The Slayer Studies by buffy.de Online

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"It's Bloody Brilliant!"

The Undermining of Metanarrative Feminism in the Season Seven Arc Narrative of *Buffy*

[1] "Chosen" (7022), the final episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, disturbs me more than any other *Buffy* episode. Though "Chosen" has generally been highly acclaimed, I see it as exemplifying elements about the Season Seven plot arc which provoke concern. Joss Whedon has described the message of Season Seven as "almost didactic in its clarity" (*Angel* News). I agree that the show's endorsement of spreading a communal female empowerment from Buffy to the symbolic "Slayers" everywhere is hard to miss. It is also an important and valid message. What troubles me is that this "didactically clear" metanarrative we are told to accept is at odds with crucial aspects of the narrative we see enacted. In this essay, I use the term "metanarrative" to denote the show's metaphorical message and the term "narrative" to describe the story performed on-screen, including not only the basic plot but rhetorical choices such as camera angles or the specific wording of lines. I argue that, ultimately, the metanarrative's feminist discourse of participatory, multivocal empowerment is undermined by the narrative's depiction of a hierarchical, largely univocal community that characterizes Buffy's strategy for fighting the First Evil as "brilliant" though, in fact, it is tactically absurd. This characterization is only made possible by the final episode's rejection of an open exchange of perspectives. Ultimately, Season Seven sabotages its own claims to a feminist deconstruction of patriarchal authority by refusing the feminist multivocality it supposedly supports.

[2] From its inception, *Buffy*'s relationship to patriarchal structures of hierarchy has been ambivalent. On the one hand, the show challenges such structures by enacting a non-hierarchical model of community in which all participants are viewed as uniquely valuable, producing what Zeo-Jane Playdon aptly calls a "contingent, contextualized, functional form of participative management" (138). In such a model, each individual subjectivity has worth. Even in "Chosen," this theme is evident. Rhonda Wilcox observes, for instance, that in the episode's (and series's) final scene, Buffy does not answer Faith's question about how it feels to share her Slayer power. "Buffy's lack of an answer," Wilcox argues, "means that *we* get to answer the question" (Par. 31). Just as all the Scoobies' viewpoints matter, so do ours.

[3] At the same time, the show places Buffy herself in the traditionally masculine role of superior hero, the Chosen One. "In Warrior

Heroes: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Beowulf," David Fritts offers a fine redaction of scholarly criticism that has situated Buffy in the heroic tradition, citing in particular the work of Laurel Bowman, Rhonda Wilcox, and Nancy Holder in placing Buffy within Joseph Campbell's paradigm of the hero's journey (2-3). The placement of a woman in this role inverts the image of the patriarchal hero without substantially challenging the legitimacy of this paradigm of heroism per se. These two modes of feminist discourse--one which deconstructs patriarchal hierarchy, one which retains but inverts it--need not be fully reconcilable or mutually exclusive to do valuable feminist work. Typically, Buffy is presented as the superior hero who is, nonetheless, most heroic when her actions are supported by the individual talents of her companions. Consider just a few examples from the climactic battles of various seasons. In Season One, Buffy single-handedly slays the Master only after being restored to life by Xander's CPR ("Prophecy Girl" 1012). In Season Four, she defeats the cyborg Adam in single combat--but strengthened by the power of the First Slayer and the Scoobies, conferred upon her by a spell ("Primeval" 4021). In Season Five, Buffy saves the world at the cost of her life, after all her companions have materially contributed their special skills and knowledge to defeating the god, Glory ("The Gift" 5022). In these cases, as in many others, the tension between the discourse of solitary heroism and the discourse of participatory community is skillfully negotiated if not finally resolved.

[4] The Season Seven finale seems to continue this negotiation. Here, Buffy heroically leads an army whose warriors all contribute to saving the world from the First Evil. But while the narrative superficially follows the typical *Buffy* paradigm, its negotiation between heroic leadership and communal empowerment is inadequate. Indeed, in the Season Seven arc, the tension between these two discursive modes escalates into open contradiction. While the metanarrative announces that it is deconstructing the discourse of hierarchical superiority via the

sharing of power among multiple Slayers, the narrative brings about this announced deconstruction by erasing legitimate challenges to Buffy's leadership. Far from sharing power with other characters, this erasure silences them, presuming that they have few to no significant insights to contribute. This silencing is enacted through a refusal of dialogic communication.

[5] In "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin argues that multivocality "represents that co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between present and past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth [. . .]" (291). Granting expression to multiple discourses through the dialogic interaction of different voices highlights the complexity and ambiguity inherent in human culture and, in so doing, works against the consolidation of power around a single dominant discourse endorsed as "correct." Now, to the extent that *Buffy* is a series that has a precise ideological mission--the empowerment of women--ideological ambiguity has never been its aim (Whedon, *Interview* 6). Yet much of the model of feminist empowerment *Buffy* espouses emphasizes the complex, heteroglot nature of human society. The first episode of the series, for instance, shows Buffy and Giles debating whether Buffy has a duty to continue as the Slayer: Giles argues that the world needs her; Buffy argues that she deserves a normal life ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" 1001). These views are, to some extent, incommensurate, yet each has validity.

