

**Pernicious Pregnancy and Redemptive Motherhood:  
Narratives of Reproductive Choice in Joss Whedon's *Angel***

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[1] Despite ending over a decade ago, Joss Whedon's *Angel* remains popular not only among fans, but also as a site of critical scholarship. Although perhaps never as popular as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the show from which the spinoff was born, the series did well during its run and remains a cult classic whose somewhat dark exploration of themes such as redemption, fate, and heroism still resonate with fans and scholars today. In particular, both scholarship and popular work on *Angel* have explored representations of masculinity, paralleling the critical attention given to Buffy's negotiations of femininity. Indeed, while Whedon has stated that he created Buffy in part to subvert the stereotype of the vulnerable female that has dominated the horror genre, *Angel*'s male lead can be read as a movement back towards traditional configurations of masculine heroism. Yet as Calvert points out, although *Angel* is often read as being "about" masculinity, the show actually devotes a significant amount of attention to its female characters, and particularly, to their (often monstrous) reproductive bodies (1). Because of this preoccupation, as well as the continued positioning of its creator as a feminist voice in both television and geek culture, it is important to continue interrogating the show's gendered representations. In this article, I add to the significant and continuously growing body of work on gender in *Angel* by examining the ways in which three of the show's most prominent female characters grapple with the dangers of forced reproduction.

[2] As has been noted in previous work, monstrous pregnancy and monstrous mothers are repeated themes in *Angel*, and three of the series' most prominent female characters experience at least one instance of their bodies being used as a means of monstrous reproduction (Calvert; Hills and Williams; Wilcox; Battis). Furthermore, these same three characters,

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Cordelia, Fred, and Darla, all meet their demise as a result of these monstrous pregnancies. Given the significance of dangerous pregnancy as a theme in *Angel* and its consequences for its female characters, it is worth examining the way in which these pregnancies play out and what their representation might communicate about the need for women to have reproductive autonomy. I argue that while it is possible to read the dangerous pregnancies of Cordelia, Fred, and Darla as a form of “pro-choice” narrative that emphasizes the dangers of forced reproduction on women and their bodies, this “pro-choice” discourse is constrained by the circumstances under which their pregnancies take place, and in particular, by the outcome of Darla’s pregnancy.

[3] My analysis of the “pro-choice” narrative put forward by *Angel* is informed by my own understanding that the right to choose to terminate a pregnancy is a necessary component of women’s reproductive autonomy. It is also informed by critiques that the dominant “pro-choice” model inadequately captures the numerous factors that influence women’s reproductive decision-making. In particular, I am concerned with the way in which the dominant “pro-choice” model aligns with neoliberal frameworks in which individual decision-making is lauded, and yet within which individual choices are governed by dominant societal understandings of what constitutes responsible, appropriate, and rational behavior. Recognizing the centrality of discourse in shaping dominant understandings of “good” and “bad” reproductive behavior, I am particularly interested in how popular representation of abortion draws upon, reiterates, and/or subverts dominant understandings of if, when, and under what conditions abortion is a viable reproductive option. I explore this question by addressing the ways in which *Angel*’s reproductive storylines promote a “pro-choice” message while simultaneously constructing Cordelia and Fred as “sympathetic aborters,” whose attempts to terminate dangerous pregnancies are framed as justifiable due to the danger these pregnancies pose, as well by the women’s construction as responsible sexual actors who become pregnant due to the conspiracies of others rather than through “irresponsible” sexual behaviour. Furthermore, I examine how the series’ framing of Darla’s decision to die for her unborn child as an act of redemption reinforces the understanding of maternal sacrifice as a moral choice and maternal altruism as the

ultimate expression of normative femininity. I conclude by arguing that while the series does acknowledge the dangers of unwanted pregnancies and the rights of women to terminate such pregnancies, readings of these narratives as straightforwardly “pro-choice” are complicated by the series’ reiteration of dominant understandings of when abortion is justifiable and by its representation of motherhood and maternal sacrifice as a site of feminine morality.

[4] Before moving forward, I want to make clear that my goal is not to establish whether or not *Angel* is a feminist or even a pro-choice television series. Rather, drawing on post-structuralist cultural theory, I believe that the meanings of texts, including television shows, are produced in the space between the text and the reader. In recognizing the role of the reader in creating textual meaning we must thus acknowledge our inability to identify one canonical or “true” interpretation of the text. Nevertheless, I also believe that we must recognize the ways in which texts do shape our readings, encouraging particular interpretations and allowing for others. Even readings that go “against the grain” may be constrained by textual elements that foreclose or limit the viability of particular interpretations. Furthermore, both the production and interpretation of texts are influenced by the discursive context in which they are created and read. That is, as readers, we come to texts with existing assumptions and understandings that may shape the meaning that we take from them. It is necessary, therefore, to examine cultural texts such as *Angel* as part of the larger discursive field of which they are part. In my analysis of *Angel*, I explore the significance of one particular reading of the series, one that is informed by an understanding of the broader discourses surrounding reproduction, motherhood, and reproductive choice, but which by no means represents the only viable reading of the series.

