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Dressed to kill: Fashion and leadership in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Introduction:

[1] Using classical and feminist frameworks to analyse the concept of leadership,this essay explores the relationship between Buffy as a leader and Buffy as a leader of fashion.

[2] Köver (2005), commenting on the polarised nature of the critical debate about Buffy's potential as a feminist role model, draws on Butler's (1990) work on performativity to frame her analysis of the multiple ways in which this character can be read. Thus, she argues, Buffy's capacity to be 'strategically useful to the feminist project of emancipation' depends not on her 'intentional resistance' to patriarchy, but on 'resignification' through performance.

[3] This emphasis on performance, rather than on an essentialist redefinition of femininity, is helpful for a consideration of the feminist implications of Buffy's costume. It is possible to think about costume as performance on two overlapping levels, that of the fictional character and that of the production team. The character performs the role of female leader in various guises, reconstructing her identity in relation to the other characters and in response to the current context and her state of mind. The production team, including writers, actor, director and wardrobe staff, are also engaged in creating a performance of female leadership in which they collectively create a series of images which engage the viewer and are reconstructed through the viewer's interpretive focus.

[4] The wardrobe for these performances often suggests that Buffy is constructing a form of female leadership that could be understood as a synthesis of two leadership styles expressed as oppositional by Plato. Plato's analysis of failures in Athenian leadership centered on a conflict between traditional values. He discussed whether it should be regarded as more contemptible to do wrong than to suffer wrong. Zeus is the father of Dik (Justice) and so sees to it that those who do wrong are punished. Doing wrong offends Greek religious sensibilities and so is contemptible. But on the other hand, Athena carries Nik (Victory) and so sees to it that one does not suffer at the hands of others, but rather is the victor and has the power to treat others as desired. Suffering wrong at the hands of others makes one a loser, abandoned by Athena, and this too makes one contemptible. Victory and justice appear to be antithetical in this analysis, but, we argue, Buffy's leadership performance locates her at different places on the axis between the two and ultimately suggests a reconciliation.

[5] Buffy has a well-equipped closet filled with mainstream fashion. Her room, closet, and two tiered trunk could be compared to Batman's cave and utility belt, in that they are all part of her super-hero toolkit. Her use of costume differs from that of the conventional comic book hero, though, insofar as her super-hero status is not determined by it. As both Levy (2003) and De la Rosa (2002) have noted, Buffy does not have to don a specific, single outfit in order to be the Slayer. Instead (as De la Rosa observes) she 'prefers to wear designer brands that she and her female youth audience can easily buy from the nearby mall.' This exploration of the variety offered by mainstream fashion enables her continually to reconstruct the Slayer through her closet. The way she does this, we argue, suggests a desire to establish a leadership style that is relational, in which her identity as the Slayer is expressed in terms of her position with respect to the rest of society and those she loves.

Fashion, feminism and leadership

[6] As Barnard (2002) notes, there have always been complex and shifting discourses connecting women, feminism, leadership and fashion. Many early second wave feminists took an interest in the way fashion contributed to the challenges women faced. They noted that women's clothing was often restrictive and designed to exaggerate secondary sexual characteristics (De Beauvoir, 1972).The argument ran that the fashion industry contributed to the establishment of women as functionally inadequate creatures who were designed as objects of desire for men, whereas men wore functional clothing that coded them active rather than passive. Fashion, it was argued, contributed to our inability to take women seriously as leaders and workers (see Hollows, 2000 for a discussion of shifting feminist approaches to fashion).