[6] While such multivocality occasions conflict, it is, nonetheless, a source of positive power. Numerous critical essays have highlighted the show's rejection of a univocal, authoritarian model of society. Brian Wall and Michael Zryd contend that in *Buffy*, "Heroism and the powers of 'good' are consistently presented in non-monumental and anti-hierarchical forms" (59). The dialogic dimension of this anti-hierarchal discourse is evident, for example, in the Season Seven episode "Get It Done" (7015), in which a conflicted conversation among Willow, Xander, Anya, Dawn, Principal Wood, and Kennedy grows into a problem-solving session that generates a strategy for rescuing Buffy from the alternate dimension where she is trapped. Because the scene is an excellent example of dialogism in action, I will quote it at length. Xander starts by suggesting that they look for help from the spell book they used to open the interdimensional portal through which Buffy has vanished:

> XANDER. Dawnie, what's the book say?
>
> DAWN. Not much. Once Buffy left, it got a little tougher to read. (holds up the book to show that it is now blank)
>
> WILLOW. Oh. (walks out of the room to the kitchen; the others follow)

KENNEDY. It's okay. We'll just start with what we know, and take it from there.

XANDER. Great, so far we know Jack about squat. Let's go from there.

KENNEDY. You've got the magic, use it.

WILLOW. I-I-I don't even know what magic to use.

KENNEDY. Why not just try all thirty-two flavors. Worst thing that happens is you go brunette.

WILLOW. (grabs first-aid kit from kitchen cabinet) That's not the worst thing that can happen. (attends to Kennedy's wounded hand)

ANYA. She's right. And you know we have a choice. We can risk Willow's life and the rest of our lives to get Buffy back, or we leave her out there.

PRINCIPAL WOOD. If we play it safe back here, Buffy could stay lost.

ANYA. You missed her "everyone sucks but me" speech. If she's so superior, let her find her own way back.

XANDER. Anya, the First [Evil] is already up and running. Every second that Buffy's not here is an opportunity for it to show up and rip us to pieces.

DAWN. Willow, how would you get Buffy back?

WILLOW. That's what I'm saying--I don't even know.

DAWN. Okay, but if another witch was to do it, where would she start?

WILLOW. Uh, physics, principles, basic laws...

DAWN. Such as?

WILLOW. Uh, conservation of energies. You can't really create or destroy anything, only transfer.

(Anya scoffs.)

DAWN. I'm sorry, are you helping?

ANYA. No, but at least I'm not galloping off in the wrong direction.

WILLOW. Magic works off physics.

ANYA. Not without a catalyst. If you're talking about transferring energies, you need some kind of conduit.

WILLOW. Like a-a Kraken's tooth.

ANYA. Yeah, skin of Draconis, um, ground up Baltic stones, something...

DAWN. Okay. Good.

No single person in this discussion has all the answers. Indeed, some suggestions are counter-productive. Anya is petulant, almost ready to leave Buffy to her fate; Kennedy is dangerously naive in her belief that throwing “all thirty-two flavors” of magic at the problem will solve it; Willow is initially self-defeatist, emphasizing the difficulties involved in using her magic. Other members of the group seem to have little to contribute: Dawn, Xander, and Principal Wood know next to nothing about magic. But in an openly dialogic forum, even the group’s contrasting failings turn into strengths. Kennedy’s over-enthusiasm for Willow’s power helps to counteract Willow’s self-doubt, just as Willow’s doubt brings necessary caution to Kennedy’s enthusiasm. Even Anya’s anger proves productive insofar as it prompts her to assert that Willow is “galloping off in the wrong direction” and offer her own expertise. By pooling their magical knowledge, Willow and Anya are able to lay the basis for a plan to rescue Buffy. Even the participants who have little expert knowledge contribute productively. Wood and Xander are voices of common sense, Wood observing that “playing it safe” will not get Buffy back and Xander adding that they must get Buffy back--Anya’s anger not withstanding--because they need her to help fight the First Evil. Dawn and Kennedy serve as motivating optimists, Kennedy voicing her faith in Willow’s power, Dawn using a series of questions to prompt the more knowledgeable members of the group to push their thinking further. In the space of a minute or two, the group has gone from knowing “Jack about squat” to developing a systematic and sensible plan for retrieving Buffy. The diversity of their voices has led them to a course of action more confident, careful, and precise than any of them could have achieved alone.

[7] Despite such strong dialogic moments, however, Season Seven’s central arc implicitly advocates a community in which univocality is sufficent. Buffy is the inspired leader at the head of an army of potential Slayers assembled to defeat First Evil’s army of Uber-vampires and save the Slayer line from extermination. Buffy’s final plan of attack requires Willow to work a spell that will transform all of the Potentials into activated Slayers. This Slayer army will, then, attack the Uber-vamps in the Hellmouth while the other Scoobies form a back-up force. Two advantages will aid in the struggle: a powerful scythe designed as a weapon for Slayers and an amulet, presented to Buffy by Angel on the eve

of the apocalyptic battle, which will confer great power on a superhuman, ensouled being, in this case, Spike. [1]

[8] During the battle, the activated Slayers fight the Uber-vamps with some success until the amulet activates, ultimately incinerating all the Uber-vamps as well as Spike. [2] The survivors flee, barely outracing the collapse of the Hellmouth and Sunnydale. We are left with the Scoobies ranged around the front-and-center figure of Buffy, Dawn asking her, "What are we gonna do now?" ("Chosen"). The implication of this final scene is that Buffy's epiphanous realization that all the potential Slayers must be activated has saved the world.

[9] Dennis Showalter succinctly encapsulates this view: "In 'Chosen,' the success of Willow's empowering spell makes the difference. Spike's charm may have more spectacular results, but at the end he tells Buffy the new slayers have won and he is just cleaning up" (14). Significantly, however, Showalter adds, "If [Spike's avowal] is a lie, then it is a 'noble lie' in Plato's sense, and we may let it so stand!" (14). This amendment suggests that Showalter has spotted the problem with this scenario. There is no visual evidence that Spike's sacrifice constitutes "just cleaning up." The Uber-vamp hoards still appear active and innumerable right up to the activation of the amulet. [3] If the "clean-up" argument is a "noble lie," however, either on the part of Spike or Whedon, it is one we must not let stand. To do so runs the risk of tacitly sanctioning an undermining of the very power-sharing Whedon advocates.

