



Marc Camron

The Importance of Being the Zeppo: Xander, Gender Identity and Hybridity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

"If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism."

–Joss Whedon (Bellafante 83)

[1] Critics of popular culture frequently cite *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as an example of a progressive, post-modernist text and sometimes *the* exemplary feminist text. Zoe-Jane Playdon describes the series as "suggestive of a series of feminisms: feminist theory, feminist mythology and lesbian feminist politics" (158). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does its best to live up to these expectations, featuring female characters in positions of great power. What could be more progressive than an empowered woman whose mission is to repeatedly save the world? Series creator Joss Whedon continually proclaims his pro-feminist agenda, noting how he wanted to create a text in which the stereotypical, sexually charged, attractive blond girl could be something other than the victim. He pictured a horror movie in which, "the girl goes into the dark alley. And the monster follows her. And she destroys him" (Qtd. in Vint ¶16). But beneath the show's progressive exterior exist situations enforcing the patriarchal society that created it. What effect does this patriarchy have, and does its mere existence prevent a text such as *Buffy* from representing a genuine feminist ideology? This paper will show how difficult it is, even with the best of intentions, to escape the prevailing hegemony, and more importantly, will seek to prove how the show's apparent failings make it a better feminist text.

[2] Of course these failings provoke arguments to the contrary. Accusations of gender swapping resulting in a text that ultimately reinforces the prevailing patriarchal hierarchy abound. Critics such as Lorna Jowett sometimes claim that by coding Buffy male, and characters such as Xander female, the end result is a smoke and mirrors version of feminism.. Jowett acknowledges the complex spider web of gender dynamics present during the series, and on the surface such claims do appear to have some validity. However, such criticisms fail to consider that to represent any version of the real world, even one with a layer of fantasy frosting on it, this series must work within certain recognizable ideologies. A *Buffyverse* where Sunnydale California exists in a United States with a woman President would not have the same impact simply because it is thus far removed from our reality. The show relies on the impact of representing the unreal within the real, so such stretches are impossible. Therefore these recognizable ideologies, in this case an established patriarchal structure, are necessary. How then can a text such as *Buffy* achieve its feminist

agenda, if indeed such an agenda exists?

[3] First, we must consider whether *Buffy* even represents a feminist text. Some critics argue the show's feminist agenda is nothing more than window dressing, particularly given the physical makeup and social tendencies of the heroine. In her excellent essay on the post-modern politics of *Buffy*, Patricia Pender acknowledges this difficulty: "[Buffy] might justifiably be accused of subscribing to, and therefore reinscribing, commercial and patriarchal standards of feminine beauty: she is young, blond, slim, and vigilantly fashion conscious" (36). To truly represent a paradigmatic feminist hero, shouldn't Buffy be buffer? Taller, more muscular, with short hair, hairy legs, dirt under her broken fingernails, bad fashion sense and an affinity for light beer? Instead, we have Barbie with the medieval weapons accessory set, complete with leather pants and lip gloss. It is an image feminist critics continually struggle with because, as Pender notes, "They [some feminist critics] suggest that Buffy can be either feminist or femme; there is no middle ground" (38). However, in reality, this middle ground helps create a rich, feminist text. Buffy allows herself to kick ass and still be feminine, which is only logical given the culture in which

the text was created. ^[1] Arwen Spicer agrees, writing, "since the Buffyverse is situated in a patriarchal society that utilizes preestablished [sic] gender stereotypes, we must acknowledge that it would be difficult for *Buffy* to address issues of gender without engaging with such stereotypes" (Spicer ¶5). Buffy does not live in a world where women dominate throughout society while men stay at home and tend to the babies. She lives in our world, should our world suddenly find itself rife with supernatural evil. She lives in our world, where the patriarchy still exists and has a tremendous influence on how women live their lives, for better or for worse.