### **Reproductive Narratives**

[5] Scholarship on reproduction within the horror genre, including existing work on *Angel*, often cites Barbara Creed’s assertion that “when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (Creed 7). I would add that, while *Angel* does provide us with some alternatives, within the series women’s reproductive bodies are not only at the center of female monstrosity itself,

but also of female encounters with the monstrous. Certainly, the female characters in *Angel* encounter a broad range of monsters and demons, particularly those characters who form part of Angel Investigations. However, narrative arcs and monstrous encounters for which Cordelia and/or Fred are at the center do have a propensity to present reproductive risks. Cordelia alone becomes pregnant with supernatural spawn three times over the course of the series. In season one's "Expecting" (1.2), Cordelia wakes up after a night spent with a man she has been dating only to discover that she is heavily pregnant with what turns out to be seven demon fetuses fathered by a Haxil demon ("Expecting"). In season two's "Epiphany," Cordelia is once again impregnated by demons, this time by Skilosh demons as revenge for the team's interferences in their previous attempts to propagate ("Epiphany" 2.16). Interestingly, although Wesley and Gunn are both threatened with possible impregnation by the Skilosh demons, it is only Cordelia who suffers this (luckily reversible) fate ("Epiphany"). Finally, in season four, upon returning from her time as a Higher Power, Cordelia, unknowingly possessed by Jasmine, has sex with Connor and becomes pregnant with Jasmine's physical manifestation—her only monstrous pregnancy to go to term. Significantly, this "successful" pregnancy becomes Cordelia's demise; she goes into a coma and ultimately dies in season five.

[6] Fred, the other long-term female member of Angel Investigations, also meets her death via the use of her body for physical reproduction by a more powerful supernatural being. In season five, Fred is infected by Illyria, one of the "old ones," a powerful demon who eventually kills Fred and commandeers her body ("A Hole in the World" 5.15). Although Fred's reproductive role does not take the form of more traditional pregnancies as do Cordelia's, I nevertheless consider the use of her body in Illyria's rebirth comparable to Cordelia's experiences, as they involve the undesired use of Fred's body to produce physical (monstrous) life. For purposes of simplification, I will thus refer to Fred's infection as a form of pregnancy throughout the remainder of this article. Finally, after a sexual liaison with Angel in season two, the vampire Darla, resurrected by Wolfram and Hart and returned to vampire form by Drusilla, becomes pregnant with what turns out to be a human fetus. Although in this case it is the mother who is monstrous and the progeny human, Darla also dies

of her pregnancy, staking herself and turning to dust when she realizes that despite her mystical ability to become pregnant and bring a child to term, her body is incapable of giving birth (“Lullaby” 3.9).

### **Terminating Dangerous, Monstrous Pregnancy**

[7] Given that female bodies have historically been associated with pregnancy and reproduction, it should perhaps not be surprising that this association is reiterated in popular culture. Indeed, feminist advocates and scholars have long been discussing the centrality of reproduction to women’s representation as well as their lived experiences, including their experiences of oppression (e.g. Rich; Yuval-Davis). *Angel*’s reproductive narratives highlight the dangers of reducing complicated, well-rounded women to reproductive vessels, with the physical destruction of these women standing in for the myriad of ways in which women’s lives might be damaged by being viewed and used as such. My initial reaction was to read these narratives as communicating a “pro-choice” discourse that emphasizes the danger of unwanted pregnancy and women’s rights to terminate them.<sup>1</sup> Despite the ways in which such a reading is constrained, I continue to see this reading as a valid interpretation of both Cordelia and Fred’s narratives.

[8] Cordelia’s first two pregnancies and Fred’s reproductive infection are clearly established as unwanted, and steps are taken by the women themselves and/or by their male allies to terminate the pregnancies. When the team realizes that Cordelia’s first two pregnancies are putting her at risk, it is taken for granted that they must be terminated (“Expecting”; “Epiphany”). Similarly, Angel and Spike go to great lengths to find a way of stopping Illyria from being born and destroying Fred. However, in Fred’s case, Angel deems the cost of termination too great, not because it would lead to Illyria’s death but because it would cause the death of thousands of innocent people (“A Hole in the World”). In these three cases, it is clear that termination of monstrous pregnancy is seen as an acceptable and even necessary response when this pregnancy puts the mother’s life at risk.

[9] The risk and ultimate death that occurs as a result of Cordelia and Fred’s involvement in demon reproduction can easily be read as a commentary on the dangers of unwanted pregnancy when women are not

able to terminate. Yet the construction of termination as a solution to these monstrous pregnancies is dependent on this very monstrosity; not only are Fred and Cordelia's lives at risk, but they are at risk because they are being used to reproduce something which is not human. The significance of the demonic nature of their pregnancies is illuminated when compared to the team's change in attitude towards Darla's pregnancy. When Darla announces during "Quickening" that she has tried, unsuccessfully, to "get rid" of whatever she is pregnant with, the team meets the announcement with a certain level of awkwardness and Fred states that she is "sorry [she] asked" ("Quickening" 3.8). Nevertheless, no one explicitly objects to her actions, and Wesley states that they will simply "wait until it is born, then we'll chop its head off" ("Quickening"). The team's urgent quest to find out what the entity is is in part driven by their need to know whether it is evil or good, and thus so to know whether to kill it or protect it. Once they learn that Darla is pregnant with a male, human fetus, termination is no longer considered an option and the team opts for protecting it and, with it, Darla.