[10] In fact, it is significant that Buffy's strategy has not saved the world. Buffy herself acknowledges that it is Spike who has collapsed the Hellmouth, eliminating the Uber-vamps ("Chosen"). Certainly, Buffy's leadership enables his triumph insofar as she consistently advocates his inclusion in her "army." Even in her most isolated moments, Buffy never imagines that she can defeat the First Evil alone. To her credit, it is fundamental to her thought processes that everyone willing to fight by her side must be allowed to do so. Anyone may have a vital role to play. She recognizes that Spike is one of the strongest fighters under her command, and for this reason, she defends his presence over the protests of Giles and Wood, among others.

[11] But though Buffy considers a Spike a powerful fighter, she never presents him as the cornerstone of her strategy. The amulet makes Spike's presence more important but not central to the plan. Consider that just as the amulet activates, Spike starts to say, "Whatever this thing does, I think it's--" and is cut off ("Chosen"). The line indicates that none of them knows exactly what the amulet will do; therefore, they have no reason to base the plan definitively around it. One could argue that the plan itself involves enabling all fighters to participate with the understanding that any one of them may end up playing a pivotal role. Buffy should, indeed, be lauded for her awareness of the potential importance of all participants. Many commentators have pointed out, for

example, that though Spike and the amulet ultimately close the Hellmouth, it is the Slayers and their companions who fend off the Uber-vamps long enough for the amulet to activate. Even though Buffy never characterizes the use of the Slayers as a tactic for “buying time” for the amulet, she does deserve credit for her adherence to the premise that all fighters can be significant. But to say that a basic understanding that any individual may contribute in unexpected ways constitutes a strategy for defeating the First Evil is generous, to say the least. In the plot line of Season Three, for instance, such a “strategy” would entail doing nothing more than sending all of Sunnydale High into hand-to-hand combat with the Mayor and his minions in the hopes something will happen that will enable Buffy and her companions to defeat him. While in Season Seven, Buffy’s initial strategy does, indeed, amount to little more than hurling her army at the First Evil’s hoards in just this manner, her definitive solution is more specific. As Showalter suggests, her strategy is not to wait for Spike’s amulet to activate but to rely on the activation of the potential Slayers itself to defeat the First Evil’s army.

[12] If the amulet were not pivotal--if it were, for example, simply another powerful weapon as the scythe is for Buffy--Buffy’s plan would likely have failed. In the vision that warns her of the approaching Uber-vamp hoards, their numbers are incalculable, blurring into the distance ("Get It Done"). Buffy is ordering her thirty-odd Slayers to fight a force which, though it might merely consist of a few thousands, might just as easily be a million strong, a possibility which a responsible leader has an obligation to prepare for. If the First Evil’s army did consist of only several thousand, Buffy’s dedicated Slayers might, with courage, strength, and luck, defeat it. If the First Evil’s army consisted of millions, they almost certainly could not. Buffy’s strategy for defeating the Uber-vamps, therefore, is based on nothing more than hope that their numbers will be relatively small, a hope that persists, if anything, against evidence to the contrary.

[13] Some contend that while Buffy’s plan is highly problematic, it is the only strategy available to deploy against the First Evil, a being about whom there is little extant information on the basis of which to form a better plan. It is not clear, however, that better alternatives have been

exhausted. In the episode “Show Time” (7011), for instance, Beljoxa’s Eye hints that the Slayer is the root cause of the First Evil’s rampage. Yet this plot line is dropped without any sign that Giles and Anya even report this information to the other Scoobies, to say nothing of the Scoobies exploring its implications for understanding, and thus productively combating, the First. Moreover, the “war on Evil” idea is not presented as a poor strategy that is, nonetheless, the only one available. No one strongly questions this strategy. Nor does anyone ask if other possibilities exist, even if only to be told that they do not. Instead, Buffy’s final plan is presented as not only viable but, in Giles’s words, “brilliant” (“Chosen”), a point to which I will return.

[14] A question crucial to evaluating the narrative’s treatment of this strategy as “brilliant” is the discursive status of tactical logic in the series as a whole. How concerned should we be with rational planning in a universe as fantastic as the Buffyverse? If Buffy’s plan is absurd, isn’t the core idea of a Vampire Slayer equally absurd? Certainly, to appreciate *Buffy*, we must accept the premises of the show, including Vampire Slayers, demons, and magic. Yet these premises carry their own internal consistency, by which the show typically abides. Buffy, for instance, cannot fly--unless some sort of spell is involved. Just as we must accept *Buffy*’s premises, we have some obligation to judge the show according to its own underlying philosophy. There is no doubt that this philosophy prizes intuitive understanding above logical reasoning. Buffy’s instinctive sense of the “right thing to do” almost always triumphs over conventional explanations of why her idea is “crazy.” At the same time, the series does not--and should not--value intuition *to the exclusion* of logical reasoning. Such a position would argue that an inspired person’s hunch will always be correct regardless of external evidence to the contrary. *Buffy* does not espouse such a view. If it did, it would not emphasize the importance of research, the accumulation of information, in fighting evil. Yet the library--a symbolic and literal bastion of research--is a central location for strategizing throughout the first three seasons of the show.

