



Bruce McClelland

By Whose Authority? The Magical Tradition, Violence and the Legitimation of the Vampire Slayer



(1) The American superhero of necessity possesses a dual personality: one, like Clark Kent, that fits, or tries to fit, invisibly into the ordinary fabric of society; another, like Superman, whose reserves of power place him far beyond mortal men. This duality is a response to an underlying, and unresolved, dualism in the society in which these heroes uncomfortably fit. The workaday identity accepts the ability of ordinary authority and enforcement structures to identify and contain undesirable elements, such as criminals. The secret identity, however, tacitly acknowledges the limitations of those structures when confronted with the darker motives of human beings.

(2) Buffy, of course, belongs to this essentially American mythological modality of superhero, yet she differs from classical superheroes in significant ways. The most significant departure from the superhero(ine) format in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) is that the undesirables whom Buffy is *chosen* to destroy are not mortal criminals, and law enforcement agencies are not only powerless, they are irrelevant. Thus in the pilot episode for the TV series, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," Willow naively asks Giles, referring to the uncovering of a passel of demons beneath the city, "Shouldn't we call the police?" With his jaded British sigh of acquiescence to the way of things, Giles candidly replies, "They wouldn't believe us, of course." So here we have a shift from the usual mythological pattern in which the hero's good deeds generally result in some punishment of the criminal at the hands of the larger society. As a consequence, Buffy, the ringleader of a band of far more ordinary helpers, is in fact enforcing a kind of vigilante justice. Indeed, her mentor Giles refers to himself as a "Watcher"—a close enough translation of *vigilant*.

(3) American movies and television have always exhibited a fascination with schemes of justice, retribution, punishment, and downright revenge that fly in the face of the overloaded, corrupt, politically controlled system of trial and incarceration. The unexpected success of movies like *Death Wish* and its several sequels reveals a general dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the sanctioned legal system. Yet this glorification of vengeance or at least direct and appropriate punishment remains vicarious, a wish. Classically, such productions always present a lopsided view of the moral dilemma of taking the law into your own hands. At some

point, one has to face the music: there is always some tacked-on epilogue in which vigilante justice is condemned as *wrong*, despite its swiftness, clarity, and seeming efficacy.

(4) With *Buffy* the untidiness of having criminals, alive or dead, to hand over to the "proper authorities" is neatly dispensed with by having the targets of Buffy's displeasure turn instantaneously to vapor or dust upon being dispatched. This is possible, we surmise, because these outlaws are *demonic*. Not exactly unreal, but not of the same substance as you or I.^[1] Yet before these demons are destroyed, sent into oblivion or wherever, they may be indistinguishable from ordinary mortals.^[2] Giles tells Buffy (and us), "A vampire appears to be completely normal until the Feed is upon them [sic]. Only then do they appear mad." ("Welcome to the Hellmouth") Thus, the task of identifying undesirables who *look like us* (an old sci-fi problem, and certainly at the heart of the story of that alien nobleman and lover, Count Dracula) falls only to those who possess a skill by virtue of being Chosen. This heightened sense is one that must be kept sharp: "A slayer should be able to see them anywhere." (Giles; "Welcome to the Hellmouth").

(5) Were Buffy's enemies characterized as mortal, we might feel less at ease concerning the absoluteness with which Buffy first identifies, then vanquishes her adversaries, rule of law be damned. Whatever doubt may surround a given suspect's guilt, which is exemplified by unrepentance (since we see that repentant werewolves and vampires, like Oz or Spike, are not destroyed, although they must be confined), vanishes as quickly as the particles of a dead demon once Buffy's perception has homed in. No one ever questions the accuracy of Buffy's judgment, and the proof is in the poof.

(6) We may conclude, perhaps, that this undying faith in the accuracy of Buffy's perception is a result of her repeated success in attacking the demonic. Even Riley, an officer in a more organized paramilitary group of vampire vigilantes, admits, "I think [Buffy] sees things the rest of us don't. We should follow her lead." ("Superstar") But where does this sanction come from? Whence does she derive her authority in the first place?

Early Slayers

(7) Whether or not the creator of *BtVS*, Joss Whedon, or the show's writers are aware of it, the tradition of the *vampire slayer* has a long history.

