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"A Very Strong Urge to Hit You": Mimetic Violence and Scapegoating in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

[1] The episode "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," from Season Two of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2016), features a scene in which the usually mild-mannered Oz marches up to Xander and, with no apparent provocation, lands a solid punch on his jaw that sends him tumbling to the floor. A startled Xander asks, "What was *that* for?" "I was on the phone all night," Oz explains, "listening to Willow cry about *you*. Now, I don't know exactly what happened, but I was left with a very strong urge to hit you." We viewers, however, know exactly what has happened to cause both Oz's sudden transformation into a pugilist and a host of other bizarre character changes in this episode. Xander has recklessly cast a love spell that has gone awry so that now every female in Sunnydale, with the sole exception of Cordelia for whom the spell was intended, is in love with him. The victims of this spell are all pursuing Xander with a mad and accelerating intensity that steadily builds to an unrestrained spasm of violence when their amorous desires collide with each other and with Xander's own attempts to escape the consequences of his folly. Violence inevitably results whenever one of this legion of suitors encounters some obstacle in the path of desire, whether one of her many rivals or simply Xander himself turning her down. Either way such obstacles, rather than deterring the suitors, only fan the flames of their desire into a homicidal rage that will converge on the one who inspired them in the first place, poor jinxed Xander. What Oz does not know is that, like the entire female population of Sunnydale, he is another hapless victim of Xander's spell, swept up in the contagion of violence that it has inadvertently unleashed.

[2] It is the argument of this paper that the view of culture and human relations embedded in this episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* coincides with key elements of the theory of mimetic desire and human violence elaborated by philosopher, anthropologist and literary critic René Girard. In such works as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, Violence and the Sacred*, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* and *The Scapegoat*, Girard has argued that we may arrive at a nearly complete understanding of the origins and maintenance of the human social order through a careful analysis of the complex interactions between two readily-observed human phenomena: our tendency to covet what others have or what we believe they desire, and our propensity, both individually and collectively, to "scapegoat" or load the blame for our difficulties on the back of someone whose elimination we can represent to ourselves as the solution to all our woes. We have been impressed by the extent to which a number of pivotal *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episodes—not just "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" but this one with unmatched clarity—dramatically and metaphorically illustrate key elements of Girard's theory. To our knowledge, however, only two papers in the burgeoning body of critical literature on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have to date approached any aspect of the series from a Girardian perspective.[1] In our paper we will suggest that the fruitfulness of a Girardian reading of the Buffyverse extends to three areas. First, Girard's theory can help draw attention to some fundamental motifs in the series, particularly prominent in this episode but easily recognizable as recurrent themes throughout the

series. Secondly, certain religious implications of Girard's theory can help us make sense of an apparent incongruity in the series, reconciling its ostensible hostility to religion with its liberal borrowing of biblical themes. Finally, we will suggest that the spontaneous way one key and representative *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode dramatizes Girardian insights may help to validate Girard's ideas as more than just some philosopher's curious musings, but perhaps the stuff of reality, inasmuch as that reality appears refracted and revealed in the artistic dream of the Buffyverse.

"Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered": A Dramatic Case Study in Girard's Theory

[3] We see five key elements of Girard's theory dramatized in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered": (1) Desire as a "triangular" or mimetic phenomenon, (2) mimetic desire as the source of rivalry and violence, (3) scapegoating as a solution to the mimetic violence, both as a culture founding and culture maintaining "mechanism," (4) outside intervention as necessary to expose this scapegoat mechanism, and (5) the epistemic privilege of the victim. Let us take a look at each one of these in turn.

[4] *Desire as triangular or mimetic.* Contrary to romantic conceptions of desire as springing spontaneously from the deep and mysterious recesses of the subject, and contrary to classical theories that ascribe an innate desirability to certain objects, Girard describes desire as an essentially triangular or mimetic phenomenon in which the *subject's* desire for an *object* is typically aroused by the presence of a *mediator*, whose own desire (or even apparent desire) for that object creates and confirms its value in the eyes of the subject. The mediator may be someone who inhabits an entirely different plane of existence that never intersects with the subject's world, as when Don Quixote takes the desires of Amadis of Gaul as the model for his knightly vocation[2] or when, with significantly less noble intentions and results, advertisers attempt to generate desire for their products by bathing them in the glamour of the celebrities paid to endorse them. Even less salutary and more dangerous, from Girard's perspective, are those desires that imitate a model whose plane of existence overlaps with one's own, allowing for two desires, modeled after each other, to converge on a single object that only one can possess.[3] But regardless of the status or location of the model, triangular or mimetic desire is always a form of "bewitchment" in which we fall under spell of a desire not originally our own, one that safeguards itself against discovery by deluding us into believing that this desire originates wholly within ourselves or within some feature of the object that makes it inherently suitable for us.[4]

[5] In "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," a witch's love spell serves as the (quite appropriate) symbol for this mimetic bewitchment, but as if to emphasize the trope-like character of this spell, the early portions of the episode show all the dynamics of mimetic desire functioning quite naturally, with no need of supernatural assistance, between Xander and Cordelia. At this point in Season Two, their relationship is just beginning to struggle into the daylight of public acknowledgment from its secretive hormonally-charged origins. But we discover at the outset of the episode that Cordelia still needs her "models," Harmony and Co., to certify Xander as a worthwhile love object. They, however, effectively and brutally remove this possibility by

devaluing Xander and humiliating Cordelia when she tries to discuss plans for the upcoming Valentine's Day dance with them.