[15] Moreover, cogent reasoning is a vital element in the climactic world-saving strategies of every season except Season Seven. In Season One, Buffy fights the Master. This makes sense: he is a vampire, she a Vampire Slayer, and even though she must confront a prophecy that foretells her death, she remains the most qualified person in Sunnydale to face this battle. In Season Two, the Whistler reveals that Angel(us)’s blood must be used to close Acathla’s vortex into Hell. Again, Buffy the

Vampire Slayer is the logical choice to slay the vampire whose blood must be shed. Season Three's finale is superficially the most like Season Seven's: in Season Three, Buffy leads an "army" of Sunnydale High graduates into battle against the demonic Mayor and his minions. The crucial difference between Season Seven's strategy and Season Three's, however, is that Season Three's is basically reasonable. Research reveals that the heretofore indestructible Mayor will become mortal after he ascends to full demon form. The question, then, is how to slay the demon. The answer is to use his "weakness," his affection for Faith, to lure him into a trap in which a bomb will kill him. The "army," meanwhile, occupies the Mayor's minions long enough for the core plan to be put into effect. The strategy is feasible and its success believable. In Season Four, Buffy is faced with the demon-robot hybrid, Adam, an adversary stronger than she is. Buffy and her friends overcome this disadvantage by casting a spell that allows her to absorb the power of the Scoobies and the First Slayer. As this super-entity, she is stronger than Adam and can defeat him. Again, within the premises of the Buffyverse, this plan is plausible. Season Five once again pits Buffy against a foe physically more powerful than she is, this time, the god, Glory. The Scoobies defeat Glory by pooling all of their available assets, ranging from the Buffybot to Xander's wrecking ball. The world, however, cannot be saved until the interdimensional portal opened by Dawn's blood is closed. Here is a prime example of Buffy's intuition at work. Unable to accept that she must either kill Dawn or let the world end, Buffy sacrifices herself to close the portal instead. She dies; the world is saved. Buffy assuredly makes an inuitive leap when she conjectures that because Dawn was made from her, her blood can close the portal as effectively as Dawn's. And yet, this leap of intuition, too, is reasonable: since Dawn *was* made from Buffy, it seems plausible that their blood has similar qualities. And even if Buffy's supposition had been wrong, nothing would be lost but her own life. The remaining Scoobies would presumably have to sacrifice Dawn; the world could still be saved. All in all, Buffy's gamble leaves relatively little to lose and plausibly much to gain. Season Six is the only season in which averting the apocalypse is not intended to illustrate Buffy's heroism. In this season, it is not Buffy but Xander whose love convinces Willow to abandon her scheme to destroy the world. Here again, Xander's strategy is plausible. He is Willow's best friend, the most apt individual to appeal to her better nature. In all of these cases, one could uncover logical inconsistencies or omissions. Just as surely, in all these cases, the core strategies for defeating the Big Bads are reasonable within the internal logic of the Buffyverse.

[16] Season Seven's strategy is not. We are given no reason to believe that the activated Slayers could plausibly defeat a large army of Uber-vamps. Though we accept that a Slayer has super-strength, we also know that Slayers have limits. Buffy cannot, for instance, defeat Adam or Glory solely using her own physical strength. It is true that we cannot quantify Buffy's limits. She has never yet been driven to exhaustion, but she has never had to fight non-stop for more than several hours at a time.

Within the established logic of the Buffyverse, Buffy's depending on a strategy that might require her army to fight non-stop for days--when we are given no indication that she has even tested the limits of her own endurance--seems almost suicidal.

[17] It may be countered that a Slayer's strength is linked to her confidence; therefore, when the Slayers feel assured of victory, victory is assured. That power through confidence is a theme of "Chosen" is indicated in Buffy's revelation that "We're gonna win" and Vi's pronouncement as she first feels her Slayer power: "These guys are dust." Nonetheless, there remain internal difficulties with this explanation. Taken to its extreme, it suggests that a fully confident Slayer is all-powerful, assuming a sort of Godhood against which any other force becomes negligible. The deification of Slayers, however, is not an intended theme. Empowerment can never be total in a world in which power is to be shared. But if confidence does not yield invincibility, then physical limitations still pertain. Confidence may improve one's odds of victory, but it cannot guarantee it. And since there appears to be no way of quantifying how much a certain level of confidence increases a Slayer's fighting ability, it would remain absurd for Buffy to assume that a confident fighting force of about thirty has a good chance of defeating an army minimally of thousands. It requires blind faith to conclude that such a gamble constitutes a well-developed strategy.

[18] The Mutant Enemy writers did not intend to advocate such blind faith in Buffy. On the contrary, they leave her pointedly open to criticism. By "Empty Places" (7019), her army has become so disenchanted with her self-righteous, autocratic attitude that they expel her from her own house. Buffy's ousting is part of the writers' attempt to address what Whedon calls her "separateness from the other characters" (*Angel* News), her self-imposed alienation from the people around her. In this episode, Anya criticizes Buffy on the grounds that she has illegitimately claimed the role of leader just because she is the Slayer. Anya argues that Buffy thinks she is "better" than the rest of them when really she is not ("Empty Places"). The contention that Buffy's leadership role has been assigned purely on the basis of her Slayer strength is not wholly fair: Buffy has led several successful efforts to save the world. In defeating Big Bads, her credentials are unmatched. Nonetheless, there is truth to this criticism: Buffy herself implicitly admits to a superiority complex in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007). Throughout most of Season Seven, Buffy allows this sense of her own superiority to shut her off from other people, to turn her into an autocratic "general." Her explicitly dull and preachy speeches, her avowal in "Selfless" (7005) that "I am the law," and her inability to express emotion over the loss of Xander's eye are just a few symptoms of this unhealthy isolation. Being rejected by her companions alerts Buffy to this problem. Having to listen to their divergent voices gives her an impetus to reconnect with the people around her. As a crisis that motivates her to reevaluate her attitude, Buffy's ousting serves its metanarrative purpose: it "addresses her separateness from the other

characters." It does so by re-endorsing the show's long-standing commitment to dialogic multivocality.