(8) In southeastern Europe, where folklore about the vampire originated (in Bulgaria, not Romania, by the way), certain classes of people were, like Buffy, chosen, marked, to become the natural enemies of vampires. Vampires, according to the stories of Balkan villagers, were only about at night and often had no visible form, although it was also claimed that if they survived detection and destruction for a period of a year, they took on the appearance of a local villager. (Indeed, even today, there are Bulgarian villages where the residents are willing to provide the phone numbers of known vampires.)

(9) As corpses terrorizing the living at night, vampires could not be destroyed except by ritual means immediately before or after burial. Vampires that could not be detected became the objects of pursuit of certain vigilantes with the power to identify and destroy them. A *sâbotnik*, who was someone (almost always a man) born on a Saturday (*sâbota* being the Bulgarian word for Saturday, the sabbath), or

a *vampirdŋia*, the offspring of a woman and a vampire, could detect and destroy ambulatory vampires. So useful were these people at times of vampire epidemics that they might even make a decent living as fearless vampire killers.

(10) The tradition of vampire killers is a topic worthy of investigation, but it is cited here merely to suggest that long before Buffy there was a tradition of investing selected individuals with the magical perceptions and skills necessary to confront the demonic head-on. But since this aspect of vampire folklore is less well-known in the West even than the Balkan vampire itself, there is no point in attempting to deduce some historical continuity between late medieval Bulgarian and late twentieth-century American understanding of the vampire motif.

(11) What is of significance, however, is that the village *vampirdŋia* or *sābotnik* was, in a sense, *chosen*. To become one of these *seers* (and note again the connection with *watching* and *seeing*), one had to have predispositions that were the result of conditions that obtained before or right at birth: physical abnormalities, day of birth, vampire paternity. So even in the old village tradition, one did not choose to become a Slayer. One was chosen.

(12) The imagery of the vampire that pervades *BtVS* is not, of course, derived directly from Eastern European folklore (McClelland 1999). Rather, it is a blend of borrowed literary (essentially post-Stoker and significantly post-Rice) conceptions of the vampire and, to a much greater extent, American and Western European ideas about witchcraft and Satan, especially as they were imagined from the late medieval period through the Inquisition (Cohn 1975, chap. 8). From a functionalist perspective, it can be argued (Klaniczay 1990; chaps. 9 & 10) that witchcraft and vampirism have related social functions. Furthermore, the complementary distribution of the two seems to correspond to a greater or lesser degree to the distribution of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. It was in Catholic countries, let us not forget, where witches and heretics were subjected to the terrors of the Inquisition. And it was during the Inquisition that another class of "slayers" came to be known, the *benandanti*, who were reputed to be able to leave their bodies during sleep (that is, in an altered state of consciousness) and go off to fight witches at their *sabbats* (Ginzburg 1983). These slayers, too, were marked: they were born, according to the testimony of the trials in which they were accused of consorting with demons, with cauls, which are amniotic membranes enveloping the skull at birth.

(13) So whether we are talking about vampires in Eastern Europe, or witches in the West, these groups of ostensibly threatening individuals provoked the creation of a class of antagonists whose function was first to identify evil and then take action on behalf of the larger society. In neither case were these early slayers recognized as official authorities, either ecclesiastical or political; they passed no tests, nor did they work their way up some ladder of patronage. They were simply chosen.

(14) Being chosen, naturally, is a credential that is indisputable, because it is signified by marks or conditions whose chance nature is attributed to an impersonal will. The *benandanti*, *sābotnici* and *vampirdŋii* were hardly responsible for their birth defects, birthdays, or parents. Since the symbolism of being chosen is inclusive and generally agreed upon in advance, almost anyone meeting the proper conditions may be elected willy-nilly to an office whose primary responsibility is to rid the world of evil demons. A slayer may thus be instantiated whenever the need arises: it is not, for example, that hard to find people born on Saturday. And this conformance

to a symbolic condition is all that is necessary to legitimate violent actions that in fact violate taboos or laws all in the name of restoring order.

