

**Throwing Like a Slayer:
A Phenomenology of Gender Hybridity and Female Resilience in
*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*¹**

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[1] In “Welcome to the Hellmouth” (1.1), protagonist Buffy Summers walks alone at night down the sidewalk of her suburban neighborhood. Background music signals imminent danger as an unknown man follows her. Hearing footsteps, Buffy pauses to turn slightly, and then speeds up her pace in an attempt to create distance between herself and the stranger. As she turns a corner, she faces the end of a dark alleyway lined with trash bins. The unknown man pursues her into the alley and steps out from the shadows, clearly in search of her. Cornered, with presumably no escape, Buffy is poised as the quintessential female victim. Yet as the camera moves outward, it reveals that Buffy is balancing a handstand on a pole high in the air. She swings around the pole, forcefully kicking the man onto his back and pinning him to the ground with her right boot. She confronts the stranger, “Why are you following me?” No longer presented as a victim, Buffy is ready to fight back against her would-be attacker.

[2] With this scene from the first episode of the series, the intent of the show is discernable. Consciously attempting to subvert the trope of the pretty teenage victim common in slasher horror films, creator Joss Whedon aimed to create a powerful female protagonist who is able to hold her own against the forces of darkness:

I’ve always been a huge fan of horror movies, and I saw so many horror movies where there was that blonde girl who would always get herself killed. I started feeling bad for her. I thought, it’s time

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she had a chance to take back the night. The idea of Buffy came from just the very simple thought of “a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her, and she’s not only ready for him, she trounces him.” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” Commentary)

Whedon’s reference to the blonde girl “taking back the night” echoes the feminist slogan from the movement to end sexual violence. Since the early 1970s, feminist activists have participated in Take Back the Night marches and events to protest the risk of violence faced by women who walk in public at night. In order to represent a young woman “taking back the night,” Whedon situates Buffy within contexts mirroring the realities faced by many American girls and women. When walking alone in public at night, Buffy is threatened with the violence many fear, namely being followed by an unknown man, ending up trapped in a dark alley with him, and becoming a rape and/or murder victim. But rather than becoming a victim, Buffy is the hero. She is not only capable of effective self-defense, but week after week, Buffy seeks out danger in an attempt to eradicate threats of violence toward others.

[3] Many fans and scholars have praised the feminist potential of the series in general and the character of Buffy Summers in particular. For example, Michele Byers argues that the show offers “a radical reimagining of what a girl (and a woman) can do and be” (173), and Irene Karras echoes this view, describing Buffy as “the prototypical girly feminist activist, intentionally slaying stereotypes about what women can and cannot do, combining sexuality with real efforts to make the world a better and safer place for both men and women” (para. 15). Other scholars register disappointment with the series, finding feminist readings of the show naïve. For instance, Gwyneth Bodger argues that “the Buffyverse [is] the product of a very patriarchal world view which pays lip service to a superficial feminist fashioning” (para. 1), and Rachel Fudge concludes that “Buffy’s unreconstructed, over-the-top girliness in the end compromises her feminist potential” (58).²

[4] This debate among Whedon scholars reflects a broader feminist ambivalence toward popular culture. On the one hand, as feminist philosophers Sharon Crasnow and Joanne Waugh point out, “popular culture is a, if not *the*, primary vehicle for presenting and

reinforcing social roles and stereotypes of women that follow from, lead to, or perpetuate discrimination on the basis of sex or gender” (1). On the other hand, popular culture is not only a site for the production and reproduction of cultural meaning; it is also a site for the contestation of cultural meaning. Pedagogy scholar Nadine Dolby, for example, argues that popular culture “should be understood as a cultural practice that has its own power to create social change—to alter social conditions and the very foundation of people’s lives” (258). For Whedon, effectively subverting the dominant paradigm of feminine victimization entails presenting a female hero with a conventionally feminine appearance who challenges expectations of what that appearance signals. Moreover, Whedon’s decision to recreate *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) for a televisual format offered an opportunity to bring this message home to a wider audience.³

[5] To determine whether or not Buffy represents a successful subversion of femininity, I draw extensively upon seminal works in feminist phenomenology, which describe feminine embodiment as a collection of disciplinary practices that produce a subordinate subject. In sections one and two below, I use these aspects of feminine embodiment to analyze how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* both reflects and challenges these norms, concluding that Buffy represents a gender hybrid, one who melds feminine and masculine being-in-the-world. Then, in section three, I examine what this depiction of gender hybridity offers for ordinary young women, that is, those without the mystically endowed powers of the Slayer, through a deconstruction of the episode “Helpless” (3.12). I argue that, instead of presenting a “docile body” inspiring sexual objectification and victimization, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers viewers a representation of female resilience.

“I may be dead. But I’m still pretty.”

[6] As early as the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949 (first translated into English as *The Second Sex* in 1953), feminist philosophers have exposed how the quest to achieve femininity harms women and girls, and thus many argue that the struggle for women’s liberation requires the rejection of conventional standards of femininity. Many girls and women go to great lengths to achieve the

ideal feminine appearance, and the representation of women in popular culture is a widely recognized contributor to the perpetuation of unrealistic standards of female beauty. In this vein, critics of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* argue that the show's feminist potential is ultimately undermined by its reproduction of feminine ideals. For example, in "Buffy the Feminist Slayer? Constructions of Femininity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," literary studies scholar Gwyneth Bodger maintains that Whedon has simply replaced "the fetishized female victim with a fetishized female hero" as Whedon's "Barbie with a kung fu grip"⁴ is still a Barbie (para. 3). She also worries that the show "creat[es] a space in which violence against women is legitimized," given that repeated acts of violence against Buffy are presented unproblematically (para. 4). Similarly, in "The Buffy Effect: Or, a Tale of Cleavage and Marketing," cultural critic Rachel Fudge criticizes the series as "a caricature of '90s pseudo-girl power" (20), acerbically describing Buffy's appearance as a marketing maneuver. She contends that Buffy's narrowly defined and exaggerated femininity lends itself to commercialism as fans pursue Buffy's style over her substance (21). In contrast, media studies scholar Michele Byers argues that to study popular culture, one must examine not only how characters look, but also what those characters do. In "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: The Next Generation of Television," she writes, "Because *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was created by the mainstream American media, the bodies it uses to articulate its messages reflect that position. But the performances of those bodies must also be considered" (175).