[10] The contrast in the team's attitude towards termination of a human rather than demonic fetus troubles a reading of the team's attitudes as straightforwardly "pro-choice." Furthermore, as *Angel* does not provide us with an example of an unwanted pregnancy that does not endanger the life of the mother, it is unclear whether or not termination would have been as enthusiastically embraced had Cordelia and Fred's lives not been at risk. The parameters under which dangerous pregnancy is represented, and in which termination is presented as a viable and even necessary option, echo prominent pro-choice discourses that emphasize the need for women to have access to abortion when the mother's life is in danger, or when the fetus is identified as having some form of impairment (Piepmeier; Shire). While these examples have been used to demonstrate the necessity of women's access to abortion, they have also contributed to the construction of a hierarchy of aborters, in which some women are seen as more deserving of or in need of abortion than others (Abraham; Shire). While these discourses have been used strategically in order to increase women's legal access to abortion, they do so at the risk of perpetuating the understanding that abortion is an option that women should only choose in the direst of circumstances, rather than as one of

many means through which women can control their own reproduction. By echoing cultural understandings of when abortion is or is not a viable “choice” these discursive strategies risk limiting rather than expanding women’s reproductive autonomy.

### **Intentionality and Sexual Responsibility**

[11] I have argued so far that the termination of dangerous, monstrous pregnancy in *Angel*, while in some ways presenting a pro-choice message, does so by reiterating a hierarchy of abortion justifications that echoes the strategic discourses employed by some pro-choice advocates. That Fred and Cordelia’s pregnancies are both demonic and dangerous constructs these women as “sympathetic aborters” whose access to termination is seen as necessary and whose attempts to abort are understood as justifiable. This construction of Fred and Cordelia as sympathetic aborters can also be seen in the way in which both characters are framed as responsible sexual subjects whose pregnancies are the result of malevolent conspiracies against them rather than of sexual deviance or irresponsibility. In this way, Fred and Cordelia are again contrasted with Darla, whose pregnancy, while potentially the outcome of forces beyond her control, is nevertheless linked to her portrayal as a sexually deviant woman.

[12] While Cordelia’s first pregnancy is the result of sexual intercourse with a man, the episode represents Cordelia as complying with dominant understandings of responsible sexual activity. Cordelia sleeps with a man whom she has been dating for a while, and the morning after her encounter she emphasizes that the sex was “safe,” implying that they used some form of contraception (“Expecting”). Furthermore, when Cordelia worries that her pregnancy is punishment for having sex, Angel consoles her and vehemently denies that this is the case (“Expecting”). In this scene, the series can be understood as sending the message that women’s sexual agency is not necessarily morally bad. Yet this message relies upon the establishment that Cordelia’s sexual activity was “safe,” echoing a recent shift in cultural understandings away from framings of sexuality as a site of morality and towards sexuality as a site of public and personal health in which “good” sex is “safe sex” (Macvarish 314-315). Furthermore, the team eventually discovers that Cordelia’s pregnancy has

been orchestrated and planned by a Haxil Beast, working through paid human accomplices (“Expecting”). Thus, responsibility for the pregnancy is placed squarely on the shoulders of others, and is not presented as being the result of any perceived sexual irresponsibility on Cordelia’s part.

[13] In her second pregnancy, Cordelia is constructed as even more sexually innocent than in her first, as this pregnancy is not the outcome of sexual intercourse at all. Again, Cordelia is intentionally targeted by demons as part of a greater plan, and responsibility for the pregnancy is placed solely with others. Similarly, Fred’s “pregnancy” does not result from sexual intercourse, although we do see signs that she, like Cordelia, does engage in sexual relationships. However, like Cordelia, Fred is constructed as a responsible sexual actor, and her impregnation is not linked to her sexual behavior. In parallel with Cordelia’s first two pregnancies, responsibility for Fred’s ‘pregnancy’ is attributed entirely to others, namely to Knox, the lab assistant who orchestrated the entire plan, and to Gunn, who signed off on the transportation of Illyria’s sarcophagus (“A Hole in the World”).

[14] We can easily read the way in which Fred and Cordelia’s bodies are commandeered by others who wish to use and even destroy them for the sake of propagation as a reference to the ways in which women’s bodies have historically been controlled in order to achieve state interests. For instance, we can draw a direct comparison to the Skilosh demons’ plan to use human bodies to produce a military army with historical instances in which (often coercive) pro-natalist policies have been enacted throughout the western world during periods of war and imperial expansion (Yuval-Davis). More significant to my argument is the way in which this clear designation of responsibility to malevolent forces establishes that neither Cordelia nor Fred are responsible for their pregnancies. The audience is encouraged to think of these women as innocent victims rather than as deviant women whose pregnancies represent predictable consequences for which they must take responsibility, if not outright punishment. Although, in his analysis of demonic maternities in *Angel*, Battis does read Cordelia and Fred’s fatal pregnancies as a form of punishment, he understands their deaths as punishment for the characters’ inability to problematize the privileges and entitlements that result from their race and class positionings, rather than

as a punishment for “irresponsible” sexual behavior. While acknowledging the validity of such a reading, I argue instead that the very racial and class positionings that Battis interrogates are key to the series’ construction of Fred and Cordelia as responsible sexual subjects and innocent victims. Produced and read in a context where racialized and working class women have been and continue to be discursively constructed as hyper-sexual and “irrationally” overly-fertile, *Angel* implicitly and problematically draws upon understandings that Cordelia and Fred’s white, middle-class femininity grants them access not only to normative motherhood, but to positionings as rational and responsible sexual subjects and decision-makers (Roberts; Tyler). The series’ positioning of Cordelia and Fred as sexually responsible subjects, in conjunction with the clear allocation of responsibility for their pregnancies with external actors, echoes arguments that abortion is particularly justifiable in cases where women have become pregnant through rape and/or incest rather than through their own agentic sexual behavior.