[4] Still, there are those who believe *Buffy* should have been something more: a less stereotypical, more fully realized feminist heroine. For some of these critics, nothing short of complete female empowerment over patriarchal expectations is acceptable. But what sort of image does this portray? Surely not one that young women can hold up as a realistic role model. Like it or not, our society is filled with overtly feminine portrayals of women, and moving too far outside the norm only creates a different sort of Other. In her feminist exploration of *Buffy*, Sherryl Vint speaks against this argument:

Rather than condemning these stereotypes—and hence the desire that women might find in them—feminism should help young women to critically interrogate the stereotype and its constructed appeal. A feminism that seeks only to judge and condemn will continue to convince young women that this is a postfeminist age. (Vint ¶7)

The question of whether or not Buffy can be feminist while being femme is the wrong one. Suggesting otherwise only replaces one gender stereotype with another. The better question would be, do these portrayals subvert the patriarchy of *Buffy* or merely flip it around?

[5] Is it possible we have a simple case of gender reversal, a world in which women replace men as the dominant while keeping social structures intact? Perhaps it would be a good idea to run through the cast of main characters, their positions and power within the group.

Females:

Buffy and Faith – Vampire Slayers: Born with dormant power later activated by an outside source.

Willow, Tara, Amy, Miss Calendar – Witches: Power attained through study.

Anya – Vengeance Demon: Power granted from higher source.

Cordelia – Rich: Power is purchased.

Additionally, all the women wield their power with confidence and poise, fully aware of their control within their world.

Males:

Giles – Watcher (Mentor), Buffy's father figure and servant: Power through study and his position in the Watcher's Council.

Oz – Werewolf: Power of being a supernatural creature three nights a month.

Angel – Vampire with a soul: Supernatural power.

Spike – Vampire without a soul ^{[1][2]}: Supernatural power.

Xander – Marginalized. No position: No power.

On the surface, it appears most of the menfolk are evenly matched with the women. However, a closer look shows that while masculine power does exist, the women continually subvert it. Giles exists to provide Buffy information so *she* may act. When he isn't around, Willow fulfills this role. When not in werewolf form, Oz is small and effeminate; when he is transformed into the powerful beast, he relies on Willow to contain him, to lock him up until he returns to normal. Both Angel and Spike devote themselves to women. Angel is completely committed to Buffy, ^[3] and before his soul was returned, he was dedicated to his sire, Darla. Spike even proclaims himself "love's bitch," and is hopelessly subservient to Drusilla. Once he manages to free himself from her draw, Spike ends up enamored with Buffy herself, replacing one female master for another. (See Jowett on Giles, Oz, Angel, and Spike as feminized males.) Finally, Xander is so femme Pender even refers to him as "Buffy's Handmaiden" (39). Arguing that *Buffy's* males are coded female and females are coded male isn't much of a stretch, which reinforces the possibility that *Buffy* as a text is merely a case of genders reversed. Spicer articulates the problem nicely:

In a social context of patriarchy, it can be argued that if Xander and Giles are men coded feminine, Buffy is a woman coded masculine. This observation is valid. At the same time, such codings have the potential to lead to the reification of masculine gender as synonymous with power, feminine gender with weakness, a move that undoes much of the transgressive work of placing a woman in an empowered and heroic position in the first place. There is a risk that Buffy, like Elizabeth I, may become reinscribed within the patriarchal order as a hero who is acceptable because she is really a masculine figure in a woman's body. (Spicer ¶4)

For many feminist critics this is a real concern. If a powerful, self-aware character such as Buffy can't represent a true feminist heroine, who can? If the patriarchal order appropriates *Buffy* as a text of its own, post-modern pop culture may lose one of its most valiant efforts at creating a feminist icon. The answer, albeit an answer that contains additional problems, may be in the character of Xander, the only character with no true power. For this let us look at the episode "The Zeppo" (3013), and see how Xander may show that *Buffy* is indeed a feminist text, though one not completely removed from current patriarchal ideology.