[7] For decades, feminists have pointed out that there is no necessary connection between having female genitalia and performing one's body in a feminine manner, which is captured by Beauvoir's most famous line, "One is not born, but becomes, a woman" (267). Nevertheless, from infancy, women learn to inhabit their bodies in ways that make it appear both to others and to themselves that femininity is innate (Butler 25, 33). In "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky details three disciplinary practices that aim to produce a body which is recognizably feminine. These practices (1) display the body as an ornamented surface, including careful attention to hair, skin, nails, cosmetics, clothing, and

jewelry; (2) produce a body of a specific size and general configuration, involving vigilant monitoring of diet and employing particular exercise regimens; and (3) elicit a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements, colloquially referred to as sitting like a girl, walking like a girl, and throwing like a girl. Using these categories, we can analyze how Buffy's being-in-the-world reflects norms of conventional femininity: Her body is fashionably adorned, slender, and, at times, moves in a ladylike fashion. Buffy's body is also white, able-bodied, and heteronormatively attractive,⁵ which also aligns with conventional feminine ideals.

[8] First, Buffy's feminine appearance is achieved through adorning her body with flattering clothes, shoes, and accessories. Whedon scholars Christine Jarvis and Don Adams characterize Buffy's attire as part of her "super-hero toolkit" (para. 5). But, whereas other superheroes wear a single costume to fight the forces of evil, Buffy wears a different outfit on each occasion, "ranging through glamorous, sporty, sexy, smart and childishly girly" (Jarvis and Adams para. 8). The value of clothing for signaling one's identity is explicitly addressed in the first episode of the series, "Welcome to the Hellmouth." When dressing for a night out at a local club called the Bronze, Buffy tries on different personae in front of the mirror by holding alternating outfits against her body: "Hi! I'm an enormous slut! [. . .] Hello, would you like a copy of the *Watchtower*?" Later in the episode, Buffy is able to identify a vampire by what he is wearing. She says, "Look at his jacket. He's got the sleeves rolled up. And the shirt...only someone who's been living underground for ten years would think *that* was the look." In "Halloween" (2.6), Buffy's donning a "princess" gown ends badly when a spell cast by the costume store proprietor, Ethan Rayne, causes her to become a nineteenth-century aristocrat "whose only job is to be beautiful." Buffy temporarily turns scared, helpless, and dependent on men for protection before the spell is broken. Although Buffy's interest in fashion is not as extreme as that of her more popularity-driven peer, Cordelia Chase, Buffy's preference for stylish clothes, shoes, and accessories—e.g. short skirts, leather pants, tank tops, high-heeled boots—is undeterred by her frequent physical altercations with vampires and demons. For instance, in "The I in Team" (4.13) Professor and Initiative Director Maggie

Walsh recommends that Buffy “suit up” in protective clothing for a planned battle. In this scene, Buffy’s arms and shoulder are bare, her bright orange blouse standing out against a sea of men in army green. Buffy dismisses Walsh’s suggestion on the basis that she would look “all ‘Private Benjamin’” and reassures her, “Don’t worry. I’ve patrolled in this halter many times.” This comment highlights Buffy’s defiant affirmation of her femininity. Unlike Private Benjamin, the young woman who successfully proves herself by assimilating to male military norms in the eponymous 1980 film, Buffy is unwilling to abandon her feminine appearance despite her masculine-coded occupation.

[9] Bartky emphasizes that achieving a feminine appearance requires more than simply wearing the right clothes. Ornamenting the feminine body also requires various beauty regimens including careful attention to skin, hair, and nails as well as the proper application of cosmetics. There are a handful of moments that viewers see Buffy engage in feminine grooming activities such as brushing her hair before bed (“School Hard” 2.3) and getting her hair cut and styled at a salon (“Gone” 6.11), yet these few incidents are insufficient for fashioning an adequately feminine appearance. Buffy would need to devote hours each day off-screen to remove hair from her armpits and legs, to apply cosmetics, to care for and style her hair, and to manicure her nails. She, or someone else in her stead, would also need to devote considerable time and effort to maintaining her wardrobe, which includes shopping for and purchasing stylish and expensive clothing, shoes, and accessories, not to mention removing the grass, dirt, and blood stains acquired from her countless battles (“Becoming Part Two” 2.22 and “First Date” 7.14).

[10] Second, Buffy achieves a recognizably feminine body size by disciplining her body’s hungers with dieting and her body’s shape with exercise. Buffy’s interest in choosing clothing not only for the identity it conveys, but also for how it displays her body shape and size is apparent in the opening scene of “Bad Eggs” (2.12). Buffy begs her mother to purchase a particular outfit while they are walking through a shopping mall. Joyce refuses, reasoning “You looked like a streetwalker.” Buffy replies, “But a *thin* streetwalker.” In this exchange, Buffy concedes to the pressure to be thin faced by many American teenage girls, emphasizing

that the appearance of slenderness trumps any other message conveyed by her clothing choice. While selecting the right clothes may assist in presenting a body of the socially-approved size and shape, the most common way for young women to ensure a slender body is through continual monitoring of their diets. Bartky writes, to discipline the body's hungers, "appetite must be monitored at all times and governed by an iron will" (66), and Buffy arguably complies. Buffy nibbles on snacks such as candy, popcorn, sodas, and blended mochas, instead of eating complete meals. And, although she is shown preparing food or washing dishes, most memorably in "Pangs" (4.8), when she prepares a Thanksgiving dinner for her friends, Buffy's high-calorie food intake is arguably a result of the forces of darkness: she chugs a half-gallon of milk to spite her demon-roommate, Kathy ("Living Conditions" 4.2); she steals her classmates' sandwich as a result of drinking tainted beer ("Beer Bad" 4.5); and she reluctantly tries a Doublemeat Medley to placate her creepy supervisor ("Doublemeat Palace" 6.12).