[15] While in many ways Darla’s pregnancy is also the result of forces beyond her control, throughout the series she is portrayed as much more sexually deviant than either Cordelia or Fred. *Angel* deals heavily with questions of fate and destiny, often grappling with the question of whether prophecies inform us of outcomes or in fact bring these outcomes into being. Thus, while there is a sense in which we can read Darla’s pregnancy and childbirth as preordained because it is the subject of a prophecy, it is much more ambiguous than the clear conspiracies which lead to Cordelia and Fred’s impregnations. Despite this ambiguity, and despite the intentions of those who produced the scene, it is also possible to read *Angel* and Darla’s sexual encounter as rape. Throughout the encounter, Angel is forceful and violent, and Darla initially pushes Angel off of her and asks him what he is doing (“Reprise” 2.15). Although Darla does eventually actively engage in their sexual encounter, pulling Angel towards her and helping him undress, due to this initial forcefulness and the lack of clear verbal consent from Darla, the scene remains problematically ambiguous. While Darla’s eventual active participation and her indication of pleasure when she believes Angel has transformed into Angelus do seem to point the reader away from such an understanding, the creators certainly do not close off the possibility of reading the encounter as sexual

assault. However, understanding the scene as a consensual sexual encounter reinforces Darla's representation as sexually uninhibited and even deviant. As Diehl outlines in her essay on vampirism and sexual deviancy, Darla, along with Drusilla, acts throughout the series as a sexually subversive foil to other primary characters within the Buffyverse. The audience discovers through flashbacks that Darla was a prostitute before she died, and she is often shown being sexually assertive and enjoys a sadistic sexual relationship with Angelus. Furthermore, her sexual relations with her vampire "family" connote incest, while implications of her sexual relations with Drusilla also demonstrate sexual fluidity as well as a rejection of monogamy. Indeed, Diehl argues that Darla's unapologetically queer sexual agency can be quite pleasurable for female viewers who are tired of watching any sexual deviance on the part of the "good girl" characters be met with tragedy. Yet while Darla's deviant, subversive, and queering role in the series may indeed produce feelings of pleasure and even empowerment in viewers, these characteristics are nevertheless bound up in her positioning as a force of evil throughout the majority of the series.

[16] Even Darla's attitude towards abortion can be viewed as reinforcing her "bad girl" positioning, for she is callous and unapologetic about wanting to "get rid" of the fetus she is carrying. Thus, Darla breaks social conventions not just of wanting to terminate her pregnancy, but of not talking about termination as a necessary tragedy (Jowett). As Abraham argues, women are often pushed into adopting this discourse of abortion as tragedy, and there is little discursive space for women to embrace abortion without risking being labelled as selfish and/or morally suspect. Furthermore, Darla fails to comply with the construction of "sympathetic aborters" as sexually responsible, moral subjects (Shellenberg et al.). Darla's construction as sexually deviant and irresponsible and her callous attitude towards termination are thus in contrast to Cordelia and Fred's clear positioning as victims whose lives have been put at risk through no fault of their own. The way in which these narratives continue to map onto dominant understandings of whose abortions are and are not justifiable thus complicates and constrains straightforward readings of the series' reproductive narratives as necessarily "pro-choice."

### **Darla's Redemptive Motherhood**

[17] I have argued that although there is potential for reading *Angel's* various reproductive narratives as portraying a "pro-choice" message, this potential is constrained by the portrayal of termination as a viable option exclusively when the mother is at risk, when the expected progeny is demonic, and when the women who are pregnant are understood as responsible sexual actors who have been victimized by others. I would also argue that *Angel's* "pro-choice" message is further constrained by the resolution of Darla's reproductive narrative, and with it her character arc. Through this resolution, motherhood, and particularly an altruistic motherhood, is constructed as a site of redemption through which Darla's sexual deviancy is neutralized and through which she is brought into the realm of normative maternal femininity.

[18] In the initial stages of her pregnancy, Darla clearly does not wish to bring her pregnancy to term, and she attempts to terminate it through several means. However, her feelings change when she realizes she loves her unborn child—a love that is only made possible by the fact that the fetus she carries has a soul and that this soul is housed within Darla's own body ("Lullaby"). Because the fetus's soul resides in Darla's body, she is affected by it and is able to feel love that she is incapable of feeling as a soulless vampire. When Darla realizes that she will not be capable of feeling this love after her child is born and his soul leaves her body, she breaks down in tears, leaning on Angel for support ("Lullaby"). This moment of emotional vulnerability calls upon the audience to sympathize with Darla, who, it should be noted, was forced to become a vampire again at the very moment that she had accepted both her soul and her impending death ("The Trial" 2.9). It is because of her re-ensoulment via pregnancy that Darla ultimately makes the decision to stake herself when she realizes that, despite being able to become pregnant, she is not able to give birth. She kills herself, turning to dust so that her human child is able to escape her monstrous body ("Lullaby").