> **Cordelia**: Well, why didn't you call me back last night? We need to talk about our outfits for the dance. I'm gonna wear red and black, (points at Kate) so you need to switch.
>
> **Kate**: Red and black? Is that what Xander likes?
>
> **Cordelia**: (confused) Xander? What does he have to do with this?
>
> **Harmony**: Well, a girl wants to look good for her geek.
>
> **Cordelia**: Xander's just . . . .
>
> **Harmony**: (interrupts) When are you two gonna start wearing cute little matching outfits? 'Cause I'm planning to vomit. (to the others) Let's go.[5]

While the plot will later on invoke an actual witch's spells to create or remove desires, at this point in the episode, the purely social bewitchment of her friends is all that is necessary to override whatever genuine fondness Cordelia feels for Xander. As if to emphasize how completely mesmerized she is by this socially induced mimetic spell, Cordelia proceeds to dismiss Xander at the Valentine's Day dance as decisively and brutally (though with less intentional malice) as her friends. Xander is brought shatteringly down to earth as he presents Cordelia a beautiful heart-shaped necklace and pendant as a token of their relationship.

> **Xander**: I've been thinking a lot about us lately . . . the why and the wherefore. You know, once, twice, a kissy here, a kissy there. And you can chalk it all up to hormones. (Cordelia looks puzzled) And maybe that's all we have here. Tawdry teen lust. But maybe not. Maybe something in you sees something special inside me. (Cordelia looks down, then back up) And vice versa. I mean, I think I do. See something. So . . . (He pulls out the jewelry box and hands it to her. She takes it and looks up at him.)
>
> **Cordelia**: Xander . . . (Opens the box) Thank you. (Holds up the necklace and pendant) It's beautiful. (Exhales and looks at him) I wanna break up.
>
> **Xander**: (Looks at her in disbelief) Okay, not quite the reaction I was looking for.

Apologetically, Cordelia explains that they just "don't fit," the absence of any models to certify his desirability having overridden whatever "specialness" the non-bewitched parts of her may have seen in him.

[6] Cordelia's mimetically-induced rejection of Xander will turn her former suitor into an enemy intent on repaying the humiliation, but an understanding of the how and why of this process, as well as the massive violence and rivalry that take over the episode, must be informed by a discussion of the second of the five key elements of Girard's theory.

[7] *Mimetic desire as the source of rivalry and violence.* Cordelia is prone to mimetic desire in a way that makes her share her peers' aversions. But mimesis just as often causes us to want to acquire the same things our peers or other admired models possess or aspire toward. When two or more desires converge on a single object that only one person can possess, we have a recipe for acrimonious rivalries and bitter resentments that may, when sufficiently exacerbated, erupt into violence. In a classic double bind, the model of one's desire becomes the primary

obstacle to its fulfillment, which only enhances the prestige of the object and intensifies the desire to possess it. The model, however, takes this as a cue to cling to the object even more fiercely or, if he does not yet possess it, to redouble his efforts to acquire it. The result is a positive feedback loop in which the rival who thwarts my desire serves at the same time to enflame it, which in turn only throws kindling on the desire that thwarts mine.

[8] Since mimetic desire works like a spell that causes each of the rivals to mistake his desire for something wholly spontaneous and original, mimetic rivalry is ideal for fomenting the most violent hatreds and resentments. Although the desire of each rival is formed in dutiful obedience to the cues supplied by the other, it is hardly possible for either to avoid seeing the actions of his rival as anything but a wholly perverse and gratuitous will to frustrate him. Consequently, mimetic rivalry can easily escalate into violence, with the desired object retreating into the background or even entirely forgotten as the rivals become more and more obsessed with simply defeating each other.

[9] It is possible on occasion for the object and the model/obstacle to be one and the same, as with the vain coquette whose indifference to her suitor certifies her value in his eyes at the same time as it incites the most virulent resentment.[6] This appears to be what happens in Xander's case, as his desire for Cordelia cedes to a desire to repay the humiliation he's suffered due to her casual rejection of him and the mockery he must then endure from his schoolmates. So powerful and obsessive is his lust for vengeance that it swallows his considerable fund of human decency, leading him to blackmail Amy, under the threat to expose her as a witch, into concocting a love-potion that will make Cordelia fall in love with him. His motive for this despicable act is not to possess her but so that he—rather than Cordelia—may bask in the prestige of winning a victory in the game of love, as the one who "dumps" her instead of the one who gets dumped. Xander's answer to Amy's mystified question about his motives leaves no doubt that his need for prestige and power *over* Cordelia has completely swallowed up his desire *for* Cordelia.

