

**“Yes Men”? Rape Myths and Gender Stereotypes
in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.***

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U.S.A.**

[1] Popular culture reflects and reproduces the values and beliefs of the society in which it is produced. More importantly, it often reinforces and perpetuates widespread, problematic societal attitudes. Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*—and self-proclaimed feminist—notes the importance of the academic study of popular culture because it “shape[s] the minds” of individuals (qtd. in Lavery par. 1). Feminist scholarship seeks to uncover how popular culture reflects and reproduces cultural norms and stereotypes. In his essay, “The Importance of Being the Zeppo,” Marc Camron notes that, although Joss Whedon maintains that his agenda is pro-feminist, some situations in *Buffy* reinforce patriarchal norms (par. 1). Yet, to completely remove the existence of patriarchy from the series would make the show unrealistic and ineffective (par. 16). He explains, “There is a patriarchy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but it is the patriarchy of reality” (Camron par. 18). Scholar Angie Burns argues that representations in popular culture that reinforce and perpetuate rape myths and gender stereotypes have real-world implications. Burns notes, “*Buffy* allows viewers to question such behaviour, to see that attempts to control and force sex is a problem. It names rape. However, these depictions of attempted rape seem to also reinforce gender stereotypes around sex, desire and control” (par. 15). While *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* “make[s] it clear that attempted rape is wrong,” gender stereotypes and rape myths are still reproduced (Burns par. 11). “This points [to] the pervasiveness and dominance of these stereotypes...” asserts Burns (par. 20).

[2] Through the examination of selected episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, we explore how portrayals of sexual victimization in television reflect, reproduce, and reinforce gender stereotypes and rape myths. Whereas victims and others often recognize the victimization of femininely-coded characters (*who are not always women*), masculinely-coded characters (*who are not always men*) are not recognized as victims, nor do they acknowledge their own victimization. These representations are problematic because they perpetuate false cultural assumptions and rape myths about male sexual victimization by females. We begin by defining the terminology used in our analysis. Next, we address the research on female perpetrated male sexual victimization, focusing specifically on the

relationship between gender stereotypes, rape myths, and sexual violence. We then explore four episodes from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* in which sexual violence occurs to illustrate that the rape or attempted rape of femininely-coded characters is depicted differently than that of masculinely-coded characters.

I. Definitions

[3] For the purposes of our analysis, we will use the terms sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, and consent to examine the sexual victimization of men and women in select episodes from the works of Joss Whedon. The U.S. Department of Justice defines sexual assault as “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient” (“Sexual Assault”). Under this definition, forced sexual intercourse and attempted rape qualify as sexual assault. The FBI defines rape in this way: “The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim” (“An Updated Definition”). This definition (updated in 2012) recognizes that both victim and perpetrator may be either male or female. Moreover, this definition of rape includes cases in which the victim is unable to give consent due to temporary or permanent mental or physical incapacitation; for instance, the use of drugs or alcohol may render a person incapacitated and unable to give consent (“An Updated Definition”).

[4] Both men and women may be forced or coerced into unwanted sexual activity without their consent. Individuals may be sexually victimized regardless of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. Perpetrators may use force, threats, or injury; yet, a lack of physical injuries does not mean the victim consented (*What is Sexual Violence?*). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), sexual violence includes “forced or alcohol/drug facilitated penetration of a victim” or “forced or alcohol/drug facilitated incidents in which the victim was made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else” (*Sexual Violence Surveillance* 11). A victim can be made to penetrate the perpetrator or someone else without the victim’s consent by force, the threat of physical harm, or intoxication through the use of drugs or alcohol (12). “Nonphysically [*sic*] pressured unwanted penetration; intentional sexual touching; or non-contact acts of a sexual nature” also fall under the definition of sexual violence (11).