[19] Before killing herself, Darla speaks to Angel, saying: "We did so many terrible things together; so much destruction, so much pain. We can't make up for any of it" ("Lullaby"). She continues, claiming "Angel, this child is the one good thing we ever did together. You make sure you tell him that" ("Lullaby"). This dialogue is significant because it is the

moment that constructs Darla's maternal sacrifice as redemptive. Although Darla acknowledges that she and Angel can never really atone for the sins they have committed, it is nevertheless important to her that she be remembered for doing at least one good thing, demonstrating her remorse and an (admittedly inadequate) attempt at redemption.

[20] As a redemptive act, Darla's sacrificial suicide fits with *Angel's* overarching preoccupation with atonement through sacrifice. Yet because Darla is one of the series' most transgressive female characters, the way in which her atonement is pursued through an act of specifically maternal sacrifice deserves some critical attention. In the remainder of this essay I will address not only the significance of Darla's changed attitude to her pregnancy upon ensoulment, but also the significance that her redemption is accomplished through an act that incorporates her into normative ideals of maternal altruism as the height of femininity and of female morality.

### **“Quickening” and the Implications of Ensoulment**

[21] It is significant that Darla's conversion from wanting to get rid of her fetus to sacrificing herself for him is prompted by the presence of this fetus's soul within her body. The question of if and at what point a fetus has a soul has long been at the center of religious and legal debates over the ethics of abortion. Indeed, the title of the episode “Quickening” can be read as a reference to this debate, as it was traditionally the moment of “quickening,” when a woman could feel the being inside her begin to move, that established the point at which the fetus gained a soul and at which abortion was no longer a legally or morally acceptable option (Reagan; McLaren). Although it is not until the following episode, “Lullaby,” that Darla feels the fetus's soul, it is in a sense appropriate that it is soon after the quickening that Darla feels the presence of the soul. While it is certainly noteworthy and perhaps of some concern that the events of *Angel* do establish that a fetus can have a soul prior to its birth, the ensoulment occurs late enough in the pregnancy to be positively progressive compared to contemporary religious-based pro-life discourses that mark ensoulment as occurring at the very moment of conception. Furthermore, it is possible to understand the concept of quickening itself as putting the decision of when a fetus is considered human into the hands of the woman who is carrying it, rather than in the hands of medical or

religious experts (McLaren). In this sense, we can read Darla's conversion as a reflection of women's own experiences of acknowledging and accepting pregnancy and of ruling out the possibility of termination on their own timeline and based on their own decisions. Nevertheless, it is important to read this decision in the larger context of the series and as being in dialogue with Darla and Fred's reproductive narratives. In this context, Darla's decision can also be read as indicating that, while termination is an appropriate and even necessary means to save a human mother from her demon progeny, it is a much less acceptable means by which to save a demon mother from her human spawn.

[22] While we can understand Darla's shifting attitude towards her pregnancy as resulting from the realization that her fetus has a soul, I would argue that this shift is at least in part provoked by Darla's own ensoulment by proxy. Indeed, if Connor's soul did not have a direct effect on Darla herself, it would be unlikely to change her attitudes, for up to this point she has enthusiastically killed numerous ensouled humans with no indication of remorse. Rather, Darla's conversation with Angel establishes that Connor's soul has allowed Darla to feel love for her unborn child, and it is this feeling of love that has caused her to change her attitudes and ultimately leads her to sacrifice herself for her child.

[23] The effect of Darla's ensoulment complicates readings of *Angel* as pro-choice in part because it establishes Darla as a moral being; that is, as someone who, unlike a soulless vampire, has a sense of morality. While *Angel* hardly presents having a soul as a guarantee of ethical action, Darla's soul does allow her to grapple with ethical questions, as demonstrated during her time in human form after her resurrection by Wolfram and Hart. Thus, Darla's decision to go through with her pregnancy and to sacrifice herself is presented as a morally informed choice. Furthermore, by positioning her choice as arising not only out of ensoulment but also out of love for her child, *Angel* reiterates cultural understandings of maternal love as all-encompassing and that a mother who loves her child will always put his or her needs above her own (Rich 22-23). While it is impossible to establish from one narrative that Darla's decisions are presented as the *only* moral decision that a woman would make under the same circumstance, it is again important to read her story within the broader discursive context in which maternal sacrifice is often reified, and

in which abortion is often framed as a “selfish” option, particularly when chosen by women who are understood as sexually transgressive and/or irresponsible (Abraham). The alignment of Darla’s attitude towards pregnancy with her status as either “soulless” or “ensouled” can be understood as reinforcing this narrative. For Darla seeks termination when she is demonic, a time when she has been read as embodying a monstrous motherhood. During this time, she acts selfishly, attacking Cordelia and only joining the team’s fight against vampire cultists when she learns that they will kill her as well as the others (“Quickening”). Before Darla’s ensoulment, her casual attitude towards termination is bound up in her “bad girl” image, and in her positioning as a “monstrous mother” who seeks to consume children rather than to nurture them (Calvert 5). In contrast, once she is ensouled, the audience is called to sympathize with Darla, watching her become emotionally vulnerable and attempt to redeem herself. It is significant that this redemption comes through her enactment of maternal sacrifice, an act that directly contradicts her previous attempts to terminate her pregnancy. I would argue that it is therefore possible to read Darla’s decision as redeeming not only her previous sins, but particularly the “sin” of attempted abortion and, with it, deviant motherhood. The framing of Darla’s sacrifice thus further constrains pro-choice readings of *Angel* through an association of termination with deviant, monstrous motherhood and of maternal sacrifice with atonement and redemption.