> **Xander**: (chuckles) What do I want? I want some respect around here. I want, for once, to come out ahead. I want the Hellmouth to be working for me. You and me, Amy . . . (looks back at Cordelia sitting with Harmony now) we're gonna cast a little spell. . . .
>
> **Amy**: Well, then I don't get it. If you don't wanna be with her forever, then what's the point?
>
> **Xander**: The point is I want her to want me. Desperately. So I can break up with her and subject her to the same hell she's been puttin' me through.
>
> **Amy**: (turns and steps away) Oh, I don't know, Xander. (turns back) Intent has to be pure with love spells.
>
> **Xander**: Right. I intend revenge. Pure as the driven snow.

[10] Although up to this point the episode's presentation of mimetic desire and rivalry has not strayed much from prosaic reality, it offers a hermeneutical key for interpreting Amy's errant love spell, which leaves every Sunnydale female *except* Cordelia hungering for Xander, as a metaphor for mimetic desire and its consequences. Literalized metaphor is, after all, B*uffy the Vampire Slayer*'s stock in trade. "High school is Hell" in no small measure because it is a place where we are susceptible

to the contagion of mimetically induced desires and animosities to an almost diabolical degree. The mimetic propensities of youth can spread these contagions to such a bewildering extent that it can seem like bewitchment to any sane and sober observer, albeit not to the bewitched, who invariably is wholly convinced that his or her own desire is “the real thing.” An almost perfect illustration of this is the encounter between Jenny Calendar and Amy, now a victim of her own misfired spell, in the library, after Giles, angry at his discovery of what Xander has done, has ordered him from the precincts of the library.

> **Amy**: (looks up at Giles) Why did you send Xander away? (Giles puts his hands to his eyes in despair) He needs me.
>
> **Jenny**: (chortles) That's a laugh.
>
> **Amy**: (to Jenny) He loves me. We look into each other's souls.
>
> **Jenny**: No one can love two people at once. What *we* have is real.
>
> **Giles**: Instead of making me ill, why doesn't one of you try to help me?

Each woman is a pure mimetic double of the other while regarding herself as the only one possessing a "true" love for Xander. Neither is capable of listening to Giles’ uselessly reasonable claim that their identical emotions are “not love,” but “obsession. Selfish, banal obsession.” Each can only see the other's actions as a deliberate and wholly unwarranted attempt to frustrate her. Furthermore, just as Girard’s theory predicts, the mounting rivalry and resentment push the love object, Xander, into the background. An earlier encounter between Amy and Buffy illustrates this even more dramatically than the confrontation between Amy and Jenny:

> **Amy**: (appears behind them) Get away from him. (Buffy turns to her) He's mine.
>
> **Buffy**: (steps toward Amy) Oh, I don't think so. (looks back at him) Xander, tell her.
>
> **Xander**: What? I, uh...
>
> **Amy**: He doesn't have to say. (Buffy looks back at her) I know what his heart wants.
>
> **Buffy**: Funny, I know what your face wants. (She swings and punches Amy in the face.)

Amy’s even more violent retaliation (she turns Buffy into a rat) parallels the manner in which Xander’s own amorous interest in Cordelia had recently been elbowed out by his desire for revenge against his rival—*his* rival, of course, being Cordelia herself.

[11] *Scapegoating as the solution to mimetic violence*. Purely individual encounters between Xander and his would-be lovers soon give way to mob violence with Xander and Cordelia at its epicenter, illustrating yet another element of Girard’s thesis. The hostility generated by mimetic rivalries turns out to be every bit as mimetically contagious as their acquisitive desire. As the violence escalates, it also displays a tendency to widen as the mimetic process pulls others into its vortex. As the mob action in this episode veers out of control and Sunnydale civilization seems on the verge of complete collapse—for once, under the weight of its characters' own desires and not a demon-engineered apocalypse—we are offered a near perfect dramatization of Girard's understanding of the fragility of human culture under the pressures of mimetic rivalry and violence.

[12] Girard invites us to imagine a situation in which this process proceeds unchecked, a situation in which we possess neither instincts nor a system of jurisprudence strong enough to staunch the swelling tide of violence. It is a situation like that in which Girard believes our early hominid ancestors found themselves. In such a situation, the spreading and intensifying heat of mimetic violence will inevitably lead to a rapid meltdown of all cultural differences, with the paradoxical result that increasingly numerous and hostile rivals, each insisting on the superior righteousness of his own cause, become more and more indistinguishable as they reciprocate each other's hostile gestures. Mimetic desire ultimately tends toward the collapse of all those cultural differences—such as social hierarchies, chains of command and obedience, and the boundaries that mark off separate and distinct spheres of life and social roles—that under normal circumstances inhibit transgressive forms of mimesis in the interest of social order. It submerges them in the violent undifferentiation of a war of each against all.

