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Girl on Girl Politics: Willow / Tara and New Approaches to Media Fandom

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(1) In case you didn't already know, television's first long-standing lesbian relationship came to an end on May 7, 2002. Willow, the powerful witch and best friend of Buffy on the popular television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, had just reconciled with Tara, her girlfriend of over two years, from whom she had been separated for several months. Near the end of season 6, in an episode called "Seeing Red", the next episode after their reconciliation, Tara was hit by a stray bullet shot by a misogynist maniac trying to kill Buffy. The character died. Willow, driven to near-madness by grief, then attempts to destroy the world. (Tune in to see the world saved; season 6 now available on DVD.)

(2) If you *didn't* know, then you might be an occasional watcher of the show but you certainly couldn't be called a fan in either the casual or the academic sense. When I say "fan", I mean fan in the academic sense first recognized over ten years ago in two ground-breaking books, Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* and Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women*. Bacon-Smith's work was an ethnographic study of the widespread community of fans revealing a huge subculture of enthusiastic media consumers with their own customs and history. Jenkins' book studied the ways in which those fans repurposed and recycled the materials they consumed for their own cultural purposes, demonstrating that they were about as far from mindless in their consumption of media materials as they could possibly be. Along with the work of Constance Penley, these studies form the basis of academic understanding of fandom, which has not been pursued as vigorously as the topic perhaps deserves. Matt Hills' new book *Fan Cultures* is perhaps the only extensive new book to look at fandom itself, and Hills shows his experience with media studies in a way that previous work, based either on anthropology or on literary studies, does not. Hills' approach keeps the door open on fan studies, and the Internet is changing the subject of both media studies and fan studies at lightning speed. The instant communication between fans and between fans and creators through the technology of the Internet, and fan culture's reception to, examination of, and even anger toward the popular culture that it consumes requires an equally nimble analysis.

(3) Tara's death, for instance, resulted in one of the great fan outcries of recent memory, ranking up there with the defection of Michael Shanks from *Stargate SG-1* and the premature cancellation of *Farscape*.[1] Several web boards and thousands of fans mounted an organized protest (many fans also protested individually); the creators of the television show responded through several venues; and the debate was covered or at least mentioned in many non-fan news venues such as Salon.com and National Public Radio.

(4) Such a high-profile incident is a great test case of how far the academic studies of fandom have progressed or not progressed over the last decade. Since 1992 and the publication of the two great books on fandom, the world-wide web has become a tremendous medium for communication, synchronous and asynchronous, among fans but also between fans and the producers of the shows they care about, as well as a means of distributing fan-produced materials including bootleg copies of television and movies. Over the same span of years, the entertainment market has become increasingly globalized, with American television dominating the international market like the proverbial Colossus. As I will explain, the case of Tara's death reveals some interesting, perhaps disturbing trends in the academic analysis of fandom, as well as new political opportunities for fandom itself as an institution that is always interacting with media production and not just consuming media product.

(5) Fans are prone to complain about what they don't like. What was curious about this fan uproar was its political nature. The character who had just died her violent, senseless death was one half of the first long-running lesbian relationship on television. Tara had been Willow's girlfriend since the middle of season 4. The relationship had had two years to build a vocal and admiring following. The fans who complained about Tara's death were often part of Internet groups (webboards and the like) organized specifically around the delights of watching a happy lesbian relationship on television: they were Willow/Tara fans.

(6) The convention of indicating a relationship between two media characters with a slash originated with fans who rebuilt the close relationships they saw on television into specifically romantic and/or sexual ones. The classic example, examined in more detail in Bacon-Smith's book, was Kirk/Spock fandom, in which stories or videos or art was produced in which Kirk's and Spock's relationship was taken to a different level.

(7) As such, classic slash fandom (as such fandoms are called) is almost always antithetical to the actual material of the (usually television) media product. Almost every popular television show and many movies which gain significant fan followings develop their own particular slash fandoms, wherein the dramatic impetus of narratives in which characters are placed in intensely emotional situations plays out as specifically romantic or sexual.[2] As such, the fans are specifically creating materials

that the media creators *would not* create. On television, Starsky and Hutch never fell in love or had sex. In slash fandom, such a relationship would be the whole point of the story, video, or art being created. Slash fandom is subversive and media creators tend to hate it, if they are even aware of it.

(8) The storyline of Willow's and Tara's romance on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* started out, as all good romances do, as little more than meaningful looks and pregnant pauses. Such material is the bread & butter of slash fandom. Imagine the fans' delight, then, when series creator Joss Whedon actually brought their imagination to light - when subtext, as they say, became text. In defiance of all television precedent, Willow and Tara got to have their romantic and lesbian relationship on screen.

(9) The term Willow/Tara, then, already encapsulates the peculiarly close relationship between Joss Whedon and the fans of *Buffy*. Rather than loathing what the fans would make of his show, Whedon runs with it. In fact, he doesn't just run with it, he rolls around in it and flings it around. Whedon, a self-proclaimed fan of movies and television himself, knows what fans actually do, and does it himself in his role as a media producer -- an unprecedentedly delightful situation for those of us in the fan community. Willow/Tara, particularly as orthographically indicated, should be an underground fan community. Instead, it's a major plotline on a broadcast television show. What bliss.