The Chosen, Magical Texts, and Legitimacy

(15) Buffy, we recall from both the original film and the TV series, is similarly chosen. Despite her continuous protestations, she is the receiver of a vocation whose duties are both sacred and obligatory. Conferred upon her through—not *by*—Giles, the mantle of *slayer* is apparently steeped in tradition. And nothing legitimates like the past: “Because you *are* the Slayer. In each generation, a slayer is born. One girl. The Chosen One” (Giles in “Welcome to the Hellmouth”). “For as long as there’ve been vampires, there’s been the Slayer. One girl in all the world, a chosen one.” (Giles in “The Harvest”).

(16) If the selection of Buffy is ordained, we may ask, what is the basis of her selection? What is the mark by which she is recognized as the One? What defect or superior capacity isolates her from her peers and, in fact, condemns her to an adolescence/post-adolescence in which “normal” (sexual) relationships lie beyond her reach (a situation brought sharply into focus, for example, in “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”)? What, finally, is the “tradition” by which authority is conferred—where does it begin and why?

(17) Since Buffy is herself ignorant, until it is announced to her in the gym (*BtVS* original film), of her own powers, she can provide us with no real insight into her own deep nature: before becoming a Slayer, she is nothing but a cheerleader, a blonde California high-school girl whose very name is meant to suggest lightness, lack of substance. Buffy’s antipathetic foil, the even more superficial Cordelia, implies that Buffy is more substantial than we might at first think. But in the final analysis, it is the British librarian Giles who, as the currently incarnate guardian of the tradition of the Slayer, reveals Buffy’s occult mission.

(18) Without Giles (or Merrick, as the Watcher, Giles’ antecedent, in the movie version is called), Buffy would never have figured out for herself who she was. Without Giles, Buffy’s serial murders of ugly kids in bad clothes (not to mention make-up) would have landed her in prison. Of course, the real social necessity for dispatching vampires is hard to argue with: “Look at his jacket,” Buffy instructs Giles while pointing at a tastelessly dressed boy on the dance floor, trying to prove that she can ‘sense’ vampires, “He’s got the sleeves rolled up. And the shirt? Deal with that outfit for a moment . . . *trust me*: only someone who’s been living underground for ten years would think *that* was still the look” (“The Harvest”).

(19) We may consider Giles something of a “keeper of the texts,” insofar as he seems to have, in a California high school library, an enormous collection of books with such unlikely names as *Vampyr* and *Witchcraft* and *Witches: Historic Roots to Modern Practice*, the latter unfortunately checked out by Xander. (“The Witch”) Giles’ personal link to the literate mystical tradition is underscored by a confused reference by Willow to his previous job as “the curator at some British museum, or *the* British Museum.” (This might even be an unwitting homage to Bram Stoker, who obtained a good deal of his knowledge of Transylvanian folklore and of Dracula at *the* British Museum.)

(20) Perhaps in no other place on the planet is a high-school library so absolutely superfluous as in Sunnydale, California. It is therefore all the more remarkable that

Rupert Giles, as the only constant grown-up in the show, is able to attract a small force of adolescent avengers into its chambers (not remarkably, there are rarely, if ever, any other students there). But it is here, in Giles' rather comfortable and relaxed space, that it is possible to learn the cosmology of the ancestral race of demons, as well as the spells and potions necessary to counteract their evil designs against the present inhabitants of the upper world:

(21) This world is older than any of you know, and contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons, Demons walked the earth; made it their home— their Hell. In time they (the demons) lost their purchase on this reality, and the way was made for the mortal animals. For Man. What remains of the Old Ones are vestiges: certain magicks, certain creatures. ("The Harvest")

(22) The texts that Giles has access to (supplemented by the stuff that computer-geek Willow finds on the Web) are contained in ancient tomes (see, even, the spines of the books on the page called "The Library" at the official Web site (<http://www.buffy.com/library/index.html> as of 9/28/00)). As a very nice touch, the prop masters and set decorators on the show have gone to the trouble of including books with Reformation-style woodcuts and actual Latin text on their pages, though the pages are shown only for a fleeting frame or two, so it is difficult to find out which texts are being consulted, or why. If nothing else, we know that these pages make reference to both the Old and New Testaments (e.g. Psalm 78 and Luke 16, respectively), but beyond that, it is likely that the pages were selected arbitrarily, representing a Hollywood look and feel of "ancient mystical texts." It is not expected, in other words, that the devotees of the show would actually (as I did) freeze the frames of the turning pages in order to read them. Much less is it assumed that the viewers know enough Latin to be able to read these pages if they did bother to freeze them. There are frequent and enormous howlers when Giles recites pseudo-Latin spells, enough to embarrass anyone who remembers even a bit of Latin morphology.