[7] Entwistle (1997) discusses the way some women sought to appropriate the power associated with male clothing by adopting it themselves, accepting the suit as powerful and the dress as a signifier of powerlessness, but resisting the gender specificity of the attire. During the 1980's power dressing, smart tailored clothing, with features such as shoulder pads that created a more masculine silhouette, was in vogue. Molloy's (1977) *The Women's Dress for Success Book* promoted strict tailored suits with padded shoulders that helped identify women as serious beings. This is the sort of feminism Plato defended in his *Republic* according to which women should be allowed access to power only to the extent that they approximate male functionality (*Republic* 451b- 466d). Women and men are equal only to the extent that women become masculine. The uniformity of the suit ensured it could be associated with the protestant work ethic, with sobriety, consistency and discipline. Thus women adopting it could be accused not only of trying to count functionally as men, but as male leaders in a capitalist economy. Not surprisingly, therefore, later feminists saw power dressing as an appropriation of feminism with its democratic and inclusive goals, by capitalism and consumerism, and derided smart successful women as 'lifestyle feminists.'

[8] In the Whedonverse the suit characterises the corporate power of organisations such as Wolfram and Hart, where Lilah's suits are indicative of her ambition and status. Quentin Travers, the head of Watcher's Council, and the rookie Watcher Wesley are buttoned-up in style. Although Quentin and Wesley are officially on the right side, against the forces of evil, they represent excessive conformity to tradition and regulation, and their suits help to signify this. In stark contrast to many demon enemies, the sinister Gentlemen on their quests for hearts also wear smart and identical suits. The heart is a symbol of emotion and humanity as is the capacity for speech and human interaction; the fact that they take these from people codes their power as particularly dehumanising. Thus the suit appears to be associated in these programmes with a particular kind of leadership and power, one which is exploitative and cold. Wilcox (2004) notes that they look like 'dead white men.' We think the suits reinforce the weight of historical power carried by the white and deadly; suits are meant to intimidate.* When Buffy leads, however, she sees no need to powerdress. Whether she leads the fighting or the planning, she is likely to do this in any number of costumes, ranging through glamorous, sporty, sexy, smart and childishly girly. Focusing on these can offer insights into some of her ideas about leadership.

[9] In "Graduation Day, Part Two" (3022), Buffy's leadership is cemented. She plans the battle and co-ordinates it, as well as operating as the warrior-hero who challenges the enemy to single combat when she lures the mayor-demon into the school.Here all the students 'graduate' by casting off the symbols of conventional graduation, the cap and gown. Buffy then leads in a fashionable leather coat and tight trousers. Historically, in line with Plato's comments, a few women have been able to undertake restricted leadership roles by renouncing their femininity, particularly their sexuality, and this has been signalled by their attire.The most obvious and complete example of this is the nun's habit, but to a lesser degree women have been able to lead at work by hiding behind academic gowns and doctors' coats. Here Buffy reclaims the right to lead as a woman. This is rolled out through various images of mainstream femininity. For example, in "Reptile Boy" (2005) she looks like the typical whore/horror victim, dressed in a skimpy short black dress. She has broken all the rules for good girls, wearing sexy clothing, disobeying the male authority figure in her life (Giles) and getting involved in an event that clearly signals adult sexual danger. This is accentuated when her accessories become the chains the boys use to bind her to the wall, whilst they await the arrival of the giant phallic symbol they think will eat her. She doesn't accept her punishment (death), kicking with remarkable agility in the dress and transforming the chains into weapons that kill the monster. In "Homecoming" (3005), Buffy is all dressed for the ball in a rose coloured evening gown that cost a 'year's allowance,' but it does not inhibit her ability to use a semi automatic weapon, swing from the light fittings during a fight or leap athletically out of a window. Her discussion with Cordelia makes it clear that she wanted the image of Homecoming Queen so that she could avoid being defined solely by her slayer duties. The conflation of the two that occurs when she uses her intelligence, skill and physical power to defeat the enemy, whilst