[6] At the beginning of "The Zeppo," Buffy and the gang are in the middle of fighting a particularly nasty group of female demons, the Sisterhood of Jhi, which is bent on opening up the Hellmouth and destroying the world. Willow casts a spell and Buffy tackles one demon. The struggle is difficult, so Giles steps in to assist in wrestling the

she-beast. The demon immediately throws Giles out of the way, as Faith comes in and skewers it with a sword. When the battle finishes, we discover Willow's casting of a "clouding spell" allowed Buffy and Faith to dispatch the monsters. The women are responsible for every visible, positive action. The only male action we witness is brushed aside like an unwanted insect. The battle is finished and Buffy quickly takes a headcount of the gang. But what's this? Xander is nowhere to be seen. Suddenly a pile of boxes begins to move. Xander emerges, proclaiming himself "fine, just a little bit dirty." But Buffy and Faith both show concern over his well-being and tell him to stop "leaping into the fray," lest he become hurt or killed ("The Zeppo" 3013). Before the opening theme song plays, we see Xander as the weakling of the group; the first one out of the battle and the only one who needs help getting up at the end. When he tries to assert himself, he is verbally castrated by one of the slayers:

Xander: Who at a crucial moment distracted the lead demon by allowing her to pummel him about the head?

Faith: Yeah, that was real manly, how you shrieked and all. (3013)

Xander is immediately marginalized by his group, both physically—not appearing in the portion of the fight we, the audience, are privy to—and verbally—as Faith, one of the text's most powerful characters, categorizes him as less than a man. (Editors' note: See Wilcox's Chapter 8, on "The Zeppo," on the waning and waxing of Xander's verbal skills in the episode.) As the episode progresses and the Sisterhood's plot reveals itself, Xander becomes further marginalized. He does not seem to comprehend why his confidants, when faced with a life or death battle, will not rely on him. He is not lacking in bravery or willingness to place himself in harm's way, so why is he being pushed aside? His ex-girlfriend, the rich debutant Cordelia, is more than happy to explain:

Cordelia: It must be really hard when all your friends have like, superpowers – slayer, werewolf, witches, vampires – and you're like this little nothing...The boy who had no cool.

Xander: I happen to be an integral part of that group. I happen to have a lot to offer.

Cordelia: Integral part of the group? Xander, you're the...the useless part of the group. You're the Zeppo. (3013)

The Zeppo is a reference to Zeppo Marx, the handsome, more serious member of the Marx Brothers some people feel was out of place with the goofy-looking comic genius of Groucho, Harpo and Chico, a character perpetually on the sidelines, still in the film but never getting the chance to look up Margaret Dumont's skirt. We are led to believe what Xander is missing is "cool," but what he really lacks is traditional masculinity. Xander does not want to acknowledge he is the only one without power. Instead he feels he must look for a hook, something to inject him with the much-coveted quality of cool.

[7] Of course, what Xander opts for is a material representation of cool – a car, a 1957 Chevy Bel-Air convertible, to be exact. When asked what he's doing, he says, "It's my thing that makes me cool, you know, that makes me unique. I'm car guy! Guy with a car." However, Buffy manages to nail it on the head – so to speak – when she asks him outright, "Is this a penis metaphor?" (3013). Of course it is, although Xander will never admit it. Xander seeks to replace his missing masculinity with the form of the large, classic automobile (Detroit "muscle"). (Editors' note: See Rogers and Scheidel on "The Zeppo," cars, and masculinity.) The ploy doesn't work, though. The car does not change who Xander is, nor does it change his position in the group. When the group begins planning for the upcoming attack, Xander is relegated to running for donuts. While

fetching the group's sustenance, he runs into a "car girl."^[4] When she quizzes him on the car's specs he only is able to respond, "Uh...very possibly" (3013). Although Xander is more than willing to give her a ride, he soon finds himself bored to tears as she regales him with talk of past car exploits. Xander does not become a car guy by driving a nice car. In fact, one could argue the introduction of the car does nothing more than further marginalize him. The car draws women in, defends them (as we shall soon see), and takes them places Xander without a car cannot. In effect, he becomes second fiddle to a pile of steel and chrome. If this isn't bad enough, Xander on his own is out of harm's way, but Xander, "guy with a car," is involuntarily drawn into a dangerous situation involving four zombies, a bomb and the end of the world.

[8] Fortunately for Xander, halfway into the episode, conditions begin to shift. Xander finds himself with a carload of zombies who want to initiate him, their new "wheel man," into their gang. Not being too keen on this idea, especially after his new buddies rob a hardware store, Xander escapes the zombie horde and heads toward home, away from the trouble everyone is so eager to keep him from. Naturally, this is when he notices Faith fighting one of the Sisterhood. She is fighting hand-to-hand, holding her own but not clearly winning. Xander hits the demon with his car, temporarily stunning her, and spirits Faith away to her apartment. There he finds his deliverance:

Faith: "She got me really wound up. A fight like that and no kill... I'm about ready to pop."