[13] The intensifying heat of mimetic violence is well illustrated in this episode. Mobs of girls attack Cordelia or each other, leading to an explosion of mob violence. This violence both promotes and is fueled by a complete meltdown of the usual markers of difference that keep society from collapsing into undifferentiated incoherence. Jenny Calendar tosses aside her dignity and teaching office in order to fight schoolgirls for possession of Xander. More repulsively, Buffy's own mother seeks to seduce Xander after he and Cordelia have sought refuge in her house from the pursuing mob. Even Drusilla's vampire nature succumbs to the spell, and she abandons her proper role as killer and ally of Angelus in order to protect Xander from the former's attempt to destroy him. At the other end of the spectrum, the shy and wistful Willow attempts an aggressive seduction of Xander entirely out of keeping with her usual character.[7] Oz, the gentlest character in the series, is also caught up in this general meltdown and winds up attacking Xander, an action that seems to mystify equally both assailant and his victim. As the cycle of mimetic desire leading to mimetic rivalry, leading to violence, leading to a general meltdown continues at a feverish pitch, the distinctive identities of each of these characters become a prime casualty as they each increasingly become mere mimetic doubles of one another.

[14] Can anything staunch this tide of violent undifferentiation? According to Girard, the process of mimetic dissolution within a given community can be halted through an act of scapegoating, spontaneous or engineered, against a victim who is blamed for the disorder tearing the community apart and whose status is such that retaliatory violence against the "scapegoaters" is unlikely. Girard typically refers to this as the "scapegoat mechanism" to indicate its capacity to operate with the same automatic and unconscious efficacy of any blind mechanism, without any conscious guidance from rational agents. The scapegoat mechanism exploits the mimetic propensity of human beings, but in this case instead of imitating each other's acquisitive gestures, we imitate each other's accusative gestures. The gravitational pull of mimesis insures that eventually all fingers will be pointing in the same direction, singling out a culprit whom we can all agree to blame. But if, objectively speaking, no one is any more or less guilty for the disorder than anyone else, how can the community narrow the field and settle on a single individual or group to blame? Girard observes that as the community approaches near total cultural undifferentiation, any conspicuous difference can serve as a lightening rod to draw all the community's violence upon itself.

Predictably, then, it is Cordelia, the lone female resident of Sunnydale who remains immune to Amy's spell, who presents herself as the logical candidate for the office of scapegoat.

[15] While the women of Sunnydale are at increasingly violent odds with each other, they all unite in hostility against Cordelia, the woman who has harmed their beloved Xander. We see Cordelia's transformation from leading snob to lonely scapegoat in two telling instances. In the first, she is halted in the school corridor by the withering glare of Harmony and Co.

Cordelia: Ha. Very funny. What did I do now, wear red and purple together?

Harmony: You know what you did. Xander is wounded because of you. (They all walk past her in disgust. She turns around, and they face her when she speaks.)

Cordelia: Are you tripping? I thought you wanted me to break up with him!

Harmony: Only a sick pup would let Xander get away, no matter what her friends said.

Cordelia is singled out as the "sick pup" different from the healthy pack since she, formerly the only one who desired Xander, is now the only one who apparently does not. This mark of difference has potentially lethal consequences for her as it sets her up for the office of scapegoat, which she will unwillingly and uncomprehendingly assume soon after this public shunning. Later we see her closing her locker and starting down the corridor, only to encounter again a "posse" of her former friends, who have now grown even more agitated and violent than before.

Cordelia: Okay, what now? You don't like my locker combination?

Harmony: (hands on her hips) It's just not right. You never loved him. You just used him. You make me sick.

Cordelia: (sarcastically) Okay, Harmony, if you need to borrow my Midol, just ask.

As Harmony slaps Cordelia, triggering a violent mob assault, we may pause to briefly note the irony of Harmony's feeling sick at Cordelia's rejection of a boy who only two days earlier had made the same Harmony want to vomit. Then we might note the even more striking irony that the violent obsession with Xander that had been setting all of Sunnydale's females at odds with each other has suddenly become the thing that unites them as it polarizes around Cordelia, the one whom they can all agree to blame.

[16] What we are beginning to see in action is the validation of Girard's claim that while mimetic desire divides, scapegoating violence unites, turning the war of each against all into unanimity of all against one. The scapegoat is blamed for stirring up all the trouble in the community and—as if confirming that judgment—his destruction brings a catharsis leading to peace. Crucial to the success of this scapegoat mechanism is that the scapegoating community misconstrues what it is really going on and sincerely believes in the scapegoat's guilt. Of course, violent undifferentiation, objectively considered, makes everyone as culpable or innocent as anyone else, although everyone is far too blinded by rage and resentment to entertain the thought of either personal culpability or a universal innocence that leaves no one to blame. The scapegoat mechanism makes it possible for each to persist in his or her

rage-induced delusion while becoming completely reconciled to all—or nearly all—of his or her similarly deluded neighbors, with the price of this reconciliation borne by the scapegoat. Peace, no less than war, is a product of enchantment.

