny and engaging. They don't give answers; they illustrate the problem. Because romance is a particular and pervasive form of gendered interaction, the characters' responses, the show's responses, or our own responses indicate the "complex position of feminism as both oppositional culture and part of the mainstream" (Thomas 1997: 203).

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did. The only good thing. I'd die every day for the rest of eternity for you." The "reality" of this encounter is not clear but it does add to Darla's presentation.

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