Xander: "Really? Pop?"

Faith: "You up for it?"

Xander: "Oh I'm up." [Faith grabs his crotch.] "I'm suddenly very up. It's just...um...I've never been up with people before."

[Faith kisses him aggressively.]

Faith: "Just relax. Take your pants off."

Xander: "Those two concepts are antithetical."

[Faith removes his shirt, grabbing him and kissing him vigorously. When he starts to react in kind, she throws him on the bed, bounding after him like a wild animal. She straddles him and removes her own top.]

Faith: "Don't worry, I'll steer ya around the curves." (3013)

This encounter at once confirms and confounds critics' claims of gender reversal. Faith is clearly the authority figure here. She has sexual experience while Xander is a virgin. The sexual encounter stems from Faith's need to expel unspent energy, something to satisfy *her* needs, and we are left with no doubt that Xander could have been replaced with Brad Pitt, the pizza guy or possibly a massaging shower head to the same effect. Faith asserts her power by instigating the encounter and remaining in control the entire time. As soon as Xander calms down and begins returning her advances, she increases the physicality by throwing him on the bed and leaping on top of him. She removes both her own clothes and his, making it clear things will progress at her discretion. She even appropriates Xander's "car guy" persona, making Xander the car and promising to steer him "around the curves" (see Rogers and Scheidel). We view a bit of the act itself, reflected in the television (cf. Wilcox 141), and it's no coincidence that Faith remains on top the entire time. Xander's submission does not stem from his lack of experience, but rather from his lack of power. Faith's strength, a very masculine strength, allows her to dominate. At no time does Faith risk becoming subjectified. After the coitus, as they lay in bed, her head remains higher than his on the pillows, again contrasting the expected image of the

woman lying on the man's chest. But here is also where the gender reversal begins to break down. Xander's head is not on Faith's chest either. Now deflowered, he is beginning to rise up, to seize a small bit of power. Xander remains slightly below Faith, but still in a higher position than he was before the commercial break.

[9] The encounter has cost Faith nothing; her power remains unchanged. The tender post-coitus cuddle lasts only a moment. The music stops abruptly and Xander is dismissed, escorted from the apartment with his clothes in his hands (all but his boxers) as Faith excuses herself with a very curt, "That was great. I gotta shower," and slams the door closed behind her (3013). Faith's final words continue to enforce her masculine side, as she acts in the callous, dismissive way we would expect from a lothario. But Xander is no longer playing his reversed role. He is not upset at being kicked out, only confused that he's just had sex in the first place. He expects nothing; perhaps for the moment he recognizes that Faith has no interest in him beyond a quick shag for fun. [5] And he doesn't care. In this moment, the focus shifts from Xander as feminine to Xander as masculine. A three-minute encounter transforms him forever. He still does not have super powers, he still is not a demon, but he has found a piece of his missing masculinity.

[10] We now face an impasse, a confusing break in continuity for those who wish to believe that *Buffy* simply represents a world of swapped genders. Things are no longer quite so simple. They say "sex changes everything," and this is particularly true in Sunnydale. When Buffy lost her virginity to Angel the world nearly ended ("Surprise," 2013). Everything young women are taught to fear about sex comes true for her. At the moment of orgasm (portrayed here as "true happiness"), Angel loses his soul and is transformed once again into Angelus, a monster, a soulless killing machine. Justine Larbalestier addresses this in her article about sex in *Buffy*: "Buffy has 'given' herself to a man and he has changed...His civilized veneer is stripped away; he has become the brutish demon we are taught lies at the heart of all men" (204). More than just a diminished afterglow, the repercussions of this act reach much deeper. Once unleashed, Angelus kills Willow's fish, taunts Buffy and her mother by leaving gruesome drawings in their house, tells Buffy's mother about having sex with her daughter, kills Jenny Calendar, indirectly causes the death of short-term slayer Kendra, murders several other people, and tortures Buffy's mentor, Giles. This escalating series of atrocities is meant to drive Buffy mad, to rub in her face the fact that what she has done has cost her dearly (*BTVS* 2014-2022). Angelus makes her regret surrendering her chastity by removing whatever innocence she had left. Nothing and no one is safe and it is clearly Buffy's fault. In the end, the only way for Buffy to restore peace and find a semblance of redemption (her lost chastity?) is to kill her lover and send him, literally, to hell: an act she must complete even after it is clear Angel's soul has been restored and he is no longer the evil Angelus ("Becoming" Part Two, 2022).

