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Angie Burns

Passion, Pain and 'bad kissing decisions': Learning about Intimate Relationships from *Buffy* Season Six

> ANYA: Next thing you know ... I'm changing to please him. (a little more upset) I care if he cares!
> SPIKE: (nodding) Right.
> ANYA: And I'm off my guard. Happy! I'm singing in the shower and doing my sexy dance?! ("Entropy," 6018)

[1] Many feminists have been critical of both romantic love and marriage because romantic love narratives can be seen to obscure power differences between men and women. Heterosexual marriage arrangements were traditionally economic and patriarchal in that they gave men cheap access to women's domestic labour and sexual services, while women gained a breadwinner. 'Love' was an ideological concept which disguised this inequality. The woman was 'grateful' to be in a relationship because she 'needed' a man in order to have status, but she had nevertheless been duped into domestic servitude, rather than happy-ever-afterness. Where such extreme material inequality has diminished, psychological gender differences are now taken to lead to 'normal' gendered behaviour in heterosexual relationships (e.g. Gray 1992). Women are expected to be the emotional specialists, while men are assumed more likely to be emotionally inexpressive or emotionally illiterate, and so should not be expected to reciprocate. Women are expected to want love, and men sex. These gender differences are commonly taken to be natural and irrefutable, and as such they impinge on our ability to have equitable relationships. As a critical feminist psychologist, I have previously conducted research into intimate heterosexual relationships by analysing how people talk about love and intimacy. I found participants often reproduced gendered versions of love stories (Burns 1999, 2002, 2003). Romance was constructed as more important to women, partly to function as a reason for sex, but my women participants constructed themselves as reflexive and ironic romantics rather than romantic, sexually exploited dupes. The research demonstrated how difficult it was for women participants to tell stories of 'love' without drawing on constructions of women's emotionality and men's emotional inexpressivity and difficulty with love and commitment. Men's stories tended to construct men as rational, but able to do relationships, though women's emotionality could be a problem. In complex ways both sorts of stories privileged men's position in intimate heterosexual relationships (Burns 2002).

[2] There is already an extensive body of critical feminist work around romantic fiction and film (e.g. Christian Smith 1988, McRobbie 1991; Modleski, 1982; Pearce and Stacey 1995; Radway 1987; Walkerdine 1990), and on self-help literature (e.g. Potts 2002). There is increasing interest, too, in critically deconstructing science fiction and other fantasy genres in terms of gender, relationships and romance (e.g. Barrett and Barrett 2001; Larbalestier 2002). This seems important as many young people eschew explicitly romantic fiction, finding it silly and girly, but encounter and engage with fictional romantic themes in science fiction films (like the *Star Wars* films, *The Terminator*, *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*) and in fantasy TV series such as the different *Star Trek* incarnations and *Babylon 5*. *Buffy the Vampire Slaye*r has been especially concerned with the relationships of its largely young (16-20ish) protagonists: their intimate sexual relationships, their friendships and their family relationships. The extensive academic cross-disciplinary literature devoted to *Buffy* (e.g. Kaveney 2004; Wilcox and Lavery 2002) which includes its own online international academic journal, *Slayage,* as well as a text on Buffyspeak or *Slayer Slang* (Adams 2003) attests to its academic relevance. Its active fan base also shows how well it 'speaks' to their interests.

[3] Inherent in science fiction and fantasy texts is an attempt to subvert, to go beyond or challenge the current state of the world. Yet, like all texts, they inevitably engage with current social relations through the discursive means they employ (Barrett and Barrett 2001; Larbelestier 2002). This is because we have no direct access to the meanings of a text. We have to make sense of it, and we do this in part by recognising what already makes sense to us. Experiences (whether fictional or 'real-life') may defy closure and definition, seeming to take form only when ways become available to speak them. This is how life experience becomes 'real'. For fictions and stories to be intelligible, they have to be narrativized in some recognisable ways. So the deconstruction of a story of fiction may identify familiar narratives to a 'real life' story. For example, the construction of the 'romantic epiphany', as desired by a fictional Bridget Jones, was much in evidence in my previous research since women participants' stories contained recurrent descriptions of 'suddenly' realising they were in love (Burns 1999). So-called truths are embedded in narratives, in how stories are told, as well in the actions and characters talked about. In analysing or deconstructing texts, the analyst's intention is not to tie down meaning, but to open it up to question and to explore contradictions, for in contradictions we can trace the juxtaposition of competing discourses and assumptions about the world.