[11] Regular physical exercise is also required to maintain Buffy's waifish figure. In addition to her physical education classes at Sunnydale High School, Buffy is an experienced figure-skater and cheerleader, largely female pursuits which require abundant aerobic activity as well as flexibility training and gymnastics. Buffy spends much of her time training her body with her mentor, Rupert Giles, at first in the high school library and then in the back room behind the Magic Box. She also spars with her boyfriends, Angel, Riley, and Spike, and with her fellow slayer, Faith. At other times, her commitment to exercise interferes with her social life as she forgoes spending time with her friends for calisthenics ("Doppelgangland" 3.16). While Buffy's physical training is part of her preparation for her role as the Slayer, as Bartky notes, "it is not always easy in the case of women to distinguish what is done for the sake of physical fitness from what is done in obedience to the requirement of femininity" (66-67).

[12] Third, Buffy's achievement of femininity is discernable through her use of specific gestures, postures, and movements colloquially referred to as sitting like a girl, walking like a girl, and throwing like a girl. In "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," feminist

philosopher Iris Marion Young describes in great detail how feminine movement is constricted. Women experience their bodies as if they are positioned in space rather than as constituting space, and they live space as enclosed or confining them rather than fully extending their bodies into the space available. In her ordinary teenage girl activities, Buffy's body comportment matches Young's description. When hanging out with her friends at school, Buffy sits *like a girl*, namely erect with her hands folded in her lap or close to her torso, and her legs crossed or pressed together. When walking to class, she does so *like a girl*, namely her stride is proportionately short for her stature, and she carries her school books close to her body rather than swinging them at her side ("The Freshman" 4.1). Young also describes the ambiguity of feminine bodily movement as inhibited intentionality: "feminine bodily existence frequently projects an 'I can' and an 'I cannot' with respect to the very same end" and as a result "women tend to locate their motion in part of the body only, leaving the rest of the body relatively immobile" (149-150). When at the beach tossing a football back and forth, her boyfriend, Riley Finn, patronizingly points out that she throws *like a girl* ("Buffy vs. Dracula" 5.1). That is, rather than engage her entire body in the forward motion of the ball, she concentrates her effort in her forearm only, and thus the ball travels slower and less precisely than it would otherwise.

[13] Both Bartky and Young are ultimately concerned with the ways that feminine disciplinary power produces subjected, "docile bodies."⁶ They uncover the effects of feminine disciplinary practices on female identity and subjectivity, namely the production of a body on which a subordinate status has been inscribed through a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency. In treating their bodies as ornamented surfaces, women turn themselves into sexualized objects and prey for a male gaze and desire; in attempting to achieve the perfect body, women regard their bodies as enemies whose hunger, cellulite, and wrinkles doom them to failure; and in the achievement of graceful and ladylike gestures, postures, and movements, women internalize the view of their bodies as fragile and vulnerable. As a result, feminine movement is constricted not only in the way women sit, walk, and throw, but also in their engagement with the larger world in an attempt to stave off danger. For instance, in a large-scale study on street harassment by Hollaback! and Cornell

University, many women reported conscientiously restricting or altering their movement to avoid potential harassment by taking a different route home, choosing a different mode of transportation, deciding against attending social events, and altering how they dress (Culp-Ressler). Building on the work of Barky and Young, feminist philosopher Ann Cahill explores the significance of the threat of rape for the production of the distinctly feminine body, not just for those who have been victimized but also for the bodies of women who have not experienced sexual violence. In her essay “A Phenomenology of Fear: The Threat of Rape and Feminine Bodily Comportment,” Cahill describes this as the body of a pre-victim, one who expects to be hurt, particularly if she breaks the rules, by, for example, wearing short skirts or going out in public at night alone. She also notes how the feminine body is not only experienced as essentially weak, but also as culpable for its own vulnerability: “If that body is hurt or violated, the blame must rest on the woman’s failure to sufficiently limit its movement” (157).

[14] While Buffy practices graceful and ladylike gestures, postures, and movements in her everyday activities, these do not exhaust the possibilities of what her body can achieve. Because she is the Slayer, Buffy’s bodily movement and spatiality violate feminine norms, most notably in that Buffy does not experience her body as fragile or vulnerable as most American girls and women do. When Buffy tells the Master in the Season One finale, “I may be dead. But I’m still pretty. Which is more than I can say for you” (“Prophecy Girl” 1.12), she is not only highlighting her physical attractiveness, she is also demonstrating her power, both her trademark use of humor to disarm her foes and the fact that not even death can stop her from saving the world. In the next section, I examine more closely her body comportment, manner of moving, and relation to space when she is preparing for and engaging in combat, and explore how her Slayer power affects her engagement with feminine disciplinary practices.

“How did you do that? You’re just a girl.”