(10) Willow/Tara fandom has some other peculiar aspects. While slash fandom regarding male characters is predominantly made up of straight women (see Bacon-Smith and any other article on slash fandom,) a lot of the established Willow/Tara fan groups are just jam-packed with people who are themselves happy lesbians or people who support happy lesbians, one of the largest being the Kittenboard, a web board that is demonstrably supportive of and interested in lesbian romance in general as well as Willow/Tara in specific. These webboards were the source of much of the organized fan outcry against Tara's death in "Seeing Red." Since much of the delight of Willow/Tara fandom lies in seeing a relationship previously verboten by television actually brought to life on the screen for the first time, and because Whedon and *Buffy* producer Marti Noxon had had extensive contact with the fan community for years and worked very hard to bring this openly lesbian relationship to television, one can imagine that the fan protest was very much along the lines of "Hey, you took our happy lesbians away." How could it have been otherwise, given this peculiar and unprecedented situation? It was the first time, perhaps, that an otherwise fringe group of fans got exactly what they wanted on the screen. They not only saw the love story they imagined, the producers assured them that it was real, that they were doing it on purpose. In these circumstances, it's not hard to sympathize with the pain and anger of fans who've just lost what was for many of them the most important thing media producers had ever given them.

(11) However, at the same time, fan protest also did contain large pieces of "Oy, mate, taking away our happy lesbians seems a bit anti-lesbian to us." Because of the peculiar situation given to these fans, where subtext became text, the destruction of the characters - the cessation of the text - was interpreted by some fans as a rather nuclear strike against the text and subtext, against Willow/Tara itself. Perhaps the best summary of this facet of the fan protest can be found in Robert Black's online essay "It's Not Homophobia, But That Doesn't Make It Right."[3] It might not be homophobia to kill a lesbian character off, Black argues, but to depict a lesbian's death by violence as taking place in the bedroom where she had just been making love to her lover - in, incidentally, the first lesbian love scene permitted by the network - ain't cricket. This *image*, Black argues, can be homophobic, even if the storyline, or even the intent, is not. Tara lying dead, and Willow thus being inspired to run amok and try to destroy the world, are images that reinforce rather than subvert or escape the dead evil lesbian clichés that have run rampant throughout popular media (and at least, I would add, since the publication of the horrifyingly influential novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928). Black's essay appeared at a number of locations online, including the Kittenboard, where it was part of an extensive discussion of the death of Tara and a concerted protest to both Joss Whedon, the show's creator and executive producer, and to his company Mutant Enemy.

(12) In other words, along with the kneejerk reactions there was a politically motivated and literarily sophisticated discussion which gave rise to nuanced essays like Black's as well as an organized campaign of protest.

(13) However, both media and academic reporting of the fan protest can unfortunately only be described as universally dismissive. For instance, Stephanie Zacharek's article "Willow, Destroyer of Worlds" for Salon.com[4], summarized the fan reaction thusly:

(14) Some fans in the lesbian community have asserted that by killing off one-half of the show's lesbian couple -- Tara, the girlfriend of the very mild-mannered, very brainy but also, we now know, very powerful Willow -- Whedon destroyed one of the few positive lesbian role models on television. Thus, they argue, it follows that he's most certainly anti-gay. (Zacharek)

(15) Zacharek confirmed to me in a personal email that this was just her general impression from checking in a at a few web boards. Okay, I thought, I can see that. Zacharek's article, after all, is really a quick television review, not an in-depth piece, although she intended it as an explanation of the quality of *Buffy* as a television show, even as (she used the word) art, and Zacharek provides an interesting close reading of Dark Willow that is not to be missed by people interested in the show. Nonetheless, Zacharek's reading is not a correct summary of Black's position or the position in general of the webboards, though it may be a correct reading of individual fan reactions.

(16) Zacharek's article was published immediately following the conclusion of season 6, after all. At that time, fan reaction was still coalescing, and anger may have outweighed analysis. We should look to other writers for further investigation of the fan reaction to Tara's death. People who are not writing for the fast-paced world of media commentary have enough time to get the nuances closer to right. And yet, as another for instance, in her essay for the new edition of *Reading the Vampire Slayer: The Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel*, Roz Kaveney, a literary scholar, has this to say about the fans' reaction:[5]

(17) Their argument is, briefly, that in a heteronormative society, the default setting in heterosexist writing is to punish lesbianism with suicide and/or madness and that the show compromised with this cliché. But this is nonsense - Tara is murdered by Warren, who is not even shooting at her, and Willow's madness is an excess of legitimate grief. The show references the cliché and subverts it, proving that it is possible for a queer character to die in popular culture without that death being the surrogate vengeance of the straight world. (Kaveney 2003, excerpt from 2004 book)

(18) I want to be sympathetic to Kaveney, who after all brings us a fun book about our beloved show. But I have to question her, again, very quick dismissive gesture here. Why is Tara's death less violent or senseless simply because Warren isn't aiming at her? How does that make Tara's death *not* "the surrogate vengeance of the straight world"? Why is Willow's madness "okay" because it comes on as an excess of legitimate grief? Grief happens over and over to the characters of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Giles finds his lady love murdered in his bed; Buffy has to *kill* her beloved herself, for goodness' sake, yet neither descends into madness and tries to destroy the world. Only Willow, the lesbian, goes this route. Kaveney might be right, but she provides us with no explanation as to why we should go along with her interpretation, even in the longer excerpt with which she provided me and in the context of which she was eager that her remarks be taken.