[5] According to the CDC consent is defined as follows: “Words or overt actions by a person who is legally or functionally competent to give informed approval, indicating a freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact” (11). Again, *a person is unable to give consent if she or he is unconscious, intoxicated, or incapacitated* (e.g. through the use of drugs or alcohol, *whether voluntary or involuntary*). Likewise, a person may be unable to refuse to participate in a sexual act due to the perpetrator’s use of weapons, physical violence, threats, intimidation, or pressure (11). The perpetrator may give the victim drugs or alcohol to intentionally incapacitate the person, or the perpetrator may take advantage of the person’s state

of intoxication or incapacitation. Additionally, the perpetrator may abuse his or her position of authority, make fraudulent claims or false promises, employ verbal pressure or use nonphysical threats, insult or humiliate the victim, and so on in order to coerce someone to engage in a sexual act (13). Consent must be voluntary and is negated by any of the above forms of coercion. The aforementioned definitions will serve as reference points for our analysis.

II. Research on Male Victims of Sexual Violence

[6] Research on perceptions of male victims of sexual violence indicates that people regard the sexual victimization of a man by a woman as implausible, as it is widely believed that a woman cannot force a man to have sex (Sarrel and Masters). Because most victims of sexual violence are women and most perpetrators are men, it is often difficult for people to comprehend the possibility that men could be victims of sexual violence, especially by female perpetrators (Fisher and Pina 57). Yet, Fisher and Pina state, “Male rape or sexual assault, by females, is a significant phenomenon that should be recognized legally, socially and empirically” (55).

[7] Fisher and Pina note that rape myths based on gender stereotypes contribute to negative attitudes and false beliefs about male victims of sexual violence (57). They state that, like female rape myths, rape myths concerning male victims “place blame on the victim and vindicate the perpetrator” (57). Researchers Kassing, Beesley, and Frey state that male rape myths assume the following: 1) Men’s physical size and strength prevents them from being forced into sex; 2) Men are emotionally and physically strong enough to cope with being raped; 3) Men who are victims of rape are not masculine; 4) Men initiate sexual acts and would not be targeted for rape; 5) Rape of men is rare; and 6) Men are only raped in prison (313). Other male rape myths claim that men can enjoy sex even if it is forced upon them, that a man can resist a rapist if he truly wants to, and that men who do not resist a female rapist are partly to blame (Sleath and Bull).

[8] Drawing from the research of Ruth Graham, Fisher and Pina assert that “the existence of male victims of rape and sexual assault, particularly in incidences [*sic*] in which the perpetrator was female, directly challenges our attitudes and beliefs about men’s masculinity” (57). They continue, stating that “male rape myths are linked to traditional beliefs about masculinity and gender roles” (58). Gender stereotypes that maintain that women are submissive and passive and men are dominant and assertive reinforce the belief that men cannot be raped by women (Fisher and Pina 58). Moreover, stereotypes that assume that men are always ready and willing for sex lead people to doubt that a man would be forced into unwanted sexual activity with a woman (Fisher and Pina 58). It is difficult for people to imagine a woman forcing an unwilling man into sexual activity or for a man to turn down the opportunity for sex with a woman (Davies and Rogers 372). Building on research by Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson, Davies and Rogers state, “Gender role beliefs, such as men should always be sexually

available to women, serve to minimize the perceived effects that sexual assault has on men assaulted by women” (372).

[9] When male victims of sexual violence are blamed for their own violation or are assumed to have enjoyed the sexual acts, the trauma that they experience as victims of rape is overlooked (Smith). Furthermore, the prevalence of victim-blaming may prevent men from reporting incidents of sexual violence; indeed, under-reporting of male rape is especially high (Sleath and Bull). Surveys of male victims of rape indicate that their friends and family often blame the male victim for his own rape (Walker). Additionally, because men are not socialized to discuss their feelings, many men have difficulty talking about their experiences of sexual victimization (Muehlenhard and Cook).

[10] Studies also indicate that people find it more acceptable for a woman to violate a man’s sexual consent than for a man to do the same to a woman (Margolin). Indeed, female perpetrated sexual violation is viewed as less threatening and less serious, perhaps because these assessments are made within a male-dominated culture where men typically hold power over women (Davies and Rogers 372). While women continue to have fewer sexual rights than men, “in some cases it is more acceptable for a woman to deny sexual access to a man than for a man to deny sexual access to a woman,” state Davies and Rogers (372).