### **Motherhood as Womanhood**

[24] I have so far argued that Darla’s redemptive act of maternal sacrifice constrains *Angel’s* pro-choice message by implicitly associating abortion with deviancy and associating maternal altruism with atonement and rehabilitation. In addition, I argue that Darla’s sacrifice undermines pro-choice readings of *Angel* by reinforcing dominant understandings of motherhood as central to women’s identities and to their alignment with normative femininity.

[25] As I have previously discussed, in her article on vampirism and transgressive female sexuality, Diehl positions Darla’s and Drusilla’s unapologetically transgressive, queer, and kinky sex lives as offering an often satisfying representation of non-normative female sexuality within

the Buffyverse. Diehl argues that “Drusilla and Darla’s sexual power and disruptiveness become attractive alternatives for those viewers who find Buffy’s sexual trauma tiresome” (1). Whereas Buffy, and at times Cordelia, work through the difficulties of balancing agentic sexuality and expectations of appropriate femininity, traits that often seem at odds with each other, both Darla and Drusilla embrace that which is powerful and transgressive about vampiric sexuality, reveling in anxieties surrounding female sexuality as potentially dangerous (Diehl 3). Furthermore, Diehl argues that female vampires “mock repressive discourses that bind women’s sexuality to reproduction and motherhood” in part because “vampires are never daughters, wives or mothers in the traditional sense, and this is a powerful imaginative possibility for many women” (6). In this statement, Diehl points to the ways in which Drusilla and Darla disrupt normative constructions of motherhood as central to feminine identities through both their rejection and perversion of motherhood throughout both *Buffy* and *Angel*. Not only do female vampires typically enjoy sexual relations as de-linked from reproduction, but as beings who take life rather than give life they flip the dominant script of women as nurturing. As Jowett observes, Drusilla subverts “natural” female mothering, encouraging Angelus to kill a toddler (78). Similarly, Darla craves the blood of children while she is pregnant and is seen in flashbacks killing Holtz’s children alongside Angelus. As those who take life rather than give it, both Drusilla and Darla disrupt assumptions that all women are maternal and that our primary role is to reproduce and care for children.

[26] Not only do Darla and Drusilla reject normative motherhood through their violence, but they also inhabit an inverted maternal role as vampiric “sires.” When Darla turns Angelus, she both kills him and gives him eternal life, feeding him blood from her breast in a perversion of the maternal act of breastfeeding (“Becoming” 2.21). Drusilla refers to Darla as “grandmother,” highlighting their familial connection, and troubling normative understandings of what it is to be a mother and/or grandmother. Familial relationships are further troubled by the implied sexual relationships between Drusilla and Darla, as well as among Darla, Drusilla, Spike, and Angelus—in various configurations (Jowett 76). In referring to Angelus as her “darling boy” Darla draws attention to, and blurs, the familial and sexual relationship between them, further disrupting

understandings of mothers as de-sexualized, particularly towards their children. Furthermore, although Darla at times shows that she cares about Angelus and the rest of her vampire “family,” as both lover and mother she nevertheless puts her needs first, as when (in a flashback of centuries ago) she abandons Angelus in order to save herself when they are being pursued by Holtz (“The Trial” 2.9). In refusing to put her family’s needs above her own, Darla further destabilizes normative understandings of mothers as self-sacrificing. As I have discussed above, this disruption continues in the early stages of Darla’s pregnancy, wherein Darla’s ambivalence towards the “parasite” within her and her attempts to terminate her pregnancy push back against dominant expectations that women experience pregnancy as a beatific experience of connection with their fetus (Diehl 10). Thus, in her existence as a vampire Darla inhabits a maternal role that subverts expectations of what it means to be a mother and, in doing so, calls attention to those maternal expectations that are taken for granted and naturalized. While Jowett situates Darla and Drusilla’s relationships with men as necessarily bringing them into patriarchal relations of control, I argue alongside Diehl that, in their sexual deviancy and inverted vampiric motherhood, Drusilla and Darla also work to subvert the authority of men and disrupt the naturalization of femininity and of maternal ideals (14). However, this disruption is limited in that both characters’ ability to exist outside of normalized maternity is linked to their demonic state and to their positioning as “bad girls” within the television series. This limitation is highlighted when Darla is folded back into normative femininity/maternity at the moment that she becomes re-ensouled. For this reason, I, like Diehl, found Darla’s sacrificial annihilation a “depressing moment,” not only because it marked the moment when *Angel* lost one of its most transgressive female characters, but also because Darla’s transgressive potential is contained through normative enactment of the very maternal ideals her previously untethered sexuality and vampiric motherhood functioned to subvert (Diehl 10).