(19) Unlike fan studies, Buffy studies are booming. There are three large books of interpretive essays and the online journal *Slayage.* And yet in none of these places do we find any treatment either of Tara's death as a text to be interpreted or of the fan reaction to it. Books take years to publish Ð but even now, more than two years after the broadcast of "Seeing Red", there are no serious analyses of Tara's death available either in books or in journals. In the three popular published books of interpretation on *Buffy*, I can find only one extended treatment of Tara's death, by Kevin Andrew Murphy in his "Unseen Horrors & Shadowy Manipulations." The book in which it is published, *Seven Seasons of Buffy: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discuss Their Favorite Television Show*, does not purport to be an academic treatment, and Murphy's "essay" is comprised largely of dark hints that the fan reaction to Tara's death was and is a far worse form of censorship than any other

experienced by Whedon and crew in the course of producing the show. Says Murphy, "Critics and self-proclaimed morality police wield much power, but sometimes the most vehement would-be censors are the fans themselves." (144)[6]

(20) The piece demonstrates a kind of schizophrenia regarding the issue of Tara's death. Yes, says Murphy, we have to take it seriously, it was important. But at the same time, Murphy wants to grind axes in regard to the fan community that disagreed with him. Murphy, who participated himself in the Kittenboard -- though he himself does not reveal his connection to it nor the reason for his rancor towards it -- quotes the Kittenboard's summary of the "Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché":

(21) What specifically is the "Dead/Evil Lesbian Clichés"? That all lesbians and, specifically lesbian couples, can never find happiness and always meet tragic ends. One of the most repeated scenarios is that one lesbian dies horribly and her lover goes crazy, killing others or herself. (Sound familiar?)

(22) Murphy immediately says that "The parallels to Tara's death and Willow's subsequent murderous rampage at thee end of season six are obvious." Murphy seems to posit as a given the premise that there are a few too many uncomfortable analogies between the dead/evil lesbian cliché and the death of Tara. But his analysis immediately devolves into a tirade against the censorship of the Kittenboard members against "divergent opinions." (147) What could be analysis transmutes into a warning about the evils of censorship in general and about censorship of the people who make the show in particular.

(23) Murphy's anti-censorship warning strikes a chord with most of us. It's not hard to convince most of us - at least left-leaning types like me - that censorship is wrong, and that telling an artist what to do is reprehensible. No ethic, we feel, is worth replacing the basic right of artistic freedom. We feel comfortable dismissing the fans' complaint in this instance because we understand that writers need to do whatever they feel is best for the art they are creating. And Joss Whedon, creator of the show and its primary creative force, has framed the dispute in those terms. Murphy quotes Whedon's own posting to the Bronze, a web board for general discussion of the show:

(24) I killed Tara. Some of you may have been hurt by that. It is very unlikely it was more painful to you than it was to me. I couldn't even discuss it in story meetings without getting upset, physically. Which is why I knew it was the right thing to do. Because stories, as I have so often said, are not about what we WANT. And I knew some people would be angry with me for destroying the only gay couple on the show; but the idea that I COULDN'T kill Tara because she was gay is as offensive to me as the idea that I DID kill her because she was gay. (Murphy 149)

(25) These words of Whedon's have been reproduced all over the net and form the crux of Whedon's own anti-censorship stance. He's trying to write good stories, that's his point. He can't let political considerations override what he perceives the need of the story to be. He's repeated this

in several formats, including an NPR radio interview on November 8, 2002 where, when questioned about the deaths of both Tara and Joyce Summers in season six, he said that if his watchers don't have a strong reaction to a character's death, then he's killed the wrong person. ("Joss Whedon")

(26) Whedon's stance is clear. He's a writer trying to tell a good story. He and his staff have long had positive relationships with the gay community, and he has been upfront about his determination to create a positive lesbian storyline for Willow, as well as about his own gay godfather and the lesbian mothers of Marti Noxon (Noxon was in charge of production on *Buffy* while Whedon managed a television empire that included *Angel* and *Firefly)*. (Mangels) Whedon's (and Noxon's) commitment to airing lesbian content has been widely reported in many interviews and on many websites; says Black, "In other interviews and on the Bronze Posting Board, Joss talked about the objections the WB executives had to the Willow/Tara kiss in the episode, "The Body." He boasted that he had threatened to walk out if the WB didn't let him keep the kiss in the episode." Whedon comes off as just this guy, writing a good show, committed to some gay-friendly storylines - in large part because that's what he is: a good guy, writing a good show, committed to some gay-friendly storylines. He represents himself as a creator, and a creator can't be censored and shouldn't be censored. This is hard to disagree with. We, the readers of these brief treatments of the Tara's death sequence, want to identify with Whedon and protect him from the mean fans who are criticizing his creative output. *Even fans* may well be inclined to view the situation from this viewpoint, dividing the fan base along the lines of people who understand and sympathize with the poor producer, and people who just "don't get it", who politicize everything fun and ruin it for those "other" fans.

(27) In this way, the media and academic writers are creating an us/them dichotomy that includes right-thinking fans but excludes the ones silly enough or evil enough to try to actually influence what the producer is doing when he produces popular television. By classifying the show as "art" (Zacharek) and Whedon as the persecuted artist, these writers and viewers create an "us" that is opposed to the bourgeois consumer, the slack-jawed TV viewer who just wants what she wants and who can't understand that her desires or political leanings are getting in the way of great art. Silly people, wanting to see more happy lesbians on television. Can't they see that Whedon is telling a *story*?

(28) This maneuver appropriates for the "us" side a certain cultural power that builds on that described by Matt Hills in his book *Fan Cultures*:

(29) Fans may secure a form of cultural power by opposing themselves to the bad subject of 'the consumer'. Academics may well construct their identities along this same axis of othering, meaning that in this case both

fans and academics may, regardless of other cultural differences be linked through their *shared* marginalisation of 'the consumer' as Other. (44)

(30) The fan who "gets" that it's silly to complain about the death of a beloved lesbian character simply because its treatment reflects certain unfortunate similarities with heterosexist depictions of lesbian characters throughout the history of television, movies and literature may be an academic, a media writer, or a "lay" fan, but at least they aren't the slack-jawed consumers who think they can order a "Happy Lesbian" storyline the way they order a Happy Meal. What's interesting in this comparison is that the people who "get it", both fan and academic, here are aligned with the *producer* against the 'consumer' as Other.

