Lewis Call

"Sounds Like Kinky Business to Me":

Subtextual and Textual Representations of Erotic Power in the Buffyverse

[1] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* have done a great deal to promote tolerance of alternative sexualities. The two programs are especially well known for their positive depictions of gay and lesbian sexuality. However, *Buffy* and *Angel* have also brought about another intriguing revolution in the representation of unorthodox sexual practices. Throughout the twelve seasons which comprise the Buffyverse narrative, *Buffy* and *Angel* have consistently provided positive portrayals of sadomasochism (S/M) and erotic power exchange. In the early seasons these representations were, of necessity, largely subtextual. As the two shows progressed, however, they began to provide bolder, more explicit depictions of S/M. Thus the Buffyverse's discourse of erotic power gradually moved out of the subtextual and into the realm of the textual. As representations of erotic power exchange became more open and explicit at the textual level, these representations became increasingly available to the Buffyverse's audience. In the later seasons of *Buffy* and *Angel*, the two programs did not merely depict S/M, but actually presented it as an ethical, egalitarian way in which participants might negotiate the power relations which are an inevitable part of their lives. *Buffy* and *Angel* brought S/M out of the closet and normalized it. The two programs thus offered their audiences a positive and practical model of erotic power exchange. The Buffyverse has already secured for itself a prominent place in the history of narrative television. By endorsing the ethical exchange of erotic power, *Buffy* and *Angel* may earn an important place in the history of sexuality as well.

[2] Few television shows are as fascinated with their own subtexts as *Buffy* and *Angel*. Both shows feature a frequently flagrant disregard for their own master narratives. "Storyteller" (B7016), for example, emphasizes the perspective of a character who would be considered minor on most programs, geeky reformed "super villain" Andrew. "The Girl in Question" (A5020) sends Angel and Spike to Italy, ostensibly on a quest for Buffy, but quite obviously for the real purpose of permitting the homoerotic relationship between the two male vampires to eclipse their mutual obsession with Buffy (who, like a proper fetish object, is much discussed but does not appear in the episode). Both shows also have a deep and abiding interest in saying those things which cannot be said with words. Thus in "Hush" (B4010), the characters must find ways to express themselves in the absence of spoken language, while in "Once More, with Feeling" (B6007), they can express their deepest feelings—but only in song. Series creator Joss Whedon seems determined to make use of every possible form of non-linguistic communication including, remarkably, ballet (see "Waiting in the Wings," A3013). Since spoken dialogue is the

main form of textuality in narrative television, the effect of these experiments is to foreground such normally subtextual elements as gesture, facial expression, color, editing cuts and (of course!) music and choreography. (But then, Giles warned us way back in Season Two that the subtext is rapidly becoming the text, “Ted,” B2011.)

[3] As several critics have noted, *Buffy* and *Angel* consistently use their subtexts to speak about marginalized sexualities—a strategy which would certainly seem to make sense, given the censorship regime which dominates Anglo-American network television. Subtextual representations of erotic power exchange appear with particular frequency on both programs. Justine Larbalestier has recently observed that "for obvious (American prime-time TV) reasons," *Buffy* stays away from explicit depictions of S/M, and "instead there are gestures of deviance, props (chains, leather etc.) and behaviours that suggest these activities" (211). A receptive audience can use these gestures to create erotically radical readings of the program which would dismay television censors (and perhaps even the show's creators). Esther Saxey has argued persuasively that "the moments of kink in *Buffy* function for a gleeful audience in similar ways to the queer recognition moments" (203). Here we should understand "kink" to mean those theories and practices which sanction the consensual exchange of erotic power. This would include the practices of dominance and submission (D/S), bondage and discipline (B/D), and sadomasochism (S/M). For Saxey, *Buffy*'s "moments of kink" permit an audience of viewers who might be sympathetic to kink to ratify the existence of that powerful alternative sexuality. Saxey is right to emphasize the importance of *Buffy*'s kinky moments, and she is also right to compare these to "queer recognition moments." In general terms, "queer" refers to those readings and representations which challenge our culture's dominant heteronormative logic. When discussing early season *Buffy*'s subtextual kink in particular, it becomes necessary to use "queer" as a verb. As Wendy Pearson has observed, when we queer certain texts, we "recognize within the texts the traces of an alternative or dissident sexual subjectivity that may be revealed through close and careful reading" (10). Particularly in *Buffy*'s early seasons, the signifiers of kink were frequently present but rarely discussed. A kinky interpretation of *Buffy* was therefore available mainly to those who were familiar with such readings in advance. In order to access that interpretation, it was necessary to queer the text; i.e., bring out the primarily subtextual elements of kink which were implicit in it.