[4] Love and desire have been a driving force behind major plotlines in *BtVS*. In watching the first seasons, it seemed that Buffy and Angel's mutual love, and whether it could ever transcend the problems they had, would be a key backdrop for *Buffy*. Who would have thought when Spike arrived in Sunnydale in "School Hard" (2003) that Buffy would ever be in an intimate sexual relationship with him without the intervention of a spell, as in "Something Blue" (4009)? Love stories are often our mundane tragedies and a happy relationship is not something we alone can bring into being, so for an engagement with the difficulties of relationships we might turn to *BtVS*. However, the writers warned us early on, in Season 1, that Buffy, Willow and Xander would struggle when it came to intimate relationships. At the end of "I Robot – You Jane" (1008), Buffy says, 'Let's face it: none of us are ever gonna have a happy, normal relationship', supported by Xander's 'We're doomed' and Willow's 'Yeah'. But the struggle for happy intimate relationships is part of what makes romantic love stories romantic (Burns 2003).

[5] *BtVS* is open to multiple readings. Buffy can be seen as a feminist (Vint 2002). Identifying discursive themes in *BtVS* can point up some of the psychological identifications made available to viewers. This doesn't mean they'll take them up. As Alison Light (1984) has suggested, reading a Barbara Cartland novel might turn a reader towards feminism rather than romance at its most banal. We are bombarded with self-help books on intimate relationships (e.g. Gray 1992). The knowledges about intimacy available in *BtVS* might cut through what is categorical, ponderous or didactic elsewhere to address important issues in ways which are funny, touching, serious and, ultimately, real. And one of the things which makes *BtVS* so entertaining and engaging is its clever, referential and surprising use of language and metalanguage. This is what really hooked me as a fan. For instance:

> SPIKE: You're a tease, you know that, Slayer? Get a fellow's motor revving, let the tension marinate a couple-a days, then bam! Crown yourself the ice queen.
> BUFFY: Need a few more metaphors for that little mix? ("Smashed," 6009)

[6] I hope to add something distinctive to the fascinating array of already available analyses of relationships and sexuality in *BtVS* (e.g. Burr 2003; Jowett 2005; Larbelestier 2004). The following analysis of intimate relationships in *BtVS* focuses on Season Six. I'm a critical feminist psychologist using discourse analytic techniques. As a discourse analyst, I focus, in detail, on the language used in the 22 episodes. I am not seeking the gist of what is said, but am analysing the words in detail, in order to explicate what the words are doing, in terms of reproducing knowledge about relationships. As well as rewatching the episodes, I read and reread the scripts,[1] and organised together all those parts which related to intimate relationships, love, romance and sex. I studied these parts, still focusing on the language in detail, in order to identify

how relationships and identities were discursively constructed as 'normal' or suitable or otherwise. I also examined in what ways the relationship experiences were storied, being attentive to issues of gender, power, abuse and attempts at control. This allowed me to identify assumptions underlying intimate relationships in *Buffy* Season Six and question how these related to commonly accepted expectations of intimate relationships. This sort of analysis is based on the understanding that there are no knowable universal truths about psychological phenomena like love or sexual desire and that identity is unstable and negotiated rather than fixed. Any apparent orderliness of intimate relationships is reinforced by its pervasive rearticulation. For instance, the notion that 'women want love and men want sex' is taken to be 'true', and people act as if it is true, as a result of its being so articulated or claimed (Burns 1999). *BtVS* reinforced this when Angel's moment of true happiness was having sex with Buffy, as well as drawing on another 'truism' that claims men change after women have had sex with them! I want to further discuss *BtVS* by highlighting the difficulty of creating potentially new discourses of relationships without reproducing stereotypic evocations of 'proper' behaviour - often gendered behaviour. In doing this, I am alert to my potential position as the producer of yet another 'translation' of the material (Parker et al 1999).

[7] Although I'm focusing on Season Six, it is difficult not to make links to other seasons. I try to do this only if it illuminates the analysis of Season Six. I've had to be very selective - as anyone else who is working with this material knows, there is just so much that could be done. Any analysis is ongoing and partial. I've focused more on heterosexual relationships than gay or lesbian, for brevity and to be more able to relate the analytic themes to previous research on the relationships between gender, power, love and romance. Also, unlike some other *Buffy* academics (e.g. Burr 2003), I'm not attempting to differentiate between vampires and humans. I take the characters to be gendered and understand monstrousness to be constructed through language, not invested unequivocally in a fixed monster or non-monster identity.