(31) It is so easy to identify with this stance, and so simple to agree that censorship or any form of artistic control is bad, that the entire issue of Tara's death and its relationship to the history of lesbian treatments in the popular media has gone completely unaddressed. What's tragic about Murphy's essay is not that it's so bad Ð and it is *shockingly* bad, an unsupported personal diatribe that bears little resemblance to a logical argument Ð but that it's the only full-length treatment about Tara's death, certainly a major plot point, in any of the scholarly collections published as books or in *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*. Ben Varkentine, who reviewed the book in which Murphy's essay appeared for the online journal *Ink19.com*, actually put on a journalist's hat to explain Murphy's bile toward the Kittenboard and the interpersonal connections that led to the essay - a job of self-reporting Murphy might have done in an ideal world. Yet no other writer, in the popular media or in academia, has come forward to try to discuss the controversy of Tara's death and its interpretation. This dead lesbian deserves more ink, and it is not fascist to say so.

(32) Fortunately, we are not required to frame the argument along the us/them lines discussed above, and the argument could benefit from some re-framing. For instance, politically motivated attempts to influence the content of art are not new nor are they necessarily fascist. Television genre shows have a tradition of fan activism, but so does television in general. When the three broadcast networks provided a political bottleneck controlling the content of television programming,

(33) A landmark U.S. Court of Appeals decision in 1964 gave public interest groups the right to participate directly in FCC policymaking. For the first time since commercial broadcasting began in the 1920s, a legal and organizational support system began to develop that encouraged less powerful groups, particularly minorities and women, to lobby actively on their own behalf to change media content. (Cantor 167)

(34) The American public owns the airwaves over which programs are broadcast. The finite nature of capital and the structural limitations to access to broadcasting mandate a public interest in what is broadcast.

Programming will always be limited, and because it makes use of public assets like the airwaves, the public has a reasonable vested interest in what is broadcast.

(35) This legislation led to many organized efforts to improve the depiction of women and people of color on television. Muriel Goldman Cantor, a social scientist who has been studying audiencemaking for decades, outlines some of these efforts made by public groups. These efforts can include boycotts, lobbies of the FCC (for instance, to deny renewal of stations' licenses), Congress or even the White House, and even plain old conversations.

(36) Conservative groups employ the same methods to put pressure on creators and broadcasters regarding the content of their shows, but we audiences may forget that the same tactics can be and have been deployed by the left. There is no natural tendency of media to evolve towards a more liberated point of view. The success of consumer advocate lobbying of any sort is still in debate, and Cantor concludes that audiences as market segments have more effect on producers than audiences as cultural politicians. The primary concern of broadcasters is money. Both right and left consumer advocate groups can try to influence programming by pointing out the benefits of their point of view in regards to the broadcasters' pocketbook. Gay and African-American groups, Cantor says, are most likely to "gain the attention of producers when their demands were not incompatible with the television industry's pursuit of its markets." (Cantor 168)

(37) The gay audience segment has been a topic for discussion among advertisers for at least ten years.[7] It is identifiable and marketable. Whedon's own remarks, published in magazines like *Advocate*, serve in one way as goodwill advertising to this desirable market segment.

(38) So both as a group interested in the cultural products of its own nation and a potential audience segment for advertisers, gays and lesbians may expect to be marketed to, and more importantly, have a right to agitate for programming that they feel represents them, as an underrepresented minority, in a better light. There is nothing particularly sinister in the public taking a hand in determining what gets put on television; they are only one voice, after all, among the voices of all the production companies (who control all the investment capital), the broadcasters (who control all the means of distribution), and the creative staff (who control the creation of all the content).

(39) In his book *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity*, Nicholas Garnham argues from the intersection of the fields of media studies, philosophy, and history that the media are, after all, social institutions and our interpretation of them must necessarily be tied to our beliefs about what society is for. If we believe in the freedom of individuals, we must necessarily be interested in whether the functioning of the media contributes to that freedom or not. The ways in which freedom may be

helped or hindered by the media are far from simple and far from clear. We tend to frame the questions in terms of our own underlying assumptions about history and the way the world works.

(40) Let's remember for the moment that public activism concerning television content is not inherently evil censorship, but rather a public right. We can believe in individual freedom, and still believe that individuals and groups may wish to exert control over media production and broadcast in order to increase the freedom of society, not reduce it. To start from this simple premise opens up new interpretive possibilities in regard to the question of Tara's death. From the standpoint of the politically motivated consumer who is also a citizen with legal interest in content of broadcast media, we can analyze the business aspects of Tara's death as a turn in the creative storyline, as well as its artistic representation in the show.

(41) Joss Whedon, for instance, is a businessman, a producer, as well as a creative writer. He was clever enough to sell three different shows to three different networks at various times. And he is no virgin when it comes to outside pressure to change the content of his shows; he has indicated in several interviews that the writers removed the Doublemeat Palace, a terrifying fast food place where Buffy had a job during part of season six, because of pressure from fast food advertisers.[8]

(42) Well, okay. That's the reality of television production; it's a business, and if Joss gave up on Doublemeat, he did keep working on showing the world a lesbian kiss. Whedon, after all, is simply claiming artistic freedom: he has the right to show a lesbian kiss, he has the right to show a lesbian death. No one can blame him for giving in to advertiser pressure on an essentially unimportant issue as long as he stuck to his guns on the important ones, right? Yes, he had his lesbian plotline, and his lesbian kiss. If he deemed Tara's death, and the particular manner of that death, to be an artistically necessary followup to that lesbian love story, how can we question it?

