

“What’s more real? A sick girl in an institution... Or some kind of supergirl...”:

The Question of Madness in “Normal Again,” a feminist reading.

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[1] Alternative realities and dream worlds have consistently held legitimacy and power within the Buffyverse. The best example of this occurs when Vamp Willow from the alternative universe of “The Wish” (3009) arrives in the “real” Sunnydale in “Doppelgangland” (3016). This gives weight to a reading of the season six episode “Normal Again” (6017) that interprets Buffy’s delusion of confinement in a mental institution as not simply a hallucination but also as a representation of an alternative reality. This interpretation is reinforced by the ambiguity of the episode’s final scene, which sees Buffy, still in the mental institution, pronounced catatonic. Such a reading has implications for the meaning of the Buffyverse and its message of female empowerment. There is a tradition within feminist criticism of reading female madness as a challenge to the patriarchal order; most notably, Sandra Gilbert and Susan M. Gubar pioneered this approach in their 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic*. However, in her 1998 book *The Madwoman Can’t Speak, Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* Marta Caminero-Santangelo questions the subversive power of the madwoman and argues that the Gilbert and Gubar reading denies the marginalization that results from being labeled insane. Both these readings illuminate important aspects of “Normal Again” because Buffy’s madness can be interpreted from either critical standpoint in whichever universe the viewer assumes is the “real” one.

[2] Gilbert and Gubar’s book deals with “The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,” as its subtitle indicates. They offer interpretations of texts by authors such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Mary Shelley, and Emily and Charlotte Brönte, texts which they view as having been created

against the backdrop of a literary culture so profoundly patriarchal that for a woman even to “attempt the pen” was considered almost insane. They argue that these women writers “almost obsessively create characters who enact their own, covert authorial anger ... [T]hey project what seems to be the energy of their own despair into passionate, even melodramatic characters who act out the subversive impulses every woman inevitably feels when she contemplates the ‘deep-rooted’ evils of patriarchy ... [It is] as if the very process of writing had itself liberated a madwoman, a crazy and angry woman, from a silence in which neither she nor her author can continue to acquiesce” (77). The figure of the madwoman is for them, then, a powerful medium through which the female author expresses her own rage.

[3] Marta Caminero-Santangelo, on the other hand, objects to the interpretation of the madwoman as an expression of female power. She writes, “Madness is not rage or even hate but hopelessness — not a challenge to constraining representations but a complete capitulation to them” (17). She points out that, by celebrating madness, Gilbert and Gubar, like French feminist theorists, “duplicate the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality” (2). Drawing on post-WWII American women’s writing, Caminero-Santangelo argues that the madwoman is silenced by the processes that label her insane and institutionalize her. This is most notable in first-hand accounts of institutionalization (fictionalized or autobiographical) that recount experiences of madness. Here, the madwoman has lost the ability to communicate effectively with others and thus her ability to transform her societal surroundings. Caminero-Santangelo explains, “Whatever the liberatory potential of madness in theory, these women who have experienced madness and then written about it have found it to be nothing less than a total silencing” (43). Although Caminero-Santangelo acknowledges that the madwoman may express resistance to patriarchal constraints, she differs clearly from Gilbert and Gubar in emphasizing that the madwoman offers only the “illusion of power” (3), for

in her moment of madness she is denied both credibility and agency, and she is quite literally reinscribed within the same patriarchal constraints she is said to transgress.

[4] A contrast similar to the one between these two interpretive models of the madwoman exists between the different feminist approaches to *BTVS*. In her article, "I'm Buffy and You're ... History': The Postmodern Politics of *Buffy*," Patricia Pender identifies the central question asked by feminists as "does Buffy represent an empowering feminist role model or a return to, and reinscription of, repressive patriarchal stereotypes?" (36). As Pender does, we would like to suggest viewing the series as subverting patriarchal ideologies rather than either conforming completely with them or overthrowing them. The subversive potential of the show lies, at least in part, in its ability to appropriate certain dominant stereotypes and assign them new and dissonant underlying meanings. The classic example of this strategy is Joss Whedon's well-known account of how he initially conceived of Buffy: "The first thing I ever thought of when I thought of *Buffy: The Movie* was the little ... blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed, in every horror movie. The idea of *Buffy* was to subvert that idea, that image, and create someone who was a hero where she had always been a victim" (quoted in *General Buffy Trivia: The Buffy Trivia Guide*). For us, then, the question becomes whether or not the use of the stereotype of the madwoman in "Normal Again," is subversive.