still dressed for the Homecoming Ball, bundles all the associations of conventional schoolgirl femininity into the leadership performance she gives, and helps to challenge restricted perceptions of leadership. When she calls the bluff of Quentin Travers and the Watcher's Council in "Checkpoint" (5012) she is in effect in high powered negotiations about her business, slaying. The other participants are formally dressed, and a suit might be appropriate for this. Instead she comes in late, fresh from firstly organising protection for her family, then winning a fight, in a large fluffy white coat, which she discards to reveal casual clothes: a tight V necked black sweater and black trousers. In this way she signals the non-institutional nature of her authority, vested primarily in herself and in her sense of responsibility. Her body language and her clothing contribute to this performance of Slayer as confident woman, at ease with her own power. In effect, Buffy has seen through the sexist logic of Plato's feminism and displays in her fashion of leadership the belief that a woman does not need straight jacketing into a male role or male clothing before she can lead.

Resistance through style

[10] Critics have drawn attention to the way *BtVS* operates in opposition to the forces of capitalism and consumerism. Pasley (2003) notes that in '*BtVS* and *Angel* there is a persistent association of capitalist values with literal inhumanity' (p. 258). Wall and Zryd (2001) offer a scrupulous analysis of *Buffy* and *Angel*'s 'self-conscious and deeply critical stance towards capital and consumerism' (p.76).Both cite the hell-god Glory's obsession with shopping and shoes. It is interesting to note, however, that Buffy's fight against the demons of capitalism takes place whilst she simultaneously celebrates consumption through her constantly changing wardrobe and declarations of affection for shopping.

[11] She tries out many looks, but these are predominantly mainstream; two she avoids are the two most consistently cited by cultural studies theorists as indicative of subcultural resistance to consumer capitalism – goth and punk. The development of styles such as punk and goth have often been read as subversive acts of resistance to fashion's capacity to reinforce gender and class hierarchies (Baddeley, 2002; Hollows 2000).Baddeley comments on the 'gender ambiguity' of male goth fashion (p. 216), whilst Macdonald (1995) notes how:

> Punk especially, broke every rule of appearance, sweeping feminine hairstyles, make-up and clothing within its black dustbin liner and mocking jewellery and adornment conventions by transferring them from their usual place on the body to new and more obtrusive locations. (213)

By drawing attention to the artificiality of all fashion, these subcultural styles undermine fashion's capacity to present socially constructed categories as natural elements in the social order, but they are not part of the Slayer's wardrobe.

[12] Diehl (2004) notes Drusilla and Darla's 'pop-punk Gothic aesthetics' and associates these with the characters as sources of transgression and disruption (¶ 1).In *BtVS*, though, far from being automatically associated with resistance, the goth look, particularly when adopted by humans, is often associated with weakness. Lily, in for example, adopts a goth look as part of her wannabee-vampire project, but all this signifies is her failure to understand the kinds of forces her wardrobe is meant to represent. The goth Drusilla-replacement whom Spike takes to the Anya and Xander's wedding never interacts with anyone except Spike, and she is so passive that she is repeatedly shown as limply being dragged around by him ("Hell's Bells," 6016).Michael, the black clad witch in "Gingerbread" (3011) is mocked and sad. Humans who attempt to look like the undead don't come off well in *BtVS.* Even Drusilla for all her vampire power is fey, distracted, even loopy for most of her *BtVS* appearances. Jowett (2005) notes that although she is powerful and threatening, she has a 'childlike manner' (p. 77).

[13] Punk fashion is displayed to some extent by Faith. Faith's attire does appear to mark her as a rebellious outsider initially, as suggested in a very brief scene where Buffy, Xander and Willow await a test in class when Faith shows up ... outside. Faith breathes on the window pane and in the condensation draws a heart with what looks like an arrow through it and beckons for Buffy to leave school. The closest she gets to joining a social group is to have someone join her outside, which Buffy does for a while.Faith, especially in those earlier episodes, is coded deviant rather than subversive in any positive sense. Her resistance is presented as resistance to community, and to respect for humanity, rather than resistance to oppression. She is a rebel, but in a series in which the central characters are already outsiders who challenge the oppressive powers of authorities and institutions, those who stand against them become perversely allied with conservatism. Thus Faith is adopted by the mayor with his family values, home-spun wisdom and clear associations with the power of institutions and political authority.