[17] We have seen this process of unification and cathartic violence beginning as Cordelia's friends slap her around. It will be completed through the somewhat different route by which Xander himself joins Cordelia in the role of a second scapegoat. As Cordelia is differentiated from everyone else as the only one *not* loving Xander, Xander himself carries the brand of difference as the one *everybody* loves. While his status is the polar opposite of Cordelia's, it makes him just as different and hence just as fatally eligible to join her in the role of scapegoat, the object of blame for all the frustrations of his pursuers. We see intimations of this in two menacing incidents that anticipate his full-fledged assumption of role of scapegoat.

[18] The first occurs in the library as Buffy (just before her confrontation with Amy turns her into a rat) attempts to seduce Xander and becomes extremely agitated at his rejection:

> **Buffy**: (starts to get upset) So you're saying this is all a game?
>
> **Xander**: A game? I . . . No!
>
> **Buffy**: (angry) You make me feel this way, and then you reject me? What am I, a toy?
>
> **Xander**: Buffy, please calm down.

Considering Buffy's powers and her current condition—in the grip of a spell that robs her of all reason and conscience— it is extremely fortunate for Xander that Amy arrives on the scene and turns her into a rat before she can turn him into the first human victim of her slayage!

[19] The second menacing incident occurs when Oz, not understanding the dynamics of mimetic desire—Why is Willow acting like this? Who is to blame?—enters the library and decks the astonished Xander. Oz seems as mystified as Xander at the "very strong urge" that has overruled his normally gentle nature and turned him into a mimetic machine duplicating everyone else's violent gestures. Without realizing it, Oz is the latest recruit into a scapegoating community that misconstrues the nature and meaning of its impulses of desire and violence and sincerely believes in the scapegoat's guilt.

[20] But Willow is the catalyst who triggers the process that transforms the rivalrous desire *for* Xander into a unanimous and cathartic discharge of violence *against* Xander. Her role as scapegoating trigger represents a triumph of poetic justice and psychological appropriateness. After all, she has genuinely desired Xander for years *sans* magic spells. Therefore, of all the women, her attempts to force him to love her are the most deeply rooted in reality. In addition to her love, her status as virgin and her nature as a shy self-conscious woman means that she stands to lose the most by the uncharacteristically blatant offer of her love to Xander.

[21] It therefore stands to reason that she would be the one whose feelings towards Xander take the most violent form after he has rejected her. Xander discovers this as he is rescuing Cordelia and is trying to escape out the school's front door. Willow meets him with a fire axe, a crowd of agitated women and a fierce determination to destroy him born of a grief and anger that he has never seen before.

Willow: I should've known I'd find you with her.

Xander: Will . . . Come on, you don't wanna hurt me.

Willow: Oh, no? You don't know how hard this is for me. I love you so much! I'd rather see you dead than with that bitch.

Willow 's attitude has clearly communicated itself to the mob behind her and they all advance towards Xander and Cordelia. Harmony and Co., emerging out the doors in hot pursuit of Cordelia and Xander, briefly act as Xander's defenders as a temporary outbreak of mimetic violence between rivals allows Xander and Cordelia to escape. But the scapegoating fever quickly melds the two mobs into one, as they take off in pursuit of their would-be victims. Xander and Cordelia flee to the fragile refuge of Buffy's house and are pursued by the mob into the basement, where it appears they will consummate their roles as sacrificial scapegoats. This violent catharsis should, according to Girard's theory, at last restore equilibrium to Sunnydale's addled social order.

[22] Before discussing why the episode does not actually proceed to this grim conclusion, we must present Girard's explanation of how the "victimage" mechanism is able to create or restore social equilibrium among mimetic, violence-prone humans. He theorizes that early hominid communities were either decimated by the ravages of mimetic violence or delivered through episodes of scapegoating. Scapegoating violence "works" to control mimetic violence whenever the memory of the cathartic effects of a particular episode are so profound that over a period of time the former scapegoat is apotheosized into a god and the lynching of the victim becomes memorialized in sacrificial rituals and other practices designed to create distinctions and taboos to help prevent the return of mimetic violence. Primitive religion, as well as every contemporary religion precisely to the extent that it retains elements of sacrificial practice and ideology, is a dim and distorted memory of the origins of human culture in scapegoating violence.