[5] *The Madwoman in the Attic* begins with a discussion of literary "authority" that argues that "the metaphor of literary paternity" (6) – briefly, the idea that literary creativity is strictly a male quality – has dominated Western culture to such an extent that it "no doubt prevented many women from ever 'attempting the pen' [...] and caused enormous anxiety in generations of those women who were 'presumptuous' enough to dare such an attempt" (7). Because women had for so long been the objects of male writing, it was extremely difficult for them to take up the subject position of author and creator. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women

writers were crippled by two male-authored stereotypes of women and their roles in society: the “angel in the house” and her polar opposite the “monster woman.” The “angel in the house” is “the eternal type of female purity” (20): these “women are defined as wholly passive, [and] completely void of generative power [...] [I]n the metaphysical emptiness their ‘purity’ signifies they are, of course, *self-less*, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests” (21). Such a woman “*has no story of her own*” (22) and exists only at the service of others. Warren’s cybernetic girlfriend April (not to mention Spike’s BuffyBot) is a near perfect example of this type. April’s anguished questioning of her own existence – “I’m only supposed to love him. If I can’t do that, what am I for? What do I exist for?” (“I Was Made to Love You,” 5015) – is remarkably similar to the couplet Gilbert and Gubar quote from Coventry Patmore’s poetry book *The Angel in the House*: “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure” (23). The opposite of this angelic woman – whom Spike might describe as “the other, not-so-pleasant” woman – is the monster-woman. “[T]hreatening to replace her angelic sister, [she] embodies intransigent female autonomy [...] [She] incarnate[s] male dread of women and, specifically, male scorn of female creativity” (29). Unlike the angel in the house, the monster-woman has her own story, one which cannot be controlled by men, and one over which she alone has “authority.”

[6] Viewing *BtVS* within these parameters, it seems appropriate to label Buffy a monster-woman. Within the reality of the Buffyverse as we know it, Buffy is a powerful young woman who has been generally seen by the viewer to be largely in control of her situation, at least in some ways; the story of her life is her own and she is its author, so to speak. Episodes such as “Becoming, Part II” (2022) and “Anne” (3001) see her demonstrate her confidence in both her own power and her identity: she is “Buffy, the Vampire Slayer” and she needs no other weapon than herself. In “What’s My Line, Part II” (2010), “Helpless” (3012), “Graduation Day, Part

I" (3021), and "Checkpoint" (5012) she is seen rejecting the control of the Watcher's Council, which is a major representation of patriarchal structure in the Buffyverse. Even her second death in "The Gift" (5022) comes at her own choice. However, after her return from heaven, Buffy is less and less sure of herself. Willow and the other Scoobies essentially revoke Buffy's authority over her own life by bringing her back into the world – into her story, which she felt she had definitively finished – without her consent. Buffy's resulting identity crisis can be said to reach its peak in "Normal Again," which sees the Slayer reduced, at least in her own mind, to a confused, inert, and practically mute patient in a mental hospital. Gilbert and Gubar write that such a state of confusion can, for the female author, be a product of the prejudices of the patriarchal system against female creativity and power. When Buffy begins to doubt the possibility of her own existence, she asks, "[W]hat's more real? A sick girl in an institution ... or some kind of supergirl ... chosen to ... fight demons and ... save the world. That's ridiculous." This dismissal of the potential that she - or any other girl - could ever hold such power resembles the type of anxiety that Gilbert and Gubar argue women must deal with in the face of a dominant point of view which sees female creativity and independence as either impossible or monstrous.

[7] Significantly, it is Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew - who can be seen as representatives of a younger generation of white men angered by their loss of traditional power - who send the demon that finally pushes Buffy to see herself in this light. After Buffy's return from heaven, which as we have already seen posed a challenge to her authority, the Geek Trio do their best to augment her feelings of displacement by appropriating that authority again and again, taking her out of the normal flow of time in both "Life Serial" (6005) and "Dead Things" (6013), literally trying to erase her from the world in "Gone" (6011), and sending her out of it once more in "Normal Again." The trio, and particularly the vilely - and violently - misogynistic Warren, are frustrated by the power the Slayer holds in Sunnydale.

Making her believe that her own story of her life is “ridiculous” is for them yet another attempt to wrest that power from her. Ultimately, however, this attempt fails. Buffy overcomes the self-doubt caused by the patriarchal labelling of her as a monster-woman; she chooses the antidote, and her life in Sunnydale, thus regaining authority over her own story.