(43) Well, let's look at the money. While it may be true in some unprovable aesthetic sense that Tara's death was necessary - even that this version of her death was necessary - from a purely business perspective, it is also true that the death of Tara and the storyline it launched - Willow attempting to destroy the world - improved ratings. Fans tend to think of "ratings" as scatological topics not to be discussed at the dinner table and not without washing your hands afterwards, but again, television broadcasting is a business, and Whedon is very successful at it. He clearly planned the sixth season arc to involve a long exploration of Willow's "addiction" to magic (Kaveney's article deals with this in more depth) capped by the Tara death/ Willow madness story. Between fifth and sixth seasons, the show switched from the WB to UPN - and the fifth season ended with the death of Buffy, the title character.

Whedon, who like all good television producers airs his most earth-shattering dramatic episodes during sweeps months and season's ends and beginnings, was certainly aware that UPN was giving him an awful lot of money in order to establish a beachhead in the 18-34 demographic that UPN wanted to be known for among advertisers. UPN was fronting 2.2 million dollars per episode, more than twice the 1 million that the WB was paying per episode. (Fitzgerald) Whedon also needed to bring over as many viewers as possible from the WB and find new ones.

(44) "Seeing Red", the episode in which Tara was shot, was not the season finale. Rather, there were three hours following it - broadcast May 14, and a two-hour finale broadcast May 21 - in which Willow's story was presented. The ratings history looks like this:[9]

(45)

Title	Airdate	Number in top 100	Neilsen Share
"Seeing Red"	May 7, 2002	93	2.7
"Villains"	May 14, 2002	75	3.2
"Two to Go"	May 21, 2002	75	3.3
"Grave"	May 21, 2002	75	3.3
"Lessons"	September 24, 2002	83	3.1

(46) In fact, the ratings over the two-part season finale ranged from 3.1 from the first half hour to 3.4 for the second, third, and fourth half hours.

(47) In other words, while *Herizons* reported that *Buffy's* viewership had dropped over the summer between season 6 and season 7, reflecting fans' displeasure with the death of Tara (Mitchell), in fact viewership picked up for the final three hours of season 6, from dismal 1.8 and 1.3 ratings for April reruns[10] to 3.3, actually 3.4 for the last hour of the season, an improvement with a significant carryover into "Lessons", the season premiere of season 7. Moreover, while for "Seeing Red" *Buffy* was far from the top-rated UPN show in the top Nielsen 100, the only UPN show that outrated it for the season 7 premiere was the *WWE Smackdown!*, the wrestling juggernaut that forms the cornerstone of the UPN audience.

(48) Ratings are never just ratings. The producers and broadcasters ask not just how many people are watching, but how many in which desirable market segments are watching. This can lead to endless wrangling over whether a show's viewership is up or down if the object of the conversation is not predefined. The writers at www.dykesvision.com, for instance, quote an interview with producer Jane Espenson from The Succubus Club[11] webboard, in their comparison of quotes from writers and producers regarding Tara's death:

(49) C: People want to know, the backlash, they are going to be tuning out.
J: People always say they are not going to watch anymore and our numbers stay the same.
C: But the numbers are down this year.
J: Yeah, but our boy numbers are up. [12]

(50) Whether or not Tara's death was a successful dramatic product is only definable, then, when one takes into account the market segment one is trying to reach.

(51) It's dramatic to see a character central to the show die. Highly-rated shows tease audiences with this possibility all the time. A closer

examination of Whedon's self-reported reasoning for choosing *this* character to die is below. But for the moment, let's just recognize that complete stagnancy produces no drama, and that without drama there is no reason for any audience of any sort to tune in to the show.

(52) Whedon needed something as dramatic as the death of a major character to drive his transition from the end of season 6 to the beginning of season 7. He decided that Tara had to die because no other reason would be powerful enough to drive Willow to the extreme where she would try to destroy the world and we would realize once and for all how very powerful a witch Willow is - and how very much she loved Tara. The business decisions and the artistic decisions are very much intertwined here. But nothing in this scenario, from either a business or an artistic point of view, mandates exactly that Tara's death had to be played out in exactly the way that it was. Fans might have had to put up with the death of a popular character, maybe even Tara, for the good of the show both as a business and as an art form. It doesn't necessarily follow that they had to put up with this particular death for this particular lesbian presented in this particular way.

(53) The tension between what fans want (in our sense here of "fans") and what the larger audience wants (with all the connotations of "wider advertising market" that "larger audience" should imply) is, and perhaps must necessarily be, constant. As Matt Hills points out in *Fan Cultures*,

(54) In short, capitulating to the fans' agenda as a target market ('empowering' the fans) potentially spells the end of the text which has inspired their very fandom, since the isolation of the fan audience from any wider coalition audience effectively terminates any economic viability for the text beyond its fan-ghetto of 'preaching to the converted'. (38)

(55) What Whedon doesn't articulate, possibly because it is simply second nature to him as a working television producer, is that the "demands of the story" are very closely related to the demands of a mass audience. The death of Tara was not just *artistically* necessary; it drove a ratings spike that his show needed. The relationship of advertising - sales - to art is usually beneath academics, since, as Garnham describes, we tend to think of media as either always already emancipatory or always already tools of oppression. But in this situation we have a tangible example of the interrelationship of art to sales that seems to beg for further study.