'Bad kissing decisions' – bad girls?

For girls and women, sex should not be just sex but must 'mean' something

[8] Despite Joss Whedon's creation of Buffy as a kick-ass heroine, in the narrativization of heterosexual relationships there is an underlying assumption that for girls and women, sex should not be just sex. Unless there is also some emotional or psychological connection to their lovers, we see women torturing themselves or being castigated. So, for Buffy, her sexual relationship with Spike (putting aside the obvious problems of his being a vampire with a chip that no longer keeps him from hurting her) is a problem. The alternative is that there are problems with her, something she tells Tara at the end of "Dead Things" (6013).

> TARA: Buffy, I-I promise there's nothing wrong with you.
> BUFFY: There has to be! This just can't be me, it isn't me. Why do I feel like this? Why do I let Spike do those things to me?' ("Dead Things," 6013)

[9] The construction of Spike as the dominant lover in their sexual encounters is at odds with the physical sex acts we have seen or heard enacted or implied thus far in Season Six. As viewers (or analysts) we might understand this as Buffy projecting her bad feelings on to Spike. However Buffy, to Tara, positions herself as victim or addict.

> BUFFY: Why can't I stop? Why do I keep letting him in?
> TARA: Do you love him?
> TARA: I-It's okay if you do. He's done a lot of good, and, and he does love you. A-and Buffy, it's okay if you don't. You're going through a really hard time, and you're...
> BUFFY: (still tearful) What? Using him? What's okay about that?
> TARA: It's not that simple.

> BUFFY: It is! It's wrong. I'm wrong. Tell me that I'm wrong, please.... ("Dead Things," 6013)

The first reason Tara offers is that Buffy might 'love' Spike, linking love and sex as is usual for women, good women that is (Jowett 2005; Larbelestier 2004; Lees 1997). However, Tara is careful to dismiss this as necessary, offering an alternative to Buffy, that she has had a hard time and so is vulnerable.

[10] Having sex because you're feeling bad is made understandable elsewhere in Season Six. Buffy tells Spike that her 'bad kissing decisions' (kissing Spike) happened because she was upset that Giles was leaving ("Smashed," 6009). Anya explains to Xander (her ex) why she had sex with Spike in the Magic Shop. 'It was just, it ... it was just a thing. I ... I felt bad, and he was just ... there' ("Entropy," 6018). And Buffy says to Xander, 'She loves you. You know that. Anya was just ... She was hurting. She was ... hurting and, and she did this really stupid thing' ("Seeing Red," 6019). These examples, among others, suggest women need psychological motivations for sex. Buffy ends her relationship with Spike ('It's over') in "As You Were" (6015).

> BUFFY: I do want you. … I'm using you. … I can't love you. I'm just ... being weak, and selfish...
> SPIKE: Really not complaining here.
> BUFFY: ...and it's killing me

What we read here is that it is not acceptable for Buffy to continue to have sex with Spike when she can't love him or wants no more than sex with him. His response that he doesn't mind ('Really not complaining here') evokes the stereotypic view that men are always up for sex. It's Buffy who can't cope with 'using' him ('it's killing me'). Nice girls don't do this as their sexuality should be bound by romance. But if it's not acceptable for women to use men, the reverse is much less clear.

'I'm gonna make you (feel it)'. Forced sex is not okay (but heterosexual men may not realise this!)

[11] Season Six addresses attempted rape in different ways. Both excerpts I use here make clear that attempted rape is wrong and will produce pain and other bad effects for both victim and perpetrator (and this theme continues into Season 7). There is no sense that *BtVS* condones such actions. The attempted rape plots also demonstrate the potential for men to come to understand what they have done, but unfortunately this gives credence to the myth that they did not know what they were doing. It allows the denial of a problem with forcing sex on a woman and little recognition, or a distorted understanding, of her rights and ability to state what she wants and doesn't want.