[19] Indeed, a complex discourse about multivocality begins to unfold as Faith temporarily takes over Buffy's leadership role. In contrast to Buffy's univocal rule, Faith's leadership begins in dialogue. Voices, such as Amanda's, Caridad's, and Vi's, that have hitherto been completely excluded from the strategizing, are suddenly freed to participate. Their participation, however, does not accomplish much. The initial dialogue of Faith's army is chaotic and inconclusive, and soon, Faith reasserts the dominance of the general's voice: "I'm your leader, which means I go first, and I make the rules, and the rest of you follow after me." ("Touched" 7020). Nonetheless, Faith remains at least marginally more open than Buffy to a participatory community structure. The chief difference between Faith's leadership and Buffy's is that Faith is more personable; she takes others' feelings into account. As she observes, she is "not the one who's been on your asses all this time" ("Touched"). Because she appears friendlier and somewhat more open to suggestions than Buffy, she re-energizes the Potentials; they do not resent following her as they did Buffy. Nonetheless, in "Touched," it is Faith's plan to assault the First's minions that leads the Potentials into a trap. Conversely, Buffy's supposition that Caleb is protecting something is correct: she successfully claims the scythe. Flushed with this success, Buffy is soon restored to her position as leader.

[20] What is the metanarrative behind Faith's failed tenure as leader? Is the message that Buffy is superior to Faith? No, it is not. When Buffy returns, Amanda voices a fear that Faith's followers have been "punished" for rejecting Buffy ("End of Days" 7021). Buffy refuses this reasoning, telling the Potentials, "You guys, it was a trap. It's not her fault. That could've just as easily happened to me" ("End of Days"). She reiterates this view to Faith herself: "People die. You lead them into battle, they're gonna die. It doesn't matter how ready you are or how smart you are. War is about death. Needless, stupid death" ("End of Days"). Buffy herself asserts that she is not categorically a better person or even a better leader than Faith. Both have made tactical mistakes. Both have led innocents to their deaths. Speaking with Faith, Buffy asks semi-rhetorically whether it matters which of them is "in charge" ("End of Days"). What does matter, the metanarrative suggests, is accomplishing the task at hand, not setting one absolute leader over another. When Buffy leads the army in "Chosen," she leads because she has--supposedly--developed an inspired plan. If Faith had developed it, Faith would lead. Leadership should be based on what one can do and how one does it, not on an abstract evaluation of whether or not one is "superior."

[21] It seems ironic that this journey toward a less hierarchical conception of leadership is illustrated via a breakdown, rather than a restoration, of multivocal communication. Buffy is ousted for her intransigent univocality. Yet Faith's abortive attempt to allow more

dialogue fails. But it would be reading too much into Faith's dialogues with the Potentials to interpret them as a metanarrative rejection of dialogism as a paradigm for an empowered community. It is the dialogic communication of conflicting views that causes Buffy to be unseated as general. It is this rejection, in turn, that spurs one of Buffy's most profound revelations: that she cannot be an autocratic leader; she must interact with others as equals. In this sense, dialogue is Buffy's salvation. What, then, is the significance of the failure of dialogic communication for Faith's leadership? Perhaps it is an illustration that there are no facile answers to the threat posed by the First Evil. If autocracy is unacceptable, dialogue is no panacea: it is convoluted, messy, far from foolproof as a means of strategizing. Diverse voices can become a cacophony. The dialogic confusion Faith faces dramatically enacts the difficulty of achieving consensus in any complex issue.

[22] This is precisely why dialogic communication cannot be used to discuss Buffy's Slayer activation strategy. Just as open dialogue exposes the error in Buffy's autocratic isolation, so would it expose the tactical absurdity of her final plan. Season Seven, unlike any other Buffy season, is ultimately forced to reject a dialogic rhetoric in order to stay "on message." It is true that not every apocalypse in *Buffy* is addressed dialogically. In Season One, for example, Buffy knocks Giles unconscious rather than waste time explaining to him why she must face the Master. In this case, however, Buffy's strategy demands no dialogic critique to highlight its unfeasibility. Buffy can refuse to debate with Giles in Season One because it is plain that she is correct: she is the plausible choice to fight the Master. I have already argued that Seasons One through Six depict basically reasonable strategies for averting the apocalypse. In Seasons Three, Four and Five, these plans emerge directly out of group discussions in which diverse voices materially participate. In Season Three, it is Wesley, the inept and craven representative of the Watchers' suspect power, who tells Buffy that Faith is the weakness she must exploit in the Mayor. In Season Four, Everyman Xander's flippant remark that they need a combination of Buffy, Giles, and Willow sparks Giles's idea to literally unite their powers. In Season Five, though Buffy herself refuses to discuss the possibility that Dawn must be killed, her intransigence is immediately--and appropriately--challenged by Giles, who proclaims that "we bloody well are" going to discuss sacrificing Dawn ("The Gift"). Here, it is misfit Anya who, then, steps in to steer the Scoobies away from bickering over Dawn and toward a sensible plan to assail Glory before she can hurt Dawn. While this plan fails to preempt the use of Dawn's blood, it is instrumental in defeating Glory herself. In Season Seven alone, the basic reasoning that would make the climactic plan plausible within the Buffyverse is missing. But since the metanarrative requires the Slayer activation, open dialogue that would engage with this lack must be thwarted.

[23] Instead, the Scoobies' only round-table discussion of Buffy's plan endorses her insight by suggesting that her core companions, whose

courage and good sense we generally respect, can find little to say against it. The discussion, in its entirety, runs as follows:

BUFFY. What do you think?

XANDER. That depends. Are you in any way kidding?