[27] Darla’s final embodiment as an idealized, self-sacrificing maternal figure rehabilitates and pushes back against the radical potential posed by her earlier incarnation (although it certainly does not erase it). Furthermore, Darla’s sacrifice perpetuates the expectation that mothers

are “good,” and that “good mothers” are altruistic and selfless, always putting the needs of their children above their own (Rich). In this sense, Darla’s story reiterates historical understandings that motherhood acts as a form of sexual redemption, an understanding that relies upon the construction of mothers as de-sexualized. This is a belief that Diehl attributes to the psycho-medical belief, dominant in Victorian times, that motherhood could act as a cure for female “perversion”; a belief that is materialized through Darla’s maternal redemption (Diehl 5). Indeed, when Darla next appears in *Angel* it is as a glowing, white-clad figure urging her son to do what is right. Her appearance is reminiscent of a guardian angel and implies that Darla is in a heavenly dimension rather than enduring (or raising) hell (“Inside Out” 4.17).

[28] Perhaps because redemption is such a central theme in *Angel*, there was something quite radical about a transgressive woman who did not wish to be redeemed. While Darla’s redemption does not necessarily disavow readings of Darla as a radical queer disruption to expectations of female sexuality and motherhood, I argue that it does complicate these readings. Furthermore, Darla’s death denies viewers a potentially powerful representation of deviant femininity, and of a transgressive, sexually agentic mother who refuses to put others before herself. In my view, Darla’s redemptive narrative instead reiterates the construction of motherhood as a space of virtue and as the apex of femininity.

[29] *Angel*’s reification of motherhood as women’s primary and most virtuous role is strengthened when we read Darla’s character arc alongside that of Cordelia’s transformation throughout the series as analyzed by Elizabeth Rambo. Rambo traces Cordelia’s character development from her time as “Queen C,” the most popular girl at Sunnydale High, to her role as the symbolic mother of Angel Investigations. Rambo argues that, during her time on *Angel*, Cordelia transforms from a self-centered, catty young woman into the kind, maternal, and nurturing “Angel” in Angel’s house/detective agency. This transformation can be read as representing Cordelia’s own narrative redemption—a redemption that, like Darla’s, enfolds her into appropriate femininity. Rambo also points out that when Cordelia transforms from a self-centered and self-important young woman to Angel’s main source of emotional support, much of what was interesting and even transgressive about Cordelia’s earlier incarnation is

lost. Drawing on Virginia Woolf's influential work on the "Angel in the House," Rambo demonstrates how Cordelia's earlier identity becomes not just transformed but subsumed by her maternal role. Like Darla's biological maternity, Cordelia's social mothering role is also sacrificial, as she gives up her dreams of being a movie star in order to stay with Angel Investigations and spare Angel the pain of taking on the visions ("Birthday" 3.11).

[30] While Cordelia hardly has as much to atone for as Darla, Rambo makes a convincing case for understanding her assumption of maternal roles as a way of redeeming her from her selfish past. Like Rambo, I agree that while this redemption does fit into *Angel's* preoccupation with atonement through sacrifice, it also denies viewers the pleasure of watching a strong, self-assured woman who does not have to, and indeed refuses to, make the sacrifices that are required of so many other characters. Furthermore, I would argue that both Cordelia and Darla's redemption narratives are gendered, and, to a certain extent, present binaric understanding of what it means to be a "good" woman. Their narratives also suggest that to be a good woman is to lose oneself, both in terms of one's physical body and in terms of one's personality. As I have demonstrated, Darla's maternal sacrifice is completely out of character, and though explained through her vicarious ensoulment, nevertheless pushes back against much of her previous transgressive femininity and sexuality. Similarly, as Rambo argues, as Cordelia becomes more maternal, she loses much of what made her an interesting character. She has much less time left for her own life and interests, and eventually her identity is erased through a complete loss of memory and through possession by Jasmine. Whereas many of the series' male characters, including Angel, maintain their duality and complexity throughout their search for redemption, the narrative movement of two of *Angel's* most prominent female characters from self-centered "bitches" to altruistic mothers not only enfold these women into appropriate gender roles but also ends their stories and their development as characters. Their narratives thus enforce the ideological construction of motherhood as a moment of, and means of, redemption, while also suggesting that in embracing traditional maternal roles these women no longer have interesting stories to tell. Thus, *Angel* manages to offer both a potential critique of how narrow

understandings of motherhood can subsume strong women and erase their previous identities, while simultaneously eliding the possibility of presenting viewers with examples of transgressive femininity and maternity.

[31] Fans and scholars who have followed the Buffyverse's transition from television to comic books will know that the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* season nine story arc "On Your Own" provides an additional pregnancy narrative in which the Slayer herself must grapple with the decision of whether or not to have an abortion. Although I have focused on reproductive story-lines presented specifically within the television series *Angel*, it is important to acknowledge how Buffy's own decision to have an abortion presents an interesting alternative to these narratives, as well as to acknowledge the way in which her decision illustrates how dominant understandings of "good" motherhood may influence women's reproductive decision-making. At the time of her decision, Buffy believes that she is pregnant with a human fetus as the result of a one-night stand during her housewarming party (Chambliss 150). Thus, Buffy's decision to have an abortion is neither justified in reference to the characteristics of her fetus, nor in reference to her own positioning as an innocent victim or sexually responsible subject. Buffy's pregnancy story-line thus presents a much more explicitly pro-choice message than do Fred or Cordelia's, in that it acknowledges abortion as a valid decision even in cases where the fetus is assumed to be healthy, and even when it has resulted from seemingly "irresponsible" sexual activity. While it is important to acknowledge the powerful message that this story arc thus sends regarding women's right to make their own reproductive decisions, it is also important to recognize that Buffy's decision is nevertheless influenced by assumptions regarding what it means to be a "good mother." Buffy decides not to go through with her pregnancy because she does not believe that she is capable of being a good mother at this point in her life, a belief that is tied up in her understanding that to be a good mother, she would have to give up being a Slayer (Chambliss 167). As readers, it is possible that we respect Buffy's decision while still problematizing the way in which dominant understandings of what it means to be a "good mother" might influence women's reproductive choices. Even though her pregnancy turns out to be a false alarm, Buffy's story-line nevertheless