[11] Despite its seemingly advanced agenda, *Buffy* must contend with the sexual attitudes of late 20th century society, which occasionally reflect some truly warped ideas:

When it became clear that there was a mutual sexual attraction between a more-than-200-year-old walking dead man (ewww!) and a 16-year old girl, there were no cries of protest; when it became clear there was a mutual sexual attraction between two young women over the age of consent (and neither undead) there was a good deal of consternation and debate (Larbalestier 197).

So although the relationship between Buffy and Angel is somewhat conventional (after all, he doesn't look 200 years old and dead), there still must be a price to pay for her dalliance. Buffy learns a lesson in proper sexual norms and does not again experiment until college, the earliest time a proper girl should do such things (monogamous relationships

only, no sluts please). Faith, on the other hand, can get away with such things because she is no innocent high-school girl. She may not be older, but she is more experienced; she has lived a harder life and has earned the right to be promiscuous. Likewise, when Willow decides she is a lesbian, she is in college, the acceptable time for such experimentation, at least in the patriarchal fantasy world. Every sexual encounter must be framed in the proper societal context; therefore Xander's foray into manhood is lauded, not scorned. (Editors' note: Cf. Jowett on Xander's encounter with Faith: "Sexual prowess is again called on to demonstrate that a new man is in fact a real man" [136]). Sex in the Buffyverse, it turns out, is less about power and more about convention. All of Buffy's power cannot salvage the negative effect her sexuality had on her and the world around her. Similarly, Xander's lack of power cannot temper the positive effect having intercourse has on him.

[12] Xander leaves his encounter with Faith energized. He then realizes his old zombie buddies planned to build a bomb. He looks for them where he last saw them, at the hardware store: "Long gone. And probably loaded with supplies. Gotta think. I can't believe I had sex. [Shakes head to clear thoughts of sex.] Okay bombs, already-dead-guys with bombs. Oh man, I'm out of my league. Buffy will know what to do" (3013). Though his masculinity is not yet fully realized – he still wants Buffy to dispatch the evil for him – the act of searching for the villains on his own is a huge step. When he happens across the zombies while on his way to find Buffy, he finds the nerve to grab one, interrogate and dispatch it. Xander learns the bomb is planted directly on the Hellmouth, where his friends are fighting to keep the world from ending. Should it detonate, they will die and the world will be overrun with demons. Of course, it is up to Xander to disarm the bomb and save the world. This scenario presents a crucial reversal from Buffy's sexual encounter. Having sex left her weakened, responsible for the destruction unleashed upon the world. Having sex enables Xander to face his crisis head-on, giving him the power to redeem himself and contain a similar type of destruction.

[13] To be perfectly fair, Xander was never one to shy away from a fight. The character always manages to work through his fear and face the evil of the week. But the new and improved Xander (now with 100% less virginity) isn't just along for the ride; he actively seeks out the danger and faces it alone without magic and super-strength at his side. (Editors' note: Cf. Gregory Stevenson's discussion of Xander's moral choices in this episode, especially 101.) Xander enters the school during his friends' apocalyptic battle, with three zombies nipping at his heels. He faces one who is trying to kill him with an axe, and destroys it by dropping a vending machine on its head. The next zombie gets sacrificed to a few hungry members of the Sisterhood, and Xander enters the basement to face the bomb and the zombie leader. With the bomb ready to explode, Xander has his third conversation with zombie Jack. During the first two, both before Xander had sex, he was scared, stuttering and cracking inappropriate jokes to mask his fear, evident in the way he quaked. But this time the conversation is markedly different, as he must convince Jack to disarm the weapon:

Xander: I know what you're thinkin'. 'Can I get by him, get up the stairs, out of the building, seconds ticking away?' I don't love your chances.

Jack: Then you'll die too.