[15] Just as one is not born, but becomes a woman, so, too, one is not born, but becomes a Slayer. In Buffy’s case, she is gifted Slayer status when she is 15 years old,⁷ and her struggle to accept and integrate her

heroic status into her self-concept is a recurring theme in seasons one and two of the television series. Because the mystical powers of the Slayer have been bestowed upon her, Buffy possesses superhuman strength, agility, speed, and stamina, which aid her in fighting the forces of darkness. As a result, Buffy's Slayer power shifts her being-in-the-world, subverting the aims of feminine disciplinary practices. With little visible effort, Buffy demonstrates remarkable upper-body strength, a kind of strength uncharacteristic of a feminine body. She is able to pull open a locked door with a single tug ("Welcome to the Hellmouth"), pick up a man six feet into the air with one hand ("Lessons" 7.1), lift a steel girder used in construction ("Life Serial" 6.5), and balance her full body weight on a block of wood with only one arm ("Real Me" 5.2). She also demonstrates considerable lower-body strength and spatial awareness. She can backflip over a gate from a standing position ("The Harvest" 1.2), break a training dummy with a standing kick ("When She Was Bad" 2.1), catch a sword between her palms with her eyes closed ("Becoming Part 2" 2.22), and twirl a stake like a baton ("The Freshman").

[16] The starkest examples of Buffy's physical abilities, and thus her deviation from conventional feminine body comportment, are realized in her combat with vampires, demons, and other evil-doers. The most memorable battle scenes include her fights with the vampire Angelus ("Becoming Part 2"), the rogue slayer Faith ("Graduation Day Part 1" 3.21 and "This Year's Girl" 4.15), the hell-god Glory ("The Gift" 5.22), the dark witch Willow ("Two to Go" 6.21), and the misogynist preacher Caleb ("End of Days" 7.21). In these battles, Buffy uses her entire body in the effort. Her stance is wide and evenly balanced. When throwing a punch, she reaches back and engages not just her entire arm into the forward motion, but uses her trunk and legs as well. She aims her fist through the body of her opponent, not just at its surface. When she kicks, she does not lose her balance. She swings her leg wide in an arc, and engages her full body weight into the forward motion of her foot. She reads the body language of her opponent well enough to anticipate what s/he will do next. When a punch or kick comes her way, she does not cower, but moves toward it to deflect the attack. She ducks and dodges and confronts her attacker with her own countermotion.

This is not the constricted and inhibited intentionality of feminine body comportment described by Young. Instead, Buffy's body comportment is open, uninhibited, and confident, echoing the comportment of the conventionally masculine body.

[17] As noted in the previous section, Buffy devotes considerable time and effort to physical exercise. But, given her role as a vampire slayer, the objective of her commitment to exercise disrupts the norms of conventional femininity. She still uses exercise to achieve a body of a specific size and general configuration, but rather than aiming for a body that is small and slender, she aims to achieve a body that is strong, agile, and tough. Although her Slayer power affords her considerable strength, Buffy trains her body to enhance her reflexes, balance, accuracy, and coordination. Giles introduces Buffy to a variety of combat weapons, from wooden staves ("Angel" 1.7) to throwing knives ("Helpless" 3.12), and stages opportunities for her to enhance her environmental awareness by, for example, sparring while blindfolded ("Band Candy" 3.6 and "Checkpoint" 5.12). Moreover, Buffy's figure skating and cheerleading skills, which are normally coded as feminine, are restyled as she integrates her gracefulness and specialized knowledge of gymnastics into her combat repertoire. For instance, in "Buffy vs. Dracula," Buffy quickly closes the space between her and a vampire with a cartwheel, seamlessly blending feminine and masculine styles of movement. Making full use of her body's spatial and lateral potentialities and putting her whole body into fluid and directed motion, she uses her landing to simultaneously kick him to the ground and land a stake into his heart.

[18] In addition to hand-to-hand combat, Buffy demonstrates outstanding facility with a wide variety of weapons. These conventionally masculine instruments are a central feature of her wardrobe. In place of a suitcase or traditional dowry chest filled with clothing and housewares, Buffy stockpiles a leather bag and wooden chest with weapons. Her implements of choice are wooden stakes and crossbows, reflecting her confidence in both melee and ranged combat. When using them, she accurately targets a specific point of contact, reflecting the manner in which these instruments are incorporated into her body schema and facilitate the realization of her intentions. Demonstrating a continuous unity with her surroundings as well as resourcefulness, Buffy frequently

turns ordinary objects into weapons and uses her environment for defensive purposes. In “Into the Woods” (5.10), for example, she grabs a long, broken piece of wood and swings it in a wide arc, dusting three vampires in a single motion. Buffy also brandishes several unique and mystical weapons to defeat particular opponents, including a rocket launcher (“Innocence” 2.14), the Blessed Sword (“Becoming Part Two”), the Hunga Munga (“Anne” 3.1), Olaf the Troll God’s enchanted hammer (“The Gift”), and the Scythe (“Chosen” 7.22). Even though she does not train with these specialty armaments, she nevertheless trusts her body’s ability to effectively wield them. In these ways, Buffy’s body is not merely an ornamented surface to be adorned with fashion accessories. She is an active agent with an arsenal of tools for transforming her world into a safer place.