(56) It seems clear that Whedon's decision to kill Tara off was not *simply* mandated by his artistic conviction that it was what the story required. It removed an actor whose storyline was, for all intents and purposes, finished. It spiked the show's ratings. It capped a lesbian plotline that he clearly felt strongly about, and freed up screen time to spend on other plotlines, newer plotlines, of potentially great interest to new viewers and to the *wider audience*. These are all concerns related to the business of television creation that may have previously overshadowed

the specific artistic interpretation of Tara's death as a dramatic plot point for the series' creators even as they were creating.

(57) And external interpreters must provide a more specific artistic interpretation. Whedon, while gay friendly, is neither a political activist nor a literary scholar. He has told *Advocate* that Willow is definitely gay now, no going back to men at all, but did not correct the Fresh Air interviewer on NPR when "bisexual" Willow is mentioned. He knows, better than anyone, what a controversy he has created, but for public purposes he frames it always as a dramatic demand of the text:

(58) "I killed her because I wanted to explore the dark side of Willow, and I needed to justify that," he says. "It may be fine on another show for people just to break up, but we're dealing with heavier, more iconic, scarier storybook stuff. The downside of that is, when you kill a character like Tara, statistically speaking, [lesbians] are underrepresented, and so people have a legitimate reason to say, 'It's not the same.' (Mangels)

(59) But Whedon doesn't have the distance from his own shows to analyze what exactly isn't the same, or why it isn't the same. Let's take him at his word: that he wanted to explore the dark side of Willow, that his is a show where people die, that to *not* kill Tara just because she was half of broadcast television's only lesbian couple would be discriminatory in its own right.

(60) Perhaps Whedon didn't notice that Tara was the only extended significant other he has ever killed on any of his shows. Miss Calendar in season 2 came closest; but while she was a love interest for Giles, they had dated only briefly (making her death all the more tragic, for what was lost and never realized,) and Miss Calendar appeared, at any rate, only over about a season (late season 1 into the first two-thirds of season 2).[13] On *Angel*, Fred was recently killed by a demon taking over her body after apparently a few happy dates with Wesley, though Wesley had loved her unrequited for years ("A Hole in the World"). Tara was Willow's love interest for almost two and a half seasons - even if one takes into account that Tara and Willow were separated for part of season 6, this is a significant investment into a character. Miss Calendar also dies with her neck broken and is found by Giles, arranged on his bed, covered with roses - very Gothic, very dramatic, also very clean. Tara's blood spatters over Willow's shirt and face as they are standing in the bedroom they shared for months, next to the bed where they had very recently made love. Tara dies in Willow's arms. Willow beseeches the unseen powers that she can call upon to return Tara - they will not. There is no return for Tara. Riley, Anya, Oz -- all other boyfriends or girlfriends of the Scooby Gang (the show's central characters) are allowed to walk away from their relationships. While Anya ultimately dies in the series' finale, there's very little dramatic payoff from this - its implications cannot be explored, nor can they drive ratings, as it's the last show of the series. The "death" of Fred in *Angel* may prove to be another exception to this rule ("A Hole in the World", aired Feb. 25, 2004) but doesn't change the fact that in the

vast majority of cases, lovers persist. Fred dies but Amy Acker remains on the show; in an interesting way, something of Fred also remains. Angel is killed Ð but he is returned to the show. Angel even receives his own spinoff show Ð to which *Spike* is returned after *he* dies on *Buffy*. Even most one-time dates, such as Buffy's in "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" and Giles' in "Hush", tend to escape alive. **[Editors' note: See the section titled "The Little Joe Phenomenon" in Wilcox, "'Who Died and Made Her the Boss?' Patterns of Morality in *Buffy"* in *Fighting the Forces.*]**

(61) This seems to take some of the bite out of Marti Noxon's self-defense wherein she, like Whedon, said that it was offensive to think they should treat some characters differently from the way they would treat other characters simply because they were gay. Says Noxon,

(62) We never thought about the fact that these characters were gay when we were deciding what their fate was going to be. They've been happy and together for longer than almost any couple on our show. In some ways I think it's kind of insulting to the gay community to suggest that we can't do to the gay characters on the show what we would do to anybody else. (Mangels)
In fact, they did to the gay characters what they had never done to anybody else.

(63) Tara was also the only character portrayed by an actor who appeared over several seasons and yet never appeared in the credits. Whedon has said this was due to simple business, hinting that Benson's agent never managed to successfully negotiate her into the credit sequence. But this seems disingenuous, given that Benson *was* included in the credits - once, for "Seeing Red", the episode where her character was shot and killed. If this was meant to be a friendly salute to the exiting actress, it was a peculiar and unfunny one; a number of fans felt it to be simply cruel.

(64) It's clear to any long-term fan of the show that Joss as a writer gets attached to certain actors and not to others. Alexis Denisof, who was meant to be a short-term addition for part of third season, returned as a headliner (in the credits) on the spinoff *Angel*, and Whedon admitted frequently that this was primarily because he likes Denisof - Denisof makes him laugh. James Marsters, who departed at the end of season 2, returns in season 4 also because Whedon simply likes Marsters -- and the expansion of Marsters' character Spike into Buffy's love interest in seasons 6 and 7 provide a great deal of the fodder academics apparently *do* like to discuss: articles on the S&M aspects of their relationship, among others, proliferate.