[23] *The need for outside intervention to bring the lie of scapegoating to light.* Why, then, doesn't the episode proceed to its natural "Girardian" conclusion of cathartic restoration of order through the elimination of the hapless Xander and Cordelia? It does not do so because of an action that appears wholly arbitrary but does in fact embody, at least symbolically, another key Girardian concept. Girard wonders how it is that human culture could ever break out of the mimetic entrapment which guarantees an eternally recurrent pattern in which violence alternately produces and then overthrows culture. This entrapment should, by its very nature, prevent the very possibility of human beings unmasking the scapegoat mechanism that founds their social order. The "spell" that produces the war of mimetic rivals and the peace of the scapegoat functions as a built-in protection against its own discovery, causing those whom it enchants to believe fiercely in the spontaneity of their desires and the guilt of the scapegoat. What could possibility strip them of this illusion?

[24] Because the mimetic spell disables our power to recognize it, Girard believes that nothing less than divine intervention could restore our sanity. This, for him, is not mere hyperbole. Girard is a Christian who believes he has discovered a revelation of the scapegoat mechanism in a number of biblical narratives that deconstruct the usual mythological depiction of criminal scapegoat and innocent community, thus disclosing the suppressed truth about the violent community and its arbitrarily chosen victim upon which these myths are founded. According to Girard,

biblical texts such as the Joseph cycle in the book of Genesis, the book of Job and, above all, the passion narratives in the Gospels establish the innocence of the scapegoat and reveal the untruth of the scapegoating community. Properly read and taken to heart by a community, these texts have the power to counter the spell of the scapegoat mechanism, which can function with full vigor only when it goes unrecognized. Of course, he also recognizes that biblical texts contain no shortage of narratives that conform in various degrees to the standard mythological storyline that underwrites scapegoating violence by assigning all guilt to the victim. As Girardian scholar Gil Bailie has noted, the Bible is a “text in travail” (133) in which violence-sanctifying myths vie for the last word with demythologizing narratives that take the side of the victim. [8] In addition, Girard acknowledges that the scapegoat mechanism achieves some degree of self-transparency in classical Greek tragedy and maybe in a few other texts that turn up outside the ambit of the biblical tradition. Nonetheless, the biblical narratives remain for him a set of singularly privileged sites of revelation.

[25] Understandably, those who do not share Girard’s belief that historical Christianity possesses a unique and unsurpassable revelatory power may be turned off by the religious exclusivism implicit in this claim, [9] but in our opinion this in no way compromises the tremendous value of his other insights. It does, however, leave us with the question of how the spell of the scapegoat mechanism gets broken in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered." Is it as arbitrary as the "backward mutters of disserving power" that Giles and Amy evoke to restore order by magic? In keeping with the trope-like character we detect in other magical actions in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* we prefer to discern a deeper process hinted at through the symbolism of magical reversal. These considerations bring us to the final element in Girard’s theory, one that he does not emphasize quite as much as the others, but that we regard as pivotal.

[26] *The "epistemic privilege" of the victim.* The victim, as the only one who knows his own innocence, is least likely to be taken in by the lie of the scapegoat mechanism. Thus truth—the revelation of mimetic desire leading to the scapegoat mechanism—can only be spoken from the position of the victim. The victim/revealer par excellence for Girard is Christ, who unmasks the scapegoat mechanism on the cross, speaking from "the position of a victim in the process of being expelled” (*Things Hidden* 216, 435). However, *any* victim can potentially exercise the position of truth-teller, providing his or her story can survive the unanimous and violent suppression that Girard argues invariably results when the many destroy the one. Against Girard’s privileging of biblical narratives, we would argue that the *Apology of Socrates* represents at least one extra-biblical example of a revelation offered from the standpoint of the victim. We also like to think that Cordelia’s “sheep” speech to Harmony at the conclusion of the episode represents another.

[27] Cordelia's status as scapegoat seems to have opened up her eyes to the truth of mimetic desire and given her some power to be an effective witness to it, as we see in the following exchange in the coda that follows the restoration of order. Xander has just collided with Harmony rounding a corner.

Harmony: Watch it!

Xander: Sorry.

Harmony: God! (looks him up and down) Y'know, I'm glad your mom stopped working at the drive-through long enough to

dress you. (to Cordelia) Oh, that reminds me. (Xander starts away) Did you see Jennifer's backpack? It is so a crying . . .

Cordelia: (interrupts) Harmony, shut up. (Xander looks back) Do you know what you are, Harmony? You're a sheep.

Harmony: I'm not a sheep.

Cordelia: You're a sheep. All you ever do is what everyone else does just so you can say you did it first. And here I am, scrambling for your approval, when I'm way cooler than you are 'cause I'm not a sheep. I do what I wanna do, and I wear what I wanna wear. And you know what? (Xander smiles) I'll date whoever the hell I wanna date. No matter how lame he is.