[4] This strategy—making kink available to those "in the know" by creating moments when the kinky reading becomes possible—is also evident in early seasons of *Angel*. Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery have recently noted that *Angel* "often uses the queer text method of frequent textual games with the characters' sexual and gender roles—especially for Angel himself" (228). The program plays similar games with other characters as well. Stan Beeler observes that the figure of Lorne, Angel's flamboyant anagogic demon, "is a strategy for allowing the representation

of the marginal to appear in mainstream forms of discourse; forms which would not normally tolerate the representation of gay men without recourse to camp humour" (89). (As Lorne said to the Groosalug, "Well, aren't you just sneaky with the subtext?" “Benediction,” A3021). Similarly, in both *Buffy* and *Angel*, a consistent commitment to erotic subtext in general and kinky subtext in particular permits the expression of ideas about erotic power which would be difficult to express explicitly on network television. In her excellent essay, "A Vampire is Being Beaten: DeSade Through the Looking Glass in *Buffy* and *Angel*," Jenny Alexander describes what she calls the "canonical subtext" of the Buffyverse:

> In the kinky register of the Buffyverse canon the show's queer and feminist sensibilities stage and eroticise the bodies of the tortured and dominated as almost exclusively male, whilst positioning participating women almost exclusively on top. . . . This canonical subtext, which plays with the eroticism of the dominatrix and her male submissive at the juncture of a shifting late twentieth century gender, sex and sexuality matrix, provides the psycho-geographical ground on which the edifice of Buffyverse kink-fic is erected. (9)

[5] I want to endorse, challenge and build upon Alexander's argument in several ways. First, I wish to argue that kink is present in the Buffyverse not only at the subtextual level (the level at which, as Alexander and Saxey have convincingly shown, the slash fan fic community has clearly gained access to that universe), but also at the level of the text itself. Second, I argue that as the two series progress, subtextual kinky gestures are increasingly supplemented, and eventually replaced, by explicit textual statements and discussions about kink. There is an increasing normalization of kink as the Buffyverse develops, particularly on *Angel*. By the final season of that series, kink was out of the closet, and could joke about itself as such. "So tell me. . .why do they call you Spanky?" Angel asks a mystic as he surveys the man's rather extensive collection of paddles and slappers (“Conviction,” A5001). (Although Angel's back is to the camera in this shot, one assumes that he says this with a queer, rather than straight, face, particularly in light of the fact that Angel concludes the scene by announcing proudly that he has "no problem spanking men.") The history of kink in the Buffyverse thus recapitulates the history of queer. Initially only cautious subtextual readings were possible. Over time, however, the subterranean discourse has become increasingly normalized and has even become incorporated into the dominant discourse, to a certain extent. (In the case of the queer discourse, this is illustrated by the popularity of programs such as *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *The L-Word*.) This historical process eventually leads to the creation of a limited but definite space in which alternatives to the heteronormative may be discussed openly. In *Buffy* and *Angel*, the critique of heteronormativity takes the form of an especially effective two-pronged attack. The Buffyverse's queer discourse undermines the *hetero*, while that universe's kinky discourse subverts the *normative*.

[6] So, what historical moment do *Buffy* and *Angel* occupy? Clearly, this is a matter of some importance to queer theory. It is also a crucial question for what I call *kink theory* (i.e., the theoretical discourse surrounding the consensual exchange of erotic power). Jenny Alexander offers us an intriguing historical reading. She argues compellingly for a historical narrative which positions Angelus as a creation of Sade's eighteenth century, and Spike as a creation of Masoch's nineteenth. In Alexander's "shifting late twentieth century gender, sex and sexuality matrix" (9), it is important that the "Sadeian patriarchal past," in which male characters dominate women, appears only in flashbacks (18). Within such a matrix—at the historical moment when it became possible, finally, to develop an effective critique of patriarchy--the figure of the male masochist was clearly crucial. However, both *Buffy* and *Angel* extend into the early twenty-first century. In the rapidly shifting world of contemporary erotic politics, these few years make a crucial difference. Laura Diehl hits the mark when she observes that:

> queer and feminist sex radicalism emphasizes roles in sexuality that are infinitely exchangeable and never align statically with gender (i.e. male sadism and female masochism). These erotics are embraced by the figure of the vampire, whose desire is ungendered and free-floating, a force that has no sense of man/woman, in/out, top/bottom binarisms." (47)

What *Buffy* and *Angel* occupy, then, is a very postmodern, early twenty-first century moment, in which there is no dominant gender identity and no privileged position within the structure of erotic power. Within this moment, males and females can experience sadism and masochism, as well as dominance and submission, and the positions are always reversible. Perhaps we can call it the Age of the Switch. And while Diehl is right to say that the vampire embraces this remarkably free-form eroticism, vampires aren't privileged either. In the Buffyverse, erotic power is equally available to humans.