(65) From an artistic standpoint, Whedon and Noxon's need to tell lesbian love stories, it appears, was also over. While Willow previously enjoyed lengthy courtships from both Oz and Tara, Kennedy, her love

interest for seventh season, represented at best a truncated storyline. It could be said that time demands caused at least part of this, but the treatment of Kennedy was also very odd given Willow's history as a character - and Whedon prides himself on giving his characters memories and having them grow through experience. In Willow's relationships with both Oz and Tara, Willow did some pursuing but was also pursued - in fact, courted. In season 2, Oz delivers possibly the world's most romantic speech ever purported to come out of the mouth of a teenager, explaining how time stops when he dreams of kissing her. In season 4, Tara, a woman of few words, turned innuendo into plotline with a simple but also romantic speech: "I am, you know." Willow: "What?" Tara: "Yours."

(66) Kennedy, on the other hand, gets Willow's attention by asking her how long she, Willow, has been gay, or rather how long she's known that she enjoys having sex with women. Kennedy has *no* courting technique - she announces at one point that she's "pretty much a brat", used to "getting what she wants" - and this appears peculiar in a storyline that supposedly includes a now more-adult Willow. If this is what grown-up romance entails, give me the teenage kind.

(67) Meanwhile, nothing written or said by any of the producers actually addresses the primary complaint of the organized politicized protest: that the death of Tara represented yet another example of the tired dead/crazed lesbian cliché. In fact, in hindsight, one of the producers has even admitted that, looking back on it, the specific representation of Tara's death - killed by a stray bullet, her blood graphically spattered onto her lover just before she dies in Willow's arms, inches from the bed where they had very recently been making love, thus causing Willow to go almost instantly insane and pursue a plot of immediate revenge and ultimately to destroy the world (the connection between the revenge and the world-destruction is tenuous at best) - the similarity between this plot and the repeated clichés is unfortunate. Even the producers may admit this, glancingly, and very much in retrospect. Espenson said in her May 22, 2002 Succubus Club interview, "It is very possible that we did a bad thing. And I don't want to completely exonerate us . . . it is possible." And producer David Fury's quote, also from the Succubus Club (interview May 15, 2002) is preserved at www.dykesvision.com.

(69) Not about killing Tara, but pushing Willow over the edge. In retrospect, I can see the cliché. That was not our intent, we wanted to show them together and happy. We dramatized them being back together, it created the impression in a lot of people's minds that the event of her death was linked to them having sex. I do understand it, I say, oh yeah. It was not intended, we make mistakes.

(70) Even the producers, in other words, recognize that while the death of a major character may have been required, while even Tara's death may have been required, for both business and artistic reasons, this particular implementation of it, dramatically presented, was unfortunately

in line with the "evil/dead lesbian cliché" fans complained about. Again, I don't wish to recap Black's essay here, but his points have validity, and when connected through the larger realm of twentieth-century representations of lesbianism - like *The Well of Loneliness* or Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* - they simply gain in strength. It isn't a math equation where Whedon and company's commitment to the positive portrayal of a lesbian relationship on television is cancelled out or overshadowed by the lapse of that portrayal into negative clichés at its conclusion. It is a more complex relationship but one that deserves attention. As Robert Black so aptly put it, "It's not homophobia, but that doesn't make it right."

(71) It is peculiar, then, that this situation, which seems to call so clearly for a closer reading by practitioners of literary or media studies has gone so ignored. The willingness of media analysis, both popular and academic, to skim past these questions demonstrates a tremendous blind spot that appears to be aided by the alignment of academics and commentators with media producers in the sort of "us/them" dichotomy described by Hills - exactly the sort of "us/them" dichotomy that, in other contexts, Whedon and Mutant Enemy are so good at overcoming. The very existence of Willow/Tara, as previously discussed, melts the "us/them" boundary between producers and consumer-fans. No wonder the fans had such a negative reaction to the re-construction of that us/them boundary.

(72) One positive aspect of the controversy demonstrates the way in which fandom, now connected through the Internet to itself and to the show's creators, has truly created a new form of politicized involvement in broadcast television to try to transcend that us/them boundary. At every step of the way, Buffy's creative staff saw and responded to fan reaction online in a number of forums. In many instances, quotes presented here from more official media channels (news and radio interviews) were developed from or expanded upon in discussions the creative staff had with fans in many online locations.

(73) This type of community interaction significantly changes previously accepted producer/fan dynamics. It is specifically against the type of fan reinvention represented by the slash tradition in the first place, and a reversal of the type of re-purposing of cultural materials that Henry Jenkins discussed in his 1992 book and continues to correctly describe as the primary machinery of fan-produced art. (2000) In effect, giving fans to some extent what they wanted - changing subtext into text - Whedon and his crew admitted their own fannishness, and in continuing to discuss what they created, to the extent that they were willing to discuss what they created, they blurred the line between creator and consumer in a way that was unprecedented. The truly revolutionary acts of the production staff were not in those moments when they insisted on their artistic freedom to do what they wanted; they were in the moments when they understood the desire of the fan communities and purposefully fueled their fires while maintaining an economically viable, indeed a good, product. In these moments they proved that Hills' observation need not

always be true, that to 'empower' the fans need not collapse the general market for good drama.