[8] Continuing the analysis from the point of view that the Buffyverse as we know it is the “real” reality, but doing so according to Caminero-Santangelo’s model, Buffy’s demon-induced hallucinations and her subsequent return to mental health would be considered the loss and recovery of agency. Buffy’s hallucinations are debilitating and they undermine her ability to communicate with others. In the scene with Dawn, Buffy has obviously been talking aloud while hallucinating, and Dawn understands the hallucination to be Buffy’s “ideal reality” where she does not exist. Buffy can say only “Dawn, I... I didn’t mean” before Dawn leaves. Similarly, Buffy is unable to respond to any of Spike’s interpretation of her problems, or to his ultimatum that she tell her friends about their relationship or else he will. Buffy also explicitly equates being institutionalized with being forced into silence when she tells Willow what happened when she told her parents about the first vampires she saw: “[T]hey completely freaked out. They thought there was something seriously wrong with me. So they sent me to a clinic. [...] I was only there a couple of weeks. I stopped talking about it, and they let me go.”

[9] Within the Buffyverse, in general, the metaphorical is made literal and the psychological material. The most obvious example is that Sunnydale High is literally hell. A second example is the Kindestod in “Killed by Death” (2018): Buffy’s fear of hospitals does not “explain away” the Kindestod because the demon has a material existence even if it does “represent” such a fear. In the same way, the demon of “Normal Again” can be read as the materialization of what Keith Topping, when writing about this episode, describes as the “primal fear [...] that madness is simply

one bad day away" (149, quoted in Gobatto 122). The demonic poison is a representation of madness as Caminero-Santangelo describes it, "inevitably surpass[ing] its causes, overshadow[ing] them, and render[ing] helpless the wom[a]n in its grasp (51)." Thus, even though it is the demon's poison that actually causes Buffy's hallucinations, there is also another set of causes that contribute to Buffy's first choice to refuse the antidote and accord the asylum the status of reality. Throughout the episode, the multiple sources of distress in Buffy's life all trigger hallucinations. Buffy feels inadequate in her roles as both provider and parental figure for Dawn, and she is unable to communicate honestly with Xander and Willow; this latter relates particularly to her self-loathing that is both because of, and expressed in, her relationship with Spike. She specifically acknowledges her depression when she says to Willow, "Even before the demon ... I've been so detached. [...] Every day I try to ...snap out of it. Figure out why I'm like that." Her retreat into the world of the asylum is a rejection of these difficult relationships and responsibilities, and a return to a child-like state where she no longer has to cope with any of this. Significantly, both her parents are present in the hallucination. In the asylum, Joyce generally speaks to Buffy as one would speak to a young child, calling her "baby" more than once and telling her, "You're our little girl, Buffy. [...] Mom and Dad just want to take you home and take care of you."

[10] Buffy's final choice to refuse the reality of the asylum and accept her life in Sunnydale is inspired by Joyce's words within her hallucination. In sharp contrast to her previous infantilization of Buffy, Joyce addresses Buffy as though she knows Buffy's strength: "Buffy, fight it. You're too good to give in, you can beat this thing. [...] You've got ... a world of strength in your heart. I know you do. You just have to find it again. Believe in yourself." Although her mother is presumably encouraging Buffy to escape from her delusion of herself as the Slayer, Buffy understands Joyce's words to mean to choose once more to live the difficult life that faces her in the real

world. Presenting escape from mental illness as a choice must be recognized as problematic; however, here Buffy's hallucinations, the trigger for madness, do have a mystical source and Buffy has previously shown herself capable of resisting mystical mind-control, notably in "Prophecy Girl" (1012) and "Buffy vs. Dracula" (5001). Overall, Buffy's struggle with mental illness, even though mystically-induced, continues to show Buffy in a positive light to viewers who are looking for a strong female role model on television. In her response to this episode in the collection *Girls Who Bite Back*, Nancy Gobatto discusses her own struggle with depression, making a parallel between herself and Buffy: "I have, for many years now, felt as though if I could only put my finger on what's 'wrong' with me, I would be able to enter some sort of better existence. [...] The truth is my own notion that I am in need of fixing has become a powerful tool I can use to distance myself from taking risks or simply living life. As long as I maintain that I am somehow unwell, un-whole, or unworthy, I don't have to face the responsibilities I am afraid of (even if it's not saving the world from the forces of evil). Like Buffy" (125-6).