BUFFY. You don't think it's a good idea?

FAITH. It's pretty radical, B.

GILES. It's a lot more than that. Buffy, what you said--it flies in the face of everything we've ever. . . of what every generation has done in the fight against evil. (beat) I think it's bloody brilliant.

BUFFY. (smiles) You mean that.

GILES. If you want my opinion.

BUFFY. Really do.

WILLOW. Whoa, hey! Not to poop on the party here, but I'm the guy who's going to have to pull this thing off.

FAITH. It's beaucoup d'mojo.

WILLOW. This goes beyond anything I've ever done. It's a total loss of control and not in a nice, wholesome, "my girlfriend has a pierced tongue" kind of way.

BUFFY. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think you could do it.

WILLOW. I'm not sure I'm stable enough.

GILES. You can do this, Willow. We'll get the coven on the line and we'll find out how they can help.

DAWN. (realizes) Oh! Pierced tongue.

BUFFY. (urgent to Giles) Dawn needs to do a research thing.

GILES. (to Dawn) Yes, you do.

(Dawn stands up and heads for the door)

DAWN. It's cool. Watcher Junior to the library.

GILES. (to Buffy) I'll go dig up my sources. Quite literally, actually. There are one or two people I have to speak to who are dead.

ANYA. (to Xander) Come on. Let's go assemble the cannon fodder.

XANDER. That's not what we're calling them, sweetie.

ANYA. Not to their faces. What am I--insensitive? ("Chosen")

This scene offers almost no dialogic exchange of ideas. To her credit, Buffy attempts to prompt dialogue. She "really does want to know" what her friends think of her Slayer activation plan, so much so that her first four lines do nothing but solicit their feedback. That feedback, however, is meager. Xander only asks whether she is serious. Once it has been established that she is, we never hear what he thinks but can assume that his silence indicates approval. Faith does nothing but state twice that the plan is rather extreme: a radical idea requiring powerful magic. Whether or not she thinks this is a good thing is not specified, though there is no suggestion in her tone or bearing that she is opposed. Dawn has nothing of value to contribute beyond the silence of her implied agreement; her two lines relate only to Kennedy's erotically pierced tongue. Her research task is presented as a joke about protecting her sexual innocence, not as an activity of use to the group. In the only example of genuine dialogism in the scene, Willow raises understandable concerns about whether using a spell as powerful as the Slayer activation will release her "dark side." Buffy and Giles quickly address these concerns. Whether or not they do so adequately is a subject for another essay; at least, it is clear that the episode attempts to deal with this question. Anya, Buffy's most outspoken detractor throughout Season Seven, is notably silent during the discussion, speaking up only at the end, after the plan has been adopted, to call the Potentials "cannon fodder," an expression that implies that she has reservations about the plan. Why she fails to voice them is not clear.

[24] It is Giles who is left to speak on behalf of Xander, Faith, and Dawn, whose failure to voice an overt opinion must be read as tacit support. Giles hails Buffy's plan as "bloody brilliant" apparently because "it flies in the face of everything [. . .] every generation has done in the fight against evil." He does not explain why this equates with brilliance. There is no necessary connection between transgression and brilliance: to build a moon rocket without concern for Newtonian physics would fly in the face of everything every space program has ever done. This doesn't make it brilliant. In fact, the text offers no concrete explanation for why we should consider this plan brilliant or even adequate.

[25] Whedon has commented that in "Chosen" he did not have enough airtime to render the story in depth (Wilcox Par. 27). If he had not been working under these time constraints, it is entirely possible that the episode would have included more discussion of the Slayer activation. It is not, however, time constraints alone that prevent productive dialogue. If sharing contrasting viewpoints had been a significant aim, it would have

been possible, for instance, to omit the banter about Kennedy's pierced tongue in favor of deeper discussion of Buffy's plan, even if this dialogue could only briefly suggest that more discussion must occur behind the scenes. Instead, the narrative's refusal of dialogue continues persistently throughout the episode. In the next scene, Buffy begins a lengthy speech to the Potentials, which ends with her telling them, "So here's the part where you make a choice" ("Chosen"). Ironically, we never see or hear them make a choice. As Buffy speaks, the Potentials watch her attentively like children in a schoolroom. Their visual representation suggests that they are receiving wisdom, not participating in its construction. At intervals throughout the episode, Buffy's speech on the virtues of the Slayer activation continues as a voice over. There is no sign of any Potential offering an opinion during any part of this exposition. The nominal dialogue of the Scoobies' discussion gives way to the literal monologue of Buffy's oratory.

[26] The only Potential to comment on the plan before it has been put into action is Kennedy. Assuring Willow that Buffy's faith in her is well-placed, Kennedy asserts, "Hey, I'm the first one to call [Buffy] out when she's not making sense" ("Chosen"). This statement has the effect of circumventing any rigorous examination Buffy's plan. The implication is that if Kennedy thinks Buffy is right, Buffy must be right because if Buffy were wrong, surely Kennedy of all people would say so. It is true that Kennedy is willing to question Buffy. In fact, she is the only one to mention any of the fundamental flaws in the overarching "war on Evil" strategy. She does so in "Bring on the Night" (7010), voicing a concern that hiding the Potentials under the proverbial nose of the being that is trying to kill them is a suspect strategy:

> KENNEDY. And if this thing is the root of all evil, isn't the Hellmouth its number one vacation spot? I mean, don't you think we should be hiding our asses on the other side of the globe?
>
> ANNABELLE. Kennedy!
>
> BUFFY. No, she's not wrong. We need more muscle. That's why we need to find Spike.