[12] Spike's attempted rape of Buffy has been taken by some commentators as demonstrating his monstrousness. But as Symonds (2004) has pointed out, the attempted rape is not done with his vamp face, but with his human face. The rape scene can be seen to have its roots in traditional romantic love narratives which link violence and love (e.g. Jackson 2001). Male jealousy and his 'going too far', or being unable to control himself, may be taken to indicate the male protagonist's strong desire and love for the heroine, either together with, or in the absence of, any declaration of it. In the absence of clear indications of his love, any of his behaviour may be interpreted to mean his (repressed) love and desire (Radway 1987). In "Tabula Rasa" (6008) Spike had evoked *Gone with the Wind*. ('We ... we kissed, you and me. All *Gone With The Wind*, with the rising music…'). This could be seen to foreshadow rape, Rhett Butler style. But Buffy wasn't going to be Scarlett O'Hara and it is not the 1930s.

[13] In "Seeing Red" (6019), Spike has good reason to believe that Buffy was upset he had sex with Anya, as Dawn has told him so ('But what you did last night ... If you wanted to hurt Buffy, congratulations. It worked'). What seems key, in the attempted rape, is Spike's reiteration and insistence that Buffy **feels** something and that

forcing sex on her will make her realise this. But he has this, and her, wrong. From his 'Buffy, my god, I didn't-'and his 'horrified' facial expression (according to transcribers), we know he knows it. Buffy has clearly denied the link between love and forced sex, and Spike has to accept this.

> SPIKE: (whispers) Let yourself feel it.
> He moves forward, puts his hands on her waist, pulls her toward him.
> BUFFY: No....
> SPIKE: You love me.
> BUFFY: Ow, no, stop it.
> ()
> BUFFY: Please don't do this...
> SPIKE: I'm gonna make you feel it.
> ()
> BUFFY Ask me again why I could never love you.
> Spike looks like he's just realizing what he was doing.
> SPIKE: Buffy, my god, I didn't-
> BUFFY: (angrily) Because I stopped you. (quieter) Something I should have done a long time ago.
> A tear runs down Buffy's face. Spike stares at her looking horrified. ("Seeing Red," 6019)

[14] In "Dead Things" (6013), Warren has abducted his ex-girlfriend, Katrina, so that he and his geek partners, Andrew and Jonathan, have a 'sex slave'. The trio had devised a cerebral dampener to control a woman (any woman they find attractive enough!). This extract follows the influence of the dampener wearing off.

> KATRINA: () You bunch of little boys, playing at being men. (yelling) Well, this is not some fantasy, it's not a game, you freaks! It's rape!
> JONATHAN: (stunned) What?
> ANDREW: No ... we didn't-
> KATRINA: (crying, and still angry) You're all sick. And I'm going to make sure you get locked up for this. And then we'll see how you like getting raped.

[15] *Buffy* allows viewers to question such behaviour, to see that attempts to control and force sex is a problem. It names rape. However, these depictions of attempted rape seem to also reinforce gender stereotypes around sex, desire and control. As Willow said in "Beer Bad" (4005):

> I mean, you men. It's all about the sex! You find a woman, drag her to your den, do whatever's necessary just as long as you get the sex. I tell you men haven't changed since the dawn of time.

Men want compliant women (robots and sex slaves)?

[16] Despite the naming and problematizing of rape, the way in which Katrina and other women are positioned for men's use is of concern. Under the influence of the cerebral dampener, Katrina has dressed in a frilly, black and white French maid's outfit, the stereotypic image of someone who looks after men's needs.She is addressing Warren, Jonathan and Andrew as 'Master'.

> WARREN: ... She's mine. But don't worry. () You can play with her all you want ... after I'm done with her. ("Dead Things," 6013)

[17] In the context of *BtVS*, we are expected to know that the geek trio are poor examples of men. Warren seems irredeemable. What is also made understandable is that men will go to (m)any lengths to have a sexually compliant woman, including using technology to build robots (April and the Buffybot) and turn women into passive sex objects. Though Spike may complain that Buffy has made him fall in love with her and turned him into 'her soddin' sex slave' ("Normal Again," 6017), this was not intended by her, and as a previous extract suggests, he's mostly not complaining about the 'sex slave' part. Treating women as sexual commodities is not presented as exceptionally dysfunctional or reprehensible, but as part of what may be expected of men.

[18] Issues about the relative power of women and men are raised explicitly, though subtly and funnily, in "Hell's Bells" (6016), for example when Anya practises her marriage vows.