Concepts of leadership: "Restless" and "Helpless"

[14] The rejection of the suit, with its connotations of socially sanctioned corporate power, and of punk and goth, with their subcultural and deviant associations, helps locate Buffy in philosophical terms in a paradoxical position on the distinction between *phusis* and *nomos*, a distinction Plato introduces in the *Gorgias* through the character Callicles. These two properties clearly relate to an individual's capacity to prioritise Nik (Victory) or Dik (Justice). According to Callicles, it is true by *nomos*

(custom, convention, law) *nomoi* in the plural, that it is more contemptible to do wrong than to suffer wrong because society creates many norms of behaviour and heavily sanctions breaches of those norms (*Gorgias* 482e-483c).However, he argues that it is true by *phusis* (nature) that to suffer wrong is more contemptible than to do wrong because those who suffer wrong are losers and those who are powerful enough to do wrong to others are winners (*Gorgias* 483b-486c).This is Spike's logic in"Pangs" (4008) when the Chumash warrior seeks vengeance against the descendants of those who killed his people. Buffy is conflicted in this episode. At the beginning an association between Buffy and those who obliterated Native Americans is created for the viewer by giving her a prominent cowboy hat to wear. In the end, Buffy must fight the Chumash warrior and defeat him, but she is very uncomfortable doing that because she feels guilty about how his people were treated.Spike is disgusted:

Spike : I just can't take all this mamby-pamby boo-hooing about the bloody Indians.

Buffy : Uh, the preferred term--

Spike : You won. All right? You came in and you killed them and you took their land. That's what conquering nations do. It's what Caesar did, and he's not going around saying, "I came, I conquered, I felt really bad about it." The history of the world isn't people making friends. You had better weapons, and you massacred them. End of story.

Buffy : Well, I think the Spaniards actually did a lot of - not that I don't like Spaniards.

Spike : Listen to you. How you gonna fight anyone with that attitude?

Willow : We don't wanna fight anyone.

Buffy : I just wanna have Thanksgiving.

Spike : Heh heh. Yeah...Good luck.

Willow : If we could talk to him--

Spike : You exterminated his race. What could you possibly say that would make him feel better? It's kill or be killed here. Take your bloody pick.

[15] For Spike, it is more contemptible to suffer wrong than to do wrong, and this is based on his observations of the history of the world, including Julius Caesar. From his perspective, Spike is simply recognizing plain facts, the way things are (*phusis*).Prescribing the way things ought to be is where the 'mamby-pamby boo-hooing' begins (*nomos*).

[16] In *BtVS*, it's not that simple. Aristotle clearly points this out early in his *Politics* when he makes the following paradoxical claim: 'we thus see that the city exists by nature (*phusis*) ...' (1.2.1253a25-b1).For Aristotle, there is something of *phusis* in human *nomos*, and there is

something of *nomos* in human *phusis*. In Aristotle's view societies are constructed by people, but it is perfectly natural for them to construct societies, the *Nichomachean Ethics* vii.1, 114a-15-34; *Politics* 1.2, 1253a 2-25.).

[17] Aristotle would argue that while Spike is correct to point out that the history of the world isn't people making friends, he does not have the whole truth. Conflict cannot simply be assigned to some *phusis* which is pure from all *nomos.* It is only human nature to construct, follow, interpret, apply and protect *nomoi*. Buffy is not a loner as a leader, because for human beings, standing outside the social group as an enemy is weakness. Buffy creatively takes up her position in society, using all her skills to make the best life that she can for herself, her family and her friends.Her fashion does not represent weakness, or the position of a powerless object either of male desire or of consumer marketing.Her fashion choices do not set her against her society; they position her firmly within society. Thus, how she dresses often signals her feelings relative to others. For example, in Season 7, where she is struggling with the increasingly uncomfortable position as leader of the potentials and is anxious not to be seen to be over-asserting her authority, she dresses in girly feminine tops that send out non-threatening messages. As she gradually distances herself from Faith in Season Three, her demure clothes and neat tailored coats reflect her alliance with social rules and mores. Finally, her fashion choices recognize that her power, and indeed the power of every person, derives not from some primal, savage, animal energy; rather it derives from our own constructive participation in the construction of human social life. We think this is nicely presented in the conclusion of "Restless" (4022):