[7] Indeed, the Buffyverse promotes a philosophy which understands power to be an inevitable part of all erotic relationships. Certainly every major relationship on *Buffy* and *Angel* partakes of such power: Buffy/Spike, Spike/Angel, Xander/Anya, Wes/Lilah. What's more, both programs sanction, at the subtextual and textual levels, those relationships which acknowledge the inevitability of power and strive to negotiate its expression in ethical ways. Power, in these relationships, is understood in Foucaultian terms: it is everywhere, which creates a paradoxical condition of perfect freedom, since power flows through the hands of the dominated as well as through those of the dominatrix, and since the relations of power are reversible at any time. The Buffyverse is truly subversive, because it articulates a philosophy of kink which holds that categories of dominance and submission, sadism and masochism exist as possibilities within any relationship[1], and because it encourages the exploration of those categories through the consensual, negotiated exchange of erotic power. There is thus an ethics of kink in the

Buffyverse, and it is not one which pleases the guardians of mainstream "vanilla" culture, for it rejects the non-consensual power exchange which is such a common feature of patriarchal society's vanilla relationships, and advocates kink as an alternative. Small wonder, then, that the BBC decided to "vanillafy" *Buffy* for its British audience.[2] And yet by doing so, Britain's television censors denied *Buffy*'s British audience the ethical option of kink. It is clear that this is a political problem. Vivien Burr is right to protest that the BBC's editing has robbed British viewers of an opportunity for moral education ("*Buffy* vs the BBC" 12). Such editing, of course, cannot remove all kink from *Buffy*, but it can drive kink back down into the subtext. Here it is more dangerous, for the late season Buffyverse's frank and open discussions of power allow the clear articulation of ethical principles, but the ethical status of subtextual gestures is often unclear. Jenny Alexander finds the subtextual canon of the Buffyverse to be kinked in ethically specific ways, away from the Sadeian patriarchal past and towards female dominance in particular (18). Yet *Buffy* is so subversive that it even kinks its own feminism. After the first few seasons of *Buffy*, Joss Whedon's "take back the night" vision (monster follows girl into dark alley, girl kicks monster's butt) was so well established that he could begin to play with it in increasingly radical ways. "I know you've got this whole Female Power, Take Back the Night thing, and I think that's cute," Halfrek tells Anya late in *Buffy* Season Six (“Entropy,” B6018). Sure, Halfrek's a vengeance demon, but she's a sympathetic one, and she understands something important: the Buffyverse authorizes male power, too. Spike has it. Even Wesley has it. So yes, the Buffyverse offers us radical images of dominant women and submissive men. But it also gives us *revolutionary* images of people whose positions within the framework of erotic power are subject to constant change.

[8] It would be easy to assume that these fluid, flexible, reversible power relations are to be found only in the world of the vampire. Vivien Burr, for example, has argued that "erotic power resides primarily in the human/vampire relationships," and that the eroticism of these relationships lies in their ambiguity. "Does he really love her or hate her? Desire her or want to kill her?" ("Ambiguity and Sexuality" 353). The answer to these provocative questions is "yes." "No, I'll save her, then I'll kill her," sings Spike (“Once More, With Feeling,” B6007). *Buffy* provides us with complex, intricate vampire-human relations whose major symbolic significance lies in the fact that these relations model the exchange of erotic power. These relationships are erotic precisely to the extent that they remain consensual; consent, in the Buffyverse as in our world, is a crucial precondition for the erotic exchange of power, and a vital boundary which separates erotic power from power's unethical forms. Because vampire-human relations make explicit the power dynamics which Burr (following Sartre) finds to be inherent in all erotic relations, Burr is also able to argue that these relations "offer a more recognizable experience of sexual relationships as they are actually lived, and that this is an

important factor in their obvious appeal to the audience" ("Ambiguity and Sexuality" 344).

[9] So *Buffy* does not offer an escapist fantasy of imaginary power relations. Instead, it provides a very real and meaningful account of the ways in which power must inevitably flow through erotic relationships. What is more, it offers us clear strategies by which we may confront that inevitability, deal with it, and lead ethical lives in a world where power is omnipresent. I must therefore challenge one of Burr's conclusions. She finds that "SM is regularly portrayed and therefore available as a sexual story for audiences to engage with, but it is associated only with vampire (and therefore perverted) sexuality. It has been hived off into a vampire ghetto" ("Ambiguity and Sexuality" 357). In the later seasons of *Buffy* and throughout *Angel*, S/M and erotic power exchange escape from their vampire ghetto. On both programs, kink is increasingly portrayed as a viable ethical and erotic option. And it isn't just for vampires (and guilt-ridden Slayers) any more. By the end of the series, even the human-human relationships—Xander and Anya, or Wesley and Lilah—have become thoroughly kinked. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a purely vanilla relationship in the Buffyverse. Buffy predicted as early as Season One that neither she nor her friends would ever have a normal relationship (“I Robot—You Jane,” B1008). But it is only in the later seasons that we realize this may be a good thing. The Buffyverse systematically obliterates the very concept of a "normal" sexuality. It provides us with a revolutionary model of sexuality in which the explicit recognition and ethical negotiation of power relations *is* the norm. Such negotiation is presented as a precondition for the erotic. The presence of kink in the Buffyverse's loving human-human relationships permits this model to escape the realm of fantasy and allows kink to become an option for the audience as well. By the end of *Angel*, these two series had achieved something which would have been unthinkable in any previous historical moment. They had presented an audience composed mainly of young people with a consistent philosophy of erotic power. This philosophy included a sophisticated system of ethics and an ethically informed sexual practice which corresponded quite closely to that of the real world BDSM community.[3] *Buffy* and *Angel* were able to bring kink out of the closet, normalize it, demystify it, and present it as a potentially positive element of human erotic relations. The two programs have thus made a major contribution to the theory and practice of erotic power exchange.