At the end of the episode, Cordelia seems to have gained a glimmering recognition of the spell of mimetic desire by which she was so enchanted at the episode's outset and from which she suffered so much scapegoating violence at its end. She is now, if somewhat haltingly, free from the spell—at least for the moment—although her initial burst of insight and courage is immediately followed by misgivings born of an awareness this freedom may come with a price. "Oh God, oh God what have I done!" she exclaims as she walks off with Xander. It is because she has spent time in the position of the victim that Cordelia comes to see the very real truth of the human condition.

[28] In the usual vampire-slaying teaser to "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," Buffy tells Xander, who has dared to compare the perils of dating to her occupation as a slayer, that "slaying is a tad more perilous than dating." The rest of the episode proves how wrong she is! Dating, as one of the principle arenas in which our mimetic proclivities display themselves in all their sordid glory, can be far more dangerous. As Giles puts it when he rebukes Xander, "Do you have any idea how serious this is? People under a love spell, Xander, are deadly. They lose all capacity for reason." If we substitute the phrase "mimetic desire" for "love spell," Giles has expressed exactly Girard's main point—one that the whole episode dramatizes.

The Fruitfulness of a Girardian Reading of the Buffyverse

[29] While the supernatural may drive the plots of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* we believe the lasting impact of this series derives from its painfully true-to-life dramatizations of human relations and cultural forces. We also believe that Girard's hypotheses are especially illuminating in showing how those forces function in the Buffyverse and that our enriched understanding of this imaginary world can help us gain deeper wisdom about the world beyond the series against which it enacts its artistic *mimesis*.

[30] First, Girard's work draws attention to—and provides an exceptionally clear and consistent framework for understanding—certain powerful and recurrent motifs that appear not only in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" but in many other episodes as well: the consistent failures of love, the menacing rivalries and outbreaks of violence, the apocalyptic note of cultural collapse, and the sadder-but-wiser view that victims are the only ones "truly in the know." These comprise the stuff of Girard's theory. It is precisely because Buffy's world is so Girardian that she has to "save the world. A lot" ("The Gift," 5022).

[31] Secondly, Girard's theory can help resolve an apparent inconsistency in the series' attitude toward religion. On the one hand, as Wendy Love Anderson has noted, "The category of religion is simultaneously a metaphor for human evil and a quasi-historical source *of* human evil throughout the Buffyverse" (216). From Order of Aurelius in Season One to the worshippers of Machida in "Reptile Boy" (2005) to the Vahrall demons who attempt to perform the Sacrifice of Three in "Doomed" (4011), it is significant that many of the series' most "religious" characters are demons and their acolytes seeking victims for their sacrificial cults. This is entirely consonant with Girard's interpretation of religion generally—and religious rituals especially—as disguised re-enactments of the original scapegoating violence that founds human culture. The series' ostensible hostility toward religion is understandable as a reaction against the violence and obfuscation of reality that Girard traces back to the very beginnings of religion as an historical phenomenon.

[32] On the other hand, despite his obvious fondness for lampooning the unsavory aspects of religion, series creator Joss Whedon has openly admitted what attentive viewers have known all along, viz., that "the Christian mythos has a powerful fascination to me, and it bleeds into my storytelling. Redemption, hope, purpose, santa [sic], these all are important to me, whether I believe in an afterlife or some universal structure or not." Of all the facets of the Christian mythos that may have bled into *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, none seem more significant to us than the theme of cruciform love to which Whedon continually returns. Buffy has repeatedly demonstrated her willingness to suffer and, if necessary, give her life to save her friends, her family and (last but not least) the world, a complete reversal of the scapegoat mechanism that saves the social order through the sacrifice of the vulnerable outsider. The gulf that separates this cruciform love from the sacrificial mentality of the scapegoat mechanism is on stark display in "The Gift" (5022), as Glory's sacrifice of Dawn, which threatens to unleash hell on earth, is thwarted by Buffy's selfless substitution of herself for the sacrificial victim, a gesture born out of her refusal to comply with the sacrificial drama this narcissistic hell-god has set in motion. The (literally) cruciform shape that Buffy's body assumes as she plunges from the tower, not to mention the epitaph that appears at the end of this episode ("She saved the world. A lot."), leaves little doubt that she is being presented as a Christ-figure. A similar Christ-like gesture occurs in "Grave" (6022), the finale to the next season. Armed with nothing but his undying love and referring to himself tellingly as a "carpenter," Xander stands between dark Willow and the ruins of a satanic temple through which she has been channeling her power in order to destroy the world. Refusing (this time) to play the mimetic game of answering aggression with anger and hatred, he allows her to wound him repeatedly, crying "I love you" each time in response until she collapses grieving in his arms. The recurrence of this motif of cruciform love as a response to sacrificial religion and mimetic violence suggests to us that the series does not exhibit hostility to religion *per se*, but only to those expressions of religion premised on scapegoating.