[19] Remarkably, Buffy’s role as the Slayer allows her to sidestep one of the most profound effects of feminine disciplinary practices on female identity and subjectivity, namely the experience of oneself as delicate and helpless, especially with respect to the threat of sexual violence. This is significant given the fact that sexual violence, perpetrated both by monsters and by human beings, is a pervasive threat throughout the show in both a metaphorical and literal sense. On the metaphorical side, the specter of sexual violence is raised during vampire attacks as vampires are highly sexualized predators, and vampirism is a nonconsensual exchange of body fluid (Chandler para. 8). Take the series premiere, “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” for example. In an attempt to “seize the day,” Buffy’s friend Willow Rosenberg finds herself in a dangerous situation with a vampire named Thomas. She leaves the Bronze alone with him on the expectation of going to the ice cream shop together. Instead, he leads her to a dark, remote location—a graveyard—and pulls her into a crypt. When Willow attempts to leave the crypt, another vampire, Darla, appears with a second victim, Willow’s friend, Jesse. Darla laments that Willow is “hardly enough to share” and Jesse complains that Darla has given him a “hickey.” Although the vampires have targeted Willow and Jesse as food, these comments invoke gang rape and acquaintance rape, respectively. Sexual violence is also an explicit threat throughout the series. Xander attempts to rape Buffy when he is possessed by the spirit of a hyena (“The Pack”

1.06); a drugged Buffy is nearly raped by a fraternity member (“Reptile Boy” 2.5); the swim team coach threatens to have the entire swim team gang rape Buffy (“Go Fish” 2.20); Faith attempts to rape and murder Xander (“Consequences” 3.15); the Trio, i.e. Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew, uses a cerebral dampener on Warren’s ex-girlfriend, Katrina, to turn her into a “willing” sex slave before murdering her (“Dead Things” 6.13); and Spike attempts to rape Buffy in her own bathroom (“Seeing Red” 6.19). Yet Buffy does what few American young women would do: she ventures into the night alone, not because she is naïve of the dangers to young women, but despite them.

[20] In contrast to the conventionally feminine body, Buffy experiences herself as capable not only of effective self-defense but also able to defend others, both male and female alike, from victimization. In the opening scene of “The Gift,” for instance, Buffy finds a young man cornered in an alley by a vampire. Both the man and vampire instruct her to “Get out of here,” the young man viewing her as a potential victim, not an asset to his defense, and the vampire viewing her as an annoyance, not a threat. After mocking the vampire, Buffy battles with and ultimately stakes him. The young man is stunned. He asks incredulously, “How did you do that? [. . .] you’re just a girl.” As a girl, Buffy is conventionally coded as the victim, not the hero in that dark alley. Not only is she expected to be overpowered, any attempts at resistance or self-defense are assumed to be feeble and ineffective. Or, better yet, she is expected to avoid the dark alley completely. But Buffy violates the rules of feminine movement. She wears short skirts and walks alone at night, and rather than being victimized and then blamed for her choices, she moves freely in the world, seeking out and defeating demons who threaten her and others.

[21] Thus far, I have described the ways that Buffy’s embodiment both reflects and challenges conventional feminine norms. On the one hand, Buffy’s appearance is conventionally feminine, requiring that she enact the feminine disciplinary practices required for the achievement of a recognizably feminine body. On the other hand, her status as the Slayer transforms the aims of those practices, preventing them from producing in her an inferior, “docile” status. As a result, Buffy represents a gender hybrid. Arwen Spicer, Marc Camron, and Lorna Jowett use the label

“gender hybrid” to describe the identities of both male and female characters in the series. Importantly, gender hybridity is not simply female characters performing masculinity and male characters performing femininity, since this reversal ultimately preserves the gender binary even while it creates distance between the categories of sex and gender. Instead, the hybridization of gender requires playfully transgressing gender stereotypes, eschewing adherence to masculinity and femininity as exclusive categories in lieu of blending and bending them. As a result, Buffy’s gender hybridity opens up the possibility for a radical reimagining of what it means to be a young woman. In place of the conventional coupling of femininity with victimization, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* links femininity with heroism.

[22] Crucially, this alternative style of feminine embodiment is not limited to the character of Buffy Summers. In defiance of the patriarchal suppression of women’s power by confining it to one Slayer per generation, Willow casts a spell to transfer Buffy’s Slayer status to young women all over the world in the final episode of the series (“Chosen”). Buffy makes the revolutionary intent of this spell clear:

In every generation, one Slayer is born, because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. [. . .] I say we change the rule. I say *my* power, should be *our* power. [. . .] From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, will be a Slayer. Every girl who could have the power, will have the power. Can stand up, will stand up. Slayers, every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?

During this speech, viewers see a montage of girls and young women—a girl in a baseball uniform standing at the plate waiting to bat, a teen leaning against her high school locker, a woman who has fallen onto her living room floor, a woman standing up at the dinner table—who are suddenly empowered—a woman blocks her abuser’s slap, the girl in the baseball uniform confidently smiles as she awaits the pitch. Slayer embodiment is gifted not only to the dozens of potentials that have been preparing to assist Buffy in an epic battle against The First and The First’s Turok-Han minions; it is transferred to women all across the world. Literary theorist Patricia Pender describes this moment as a corrective to the uninterrogated white privilege of the series. In “Kicking

Ass is Comfort Food: Buffy as Third Wave Feminist Icon,” she writes, “In extending the Slayer’s power to young girls across the globe, Buffy’s season seven can be seen to begin to redress—albeit belatedly and incompletely—the national, cultural and racial privilege the show has assumed through its seven-year cycle” (231). Buffy’s final command and question “Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?” signals that this gift is one that can be accepted or refused. Although one may not be born as such, one can, through a conscious choice, become a slayer of one’s own demons. However, one may wonder whether this portrayal of gender hybridity has anything worthwhile to offer ordinary young women. After all, Buffy’s ability (as well as that of the other Potentials-turned-Slayers) to challenge conventional feminine norms of body comportment is seemingly premised on her having been blessed with mystical powers. What if she lacked these superpowers as ordinary women do? Would she become “just a girl,” weak and helpless like the stereotypical blonde female in slasher horror films? In the next section, I turn to a specific episode in which Buffy temporarily loses her slayer power to better understand the relationship between Buffy’s slayer status and her gender hybridity.

“What if I just hide under my bed, all scared and helpless?”