Xander: Yeah, looks like. So I guess the question really is, "Who has less fear."

Jack: I'm not afraid to die. I'm already dead.

Xander: Yeah, but this is different. Being blown up isn't walkin' around drinkin' with your buddies dead. It's little bits being swept up by a janitor dead and I don't think you're ready for that.

Jack: Are you?

Xander: I like the quiet. (3013)

This simple exchange says everything. Xander's fear is completely suppressed and he controls the situation with a newfound power manifested as calm psychological banter. He cannot overpower the zombie, and he can certainly not kill something that is already dead, so he talks his way out of the situation. Xander is now James Dean and the conversation is a game of verbal chicken. The zombie blinks first.

[14] The episode ends with Buffy and the gang recovering from their fight. We are told the horrors we barely glimpsed were worse than anything we have seen in the series, and most likely anything ever to come. When Xander walks by, he is told how lucky he was not to be at the school the previous night. He smiles and says, "Well, uh, give me the quiet life" (3013). He does not need to tell his friends that he is the real hero of the night, that he saved them all. He does not need to brag to reinforce his masculinity. Externally, Xander remains the same, but internally the character is finally comfortable with who he is.

[15] And this is precisely why criticism that *Buffy* is simply an exercise in gender switching, thereby reinforcing the patriarchy, misses its mark. The characters are not simply cross-dressing, they are negotiating an incredibly complex existence in which societal norms and expectations do not match the hidden sub-society in which women hold the bulk of the real power. (Editors' note: Cf. Jowett 142.) Were this a standard patriarchy flipped around, Buffy's femininity and Xander's masculinity would be completely suppressed. Buffy has strength and might, yet manages to dress and act femme. Xander has no power but willingly runs into the fray, continually risking death because his friends need him. Xander is not Buffy's handmaiden, he is her squire, ready to carry her standard and raise her sword should she fall. In a simple gender swap, Xander—not Buffy—would have suffered the horrible consequences of being deflowered. Instead, Xander is permitted to be submissive in the bedroom and aggressive following his sexual exploits. Other characters illustrate these complexities as well. Faith dominates in the bedroom, but falls into a loving, innocent father/daughter relationship with the evil Mayor a few episodes later, completely submitting herself to a patriarchal figure, ostensibly to fill a void from her youth ("Consequences" 3015). Giles submits to Buffy, not because he has to, but because he respects her. We cannot forget that he himself is knowledgeable in magic and fighting, and even made a bit of a reputation for himself in his youth under the frightening nickname, "Ripper" ("Band Candy" 3006). Examples flourish, and attempts to pin a generic gender role on any of these characters does them a disservice, because, as in reality, what lies beneath the surface is more complicated.

[16] Since the characters are thus not merely gender-switched enforcements of the prevailing patriarchy, we can finally decide whether or not *Buffy* is a progressive, feminist text. Shortly after "The Zeppo," *Buffy* cements itself as transgressive when the main character completely rejects the Watchers Council, the patriarchal order that most directly affects her actions: "The council is not welcome here. I have no time for orders" ("Graduation Day" Part 2, 3022). This action is her declaration of independence, showing all in charge she has embraced her power and no longer needs their approval to act. However, this does not erase the existing binaries that surround her every day, binaries that have some feminists crying foul. Jowett notes, "Some representations of masculinity in *Buffy* seem able to transcend gender binaries, but on closer examination their masculinity retains traditional elements" (142). Holly Chandler argues, "modern feminist theory suggests that binarism itself, regardless of which side is demonized, is an unhealthy patriarchal worldview" (Chandler). While this assessment may be valid, it is not realistic. It may sound ridiculous when talking about a text involving supernatural creatures, but removing the binary would place the show so far into the realm of unreality it could no

longer be effective. Given the choice of subverting a fictional reality by presenting a text in which these binaries no longer exist, or subverting our present-day patriarchal society by presenting a text that offers examples of transgression, and character models that straddle male/female stereotypes, the creators chose the latter. Vint goes so far as to claim, "the multiple and contradictory readings of *Buffy* are also a place where young women might begin to develop a critical consciousness about the construction of female identity and sexuality" (¶3).. This "critical consciousness" would not be possible if these young women could not identify with the women of *Buffy* at some level. Viewers learn it is possible to be a strong woman with vulnerabilities or a physically weak man with inner strength.