III. Four Representations of Sexual Violence

“Dead Things”

[11] In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode “Dead Things” (B6013), the Trio—a group composed of three “supervillains”: Warren Mears, Jonathan Levinson, and Andrew Wells—have constructed a “Cerebral Dampener.” This magical equivalent of a date-rape drug allows them to remove all free will and completely control the mind and actions of any victim of their choosing. They intend to use the Cerebral Dampener to gain sexual power over women; Warren states, “With this baby, we can make any woman we desire our willing sex slave.”

[12] Warren surveys a restaurant for suitable candidates, while in a surveillance van Andrew and Jonathan watch a live-feed from a concealed camera on Warren’s tie and make suggestions. Jonathan and Andrew stare in awe at the monitor as Warren sweeps through the restaurant, focusing in on a succession of beautiful women. When they consider which woman they want to target, Andrew and Jonathan objectify the women they see and reduce them to their body parts; Jonathan wants the woman with a long neck, Andrew wants the redhead, and they both end up encouraging Warren to choose the buxom girl in the red leather skirt with the “bazoombas.” Warren, however, dumps his earpiece in a martini glass and approaches his former girlfriend Katrina. He attempts to reconnect with Katrina without the use of the Cerebral Dampener, but she makes her contempt for him evident, saying, “I thought I was pretty clear

with the never wanting that to happen again.” Insulted and aggravated by her blatant rejection, Warren resorts to using the Dampener to regain control, which immediately transforms Katrina into an obedient automaton that addresses Warren as “Master.”

[13] Later at their lair, the Trio enjoy champagne served by Katrina, who is dressed in a “French maid’s” outfit complete with fishnet stockings and stiletto heels. Warren takes Katrina into another room for sex, but lets Andrew and Jonathan know that they can “play with her” all they want after he is done with her. When Warren is about to have Katrina perform oral sex, however, the Dampener’s control fades. Katrina angrily and bluntly confronts the Trio, saying, “This is not some fantasy. It’s not a game, you freaks. It’s rape!” When Katrina attempts to leave the basement and threatens to send Warren to jail, he kills her.

“Yes Men”

[14] In an episode of *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, ironically titled “Yes Men” (MAS1015), Lorelei, a beautiful female alien from the planet of Asgard (the home planet of Thor and Loki from *The Avengers* (2012)), has escaped from an Asgardian prison and fled to Earth, where she intends to take control of the planet. Lorelei has powers of sorcery; she can bend men to her will with the sound of her voice and her touch. The men she controls do not forget who they are or what they know, but as Agent Phil Coulson states, Lorelei “becomes the embodiment of all their desires.” Controlling men gives Lorelei a thrill, especially if the man is already in a relationship with another woman. On Earth, Lorelei uses her powers to amass men, gold, and weapons to build an army. The agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. are dispatched, with the help of another female Asgardian named Sif, to stop Lorelei.

[15] Grant Ward, one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s best and “most lethal” agents, attempts to apprehend Lorelei, but she quickly subdues his will and takes control of his mind. “Yes Men” portrays Lorelei as a dominating, powerful woman. Her dominance is visually conveyed in her first meeting with Ward; when Lorelei sees Ward, she is standing atop the roof of a building and the camera is looking up at the two of them from the ground. She looks down upon a dwarfed Ward, who is unaware of her presence, illustrating her higher status and power. Lorelei takes control of Ward’s mind through her touch, then abducts him, commanding him to take her somewhere deserving of a ruler.

[16] Ward takes Lorelei to Las Vegas on a motorcycle. He drives while she sits behind him. The camera angle emphasizes that Lorelei is positioned slightly higher than Ward, looking over his shoulder—signaling to the viewers that she is in control. She wears an authoritative expression on her face and Ward’s countenance suggests obedience. Once they arrive in Las Vegas, Lorelei flatters Ward, and Ward says he would die for her. Lorelei, maintaining her control through touch, commands, “You will present me with an army, and I will give you a gift

in return.” This segues into the scene where Lorelei and Ward have sex, which is framed as sexy and erotic.