I. "I Believe the Subtext Here is Rapidly Becoming Text": The Shift from Subtextual to Textual Representations of Erotic Power

"Did We Not Put the 'Grr' in 'Grrl'?": Will to Power

[10] Everyone in the Buffyverse follows the path of power in one way or another, but nobody travels further on that path than Willow. Willow's story shows us how representations of erotic power eventually escape from the Buffyverse's subtext and enter the realm of the textual. Buffy's best friend comes from humble beginnings. She starts the series as a shy, fashion-challenged computer nerd. "I don't get wild," she declares in the first Halloween episode (“Halloween,” B2006). It's entertaining to re-read this early self-diagnosis in light of Willow's eventual destiny ("I flayed a guy alive and tried to destroy the world," “Orpheus,” A4015). Clearly, Willow *does* get wild, and not always in a good way. So the crucial questions are, when and how does Wild Willow emerge? We get intimations of the erotic nature of Will's wildness when she reluctantly dons a halter top and leather miniskirt for Halloween. "But this just isn't me," she protests. "And that's the point," Buffy replies. Desire is still scary in Season Two, but even so, Buffy is able to introduce her introverted friend to the important concept of identity hacking. On Halloween night, she *can* be Wild Willow (at least in theory: in practice, she chickens out and puts a ghost costume on over the sexy outfit).

[11] Early seasons of *Buffy* offer Willow

plenty of safe opportunities for closeted S/M experimentation. When you live on a Hellmouth, after all, you can almost always claim that you've been under the influence of some spell or mystical possession. When Xander's love spell backfires, Willow and every other woman in Sunnydale falls madly in lust with him (“Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," B2016). The problem lies in the form of Willow's desire. When Xander is overwhelmed by his friend's unwanted attentions, he threatens to restrain her by force if necessary. Willow informs him that "force is OK!" The spell creates desire in all women (except Cordy!), yet only Willow gives that desire a specifically sadomasochistic form. This suggests that Willow is inherently kinky and that the spell has simply brought that kink to the surface. The spell provides *Buffy* with a relatively safe way to address Willow's kink. The kink is made briefly explicit, but the device of the spell ensures that this kink is bracketed off from the canonical text (since these acts were not performed by the "real Willow "). When the spell is broken, Willow's kink retreats into the subtext.

[12] It doesn't stay there, however. *Buffy*'s early season strategy of allowing kink briefly out of the closet via a spell reaches its highest expression in "The Wish" (B3009) and its sequel "Doppelgängland" (B3016). The first of these episodes, a multi-signifying masterpiece by Marti Noxon, concerns the fulfillment of wishes: textually, Cordelia's wish that Buffy had never come to Sunnydale; subtextually, Willow 's wish "to be strong Willow ." She is speaking in the context of her recent breakup with Oz, but the fulfillment of her wish takes an unexpected form. Cordy's wish initiates an alternate reality (the "Wishverse") in which vamps rule Sunnydale. In a beautiful symmetry, this world creates the conditions in which Willow may learn how to fulfill *her* wish. Specifically, the Wishverse creates Vamp Willow, the polymorphously perverse, sadomasochistic

version of Willow whose explicit textual kink is sanctioned by her status as an *alternate* Willow . Vamp Willow is everything that Vanilla Willow aspires to be. She is honest about her desire. She knows what she wants, and she initiates negotiation with Vamp Xander to get it: "Play now?" The scene in which the two vampires drink Cordelia together is clearly filmed as a sex scene; the vampires are making love to each other through Cordelia's body and blood.