[23] “Helpless” is an important episode for identifying the profound impact of Slayer power on Buffy’s ability to challenge norms of feminine embodiment. In this episode, the Watcher’s Council has scheduled a rite of passage for Buffy called *Tento di Cruciamentum*, which is administered to each Slayer who reaches the age of 18. In the days preceding her birthday, Giles secretly injects Buffy with an organic compound of muscle relaxants and adrenaline suppressors to temporarily impair her Slayer powers. Once her powers are inhibited, the Watcher’s Council has planned for her to battle Zachary Kralik, a Hannibal Lecter-like⁸ serial-killer-turned-vampire. During the episode, it is revealed that Kralik was notorious for having tortured and murdered more than a dozen young women, including his mother, whom he killed and ate. The purpose of the *Tento di Cruciamentum* is to test a Slayer’s intelligence and ingenuity. Senior Watcher Quentin Travers describes the skills required to pass the test to Giles: “The Slayer is not just physical

proWess. She must have cunning, imagination, a confidence derived from self-reliance. And believe me, once this is all over, your Buffy will be stronger for it.” In other words, to survive the encounter, Buffy must draw upon human sources of strength rather than supernatural ones. Because Buffy’s slayer power is disabled in this episode, we are able to distinguish those elements of Buffy’s being-in-the-world that can be attributed to her slayer status, and those which belong to her as an ordinary young woman.

[24] First, as a result of the injections, Buffy loses her physical competence. Without supernatural strength, her body is unable to accomplish tasks beyond her muscles’ human capacity, which may also have been compromised, considering the muscle relaxants she has been given. In an attempt to defend Cordelia against an aggressive boy, Buffy loses her balance when he pushes her away, falls back against a concrete bench, and tumbles to the ground. When trying to climb over a fence, she is unable to pull up her own body weight. After stocking her weapons bag full, she heaves it onto her shoulder, visibly struggling to carry the heavy load. And, when trying to find her mother in an abandoned building, Buffy is incapable of forcing open locked doors as she has done on numerous past occasions. Without supernatural coordination, Buffy is also unable to accurately use combat weapons. While patrolling, Buffy unexpectedly loses her focus and a vampire is able to overpower her, nearly killing her with her own stake. While she is practicing her knife-throwing in the library, her knives land outside the target area, instead breaking glass objects in the room. And, when firing her crossbow at a vampire, she misses him entirely, allowing him the opportunity to grab her by the neck. Without the facility to effectively wield these arguably phallic weapons, Buffy is seemingly rendered impotent.

[25] Not only does the loss of physical strength and coordination impact Buffy’s safety, her impaired abilities profoundly impact her confidence as she quickly apprehends her vulnerability. Given her knowledge of the profound dangers of living on the Hellmouth, Buffy becomes anxiety-ridden. She confesses to her vampire boyfriend Angel, “I’ve seen too much. I know what goes bump in the night. Not being able to fight it . . . What if I just hide under my bed, all scared and

helpless?” and she tells Giles, “I can’t be just a person. I can’t be helpless like that.” Without her Slayer power, Buffy perceives herself to be helpless, a description she attributes to the average person. Most compellingly, the threat of sexual violence emerges, altering her self-perception from that of the confident hero to that of the pre-victim described by Cahill. While walking home at night from Angel’s mansion, Buffy pulls her red coat tightly around her torso as she passes by two unknown, laughing men. One of the men calls out to her, “Hey, sweet girl! How much for a lap dance for me and my buddy?” Buffy starts to turn back toward them, presumably to reply to the street harassment with a characteristic verbal or physical comeback, but instead she walks on, berating herself for her naiveté, “Walk me home, Angel. No, I’m fine. I can take care of myself.” By reciting this earlier conversation with Angel, Buffy reminds herself that her ability to safely walk alone at night, which she usually takes for granted, can no longer be relied upon. Later, when heading home from the library, Giles warns her, “You can’t walk home alone, Buffy. It isn’t safe.” Like the women described by Cahill, Buffy experiences her body as a liability. The threat of sexual harassment, kidnapping, sexual violence, and murder are unmistakable, and these dangers are confirmed by others who remind her of the rules: as a woman, she is expected to restrict her movement in the world to avoid getting hurt.

[26] Buffy’s sense of helplessness is compounded as she loses trust in both herself and others. Not only does her body betray her as her strength and coordination falter, Buffy is also betrayed by her loved ones. Her largely absent father, Hank, betrays her by canceling their annual plans to go to the ice show for her birthday. Her mentor and substitute father-figure, Giles, betrays her by secretly administering to her the muscle relaxants and adrenaline suppressors that temporarily impair her Slayer powers and thus put her in mortal danger. The Watcher’s Council betrays her by imposing the *Tento di Cruciamantum* on her to test her resilience, thus revealing her subordinate status from their perspective. Even her boyfriend, Angel, and closest friends, Willow, Xander, and Oz, are preoccupied and unavailable to assist Buffy in her weakened state. Interestingly, the only person Buffy is able to rely upon in this episode is Cordelia. After Buffy’s attempt to rescue Cordelia from

the aggressive boy fails, Cordelia steps up to defend Buffy. She demands incredulously, “What is wrong with you?” pushing the boy backward and barraging him with her fists until he walks away. And, later in the episode when Buffy is warned by Giles that it isn’t safe for her to walk home alone, Buffy asks Cordelia to drive her home. Cordelia agrees to the request without question, indicating a hint of female solidarity, for she too has been targeted by male violence against women.