[17] Afterward, Lorelei is standing by a window while Ward is depicted lying in bed. Lorelei confides her fears of Sif to Ward, and he promises to protect Lorelei from Sif and S.H.I.E.L.D., his former friends. At this point he takes out a handgun and the camera looks up at him, his face is obscured by shadows, emphasizing that under Lorelei’s enchantment, Ward is no longer the man he used to be.

[18] Later, Sif fights Lorelei and puts a collar on her to prevent her from speaking, and the spell is broken. Agent Melinda May, Ward’s lover, then punches him in the face, expressing her anger at Ward for sleeping with Lorelei. Soon after, Ward conveys feelings of remorse to May and jokes that he would let her punch him again, saying that he never intended to hurt her. May is angry with Ward, and it is implied that he should feel guilty for having had sex with someone else. At the end of the episode, May ends her relationship with Ward.

“Who Are You?”

[19] On *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in the episode “Who Are You?” (B4016), Faith has used a device to switch bodies with Buffy. Faith—who is in trouble for assaulting Buffy’s mother, Joyce, and will be arrested—is happy to be rid of her own problems. Faith behaves arrogantly and recklessly in Buffy’s body; she feels powerful and invincible. While she is supposed to be patrolling, she instead goes dancing and partying. She encounters Spike and antagonizes him; she teases him sexually and tells him that she could sexually dominate him. “I could have anything. Anyone. Even you, Spike. I could ride you at a gallop until your legs buckled and your eyes rolled up,” Faith teases, adding, “I’ve got muscles you’ve never even dreamed of. I could squeeze you until you popped like warm champagne, and you’d beg me to hurt you just a little bit more.”

[20] Faith then goes to the home of Riley, Buffy’s boyfriend, where she seduces him in the guise of Buffy. Faith is excessively sexual, and the camera looks at her from sexualized angles, emphasizing her cleavage and buttocks. Faith attempts to initiate kinky sexual play, asking Riley, “What do you wanna do with this body? What nasty little desire have you been itching to try out? Am I a bad girl? Do you wanna hurt me?” Simkin states, “It is worth noting that Riley is unnerved by his partner’s unusual ‘bad girl’ sexual advances when Buffy’s body is being inhabited by Faith in ‘Who Are You?’: he is clearly thrown by being cast into a passive role in their love-making.” Plainly, Riley is used to playing the sexually dominant role in the relationship. Riley, believing that Faith is Buffy, longs to be gently intimate with her. The music changes from sensual and dark to sweet and tender, and the lighting is soft and romantic. After

their encounter, Riley tells Faith, “I love you,” further indicating that the sex scene is intended to be romantic.

[21] Later, after Buffy and Faith have switched back, Buffy and Riley discuss the incident, and he acts guilty and apologetic. He says, “I knew there was something. I should’ve picked up on it. I should’ve just...” At this point, Buffy realizes that Riley had sex with Faith. Buffy says, “You slept with her.” Riley replies, “I slept with you.” Buffy feels hurt and betrayed. The episode concludes by depicting both Faith and Buffy struggling with their feelings in the aftermath of Faith’s encounter with Riley.

“Consequences”

[22] In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, “Consequences” (B3015), Faith’s plan to hide her accidental murder of Deputy Mayor Allan Finch fails when Finch’s body is quickly discovered. Faith struggles with accepting the consequences of her previous actions and the subsequent emotions she experiences. Giles, Buffy, Willow, and Xander, worried about Faith’s increasingly reckless behavior and unwillingness to accept responsibility, meet to discuss how to handle her situation. After Giles suggests that Faith would respond more positively to a one-on-one approach, Xander offers to reach out to Faith because he believes they share a “connection” as a result of a previous sexual encounter. Buffy rejects Xander’s proposition, telling Xander that he was just a fling to Faith.