[33] Finally, just as Girard's hypothesis may help to unravel an apparent contradiction in the Buffyverse, the artistic integrity and power of that imaginary world might also be proffered as a piece of evidence for the truth of Girard's theoretical insights in our real world, at least for those who find merit in Aristotle's interpretation of literary art as *mimesis*—an imitation of reality that highlights those features that are

most universal (16)—and are open to Kafka's claim that "the terror of art [is that] the dream reveals the reality" (1640). If the grotesque and magical world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* exposes inauthentic love, violent rivalries and scapegoating as the products of mimetic enchantment, we may well suspect that this artistic "dream" serves, like Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, as a grotesquely accurate picture of the real world. Girard himself has spoken of the contribution of literature in stimulating the development of his own theories. He first presented his mimetic theory in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, a study of Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Dostoevsky and Proust, arguing that each of these writers had succeeded in portraying the psychology of mimetic desire in a unique way. Subsequent studies of a diverse assortment of authors, including Dante, Shakespeare and Camus, have helped Girard build his case that the great writers have all arrived at fundamentally similar conclusions about the nature of human desire, the enormous variety of ways they had of expressing their converging insights constituting a mountain of circumstantial evidence for their validity. In a recent interview, he responded to a question about the status of this evidence:

> Writers are always different in their coping with the mimetic mechanism. . . . This variety posits a fascinating case for the mimetic theory: if writers are all so different, and yet the same fundamental principles can be identified in their works, then this could be considered as strong evidence of the viability of the mimetic hypothesis. (Girard *Evolution* 164)

Considerations advanced in this essay make a strong case for adding "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," along with other portions of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* canon, to the list of works that independently confirm the power and menace of mimetic desire in human experience.

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Notes

[1] "Why We All Want Spike: Gothic Sexuality in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," by Bron Bateman, unpublished paper presented at the "Staking a Claim: Exploring the Global Reach of Buffy" conference held at the University of South Australia, Adelaide , Australia in July, 2003, and "The (Un)importance of Being Xander: Mimetic Triangles and Unrecognized Desire," by Carrie Wadman, unpublished paper presented at WisCon 29, Madison, Wisconsin, May, 2005. Wadman accounts for Xander's unreasonable hatred of Angel in Season Two (before Angel goes evil) as an expression of his resentment of Angel's refusal to acknow ledge him as worthy to enter into a mimetic competition for Buffy." Bateman describes the rivalry between Spike and Angel for Drusilla as a Girardian mimetic triangle because, in accordance with Girard's thesis, the "rivalry determines its object, rather than the object creating the rivalry." This characterization of the interpersonal dynamic between Spike and Angel strikes us as right on the money. But the mimetic rivalry between Spike and Angel, fueled by each one's fascination with his rival and not merely the accidental convergence of their desires on the same object, is not restricted to their competition for Drusilla. If their rivalry is indeed mimetic, it must also be portable from one object to another—and this is precisely what happens as their rivalry perpetually resurrects itself with regard to their mutual love for Buffy, their prospects of fulfilling the Shanshu Prophecy and, more generally, the respective merits and costs of each one's soul-having. One of our students, Melissa L. Cummings, has done an impressive job of identifying and exploring these issues in her paper, "Spike vs. Angel: The Fight for Heart, Soul, and Destiny: A Look at Mimetic Rivalry in the Buffyverse."

[2] The question posed in the title of Jana Riess's book *What Would Buffy Do? The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) exemplifies this "Quixotic" practice of modeling one's desires

and choices after an admired mediator who occupies a superior plane of existence that does not intersect with one's own. Girard's technical term for this is "external mediation," which he contrasts with "internal mediation" in which subject and mediator occupy the same plane and thus constantly risk becoming rivals.

[3] See the discussion of Spike and Angel in footnote one for an example of the sort of rivalry that can stem from what Girard calls "internal mediation" of desire.

[4] See *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*, by Jean-Michel Oughourlian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) for an eye-opening account of how a wide variety of phenomena traditionally associated with witchcraft and enchantment can be seen as dissembled operations of mimesis. In his book on Shakespeare, *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), Girard himself treats the spells cast by the fairies in "Midsummer Night's Dream" as metaphors for the bewitching effects of mimetic desire. Our reading of "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" employs a similar hermeneutical, treating "spell" as a trope for mimetic desire.

[5] All dialogue and stage directions are from www.buffyworld.com. We have occasionally inserted a parenthesis or other minor mechanical corrections when it seemed necessary to increase clarity.

[6] The possibility of the model and object of desire coinciding is illustrated with malicious wittiness in Dorothy Parker's comment on the autobiography of a prominent Englishwoman: "The affair between Margot Asquith and Margot Asquith will live as one of the prettiest romances of literature."

[7] In light of what happens later on in the series, especially in Season Six, this statement may need to be qualified. Willow 's actions under the spell of mimetic violence may foreshadow her later actions when she is controlling the spells instead of being merely victimized by one.

[8] See his *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), pp 133-152.

[9] In the interests of full disclosure, we should acknowledge that the authors of this paper are of two minds on this issue.