Kennedy makes an excellent point, which is never addressed. For while having Spike's "muscle" to protect the Potentials may be better than not having it, this is hardly an answer to Kennedy's objection that bringing the Potentials to the First Evil's doorstep does not make self-evident sense. Buffy concedes that Kennedy is "not wrong" but then ignores her concern. Kennedy herself never voices it again. Yet this abortive attempt at dialogic

discussion of the core strategy to defeat the First Evil is perhaps the most cogent the season offers.

[27] It does not take a great deal of investigation to expose questionable assumptions in Buffy's strategy. Is incorporeal evil best opposed by a physical army? Can that army--however strong and courageous its soldiers--be expected to defeat an enemy force whose maximum possible number they cannot even guesstimate? These are obvious questions. But such questions are never asked. This omission devalues the individuality of the various Scoobies. In order to achieve consensus on Buffy's plan, most of the Scoobies must be behave in manner that is, at least to some extent, out of character. One could argue that all the participants in the discussion of the Slayer activation, including Buffy, are acting out of character simply in their inability to see the flaws in the plan: usually, they are all more perceptive than this. In addition to this basic lapse in characterization, other, more specific problems are evident. Some of these problems are relatively minor. Dawn's silence is not in keeping with the talkative teenager who spurs the action in "Get It Done." Xander's essentially unquestioning approval is peculiar in a man who recently lost an eye while following Buffy into battle and who, only three episodes before in "Empty Places," shows himself quite willing to challenge her tactics. Faith, who questions authority by instinct, also resists Buffy's plan in "Empty Places" but has no concerns to forward in "Chosen." If these responses seem somewhat unlikely, however, the reactions of Willow, Giles, and Anya are radically implausible. In "Lessons" (7001), Willow and Giles are unwilling to let a single flower remain in England by magic when its natural place is on the other side of the world. The post-Season Six magic training that Giles helps to give Willow is principally oriented around working within the natural balance of the Earth. It defies credibility for these characters that neither of them raises any question about how loosing the tremendous magic required to activate all the Potentials might affect the balance of nature. Yet Willow questions only whether she herself can safely wield such magic, and Giles's response is unambivalently enthusiastic. Finally, it is impossible to credit that Anya, who by her own admission in "Empty Places" is not Buffy's friend and who has never been known for restraining her criticism, should offer no critique at all of Buffy's strategy. Indeed, the only major characters whose unquestioning acceptance of this plan is entirely in character are Spike and Andrew. Since Season Five, Spike has considered it a sign of his love for Buffy to stand by side her without unduly examining the wisdom of her choices. In Season Seven, Andrew largely allows Buffy to replace Warren as the leader whom he, too, will follow without question. Buffy's plan to "share the power" is enabled by an effacement of the individual personhood of all but these two of her close companions. When the Scoobies' natural predispositions would challenge the metanarrative's need to attain the Slayer activation, their natural predispositions must be suppressed.

[28] Whedon himself addresses this de-emphasis on characterization in response to a question from IGN Filmforce on fan discontent with the Potentials:

> IGNFF INTERVIEWER. It seemed the introduction of the potentials--and here's a dozen potentials and new characters accompanying them--that it diluted the core group that we care about.
>
> WHEDON. Yeah, I think it did, and I had to get to that ending. (9)

For Whedon, the final theme of the Slayer activation was the goal that could not be sacrificed even though retaining it had a negative impact on other aspects of the season. Ironically, the means the writers adopted to attain their final message contradict that message. In order to achieve the metaphor of "sharing power," the participatory power of every voice but Buffy's is gutted. The problem is that being denied the free expression of one's individual identity is not empowering. Being silenced is not empowering.

[29] Some object that this disjunction between the metaphor of power-sharing and a rhetoric that largely denies the sharing of power is no more than an oversight. Of the numerous fan responses I have encountered, not one failed to grasp Season Seven's metanarrative message of feminist empowerment. Isn't *Buffy*, then, fulfilling its ideological purpose? If no character notices that Buffy's plan is questionable, isn't that just a plot loophole of the kind we learn to expect and forgive in fantasy and science fiction TV? On the contrary, the absurdity of Buffy's plan cannot be excused as a mere plot oversight because it is only by the refusal of the most basic, critical discussion among the characters that such an unfeasible plan can go unchallenged. And yet regard for such basic multivocality is central to the dissemination of power the metanarrative advocates.

[30] Writing at the beginning of Season Seven, David Lavery observes that "Buffy's power source is narrative" (Par. 1). Few *Buffy* fans or scholars would disagree. Throughout its seven seasons, *Buffy* has made an astounding contribution to the dissemination of a sophisticated feminist ideology through a commitment to morally complicated, multivocal storytelling. It has done, indeed, precisely what its Season Seven metanarrative claims. But as soon as the show demands that we listen to its message at the expense of its story, it begins to lose this claim to cultural edification. A story of feminist empowerment that is not supported by a plausible narrative does not make a plausible case for feminist empowerment. As Buffy and Faith discover, a leader must be judged by

the quality of her leadership. A narrative that endorses a feminist dissemination of power via a plot that undermines this message begins to move in the direction of a dogmatic feminism that requires the ideological support of female power regardless of how that power is used.