[13] Vamp Willow is generally sadistic; she watches as the Master's blood-harvesting deathtrap drains a girl, and the lust in her eyes is positively palpable. However, her sexuality exceeds simple sadism. She shows clear affection—even love—for Vamp Xander. Vamp Willow is also very switchy. She ruthlessly dominates the Wishverse Angel (Vamp Xander likes to watch her play with her "puppy"), but she submits to the Master. When Vanilla Willow meets her vampire double in "Doppelgängland" (B3016), she finds the experience very educational. Lorna Jowett has pointed out that "pleasure can certainly be gained from her alternate version of Willow, her acting out as 'bad' and as more sexy or sexual than regular Willow" (81). However, Willow is not simply "acting out"; she is also trying to *come* out. She *is* sexual (and kinky!); she's just having trouble admitting it to herself. She may try to dismiss her vampire self as "evil and. . .skanky" (B3016), but since Vamp Willow represents a repressed desire, Vanilla Willow's revulsion confirms that desire rather than eliminating it. Willow tries to deny kink any place in her "normal" life: "Oh, right. Me and Oz play 'Mistress of Pain' every night" (B3016). But this statement only encourages Buffy's friends (and the audience) to ask "well, why not?" Oz is a werewolf, after all, which means that vanilla relations are out of the question for at least three nights a month in any case. Willow's friends react to the thought of Kinky Willow with disgust. Reading this scene with later developments in mind, however, it is easy to see that both Buffy and Xander protest far too much. As for the audience, they respond by generating gigabytes of erotic fan fic about the "Mistress of Pain."

[14] So Willow witnesses the erotic power of the Wishverse. In fact, she participates in that power. In "Doppelgängland" (B3016), Joss Whedon directs Alyson Hannigan in an amazing performance of Vanilla Willow performing Vampire Willow. This play—textually sanctioned as a ruse to fool Vamp Willow's gang—continues to haunt Vanilla Will. She becomes increasingly frustrated by the lack of kink in her life. She is genuinely upset when Spike is unable to bite her (“The Initiative,” B4007), and she complains that "everyone's getting spanked but me" (“The I in Team,” B4013). Willow wants out of the closet, but it takes the tragedy and trauma of Season Five to get her there. After Joyce's death, Tara tells Willow that the two of them can be strong. Weeping Willow reaches for this hope: "Strong like an Amazon?" (“The Body,” B5016). Tara replies, "Strong like an Amazon, right." Season Five also acknowledges the exceptional nature of Willow 's strength. When Glory sucks the sanity out of Tara , we get our first glimpse of Dark Willow. "I owe you pain!" she

cries, and makes with the bag of knives (“Tough Love,” B5019). In the season finale, Buffy calls Willow "the strongest person here," and points out that Willow is the only one who has ever even hurt Glory (“The Gift,” B5022). Of course, what is remarkable about Willow 's power is the fact that it is purely hers. She has no Slayer or vampire strength—just a connection, as Giles later tells her, to a great power (“Lessons,” B7001).

[15] Willow begins Season Seven terrified of that power, convinced that she cannot use it without reverting to the Dark Willow who killed Warren and nearly destroyed the world in the previous season. Season Seven is the moment when Willow finally learns how to eroticize her power and how to use it safely, sanely and consensually. As Willow learns these crucial lessons, *Buffy* provides increasingly textual representations of her erotic power. "I *am* the power," Willow realizes in "Conversations With Dead People" (B7007). Willow has learned that the distinctions she was so desperately trying to maintain between her "self" and her power are illusory. She understands herself now as a human node within an ancient power matrix—a rather Foucaultian perspective. Her next move is erotic, kinky and queer (again with the Foucault!). Willow develops a relationship with Kennedy, one of the potential Slayers. Lorna Jowett is quite right to suggest that this relationship is eroticized by the tension which Willow 's power creates (59). Kennedy immediately starts to eroticize Willow 's dark side: "Big, scary Willow ? That's something I'd almost like to see" (“Showtime,” B7011). At this point, Willow is right on the cusp. She's come out of plenty of closets in her day: first about the witchcraft, and then "Hello? Gay now!" (“Triangle,” B5011). She's almost ready to come out about kink. To bring Buffy back from the dreamtime after her encounter with the Shadow Men, Willow must draw upon Kennedy's strength. Kennedy is clearly attracted to Willow 's kinky side, and she has consented to exchange erotic power with Willow . As a potential Slayer, Kennedy knows something about power's erotic nature herself. And yet she is still scared when Willow introduces pain and power into their relationship by draining Kennedy's strength so that she can bring Buffy back. "I thought it would be. . .I don't know, cool somehow. It just hurt," Kennedy says (“Get it Done,” B7015).

[16] Frightened by this glimpse of Willow 's true power, Kennedy backs off. This gives Willow an opportunity to experiment outside of her relationship with Kennedy. Willow takes a brief trip to L.A. , where she and Fred cast a spell whose rituals require Fred to perform what can only be called "pony play" (“Orpheus,” A4015). Fred trots around the lobby of Angel's hotel ringing a small bell, while Willow gently corrects her posture and assures her that she's making "good bells." At the end of her visit, Willow nervously informs Fred that she's seeing someone. Clearly there is an erotic connection between Willow and Fred. Under the ethical rules of the Buffyverse (which correspond to those of many real world BDSM relationships), Willow may *play* with Fred, while remaining sexually monogamous with Kennedy.