[27] Episode writer David Fury notes that “Helpless” deliberately revisits the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale (“Helpless” Commentary). Buffy dons a bright red, hooded coat, and she is confronted by the “big bad” Kralik while walking home alone. During this scene, Kralik rips off Buffy’s coat and later disguises himself with it to lure Joyce out of her home. When Buffy goes to the Sunnydale Arms building to rescue Joyce, Kralik references the fairy tale explicitly by asking her, “Why did you come to the dark of the woods? To bring all these sweets to grandmother’s house?” He also warns her, “If you stray from the path, you may lose your way.” While interpretations of Little Red Riding Hood vary, in this instance, the “moral” subtext connects well with the episode. Standard readings reference the dangers of gender-based violence, especially that perpetrated by strangers, which is echoed both by Kralik’s reputation for killing women and the street harassment Buffy encounters. Other interpretations suggest the tale is a sexual maturation metaphor as the color of the cloak symbolizes menstruation (Fromm 240). This reading is also apt as the episode coincides with Buffy’s eighteenth birthday, the moment Buffy reaches legal adulthood.

[28] Without her slayer power, Buffy is poised to embody the “blonde girl who would always get herself killed” in the slasher horror films which Whedon aimed to subvert. Holly Barbaccia argues that this episode consciously reproduces and parodies the core elements of those slasher films by employing the tropes of the Killer, the Terrible Place, and the Final Girl. In “Buffy in the ‘Terrible House,’” she explains how the episode pays homage to Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho*, as Kralik’s matricidal tendencies echo those of Norman Bates, and the Sunnydale Arms boarding house, the site the Watchers’ Council has staged for Buffy’s battle with Kralik, substitutes for the Bates Motel. Like the Bates Motel, the Sunnydale Arms building presents a creepy

location. It is abandoned, dirty, and filled with broken and dilapidated furniture, and the rooms are poorly lit, with only a glowing fireplace in one room and a small light fixture on the wall near the staircase. The spooky building becomes a house of horror once Kralik escapes from the control of the Watchers' Council. When Giles discovers a bloody trail leading to a room containing Hobson's body, his expression, the smears of blood on the wall, and the bloodied and lifeless arm lying across the screen convey the brutality of this particular killer.

[29] Barbaccia also notes how Buffy's confrontations with Kralik resemble scenes from slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s. In these films, the Final Girl defeats the bad guy in the end, but not until after an hour of "being chased and almost caught, hiding, running, falling, rising in pain and fleeing again, seeing her friends mangled and killed by weapon-wielding killers, and so on" (Clover x). Fury's audio commentary confirms this reference by characterizing the scenes between Buffy and Kralik as a cat-and-mouse-game ("Helpless" Commentary). This game begins after Buffy's encounter with street harassment. When she turns a corner, she hears humming and runs into Kralik. He grabs her and, unable to pull herself free, she feebly drums her fists against his chest and cries out for help. Buffy manages to wriggle out of her coat and flees into an alley. In stark contrast to the alley scene from "Welcome to the Hellmouth," Buffy is not ready to fight against her attacker but is clearly terrified. She repeatedly screams, "Help me! Somebody, please!" When she reaches a fence at the other end, she squeezes underneath it, narrowly escaping another vampire's clutches. She then runs into a street to flag down a car for help, and after it swerves to avoid her, she is picked up by Giles.

[30] In her second confrontation with Kralik, the cat-and-mouse game continues. Although Buffy chooses to engage Kralik this time, her vulnerability is evident. At first, she moves through the darkened Sunnydale Arms building tentatively, jumping nervously when the front door closes and visibly spooked by Kralik taunting her from the shadows. When Kralik finally shows himself, he pursues her slowly and playfully, savoring her ineffectual use of weapons and her frantic attempts to escape. In place of her trademark stake and crossbow, she nervously holds out a wooden cross. Kralik grabs it and presses it against

his chest, moaning with pleasure as it sizzles against his flesh. Buffy is heading upstairs when Kralik trips her by suddenly punching his arm through a staircase railing. With some difficulty, Buffy is able to break away from his grasp, and at this point, it is unclear whether she is searching for Joyce or for a place to hide. Buffy's terror peaks when she finds a room wallpapered with Polaroids of her bound and gagged mother. The repeated captures and escapes culminate in the basement of the building, where she, like the Final Girl in slasher horror films, finally manages to defeat the monster.

[31] Buffy's loss of her masculine-coded strength, weapon facility, and confidence may lead one to conclude that her gender hybridity is a result of her Slayer status. On this reading, Buffy's femininity is presented through her "normal" life as a girl and her masculinity is presented through her heroic alter ego. However, in this episode, Buffy's loss of Slayer power is also accompanied by a loss of her feminine appearance.⁹ She worries that without her Slayer power, she is unattractive. She asks Angel, "if I'm not the Slayer, what do I do? What do I have to offer? Why would you like me?" Later, when Buffy engages Kralik in the Sunnydale Arms building, she replaces her designer clothes with baggy dungarees¹⁰ and her perfectly coifed hair is pulled up into hairclip, a hairstyle Cordelia once referred to as "street-urchin" ("Halloween"). While this implicit coupling of physical prowess and feminine appearance may seem unexpected, earlier in the episode, Buffy explicitly links Slayer power with femininity. When she first notices that her power is faltering, she turns to Giles for help:

BUFFY: Okay, I just got swatted down by some no-neck and rescued by Cordelia. What the hell is happening?

GILES: I'm sure it'll sort itself out.

BUFFY: You're not getting the big picture here. I have no strength. I have no coordination. I throw knives like . . .

GILES: A girl?

BUFFY: Like I'm not the Slayer.