[23] Xander, goaded by Buffy’s remark, goes to Faith’s motel room in an effort to reason with her and offer support. Immediately after seeing Xander at her door, Faith assumes that he is there for sex. Xander lightheartedly acknowledges Faith’s false assumptions about his intentions and proceeds to emphasize his inferior physical strength. While pointing to his bicep he says to Faith, “See? Feel that. Must be like a wet noodle to you.” After Faith lets him inside, Xander proceeds to offer his support to Faith, telling her that he would be willing to testify that the murder of Allan Finch was not her fault. Again, Faith shifts the conversation to her assumption that Xander is only offering her support because he is interested in having sex with her, accusing Xander of offering to testify so he could bring up the fact that Faith made him her “boy toy” for a night in front of his “geek pals.” Xander denies this. Faith’s attitude shifts and becomes more sexual and predatory. She leans in to caress Xander’s face but he pulls away, rejecting her sexual advances yet again. Faith continues to accuse Xander of only reaching out to her in the hopes of having sex with her again. She says, “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? You just came here because you want another taste.” Again, Xander declines Faith’s advances, saying “no,” but acknowledges that he may be interested in sleeping with her “someday, but not now, not like this.”

[24] Faith disregards Xander's disinterest and continues to act overtly sexual toward him, asking him suggestive questions such as "Lights on or off? Kinks or vanilla?" Xander conveys his sincere desire to help Faith and reminds her of the connection he believes they share. Amused, Faith forcefully grabs Xander's chest and shoves him down onto the bed. She straddles him, roughly places her hands under his shirt, kisses him, and then says, "I see. I want. I take." Xander again rejects her sexual advances saying, "No. It was more than that." Faith places her hands around his neck and squeezes while continuing to lick and kiss Xander. As Xander struggles for breath, Faith reminds him that she could "make him die," further emphasizing her position of power, and Xander's vulnerability in the interaction. His arms claw at her, then drop as Xander loses consciousness. The scene concludes with Angel intervening and knocking Faith unconscious with a baseball bat.

IV. Rape Myths and Gender Stereotypes in Portrayals of Sexual Violence

[25] "Dead Things" (B6013) portrays Katrina's experience as attempted rape. Katrina lacks the ability to give informed consent because she is incapacitated by the Cerebral Dampener. The dialogue between Katrina and Warren in the restaurant conveys to viewers that Katrina has no intentions of having sex with Warren, leading audiences to recognize Katrina as a victim of attempted rape. This episode acknowledges Katrina's lack of consent and feelings of violation. When Katrina regains consciousness, she is outraged, and states that what the Trio was attempting to do was illegal, immoral, and an act of rape. Since the majority of rape victims are female and this is an issue that feminists have brought attention to, audiences can perceive Katrina as a victim. The use of the Cerebral Dampener to incapacitate Katrina is an allegory for the use of alcohol or drugs for date rape. In "Yes Men," (MAS1015), however, when Ward is incapacitated through the use of mind control, the series does not acknowledge his victimization.

[26] The encounter between Ward and Lorelei meets the definition of rape because Lorelei has sexual intercourse with Ward without his consent. Because he is under mind control, he is essentially incapacitated and lacks the ability to make informed, rational decisions. As previously defined, consent must be voluntary and requires the exercise of free will, but Lorelei uses to her power to bend Ward to *her* will, taking advantage of his state of incapacitation. Despite this evidence, however, the episode portrays their encounter as a typical, steamy television sex scene. Furthermore, much of the episode focuses on May's feelings of betrayal, suggesting that May is the wronged party, rather than Ward.

[27] Despite the fact that Ward cannot consent to sex with Lorelei because she is controlling his mind, Ward is not portrayed as a victim. Throughout the episode, Lorelei is portrayed as dominating and powerful, but a desirable woman, nonetheless. Because Ward is masculine and Lorelei feminine, the characters do not fit the stereotypes of victim and perpetrator. Ward's victimization is strikingly similar to the attempted rape of Katrina; both

Ward and Katrina were incapacitated through the use of mind control. Yet, Katrina's attempted rape is portrayed as morally reprehensible, while Ward's violation is not defined as such and even overlooked by *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Likewise, in "Who Are You?," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fails to acknowledge Riley as a victim of rape.