(23) In "The Witch," for example, Giles retrieves the exact book used by a witch (a cheerleader's envious mother, in fact) to cast a spell on Buffy. Like a high priest, he opens it and begins intoning in a "Latin" whose ungrammaticality we might be able to ignore if he didn't also provide a "translation" of the Latin spell:

*Centrum est obscurus, tenebrae respiratus.*The center is dark, darkness breathes.

(24) Or in "Superstar," while Xander is casually leafing through some powerful book of spells, at the very second he says "Right. You can't just go '*librum incendere*'" the book spontaneously combusts. Angered by Xander's lack of proper respect for the magical power contained in his books, Giles snaps, "Xander, don't speak Latin in front of the books."

(25) This use of broken Latin is intended to invoke, by its very mysteriousness and by its reference to the language of the medieval Church, the Western European demonological tradition. (Egyptian hieroglyphics ('sacred writing') functioned similarly in such movies as *The Mummy*: shorthand for a lost, non-Christian religious system which by nature was linked to magic. The Latin in which the offending Satanic spells were supposedly written is, of course, the language in which the Church made its high-flown, theologically overwhelming accusations against often illiterate "heretics." Much later, through the Reformation up to the nineteenth-century theosophical movements with their romantic obfuscation, the projected

fantasies of the Inquisitors were reimagined as authentic texts.

(26) It is not the *actual* history of demonology (and certainly NOT vampirism, which in its authentic state was purely oral, after all) that *BtVS* cares about invoking. Rather, it is the vague but widespread sense that the philosophical dualism so vehemently attacked by the Church^[3] is still heretical. Paganistic and polytheistic beliefs in demons are therefore still deserving of annihilation. The attack on heretical beliefs in demons has been transposed, however, to the demons themselves. The obscure spells dredged up from the demonological writings in Giles' curiously nefarious collection, by virtue of their links to a period in which real social action was taken with impunity against "witches" are proof enough of the legitimacy of the struggle.

(27) The cosmology of demons, Old Ones, and vampires (the latter monsters resulting from the impure miscegenation between demons and humans ("The Harvest")) reinforces the interpretation that the conflict between good and evil is ongoing. The eternal nature of the battle, projected into the present and future, itself legitimates all actions taken to destroy the prehistoric inhabitants whose envy and resentment lie behind a plot to reverse what might actually be seen as an injustice. Like the transgressed Native American burial grounds whose vengeful rage is personified and animated in Stephen King movies and the like (e.g. *Pet Sematary*, *Poltergeist*), the aboriginal inhabitants of contemporary Silicon Valley—aka Hellmouth or *Bocca del Inferno*—represent a repressed but persistent threat to reclaim the world of shopping malls and cheerleading to which Buffy belongs.

(28) Here, then, is why Buffy is the Chosen: in the movie more than in the TV show, she is the archetype of the postmodern, the perfect embodiment of the slick democratizing values which would be undercut by any admission of what had been displaced to make way for post-capitalism. She is first discovered by Merrick^[4] in a shopping mall elevator and again later in a high-school gymnasium after cheerleading practice.

(29) She is common in other ways: we learn that in her past-life alter-ego dreams, she was a "slave in Virginia," "a servant girl or barmaid" in medieval England or New England. She thus represents the common (read: dominated) individual who is mistreated by the upper classes. With such a reincarnational pedigree, Buffy is not only entitled, but obliged to rectify centuries of social injustice. Disdain for the authorities may be the result of a perception that they are members of the dominant class.