[17] Her positive experience with Fred gives Willow the confidence she needs to confront her fear (and Kennedy's). She may now continue building her erotic relationship with the potential Slayer. By the end of the series, Willow is able to embrace and revel in the loss of control that comes with erotic power exchange "in a nice, wholesome, 'my girlfriend has a pierced tongue' kind of way" (“ Chosen ,” B7022). What Willow is really experiencing here is the loss of repression. At the conclusion of the series, Willow 's desire is finally liberated. Confident at last that her power is erotic and beautiful, Willow works the spell that activates the Potentials. It is Will's will which creates the new community of Slayers. And she works that will through an act of love. Her spell gives her an erotic connection with *all* of the (no longer just potential) Slayers. The textual requirements of *Buffy* are such that the program must conclude with a massive vampire-Slayer fight scene. But we must not let this fight scene distract us from the more radical love scene which unfolds as Willow casts her spell. This scene depicts the redemption of Willow 's power. As she casts the most powerful spell she has ever attempted, Willow is transformed once more—but this time into White Willow. "You're a goddess!" cries Kennedy as her lover changes before her eyes. Yet it is clear that Willow is no more or less a goddess than any other woman who has found the courage to embrace the erotic power which flows through her. It is equally clear that by the end of the series, *Buffy* is able to provide open, honest, textual representations of Willow 's erotic power.

"Give Me Something to Sing About": Buffy and Spike

[18] No relationship in the Buffyverse has generated more controversy than Buffy's kinky affair with Spike. Thomas Hibbs has called it "the most demoralizing subplot in the sixth season" (57). Carla Montgomery asserts that "there is absolutely nothing healthy in this relationship other than their mutual libidos" (154). Interestingly, however, *Buffy*'s audience responded very differently to Buffy's sadomasochistic interactions with Spike. The *Buffy* fan community read the Buffy/Spike relationship in a far more positive light. Indeed, *Buffy*'s audience became so infatuated with Buffy and Spike that the show's producers felt it necessary to write a scene in which Spike attempts to rape Buffy, in order to dampen fan enthusiasm for this relationship (Heinecken 38). The crucial question, then, is this: why were the show's producers so terrified by the positive fan reaction to Buffy and Spike's sadomasochistic play? What was it about that play which was so dangerous that the show's writers felt compelled to alter the storyline in a fairly unnatural direction, in the hopes that viewers would not continue to endorse it? Jennifer Crusie has argued compellingly that "the continued insistence throughout season six that this relationship is wrong, unhealthy, symbolic of something evil and immoral is not only inexplicable but annoying, which is probably why so many viewers are unhappy with the direction the series takes in the sixth season: they were reading a different metaphor than the writers intended" ("Dating Death"

94). What, then, is this metaphor, and what is its significance to the operation of erotic power in the Buffyverse?

[19] In her excellent queer reading of Spike, Dee Amy-Chinn argues that "Spike's queerness becomes the source of his power, particularly of his erotic power" (314). Her convincing analysis explains why *Buffy*'s producers began to fear their own creation. For Amy-Chinn, "Spike exemplifies the breakdown of gendered binaries that underpin the heteronormative matrix, and by his actions seeks to legitimate some of those minority sexual practices which generate anxiety" (326). This reading suggests that the creators of *Buffy*—who, despite their obvious sympathy towards kink, are still constrained by the heteronormative cultural logic of network television—felt they could not risk unleashing an explicit, positive portrayal of sadomasochism upon an unsuspecting television audience. They thus found it necessary to undermine the kink-positive reading of Buffy/Spike. But by making this choice, the writers of *Buffy* (much like the BBC executives who attempted to vanillafy the British version) were depriving their audience of a valuable opportunity. *Buffy*'s kink-friendly audience recognized what the program's writers perhaps could not: kink offers its practitioners a number of vital benefits and advantages, many of which Buffy and Spike enjoy in the course of their relationship.