[17] And so we have Xander, the only member of Buffy's gang with no special abilities, yet upon closer examination, the one character the Scoobies can always count on when the battle explodes, no matter how dire the situation Eventually Angel, Cordelia, Oz and Giles all leave town. Spike and Anya flirt with their evil, demonic ways and when Willow turns evil, she almost destroys the world all by herself. But Xander remains in Sunnydale ready to help Buffy take on whatever threat comes next. [6] Xander resuscitated Buffy when she died the first time ("Prophecy Girl," 1012). Xander brought evil Willow back from the edge and saved the world ("Grave," 6022). Xander stood strong after losing his eye to Caleb ("Dirty Girls," 7018), and helped Buffy defeat the Original Evil and close the Hellmouth forever ("Chosen," 7022). Xander the squire embraces his masculinity when he must, and subjectifies himself to Buffy the rest of the time, because he knows her power trumps his. He is not a woman in man's clothing, but a fully actualized and hybridized male character. Buffy producer Fran Rubel Kuzui believes it was important to feature strong female characters in the show, but articulates the need to go further: "You can educate your daughters to be Slayers, but you also have to educate your sons to be Xanders" (qtd. in Jowett ¶1). This education is *Buffy's* primary concern. The show isn't about destroying all of the binaries, but about showing ways to move beyond their boundaries.

[18] There is a patriarchy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but it is the patriarchy of reality. Buffy exists in a slightly twisted version of our world, in a culture very much like our own. Frances Early notes exactly this in her essay on *Buffy* as transgressive, saying, "From its beginnings, *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* has been engaged in developing both a playful and a serious consideration of gendered relations of power in contemporary North American society" (Early). But *Buffy* exists in a world where gender assignment is not as simple as putting on a costume. As Spicer says:

Its [*Buffy's*] challenge to gender roles goes beyond a simple assignment of male roles to women and female roles to men. Instead Buffy repeatedly depicts a hybridization of conventional gender roles within individual personalities in ways that evade categorization. The traditional tropes of gender persist, but they become so dissociated from their traditional correlations to physical sex that they often interrogate more than support the gender roles they typically define. (Spicer ¶5)

Buffy operates inside of a patriarchy that neither realizes nor acknowledges the feminine power flowing around it. Buffy's male friends and confidants are another matter. The same awareness that allows them to see the evil aimed at destroying their world allows them to accept the differentiated gender roles presented by the empowered female characters. It also allows them to accept their own emasculated roles without regard to the societal implications. It does not, however, completely erase the influence of society. Sexually, Buffy and Xander still play the roles they were taught from childhood. [7] Even when they manage to resist these stereotypical roles, society conspires against them to drag them

back in. *Buffy's* classification as a successful feminist text does not depend on the complete subversion of these stereotypes because complete subversion is not possible. *Buffy's* classification as a successful feminist text depends instead on a successful hybridization of acceptable gender classifications, and this is something it does exceedingly well.

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[1] I feel compelled to note that some may suggest that *Buffy* is therefore a post-feminist text. This is not, however, a case of being whatever she wants to be, but rather being exactly who she is, a distinction absolutely necessary to true feminism. Editors' note: For a discussion of *Buffy* as third wave feminism in distinction from postfeminism., see Pender's "Kicking Ass Is Comfort Food."

[2] Until he gets his soul back of course, but we are speaking of the majority of the text.

[3] This is not to be confused with the character of Angelus, Angel without a soul, who is evil and serves no one but himself now that Darla has died (until she returns of course, via the power of the convoluted plotline).

[4] It is worth noting that this situation provides several other examples of gender reversal. Not only is Xander providing the food, traditionally a female trait, but also the women are allowed to eat first, leaving only the unwanted remains for the men.

[5] Editors' note: Later in the season Xander claims that he and Faith have a "connection" based on their sexual encounter ("Consequences" 3015).

[6] This trend continues in *Buffy Season 8* as Xander is the first of the regular characters we see working for Buffy and the slayers.

[7] Not during sex, as what happens in the bedrooms stays hidden and allows Xander to become the submissive, but afterwards, when facing the outside world.