(30) Such a reference to her social inferiority is not anomalous. Rather, this status is frequently associated with those who are chosen to restore social order by means of violent transgression. Indeed, as Bourdieu points out,

Sacrilegious transgressions may be delegated to an inferior being, both feared and despised, a sacrificer and scapegoat whose role is to take away ill fortune. (Bourdieu 1990, p. 234)

(32) *BtVS*, then, represents an updating of at least two significant motifs: first, the idea of Satan (paralleled by the figure of the subterranean Master in the show) “having servants amongst living men and women” (Cohn 1975, p. 63), who have a demonic interest in inverting the current social order; and second, the notion that violent rites performed outside the law without benefit of evidentiary proceedings may be legitimated by invoking popular notions about late medieval demonology. Magical invocations in Latin are a means of summoning, or encountering, the repressed demons. Destruction of vampires by ritual means (with the usual paraphernalia) is a legitimate obligation, which must take place outside the law because the very power of these evil beings allows them to go undetected by ordinary mortals. The drift from the original concern with vampires toward a more generic interest in demons is perhaps not merely a scriptwriter’s trick. There is a natural discomfort in the American psyche with the truth of all vampire folklore: the fact is, in the Balkan imagination, killing a vampire is a harmless act, since in reality people who are considered vampires are also known to be dead. The attack on witchcraft in the West, on the other hand, resulted in the torture and murder of living people. The violence of the Inquisition is more deeply embedded in American consciousness than the mock violence of vampire lore.

(33) Buffy becomes a *demon* slayer more than a vampire slayer, and the imagery used to legitimate her actions before an audience more familiar with the fantasies of Satanism (a pseudo-religion which never really took hold in Orthodox countries) and Inquisitorial persecution is clearly derived from popular notions about the Middle Ages. At the very center of *BtVS* is an occult library, and in those obscure books which no one read anyway are to be found the reasons why Buffy is allowed to get away with murder.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Cohn, Norman. *Europe’s Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.

Forsyth, Neil. *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Translated by John and Anne Tedeschi. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

Klaniczay, Gabor. *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*. Translated by Susan Singerman. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.

McClelland, Bruce. *Sacrifice, Scapegoat, Vampire: The Social and Religious Origin of the Bulgarian Folkloric Vampire*. Charlottesville: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, 1999.

McGinn, Bernard. *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994.

Stoyanov, Yuri. *The Hidden Tradition in Europe: The Secret History of Medieval Christian Heresy*. London: Penguin Books, 1994.

[1] In an interview with Joss Whedon included on the VHS tape of "Angel" and "The Puppet Show" Buffy's creator explains that the series' signature "dusting" serves three purposes: (1) to remind audiences that those Buffy kills are not human; (2) to instantaneously get rid of all the bodies; (3) because it looks "real cool."

[2] The conflation of vampires with the more generic class, demons, is accomplished early in the series, presumably to meet the technical demands of plotting the show week after week. In "Welcome to the Hellmouth," Giles says, "Not just vampires . . . Werewolves, *incubi*, *succubi*. They're all real!"

[3] The attacks on dualistic heresies are largely responsible for the emergence of the figure of Satan in Western consciousness as an evil usurper rather than, as he is portrayed in the Old Testament, a tester of moral commitment (McGinn 1994; Forsyth 1987). See also (Stoyanov 1994).

[4] A cryptic reference to Meric Casaubon, perhaps? Meric Casaubon in 1659 edited and published a transcription of a mystical work that involved automatic writing between Dr. John Dee, mathematician and alchemist to Elizabeth Regina, and Edward Kelley, an alchemist-magician whose reputation did not stand up quite so well. The manuscript purported to have been dictated by the Angels in a language called Enochian, which had its own mystical (quasi-Hebrew-quasi-alchemical) alphabet.

Merrick so spelled is a common enough Anglo name, while Meric Casaubon is relatively obscure. The book edited by the latter was known as *A True and Faithful Relation of What passed for many Yeers Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits: Tending (had it Succeeded) To a General Alteration of most STATES and KINGDOMES in the World*.

A coincidental vampire connection is noted in Donald C. Laycock's *The Complete Enochian Dictionary: A Dictionary of the Angelic Language* as revealed to Dr. John Dee and Edward Kelley (1978):

Prague during the reign of King Rudolf II was devoted to the Hermetic arts and sciences which fascinated its monarch to the exclusion of all else. King Stephen of Poland, who had his seat at Cracow, was related to the Hungarian Bathori family which legend identifies with Count Dracula.