[28] In the sex scene between Faith and Riley, Faith misrepresents her identity and lies to Riley in order to coerce him into having sex with her. In other words, Faith uses fraud as a tactic to perpetrate sexual violence thus negating Riley's consent. He is being deceived. Faith's trickery invalidates Riley's ability to give *informed* consent. Despite the fact that Faith deceives Riley, disregarding his consent and tricking him into having sex with her, the encounter is portrayed as a tender love scene. Moreover, the focus on Buffy's feelings of jealousy and betrayal lead audiences to perceive Buffy as the wronged party, rather than Riley.

[29] Ward and Riley both epitomize the hegemonic male: young, white, heterosexual, handsome, physically strong, competent, skilled in combat, and gainfully employed in extra-military organizations that protect ordinary people (Kimmel 11). As hyper-masculine characters, neither Ward nor Riley are portrayed as victims of sexual violence. These representations reinforce the gender stereotypes and rape myths that have been established in the research literature on male victims of female-perpetrated sexual violence.

[30] Rape myths prevent Ward and Riley from being recognized as victims; each seems too strong and too masculine to be perceived as a victim of rape. Their feelings and emotional well-being are ignored after they are victimized, furthering the myth that men should be strong enough to cope with being raped. Yet, the literature shows that men who are sexually victimized by women find the incident traumatic and feel victimized. They may suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and experience impaired sexual functioning (Fisher and Pina 56). The rape scenes in "Yes Men" and "Who Are You?" trivialize their victimization, portraying the encounters as steamy and romantic, respectively. It is implied that both men enjoyed the sex, which reinforces rape myths that attribute enjoyment to male victims of rape and downplay the trauma male victims of women's sexual violence might feel.

[31] Traditional gender stereotypes also prevent Ward and Riley from being recognized as victims of sexual violence. "Yes Men" reinforces stereotypes that assert that men are always ready and willing to have sex with a woman. It is said that men's desire for sex is an "inherent weakness" that women do not have. Another male character in the episode seems to think Lorelei's powers are amusing and "hot." Lorelei suggests that sex with her is a gift that she bestows upon Ward, despite the fact that Ward cannot consent. Gender stereotypes presume that he would consent if he were fully conscious. Moreover, Lorelei's framing of the incident as a reward for Ward reinforces gender stereotypes that assume sex is something that is given by women and taken by men, and never the other way around.

[32] Other characters blame Ward and Riley for their rapes, and neither man receives any sympathy in these episodes. Fisher and Pina note, “Negative attitudes due to the endorsement of rape myths [and] sex-role or traditional gender stereotypes ... can cause victim blaming” (59). Ward and Riley—who, arguably, have internalized cultural sex norms and rape myths—even blame themselves; they both act guilty and apologize to their significant others. The women in Ward and Riley’s lives (May and Buffy) are allowed to express feelings of jealousy and betrayal in the series, but the shows fail to recognize Ward and Riley’s feelings of trauma or victimization. This approach reinforces gender stereotypes that hold that women are emotional and expressive, while men are unemotional and stoic. Furthermore, Ward and Riley may not acknowledge their victimization due to fears of being stigmatized (Fisher and Pina 59) or fear that they have lost their masculinity (Muehlenhard and Cook).

[33] Research confirms that there is a lack of sympathy for men who are sexually victimized by women. People believe rape is less serious for male victims (Burczyck and Standing). Ward and Riley may not be perceived as victims because they were not physically injured when they were raped. Just because Ward and Riley are not violently assaulted, however, does not mean they were not sexually victimized. “The focus on physical harm equaling rape means that a lack of physical abuse is often erroneously viewed as consent. Therefore, a man who does not display physical injuries after a female perpetrated assault, may be viewed by others as having been involved in consensual sex and later regretting it,” state Fisher and Pina (57).