(74) This type of interaction characterizes Whedon and his crew as the type of producers who do not look down on the consumers of their work. Statistically, these types of producers are rare. In Cantor's research, she says that for her book *The Hollywood TV Producer (1971/1987)* she wanted "to learn how much creative autonomy producers and other creators have within the organizational, economic, and political contexts of their work and, second, to describe what [she has] called elsewhere the "negotiated struggle"É, the process that producers and writers go through to get "their" content to an audience." (160)

(75) Through interviews of 59 producers, Cantor discovered them to be largely divided between the (larger) group that had a "low opinion of their audiences' intelligence and taste." This group feels that they are designing for a lowbrow mass audience that would not appreciate the kinds of materials that they themselves appreciate. But a few other producers felt the opposite. "They thought that they were the audience and, if the program appealed to them, it would appeal to others as well." (160)

(76) This smaller group of producers was comprised of the type of people who read letters, who were interested in the opinions of engaged viewers. Typically, says Cantor, producers are interested in engaged viewers' opinions when the show is in trouble. This makes sense, as those are the moments when the producers are floundering and eager for outside guidance. The interested viewership forms a sort of counterbalance to ratings. When ratings are low, producers become invested in the interested viewership; when ratings are high, individual or group direct voices tend to be ignored.

(77) Joss Whedon and his production group demonstrate that they are interested in both. While they would be foolish to ignore ratings, the existence of all the articles quoted here indicate that Whedon, Noxon, and other producers/writers were willing, even eager, to discuss the controversy of Tara's death, not just in broadcast media, but on web boards and with the fans, and not because the show was floundering, but because they were sincerely interested. Whedon is very clearly a producer in the smaller group, the guy who thinks of himself as the audience. He has said in various interviews that he is in love with all his characters ("Joss Whedon"), and his shows demonstrate time and time again that essentially, he is us. All fans of his work have had the experience of shouting at the television, to have, in the next second, one of the characters say exactly what we had shouted at them to say. He is on the same wavelength as his audience; he does not intend to dumb things down for them. This makes the treatment of lesbians on his show(s) even more interesting and ought to cause us to subject them to even more study; we know he really wants us to have meaty material to chew on, but not all of it expresses his conscious goals.

(78) But even more importantly, the actions of Whedon and his team have led to the development of a genuinely new form of virtual literary community. By engaging with fans and the media, Whedon's actions as much as his work provide a new and rich arena for the consumption and digestion of his product, enabled by the electronic communications tools of television (one to many) as well as the Internet (many to many, or sometimes one to one). The controversy over Tara's death, the reaction of the fans and the reaction of Whedon and his crew represent a cycle of communication that is perhaps unprecedented.[14]

(79) What is sad is that these truly new developments have been largely ignored by the press, both popular and academic. A too-ready reaction to any fan activism as silly, or worse, fascist, destroys our opportunity to investigate the really new relationships between producers, fans, and consumers that await us. If Tara had to die, surely her death is worth serious attention.

NOTES

[1] I say "recent" to distinguish it from fan uprisings of the more distant past, as in the reaction to the cancellation of the original Star Trek.

[2] Fandom, and slash fandom, is not limited only to so-called "genre" shows or movies these days; the popular television shows 24 and the various incarnations of Law & Order, for instance, have their own fandoms - and indeed their own slash fandoms.

[3] http://www.xtreme-gaming.com/theotherside/homophobia.html

[4] http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/feature/2002/05/22/buffy/index.html

[5] In fall 2003 Roz Kaveney was kind enough to share an excerpt from her essay in the second edition of the book, which was released in March of 2004.

[6] The third major book on Buffy, besides Kaveney's and this one, is Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, editors of the online journal Slayage.

[7] See, for instance, articles such as Gunn, Eileen P. "Merchandising arrives at new comfort level." Advertising Age, 71.26 (June 19, 2000): 60; Benezra, Karen; Ebenkamp, Becky. "Advertisees Anonymous." Brandweek, 41.11 (March 13, 2000): 24; Webster, Nancy Coltun. "Playing to gay segments opens door to marketers." Advertising Age, 65.23 (May 30, 1994): 5-6; Hudis, Mark. "Major advertisers devise new products for gay consumers." MediaWeek, 4.1 (Jan 2, 1994): 2.

[8] This is mentioned in the May 16, 2003 "Readers' Opinions" column of the New York Times, but has been repeated in any number of other articles with Joss (such as Sci Fi Wire, June 30, 2002. http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue270/news.html), and is no secret.

[9] Nielsen ratings and top 100 numbers culled from Slayernews.com but confirmed in Daily Variety in Rick KissellÕs articles, listed in bibliography (except for the Sept. rating).

[10]Rick Kissell, ÒNBC, CBS sweep into victoriesÓ, Daily Variety; 4/24/2002, 275:39, p13.

[11] They misattribute this to the "Succumbus Club", but it is in fact a webboard called the Succubus Club, at http://www.thesuccubusclub.com.

[12] An audio recording of Espenson's VIP interview is available at http://www.kitis.net/thesuccubusclub/SuccubusClub_020522_JaneEspenson.mp3

[13] Recently, Mutant Enemy has topped itself in this annoying fashion: after seasons of Wesley's unrequited love for Fred on the ME show Angel, Wesley and Fred get a happy couple of days together, then Fred is killed by an ancient demon who takes over her body, theoretically annihilating her soul in the process. Wesley and Fred get an agonizing death scene, even more protracted than Willow's and Tara's, with the dramatic followup that the actress who played Fred, Amy Acker, now gets to play a demon, and the actor who plays Wesley, Alexis Denisof, gets the dramatic payoff of playing the lover left to face it.

[14] Except that Susan Merritt and Christopher Heyn have now demonstrated to me that similar sorts of interactive discussions also happened during the course of the television show La Femme Nikita. Clearly, there is plenty of material here for fan studies to tackle, particularly in the area of the effect of the Internet on producer/fan dynamics.

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