[20] The relationship between Buffy and Spike is profoundly erotic, and this is true from the beginning. Naturally, representations of the erotic power which flows between the two characters are initially found at the subtextual level. Spike initiates the relationship by bragging about the Slayers he has killed (“School Hard,” B2003). At first, this seems like typical "Big Bad" posturing; however, if we read this violent bravado with Buffy/Spike's subsequent S/M relationship in mind, it starts to look more like foreplay. Of course, this reading is available only in retrospect. If we were dealing with an ordinary television program, it would perhaps be problematic to read the early behavior of the characters in terms of motivations which emerged only later in the narrative. But *Buffy* is no ordinary program. The show's writers have acknowledged what Roz Kaveney calls "inadvertent foreshadowing" ("Writing the Vampire Slayer" 107). Buffy's characters are so coherent and so realistic that they often appear to be speaking *through* the writers, and this frequently occurs at an unconscious level. For example, *Buffy* writer Jane Espenson has noted that Willow 's lesbianism was foreshadowed in "Doppelgängland" (B3016). "When we started plotting the Tara arc in Season Four," she remarks, "Joss [Whedon] said, 'Were we planning this back then?' And even he didn't know for sure" (qtd. in Kaveney, "Writing the Vampire Slayer" 107-8). Given *Buffy*'s unique scripting process, then, it may be reasonable for us to read a character's actions in light of later developments. Certainly *Buffy*'s critics have been willing to read sadomasochistic motivations into Buffy's early interactions with Spike. Thus Terry L. Spaise has identified elements of S/M in "the physical and verbal sparring that Buffy and Spike have indulged in over the years" (750). It's also clear that Buffy and Spike

both participate in this "sparring." In their first encounter, Buffy promises Spike that "it's gonna hurt a lot" (“School Hard,” B2003). Buffy has no idea, at this point, just how true that is.

[21] Buffy/Spike follows the typical pattern of power-exchange relationships on *Buffy* (i.e., it becomes increasingly explicit and textual in later seasons). Early in Season Five, Spike has a sexual dream in which Buffy stakes him (“Out of My Mind,” B5004). As a polymorphously perverse vampire, Spike has an easier time incorporating unconscious desires into his conscious life than does Buffy; thus, he is able to have sex with Harmony while fantasizing about fighting the Slayer (“Family,” B5006). Spike and Harmony even engage in kinky vampire-Slayer role playing, with Harmony taking on the role of Buffy in an attempt to satisfy Spike's erotic desires (“Crush,” B5014). Here as elsewhere, the vampire community shows a close kinship with the real world BDSM community: in both communities, fantasy role playing is used as a safe way to fulfill desires whose literal expression is either physically dangerous or unacceptable to the community. (By vampire standards, the desire to get staked by a Slayer is certainly both.) As Spike's desire becomes more explicit, Buffy becomes increasingly aware of the nature of that desire: "I do beat him up a lot. For Spike that's like third base" (B5014).

[22] At this point in the narrative, it is not yet possible for Buffy to embrace openly the erotic possibilities which Spike offers her. However, *Buffy* is determined to play with those possibilities nonetheless. Warren 's "Buffybot"—a nearly perfect robot replica of Buffy—permits this. Initially commissioned by Spike to serve as a sex toy, the Buffybot enables some fascinating meditations on the ethics of consent. Spike's behavioral control chip prevents him from using violence against humans. He suspects that the chip will not allow him to attack the extremely lifelike Buffybot: "You know I can't bite you.” The Bot's reply is most instructive: "I think you can. I think you can if I let you. And I want to let you" (“Intervention,” B5018). This raises some intriguing questions. How, exactly, does Spike's chip define "violence?" If Spike's "victim" consents to his "attack," the chip might not activate. In short, Spike's chip may be capable of drawing ethical distinctions between erotic power exchange and sexual violence, based upon the principle of consent.

[23] The Buffybot also promotes interesting interactions between the textual and the subtextual. After Spike is nearly killed by Glory, Buffy visits him in the guise of the Bot. "Spike!" gushes Buffy-as-Bot. "You're covered in sexy wounds!" (“Intervention,” B5018) Textually, Buffy is trying to ascertain if Spike has told Glory about Dawn. But because she is playing the role of the Bot, Buffy is able to eroticize Spike's wounds. This brings her subtextual kinky desire for Spike a bit closer to the surface, and provides important foreshadowing for Season Six.

[24] In the pivotal sixth season, the sadomasochism which had been implicit in the Buffy/Spike relationship from the beginning—and which had become increasingly explicit in Season Five—finally becomes overt. This

represents a real turning point for the series. By Season Six, subtextual representations of kink had been fading for some time, in favor of increasingly open, honest, textual discussions of erotic power. The time had now come for the textual to eclipse the subtextual completely. But before the show could explicitly embrace erotic power, it would have to complete and transcend the subtextual representation of that power. This would clear the way for the explicit textual discussions of erotic power which form the thematic core of Season Six.

[25] The astonishing shift from the subtextual to the textual occurs in the groundbreaking musical episode, "Once More, With Feeling" (B6007). Written and directed by series creator Joss Whedon, this episode (like so many others) is concerned with expressing those thoughts and feelings which cannot be articulated in spoken language. In the musical episode, the characters must express their darkest truths, including their most sincere desires—and they must do so in song. When they sing, what had always been implicit suddenly becomes explicit. The effect is only momentary, but the consequences are long lasting. Once a desire is sung, it becomes available for later use at the textual level. The songs of "Once More, With Feeling" thus permit kink to come out of the closet in subsequent Season Six episodes.