[31] The aim of "Chosen" is not to valorize Buffy at the expense of other characters. Indeed, in his DVD commentary on "Chosen," Whedon describes his message to *Buffy* fans as a shift away from Buffy as the central hero: "Okay, great that you've worshipped this one iconic character, but find it in yourself, everybody" ("Chosen" commentary). The Slayer activation idea, however, is so inept as a strategy that it can only be pursued by erasing other voices that would question it. Since Buffy, the protagonist, is voicing the plan, this refusal of questioning inadvertently reinscribes her in the role of unchallengeable hero. The manner of the message's delivery reflects upon both the message and the messenger. By foregrounding Buffy's voice as correct while denying other voices the right to contribute, "Chosen" subverts its own metanarrative intent, presenting Buffy as the Chosen One who must be followed without question. In her analysis of the politics of race and culture surrounding the Slayer activation, Patricia Pender invokes cultural critic Gayle Ward, who "has warned that feminist scholarship must be wary of uncritically reproducing simplistically celebratory readings of popular culture that focus on gender performance 'as a privileged site and source of political oppositionality'" (Par. 15). Buffy is deservedly a feminist icon; that should not exempt her or the series that bears her name from the same type of critical questioning Whedon's feminism persistently advocates.

[32] As I close this essay, I must state clearly what I do *not* object to. I do not object to Season Seven's message of feminist empowerment through power sharing; this message is a good one. [4] I do not object to the handling of Buffy's unhealthy separateness from other characters; the season addresses this well. I do not object that Buffy's final plan cannot be justified; given the possibilities of the Buffyverse, it probably could have been explained plausibly. I do not even object that Buffy's plan

should have been presented without logical inconsistencies; fantasy TV can legitimately require a measure of suspension of disbelief even with regard to its own internal rules. What I do object to is the adherence to a univocality so persistent that the inadequacy of Buffy's tactics can pass almost completely unremarked. What I object to is the implicit--if unintentional--suggestion that when Buffy is representing the "right message," she must be correct no matter what she actually says or does. Discussing the first five seasons of the show, Wall and Zryd observe, "Buffy's relation to authority remains questioning and critical. She challenges all of the authority figures in the show [. . .]" (61). Season Seven, however, closes by presenting Buffy herself as an authority who cannot be challenged. This is a double standard. It suggests that anyone marked as a "subversive feminist" deserves unreflective allegiance. We know that this is not the message the Mutant Enemy writers were intending to convey. It is doubly unfortunate, therefore, that the Season Seven arc narrative finally subverts the show's intended message of a disseminated, multivocal, and critical female empowerment.

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Notes

[1] James South offers a powerful answer to the common criticism that, as he explains it, "the introduction of the scythe seemed pretty lamely ad hoc, or even a kind of *deus ex machina*" (19). On the contrary, South contends, "[I]t's precisely the ad hoc status of the scythe that makes it so important" (19). (The same could be said of the amulet.) For South, the scythe as an unexpected surprise exemplifies the power of the antiteleological discourse he sees at work in Season Seven. Buffy's openness to the unexpected, her ability to make use of whatever resources come her way, signifies that she is more capable, and wiser, than beings like the First Evil or Caleb who expect the world to follow a preordained system. Buffy's ability to take up the scythe--a last minute introduction--and make it fundamental to her plan is evidence of her power to think outside of the proverbial box, the same power that enables her to imagine a world with multiple Slayers.

South's reading of the antiteleological worldview of Season Seven is insightful, and on a metanarrative level, the scythe can, indeed, function exactly as he suggests. On a narrative level, however, the introduction of the scythe illustrates a weakness in Buffy's leadership. While we may certainly applaud her for making full use of the scythe when it appears, the fact that her entire plan hinges on this last-minute discovery, essential to the Slayer activation, does not speak well for her tactical skills. The rejection of teleology in the Buffyverse suggests that the advent of the scythe was not a foregone conclusion. On the contrary, to assume that some object or insight must appear at the last minute to enable victory is, in fact, to embrace a teleological worldview in which victory is assured irrespective of one's individual actions. Buffy does not assume this, but without this assumption, she remains without a feasible plan just days before the apocalyptic battle despite having had months to strategize. Certainly, the writers explicitly mark Buffy's initial leadership as inadequate. This does not explain, however, why her companions so seldom comment on her obvious tactical inadequacies. This lack of commentary exemplifies Season Seven's de-emphasis on multivocal dialogue.

[2] Spike's heroic, mystical death is essential to the plot line of Season Five of *Angel*, in which Spike returns from the dead to challenge Angel's status as the only world-saving, ensouled vampire. To an extent, therefore, the amulet in *Buffy* may be more a convenience for *Angel* than significant part of *Buffy*'s metanarrative. This would explain Spike's pointed contention that his role is merely "clean-up": in *Buffy*, the Slayers

are supposed to be the principal saviors. If the disproportionate power of the amulet is largely incidental to *Buffy*'s core theme of communal empowerment, it is a dramatic illustration of the needs of the narrative conflicting with the needs of the metanarrative.

[3] Even if the staging of the scene had portrayed the Uber-vamps as being almost overrun by the time the amulet activates, this would not have validated Buffy's plan. The defeat of the Uber-vamps, in that case, would have been largely due to happenstance: their numbers would luckily have been small enough for the Slayers to defeat them. Buffy, however, has no reason to base her plan on this assumption. In fact, her vision of innumerable Uber-vamp hoards in "Get It Done" gives her ample reason to suspect that their numbers will be massive. Giles once remarked of Willow's resurrection of Buffy, "I wouldn't congratulate you if you jumped off a cliff and happened to survive" ("Flooded" 6004). The same could be said of the defeat of the First Evil.

[4] The body of excellent scholarly criticism on the themes of Season Seven provides ample evidence that the power-sharing metanarrative can, in itself, be read as highly sophisticated. James South, for instance, argues that Season Seven projects an antiteleological worldview in which power is contingent upon openness to the unexpected. Rhonda Wilcox argues that *Buffy* in general and Season Seven in particular advocate a type of power-sharing that is explicitly engaged with the politics of globalization. It is not my intent to invalidate the depth that such readings have uncovered in the Season Seven metanarrative. I argue only that monologic structures in the narrative diminish the power of these sophisticated metanarratives.

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