[11] Thus, we posit that both interpretive models would, if for different reasons, argue that a reading of "Normal Again" that privileges the Buffyverse as the "real" reality, contains positive messages of female empowerment. More problematic, however, is the alternative interpretation that takes the asylum as the "real" reality. Gilbert and Gubar would likely still argue that asylum-Buffy is a subversive figure. According to their theory, Buffy could be seen as the author of her own delusion. She has created a world based on, to quote Joss Whedon, a "very simple concept, that this silly woman no one takes seriously is actually the most powerful woman in the world" (*News – Sci-Fi/Fantasy*). Inside her delusion – and her delusion is obviously very, very real to her – she has felt, at least until recently, empowered and respected. In other words, her insanity is indeed an experience of "authority" for her: like the monster-woman, asylum-Buffy "generates" her own

story (28). Labelling her insane and having her committed - and on this point Gilbert and Gubar would likely be in agreement with Caminero-Santangelo - is an attempt by patriarchal society to silence her and infantilize her. Gilbert and Gubar, however, would probably argue that this attempt is unsuccessful because, although Buffy's body has been confined by patriarchal constraints, in her mind she continues to live by her own standards, under her own terms. This madwoman is the madwoman as described by Gilbert and Gubar: "liberated [...] from a silence in which [...] she [...] can[not] continue to acquiesce" (77). Within her mind, Buffy returns to the world where her true strength lies, where she is viewed as a capable and strong young woman and not a helpless child. Buffy's choice (and it is clearly presented as a choice) to live in her delusion can be viewed in this light as a rebellious and subversive act.

[12] However, Caminero-Santangelo would likely disagree. She does not follow what Toril Moi describes as Gilbert and Gubar's "troubling" tendency to read the madwoman as the author's double, a reading strategy that insists on "the identity of author and character" (61). Instead, Caminero-Santangelo makes an important distinction between the madwoman and the female author, a distinction that hinges on the woman's ability or dis-ability to "produce representations recognizable as meaningful within society" (11). The author is able to respond to patriarchal discourses, to "counter representation with representation" (11); however, the madwoman lacks that power. Thus, asylum-Buffy lacks both credibility and agency. For when the author is no longer conflated with the character, we see that it is not Buffy who communicates the content of her delusions to us, the viewers or "readers" of the show. The character is nearly incapable of verbal communication, and ultimately, she is catatonic. The author, not Buffy herself, is the one who represents to us both asylum-Buffy *and* her delusions. Consequently, although this act of the author's may communicate to the viewer the content of the madwoman's

albeit subversive delusions, this does not in any way liberate asylum-Buffy – if we understand liberation as the recovery of agency. Catatonic-Buffy has fully retreated from the social order. This retreat can be considered resistance, but as Caminero-Santangelo emphasizes, “when the social order leaves no alternative but madness, the next logical step is to assert that the social order must be changed” (180). Asylum-Buffy’s resistance has no power to change the world outside (or inside) the asylum; however, the author’s communication of Buffy’s story to us, the viewers, does have that potential to be transformative. Therefore, while this reading of the asylum-reality would reject asylum-Buffy as a subversive figure, it would not deny the show’s potential to communicate to viewers the necessity for social change.

[13] We, as two fans and viewers of *BtVS*, have tried to draw on both these interpretive models to understand why “Normal Again,” and particularly its ambiguous final show, is so jarring to our “normal” perspective of the show. That as fans we should want to believe that the Buffyverse as we know it is the “real” reality is perhaps not surprising. After all, we have devoted significant time and energy to our engagement with the show’s universe, and, as author Neil Gaiman understands, being told point blank that something we have invested so much in is in fact fake, even within its own context, is perhaps the ultimate let down for a fan: “There are things that you can do as an author in a narrative that are unfair to a reader. Ever read something really interesting that ended with a disappointing ‘And he woke up. It had all been a dream’? Normally it tends to be an incredibly irritating ending to a good book or short story, because it breaks part of the compact between reader and writer, that, in fiction, you’re being told something that matters, and that you’ll care about, and which will have consequences, and won’t leave you feeling cheated” (“rhubarb and cherries and fireworks, oh my ...”). Beyond its effect on our desire for the Buffyverse to maintain its internal logic, however, the episode is also disruptive because it distances us from the Buffyverse and forces us to acknowledge that it is –

yes, it's true – just a show. This episode uncomfortably places the viewer in the position of catatonic-Buffy, dreaming of a world in which one girl does have the strength and skill to stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness: the power to save the world. A lot. By emphasizing the fantastic aspects of the show, "Normal Again" forces us to ask what *is* real about the Buffyverse as we know it? Caminero-Santangelo offers a helpful perspective here in her emphasis on the need for a move beyond the resistance figured in the madwoman to an engagement with the potential for liberation, and for social transformation. Thus, "Normal Again" prompts us to re-examine not only *BtVS's* engagement with the feminist struggle both within and outside the Buffyverse, but also our own engagement with this struggle in the "real world."

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