In this exchange, Giles' response reflects a conventional understanding of feminine embodiment. He equates "throwing like a girl" with lack of strength and lack of coordination. Buffy rejects this understanding, instead bemoaning her inability to "throw like a Slayer." After all, the

Slayer is, by definition, a girl, and thus strength and coordination reflect girl power, not the absence of femininity. Indeed, Buffy regularly experiences her femininity in concert with her Slayer duties. In “Faith, Hope, and Trick” (3.3), for example, she lists all the things she wants to do: “date and shop and hang out and go to school and save the world from unspeakable demons. You know, I wanna do girlie stuff!” That is, “girlie stuff” includes, rather than excludes, killing monsters. Even when wearing formal attire for the Spring Fling, Homecoming Dance, or Prom, Buffy still kicks ass (“Prophecy Girl,” “Homecoming” 3.05, and “The Prom” 3.20).

[32] Without her Slayer power, Buffy is stripped of both her masculine and feminine characteristics, revealing the attributes Buffy retains outside of the realm of the superhuman. Buffy is not only vulnerable, she is also resilient. First, Buffy embodies courage. Although Buffy is well aware of Kralik’s strength and her own relative weakness, she nevertheless chooses to enter a dangerous environment to rescue her mother. She loads up a leather bag with weapons and heads to the Sunnydale Arms building. She does so not because she is unafraid, but in spite of her fear. Second, Buffy embodies resourcefulness. Once she accepts that her usual stake and crossbow will be of no use, she searches for other options to aid her in combat.¹¹ When attacked by Blair, a member of the Watcher’s Council whom Kralik has turned into a vampire, she heaves a bookcase on top of him and whacks him with an andiron she finds nearby. When Kralik trips her by suddenly punching his arm through a staircase railing, Buffy uses a broken piece of the railing to stab at his arm and thus is able to break away from his grasp. Third, Buffy embodies wit, in both senses of the term: keen intelligence and humor. Well aware that she lacks the physical strength to defeat Kralik, especially after he grabs her cross and presses it into his sizzling flesh without flinching, Buffy realizes that she can only defeat Kralik by outsmarting him. She anticipates her opponent’s actions—needing water to swallow his medication—and thus manages to trick a seemingly invincible foe into drinking holy water. As she watches Kralik’s body smoke, she quips, “If I was at full Slayer power, I’d be punning right about now.” While the content of this remark implies that wittiness is a

feature of her Slayer power, it demonstrates instead that her wit is truly her own.¹²

[33] In an effort to determine whether or not *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers a successful subversion of femininity, I have explored the ways in which Buffy's being-in-the-world both reflects and challenges feminine norms. On the one hand, Buffy's being-in-the-world reflects norms of conventional femininity in that her body is fashionably adorned, slender, and often moves in a ladylike fashion. On the other hand, Buffy's being-in-the-world challenges norms of conventional femininity in that, when preparing for and engaging in combat, her body comportment, manner of moving, and relation to space incorporate aspects of the conventionally masculine body. That is, Buffy represents a form of gender hybridity, a style which replaces the conventional coupling of femininity and victimization with femininity and heroism. As a result, Buffy is able to participate in the disciplinary practices of femininity without experiencing their usual effects. Unlike most American young women, Buffy's embodiment is not limited by the fear of sexual violence, but instead undermines patriarchal restrictions on feminine movement in the world. In this way, Joss Whedon has succeeded in subverting the slasher horror film's usual representation of young women. A conventionally feminine appearance does not necessarily signal victimization.

[34] Crucially, Buffy's gender hybridity is not a result of a juxtaposition of her superhero and human identity, but is contained within her Slayer identity. Rather than compartmentalizing her human status as feminine and her superhuman status as masculine, Slayer being-in-the-world is itself an integration of feminine and masculine characteristics. As shown through the episode "Helpless," the loss of her Slayer power entails not only a loss of her masculine strength, but a simultaneous loss of her feminine appearance. What remains when Slayer power is absent, then, is a different form of strength, human strength. This human strength is characterized by courage, resourcefulness, and wit, which is realized in a distinctly female body.¹³ Buffy cannot escape her vulnerability. The fact remains that she lives in a patriarchal world brimming with threats of sexual violence, kidnapping, and murder. Her wounds are visible, and healing will take time, but she

is resilient. She has the power to recover from adversity and thrive not in spite of, but because she has overcome it. As a result, Whedon and company¹⁴ do not deny the fact of female vulnerability, but instead deny that this vulnerability entails helplessness. With or without Slayer power, Buffy represents a young woman who can take back the night.

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² See Lauren Schultz on "The Contested Feminism of Joss Whedon" for a survey of scholars' views.

³ See Jowett and Abbott for an illuminating exploration of how television is an ideal format for the horror genre.

⁴ In an interview with Tasha Robinson, Whedon characterized Buffy as "Barbie with a kung fu grip" (28).

⁵ See Byers and Pender on how *Buffy's* engagement of difference within individual characters marginalizes real bodily difference and diversity, thus naturalizing whiteness and white privilege.

⁶ Bartky explicitly refers to Michel Foucault's work on disciplinary power with the term "docile bodies."

⁷ Karras notes that, in contrast to many American girls, Buffy's power increases rather than decreases upon reaching menarche (para. 12).

⁸ Writer David Fury notes in his audio commentary of the episode that Kralik was inspired by the Hannibal Lecter character from a series of suspense novels by Thomas Harris.

⁹ Interestingly, the combination of masculine power with feminine appearance is also true of Willow, whose growing magical power accompanies "a more conventionally attractive feminine style" (Levine 180).

¹⁰ Buffy's "Helpless" appearance echoes the more boyish appearance of the Final Girl described by Carol Clover (40).

¹¹ Buffy's trademark stake is noticeably absent in this battle. The substitution of the more feminine holy water for the phallic stake reflects her loss of masculine-coded Slayer power.

¹² See Reiss on the use of humor as a central feature of Buffy's fighting style.

¹³ See Camron (2007) for an excellent analysis of Xander's human courage, resourcefulness, and wit in "The Zeppo."

¹⁴ "Helpless" is written by David Fury and directed by James A. Contner.