> I, Anya, promise to ... love you, to cherish you,...to honor you, uh, but not to obey you, of course, because that's anachronistic and misogynistic and who do you think you are, like a sea captain or something?

Yet Anya, the straight-talking voice of rampant individualism and vengeance for women, struggles to use emancipatory discourse

> [I promise] ...to have sex with you whenever ... *I* want, and, uh... uh, pledge to be your friend, and your wife, and your confidant, and your sex poodle.... ("Hell's Bells," 6016)

Tara questions whether Anya should say 'sex poodle' in her vows. Even in the context of romance and marriage, is this bringing sexuality, especially women's sexuality, too much to the fore or challenging Anya's apparent sexual submission?

[19] Despite Xander's position as a not particularly dominant male, he is still constructed as a male who fears commitment. He is given dominant male credentials when Anya is seen to have to nag him about his reluctance to be open about their relationship and to get married. She also positions herself as having changed to please him.

> ANYA: Next thing you know ... I'm changing to please him. (a little more upset) I care if he cares!
> SPIKE: (nodding) Right.
> ANYA: And I'm off my guard. Happy! I'm singing in the shower and doing my sexy dance?! ("Entropy," 6018)

[20] The themes I've suggested so far suggest that gender stereotypes around sex, desire and power, though questioned and sometimes made explicit, are still also reproduced. Thus *Buffy* inevitably fails to avoid partly reinforcing gender stereotypes around sex and control. This points up the pervasiveness and dominance of these stereotypes, and the difficulty of creating relationships which move beyond them in both fiction and real life.

'Love's a funny thing'

[21] In my previous research in which I undertook and analysed interviews with women and men about their intimate relationships, it was the powerfulness and weirdness of their feelings which were claimed by women as evidence of knowing they must be in love (Burns 1999). This is part of the common romantic discourse of love, and it is similarly employed in *BtVS*, but for both women and men. 'Love's a funny thing' says Clem in "Seeing Red" (6019) reprising what was said previously by Spike in "Lover's Walk" (3008). 'Love' also 'makes you do the wacky', as Willow and Buffy both say in "Some Assembly Required" (2002). What is clear, in *Buffy*, is that love is neither simple nor straightforward, no matter how great the sparkage between characters, and viewers are not subjected to the idea that you can or should do anything for love. At the end of

Season Two, after mutual 'I love you's,' Buffy had to kill Angel ("Becoming, Part Two," 2022). In Season Six, Tara won't stay with Willow after she has manipulated her and her memories once too often.

[22] The romance in *Buffy* is, in part, Gothic, in that it is driven by powerful emotions and the more difficult the obstacles to the romance, the more dramatic and romantic the love story that may be told, something also demonstrated in 'real-life' love stories (Burns 2003). So a relationship between a vampire slayer and vampire is going to be a serious contender for a dramatic, romantic story. In the love narratives we find pain and pleasure, ups and downs (very dramatic downs – Angel becomes Angelus, Tara has her brain sucked out, Oz is a werewolf and often the men just leave!). Victoria Spah (2002) has delineated the ways in which Spike can be seen, in part, to be carrying on the tradition of courtly love, attempting a tortuous quest, with some potential for transformation. But where this traditional romance narrative, in part, holds out the possibility of a future happy ever after for any couple in love, Buffy and Spike don't seem like a long-term prospect. It is only the most romantic of viewers who can see a future happy-ever-after for the 'Big Bad' and Buffy. However, it is often Spike who is shown as knowledgeable about love and seduction. Take, for instance, his comments on Parker's strategy with Buffy. 'Did he play the sensitive lad and get you to seduce him? That's a good trick if the girl's thick enough to buy it' ("The Harsh Light of Day," 4003).

[23] Passionate love in *BtVS* is constructed as fragile and temporary, which, in part, reproduces the passionate love/ companionate love binary of mainstream psychology (Berscheid and Walster 1978).