Tara (speaking for the First Slayer): I am destruction. Absolute ... alone.

Buffy: The Slayer.

Tara (speaking for the First Slayer): The first.

Buffy: I am not alone.

Tara (speaking for the First Slayer): The Slayer does not walk in this world.

Buffy: I walk. I talk. I shop, I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out. And I don't sleep on a bed of bones.Now give me back my friends.

First Slayer: No ... friends! Just the kill. We ... are ... alone!

Buffy: That's it. I'm waking up. (They fight.) It's over.We don't do this any more. Enough!(Buffy wakes up, the First Slayer lands atop Buffy and starts stabbing her.) Are you quite finished? (First Slayer stops stabbing Buffy.) It's over, okay? I'm going to ignore you, and you're going to go away. You're really gonna have to get over the whole ... primal power

thing. You're NOT the source of me. Also, in terms of hair care, you really wanna say, what kind of impression am I making in the workplace?

Down in the dungarees

[18] Having suggested that Buffy's clothing reflects her position regarding leadership with respect to the distinctions between *phusis* and *nomos*, we want to argue that it also reflects the series' contribution to feminist debates about fashion, power and consumerism. In "Helpless" (3012) Buffy would appear to be removed from her sources of power and leadership. She is physically weak because she has received a drug that removes her slayer powers. The drug is an adrenaline inhibitor, which suggests that it is her personal power and drive, her *phusis,* which is under attack. She is also emotionally weak because she was hurt by her father, then betrayed by Giles. And she has been stripped of leadership because she has been manipulated, because she is a tool of The Council rather than an autonomous individual, let alone a leader and decision maker. She is also stripped of leadership because the trial she undergoes has to be faced alone.

[19] It is significant, then, that in this context, where she is not a leader and not powerful, she chooses to wear the stereotypical badge of the feminist –dungarees. It is worth considering the complex semiotics of the dungaree. These are difficult to unravel because they are overlaid with contradictory responses to their supposed impact. They carry most obviously signals of class and gender having a primary association with male working class clothing. They could be adopted as an indication of solidarity with the class struggle and also, because of their association with manual labour, as an appropriation of strength typically associated with men and a rejection of socially constructed feminine weakness. Their plainness offers a challenge to expectations that women should seek to be objects of desire for men. They are associated with feminism, whether or not feminists ever actually wore them. These might be considered the primary almost innocent connotations of these modes of attire. At the same time, as has often been noted, dungarees became a fashion item in themselves, one which accentuated rather than confined femininity. They could be used to emphasise the smallness of the woman wrapped in the big baggy male outfit, to provide a contrast that highlighted her feminine features, hair, hands, breasts, so that the effect is not gender neutral or masculine, but extremely feminine.

[20] There is an incident in "Helpless" (3012), before the final dungareed show down with Kralek, when Buffy, dressed in a demure white twin set and a red coat with a hood, is taunted in the street at night by a group of men, asking her for a lap dance. Stripped of her slayer powers, she cannot confront them, depriving the audience of the usual satisfaction of a wise-crack followed by violent revenge. Instead she has to pull her coat on further, almost as though she is hiding her femininity inside it, only to have it torn off by the escaped Kralek. The associations with Little

Red Riding Hood, the archetypal female victim, are clear. Immediately following this she takes to her dungarees, suggesting that it is only when she actually is weak that she rejects typical female fashions and their connotations of weakness. When she is powerful, she is able to transcend the interpretations placed on female fashion, such as weakness, sexual objectification and passivity.