[34] While it may be difficult for viewers (and characters) to recognize the rapes of hyper-masculine Ward and Riley, audiences are more likely to identify Faith’s sexual assault of Xander as such because he is femininely-coded, and thus compatible with the myth that only females are potential victims of sexual violence. Traditionally, the audience expects the male character to fulfill an active role in sex while the female remains passive (Mulvey). “Consequences” subverts this pattern. From their initial interaction, Xander assumes the passive and feminine role, while Faith’s unwanted sexually dominating behavior, coupled with her physical power over Xander, indicates that Faith inhabits the position of dominance customarily occupied by the masculine figure.

[35] When examining this incident strictly in terms of physical strength, it closely resembles a stereotypical male-on-female sexual assault. As a slayer, Faith possesses superhuman and stereotypically masculine abilities, including exceptional agility and physical strength; she easily overpowers Xander in the scene and ignores his repeated objections to her sexual advances. Faith also resorts to insulting and humiliating Xander. This clear lack of consent and use of physical force allows viewers and other characters in the show to recognize Xander’s incident with Faith as attempted rape. Unlike the cases of Ward and Riley, Xander’s

victimization is acknowledged. Angel, after saving Xander's life by incapacitating Faith, chastises her and tells her that her actions were unacceptable. Willow, although only saying that Faith "hurt" Xander, also recognizes the assault. However, because Xander is male, the episode does not fully explore his victimization.

[36] Like the cases of Ward and Riley, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does not depict how Xander deals with the aftermath of his assault; Xander suffers a brutal sexual assault at Faith's hands yet he bounces back in the next episode with no apparent emotional effect and no emotional insight into what he went through. His trauma, like that of Ward and Riley, is left unexplored and unresolved. Although Xander does not recognize himself as a victim of sexual assault, the audience does. Unlike the masculine victims Ward and Riley, other characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* acknowledge Xander and Katrina's attempted rapes. Both Xander and Katrina's attempted rapes are recognized as such because they fit into the popular imagination of what most would consider rape: a weak, passive (feminine) victim being victimized by a more powerful and dominant (masculine) perpetrator.

V. Conclusion

[37] Cultural gender stereotypes and rape myths prevent others from recognizing men as victims of women's sexual violence, and popular culture reflects, reproduces, and reinforces this pattern. In the depictions of masculine victimization discussed here, *Buffy the Vampires Slayer* and *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* overlook the progressive goals underlying Joss Whedon's deliberate avoidance of portrayals of women as victims of sexual violence. Katrina's victimization is easily recognized because she is a woman who is attacked by men. Because Xander is a femininely-coded male character, his victimization is also recognized, and the audience identifies and accepts Faith as a perpetrator because of her masculine coding. Yet, because he is a male, the series does not give Xander the space to deal with his experience of sexual violence. On the other hand, the masculine male characters of Ward and Riley are not recognized as victims at all.

[38] The representations examined here are problematic because they reinforce and perpetuate false ideas about male victims of sexual violence. Media is a powerful agent of socialization. We need different representations in popular culture in order to change the perception of male victims of rape. If popular culture acknowledges the victimization of men without feminizing them or masculinizing female perpetrators, society at large may begin to recognize men as potential victims.

[39] In her book *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker introduces the concept of hermeneutical injustice as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the

collective hermeneutic resource” (155). Better representations of male victimization in popular culture can redress the epistemic injustice faced by male victims of sexual violence. The recognition of male victimization can give a name to the experiences that real world male victims face. If real world men do not have the resources to name their experiences of victimization, they may be unable fully to realize what has happened to them, compounding their suffering. Naming one’s victimization can enable an individual to seek help in order to cope with and move past their experience of victimization. Moreover, if men who are victimized have their experiences validated within popular culture, they may be empowered to report their victimization to authorities, bringing justice to the perpetrators and increasing societal understanding of the problem of female-perpetrated male sexual victimization.

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