> BUFFY: I have feelings for you. I do. But it's not love. I could never trust you enough for it to be love.
> SPIKE: (laughing) Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy. (Buffy rolling her eyes) Great love is wild ... and passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes.
> BUFFY: Until there's nothing left. Love like that doesn't last ("Seeing Red," 6019).
> D'HOFFRYN: Ah. Hymen's greetings.
> DAWN: Hy - what?
> D'HOFFRYN: Hymen, the God of Matrimony. His salutations upon you. May the love we celebrate today avoid an almost inevitable decline. ("Hell's Bells," 6016)

[24] Viewers of *BtVS* are given contradictory and partial meanings of love, which allow an active engagement in understanding it. The relationship between Buffy and Spike has led to intense online argument about its suitability. We can question how we know Spike loves Buffy – he has counted the days (147) she was dead and has proved himself in many ways--while also doing what cannot be commensurate with love in trying to hold on to his 'big bad' persona. We are also reminded by Tara (the most level-headed and supportive Scooby) that relationships are about work and trust, a long and important process. But, even for her, passion and feeling may take precedence.

TARA: [To Willow about getting back together] There's just so much to work through. Trust has to be built again, on both sides ... You have to learn if ... if we're even the same people we were, if you can fit in each other's lives. It's a long... important process, and ... can we just skip it? Can-can you just be kissing me now? ("Entropy," 6018)

BtVS also demonstrates that love hurts (Symonds 2004).

Love hurts: 'You always hurt the one you love'

> ANYA: ...and I had seen what love could do to people, and it was ... hurt and sadness. Alone was better. And then, suddenly there was you, and ... you knew me. You saw me, and it was this ... thing. You make me feel safe and warm.
> ()
> ANYA: So, I get it now. I finally get love, Xander. I really do. ("Hell's Bells," 6016)

[25] Having taken so long to 'get it', to feel love, Anya is going to be very hurt.

SPIKE: You always hurt ... the one you love, pet. ("Dead Things," 6013)

[26] Breaking up is shown to be hard to do, and it will hurt. We also see that people survive, and unless they have special powers, they won't end up almost destroying the world. A good deal of break-up heartache is articulated in *Buffy* by using music with pertinent lyrics, rather than dialogue. We hear Michelle Branch's 'Goodbye to You' when, at the end of "Tabula Rasa" (6008), Tara leaves Willow because she has abused her trust yet again, not because she no longer loves her. *'I want you But I'm not giving in this time Goodbye to you'.* So love, in *Buffy*, does not mean having to give in to your partner or put up with being manipulated - a good feminist sentiment.

[27] A common expectation found in my previous research on 'real' relationships was that women anticipated being left by men, rather than the reverse. This expectation meant that women doubted whether their men would stick around in the future, and men constructed themselves as less tied to relationships than women (Burns 1999). This privileges men in relationships, giving them more of a choice about staying or not. In *Buffy* too, women seem more likely to be left by men, than they are to leave. In major break-ups in earlier seasons, Buffy and Willow are left by men. Buffy is left by Angel and later by Riley, Willow by Oz, though we are supposed to allow that Angel and Oz leave because they care about Buffy and Willow, and want to protect them, whether or not Buffy and Willow wanted this. The decision was taken from them. Women in *Buffy* are shown as very vulnerable to break-up heartache. Anya, left at the altar ("Hell's Bells," 6016), is positioned as very damaged by being abandoned by Xander.

XANDER: Was she looking for me? (Willow fidgeting) Before she left, did she say anything?

WILLOW: You mean, between sobs? (Xander looking guilty) There was mostly just wheezing.

BUFFY: She was a little ... she was ... kinda broken. ("Normal Again," 6017)

Later to Spike, about the non-wedding,

BUFFY: It was awful. (sits nearby) Anya was devastated. ("Normal Again," 6017)

Yet, despite being left, they survive.

Friendships last unlike sexually intimate relationships

[28] The 'will they/ won't they's' of intimate relationships often drive plot lines, and the obstacles put in the path of 'true love' are part of the drama expected. But *Buffy* has not been afraid to end intimate relationships (an occupational hazard as actors leave). Though intimate relationships have always been important in the series, it has been the friendship of Buffy, Willow and Xander (with the support of Giles, Anya, Tara, Spike, Angel and Dawn at different times) that has been the solid central ground. When Willow goes bad (very bad indeed), it is her friend Xander and their friendship which saves the day and brings her and the world back from the brink.

[29] *BtVS* does not offer us examples of a romantic happy-ever-after. There are few older adult characters in general, and among them there is an absence of happy adult relationships. Buffy's parents are divorced and are only seen together in Buffy's psychotic alterworld in "Normal Again" (6017). Giles is mostly single through the series, his most significant intimate relationship with Jenny Calendar doomed from the outset. Riley and his wife may be happy – we'll never know. Xander and Anya's faked future together was unhappy, mirroring his parents' marriage. We see and hear Xander's parents, in their full unhappiness, in "Hell's Bells" (6016) when his father verbally attacks his mother.