[21] Of course the series frequently exploits the overturning of expectations created by girly fashions, from the opening sequence where Darla, dressed in neat skirt and blouse, devours her would be suitor, through all the scenes in which little blonde Buffy shocks yet another male/group of males who thought she was to be their victim. By fighting and winning as she does, in clothes that have been understood in terms of a kind of complicity between consumer culture and patriarchy, she reclaims those clothes and contributes to the re-appropriation of fashion identified by various post-modern feminist writers who have argued that women were agents rather than victims in their relationship with fashion, using style to reinvent themselves and forge a range of personae. Writers like McRobbie (1989, 2000) have argued that fashion choices can be understood less as indications of slavish adherence to the blandishments of big business and more as a kind of bricolage, through which women are able to produce meanings and express creativity.

Conclusion: Style Matters

[22] Fashion, particularly mainstream consumer fashion, is often regarded as trivial. However, as Jowett (2005) notes, Buffy's 'style conscious and "feminine" appearance has always been part of her appeal and viewers frequently comment on clothes and hairstyle in the series (p. 21). Early's (2002) essay on transgressive women warriors discusses the emergence of women like Xena, La Femme Nikita and Buffy, 'disarmingly recognizable women (who) battle evil on a daily basis and without much fanfare repeatedly save the world from untold horror' (¶ 1).Buffy's use of mainstream consumer fashion enhances this recognizability, in stark contrast to Xena in her battle gear. The importance the characters place on fashion can be seen in the final episode ("Chosen," 7022) where there are two references to shopping.During the pre-battle repartee we have this exchange:

Buffy:So what do you guys want to do tomorrow?

Willow:Nothing strenuous.

Xander:Well mini-golf is always the first thing that comes to mind.

Giles:I think we can do better than that.

Willow:There's an Agnes B in the new mall.

Xander:Good. I could use a few items.

Giles:Aren't we going to discuss this? Save the world and go to the mall?

Buffy:I'm having a wicked shoe craving.

(Discussion about a whole new pirate look for Xander)

Giles (to himself): The earth is definitely doomed.

[23] Later, following all the death and destruction and looking at the gaping hole that was Sunnydale, we have this exchange which is characteristic of the camp gravity applied to mainstream fashion and consumption.

Willow: We changed the world. I can feel them, Buffy. All over. Slayers are awakening everywhere.

Dawn: We'll have to find them.

Willow: We will.

Giles: Yes, because the mall was actually in Sunnydale, so there's no hope of going there tomorrow.

Dawn: We destroyed the mall? I fought on the wrong side

Xander: All those shops gone. The Gap, Starbucks, Toys R Us. Who will remember all those landmarks unless we tell the world of them?

[24] Although the fashion icon Cordelia is generally represented as shallow, Buffy shows at least as much interest in fashion in ways that could be read as indicative of a slavish mentality, rather than characteristic of leadership. Giles interpreted this initially on these lines in "Earshot" (3018), thinking "if a magazine told her to, she would wear cats strapped to her feet," but there is another way of looking at this. Buffy's interest in fashion and consumption is part of her engagement with a creative process of identity construction. The meaning of Buffy's outfits can only be understood contextually, in terms of her relation to those around her, her situation and the challenges she faces. Within this network she constructs the kind of leadership identity she wants to have. As learning to lead is challenging to her, and the meaning of leadership is not fixed, so she finds she can enjoy the various images offered by mainstream fashion to reflect a multi-faceted leadership identity, grounded in a concept of leadership that is simultaneously about *nomos*–her natural power as the Slayer--and *phusis*–her human relationship and responsibility as the Slayer.

*Editors' note: Whedon himself comments on the Gentlemen's suits, as quoted in Wilcox (2005); see pp. 151, 153, 156 on the 'monied male power structure.')

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