further emphasizes the need to interrogate simplistic understandings of reproductive “choice” that fail to take into account how dominant understandings of motherhood might constrain women’s reproductive decision-making.

### **Conclusion**

[32] It would be dishonest to conclude from my analysis that it is impossible to read *Angel* as presenting a “pro-choice” message. Indeed, as I have argued, the narratives surrounding Cordelia and Fred’s pregnancies highlight the importance of reproductive choice and the dangers faced by women who are denied it. Yet I have also shown that within *Angel*, termination is presented as an acceptable choice when women are at risk, when they are sexually innocent and/or responsible sexual subjects, and when the fetus in question is not human. “Pro-choice” readings are further constrained by the series’ continued idealization of motherhood as a site of bodily and emotional sacrifice, and its establishment of motherhood as something that women not only want, but find redeeming. I have argued that we can read *Angel* as echoing discursive strategies employed by pro-choice advocates who capitalize on support for abortion under seemingly mitigating circumstances in order to minimize barriers and to increase women’s access to abortion services more broadly. However, in analyzing *Angel*’s reproductive narratives, my goal is to demonstrate the importance not only of having legal and material access to reproductive services such as abortion, but to demonstrate how ideological understandings of reproduction and abortion may also constrain women’s reproductive choices. In reading these story-lines it is important to understand the implications of presenting termination as justifiable in some cases, but not necessarily in others and of reinforcing the idea that some women’s decisions to abort are more acceptable than others. It is also important to acknowledge the danger of recognizing a woman’s right to “choose” while continuing to idealize women who sacrifice themselves on the altar of motherhood, and of perpetuating the idea that motherhood is the highest achievement to which women can aspire. The “motherhood imperative,” the cultural belief that all women either are or one day will be mothers, may not have the same impact on women’s reproductive choices as legal or economic barriers to abortion,

but it does shape women's understandings of what reproductive choices are available to them. So too does the stigma around abortion and the assumptions regarding when and why abortion is a responsible and ethical decision. For this reason, it is important to interrogate representations of women's reproductive choices and experiences in popular culture, and it is why I have concluded that "pro-choice" readings of *Angel* are constrained by the series' continued idealization of motherhood as bodily and emotional sacrifice, encouraging a reading that recognizes the dangers of unwanted motherhood while nevertheless establishing motherhood as something that good women should want, and perhaps more importantly, as the site of our redemption.

[33] I wish to conclude this essay by pointing to the ways in which my analysis of *Angel* can illuminate some of the difficulties of addressing reproductive rights within a mainstream television series. As my analysis has been based solely on textual evidence, I cannot speak to the goals and motivations of the show's creative team. That being said, I see *Angel* as a television series that in many ways succeeds in telling interesting stories about transgressive women. Thus, I want to acknowledge the possibility that the limitations I have identified are at least in part attributable to existing understandings of abortion as a "controversial topic" within North America. I am cognizant that using dangerous, demonic pregnancies to address issues of reproductive autonomy may have been a strategic move that allowed for the series to engage with these issues in a relatively "safe" manner. Indeed, while it may be the case that North American television audiences are becoming increasingly open to engaging with issues of reproductive rights, the recent backlash against *Scandal's* 2015 winter finale, which showed the main character having an abortion, illustrates that such storylines are still met with some resistance (Fallon). Indeed, such backlash is not surprising in a context wherein American women in particular are facing increased legislative restrictions on abortion access, and wherein Planned Parenthood, which provides abortion services (among other women's health services) has faced defunding by the federal government as well as continued violence and harassment, including a fatal shooting at one of its clinics in November 2015. Acknowledging this context is critical to understanding why *Scandal's* depiction of Olivia Pope's abortion was called "sick" by some,

and yet “brave” by others (Fallon). Acknowledging this context is also critical to understanding why, despite critiques, reproductive rights activists might draw on strategic discourses that emphasize the needs of “sympathetic aborters” in their attempts to keep abortion accessible. Yet, as my analysis has shown, it is important to interrogate these strategic choices, and to acknowledge that a “pro-choice” framework that highlights the importance of women’s right to make autonomous reproductive decisions, while simultaneously hierarchizing women’s choices and the rationales behind them, may ultimately serve to constrain women’s reproductive autonomy. As such, this essay points to the need to acknowledge the ways in which both material and discursive factors work to constrain choices and the need to move towards representations of abortion that are honest, diverse, and non-judgmental—and that refuse to set up a hierarchy in which particular women’s experiences draw sympathy, while others are condemned.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘terminate’ rather than ‘abort’ because I am examining attempts, successful or otherwise, to terminate pregnancies through means that do not always take the form of abortion.