MR. HARRIS: ...and to my wife, Jessica. Where are you, honey.

()
MR. HARRIS: There she is. (raising glass) To my wife. What would I do without you, beautiful?
Mrs. Harris looks a bit surprised, smiles.
MR. HARRIS: Wellllllll, for starters, I probably wouldn't need to drink so much, would I.
Mrs. Harris looks hurt. The other guests look uncomfortable.
MR. HARRIS: On the brighter side, marriage has probably saved me from a nasty dose of the clap. (chuckles) Here's to ya. (drinks)

So *Buffy* Season Six is not promoting a happy ever after wonderland, with or without marriage. But life is seen to go on.

[30] My analysis has shown how assumptions about gender, gendered behaviour and emotion are difficult to avoid, even in a show where the two strongest characters are women, Buffy and Willow. Their strength does not protect them from heartache but they are not going to be romantic dupes, as *Buffy* is not promoting the need for women to be in a relationship. As in soap operas, a consistent lesson about intimate relationships in *Buffy* Season Six (and other seasons) is that relationships are fragile and that they can and do change. They change as we change, they change as our situations change, and they change whether or not we want them to. They change in predictable and unpredictable ways, and trying to control the other person is not going to get us love. Where traditional romantic stories have tended to imply that people are somehow fickle and untrustworthy if their feelings are mutable, *BtVS* is much more realistic and pessimistic about the possibility of something we would call 'lasting love' when the world is changing around you, and in *BtVS* the world can change dramatically and very quickly. Intimate relationships are contingent and often temporary and though the end of Season Six is held out the possibility of a romantic future for Buffy and an ensouled Spike, the series' end (with Spike's death) made it seemed ultimately doomed or unlikely (despite his rebirth on the Angel series). Willow and Xander end the season single. This means that *Buffy* is showing that it is not the end of the world, or even a big disaster, if your relationships end and you're not in an intimate relationship. Your life and future possibilities are still there for you. Identity is unstable, and it doesn't make you a bad person if you change. You're like Buffy, like 'cookie dough' ("Chosen," 7022). And you won't ever be fully baked unless and until you believe you are.

[31] The intimate relationships in *Buffy* Season Six differ, however, from fictional relationships in romances and soap operas, and real relationships, in that there is an absence of sexual infidelity. When Anya and Spike have sex, their relationships with Xander and Buffy are over. We are expected to see this as emotional infidelity, as infidelity to the person they are expected to still love, because they are censured for doing this. In real-life love stories, 'falling in love' is often adulterous as it is one common way to tell a dramatic and emotional love story (Burns 2003). Despite the overarching notion of the fragility of relationships, infidelity is not being offered as the way out of a relationship or to dramatise love, which is unusual.

[32] In conclusion, femininity and masculinity are constructed in Season Six in both recognisable and challenging ways. I've shown here some of the difficulties of moving beyond assumptions of gender difference, in order, partly, to demonstrate how difficult it is to do this. Some *Buffy* scholars have been reflecting on and writing about 'feminised' male characters in *BtVS* (e.g. Heinecken 2004; Jowett 2005), and I think this is a worrying trend as it reifies and reinforces the notion of fixed feminine characteristics and reproduces the gender binary.

[33] Despite my feminist concerns about the evocation of gendered myths, which I've outlined in this paper, ultimately *BtVS* offers us choices, not prescriptions. It allows viewers to engage with common dilemmas, presenting possibilities which may help us live our lives and experience relationships more fully. Analysing *BtVS* shows how difficult it is to refute or subvert common gendered stereotypes, especially around sexuality and emotion. But *BtVS*'s dialogic approach to intimacy, gender, sexuality, power and

emotion, opens them up for discussion. For both academics and fans, this, in part, is what makes *Buffy* so important and enduringly watchable.

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1 I am indebted to Joan the English Chick for her excellent transcriptions of *BtVS* episodes available via www.Buffyworld.com. Conventions for transcripts for discourse analysis usually use … for ellipsis. In her transcripts they indicate a pause or stutter. Empty brackets () indicate where I've omitted parts, usually descriptions of action rather than words.