[26] "You know," Spike sings, "You've got a willing slave" (“Once More, With Feeling,” B6007). Here he falls to his knees, confirming in gesture what he has just expressed in song: that his desire for Buffy has taken the form of a powerful submissive masochism. Perhaps Spike is so determined to position himself on the bottom of this power relationship because he understands how hard it is for Buffy to come out about the reciprocal sadomasochistic desire which she certainly feels. If he makes himself into the slave, then Buffy will become the Mistress, and power will reside (for the moment) with her. But Spike's opening position is more complex than that, for these are serious negotiations. He also challenges Buffy's unwillingness to come out of the closet about her kink. "And you just love to play the thought/That you might misbehave./But till you do I'm telling you,/Stop visiting my grave!/And let me rest in peace!" Spike's song sends a very clear message: Buffy has had plenty of time to consider vanilla, to experiment, to play at kink. But it's time to grow up. If she is serious in her desire to know the erotic side of power—as Spike suspects she is—she needs to consummate the relationship. If not, she needs to stop teasing him. As a submissive who is being courted by a reluctant, inexperienced dominant, Spike has every right to present these terms.

[27]The decision to place himself in the submissive posture shows us something important about Spike: consent matters to him. Indeed, as Amy-Chinn points out, "consent is critical to Spike in terms of his sexual relationships" (323). Recognizing that Buffy has come as far as she can without actually having kinky sex with him, Spike has created a situation in which Buffy may either see her desire through or turn her back on it. It might appear that Spike's decision to force Buffy's hand is coercive, but in fact he is only revealing to her the choice which her own desire has

already forced upon her: "kinks or vanilla" (as Faith said way back in “Consequences,” B3015), but for real this time, as a life choice. Spike's lyrics are also (not surprisingly) performative. He is not simply presenting Buffy with a choice between two erotic systems and two different communities. By requiring her consent before he proceeds, he is also modeling one of those systems and one of those communities for her.

[28] It would be cliché (but not wrong) to identify Buffy's song as the climax of the episode. Plucked from a peaceful death by her well-meaning but clueless friends, Buffy can finally sing what she has so far only been able to say to Spike: "I live in Hell/'Cause I've been expelled/From Heaven/I think I was in Heaven/So give me something to sing about!" Buffy begins to shake her hips seductively. As with Spike, her erotic gesture matches her song. Here Buffy becomes uncharacteristically vulnerable, even desperate. "*Please*/Give me something. . ." she begs.

[29] At this point Buffy, under the spell of the demon Sweet, begins dancing herself to death. Spike intervenes to save her. He sings: "Life's not a song/Life isn't bliss/Life is just this/It's living/You'll get along/The pain that you feel/You only can heal/By living." The negotiations are complete. Spike has offered to teach Buffy about erotic power. She has accepted, largely out of therapeutic need, though that will change. Spike confirms her acceptance while simultaneously taking kink into the textual ("Life's not a song") and out of the closet. The show concludes with one final subtextual confirmation of Buffy and Spike's negotiations ("The curtains close on a kiss, God knows.") *Buffy* then moves bravely into the textual.

[30]Only an outbreak of magical amnesia ("Tabula Rasa," B6008) can keep Buffy and Spike from consummating their erotic power relationship immediately; they do so in the following episode, "Smashed" (B6009). Rhonda Wilcox has noted that Buffy and Spike do not actually have sex until they know that he can hurt her ("Every Night I Save You" 17). Terry Spaise has identified this moment as marking a "shift in the power paradigm" of the Buffy/Spike relationship, since Buffy held the dominant position in the relationship prior to "Smashed" (B6009) (752). However, it is important to be clear about the nature of this shift. Some critics have mistakenly read this change as a return to politically problematic power relations. Dawn Heinecken takes it as evidence that "men need to be violent and able to dominate their women" (22). "When did it become okay to hit a woman and then have sex?" demands Rachel Thompson. The answer, of course, is: when she consents. In fact, Buffy initiates violent sex with Spike, and participates enthusiastically.

[31] What has really happened in "Smashed" (B6009) is that Buffy and Spike have moved from a situation in which Buffy had all the power into a situation of *equality*. The problem lay not with Buffy's vulnerability but with Spike's. By giving Buffy all the power, he had placed himself in a very delicate situation. He could only feel secure enough to pursue a serious S/M relationship if the power between them were equalized. It is

important to remember here that Spike is a switch—and an accomplished one, as Amy-Chinn has observed (316). Spike thus reflects the basic erotic orientation of the Buffyverse. He represents a profoundly egalitarian sexuality in which dominant and submissive relations are always reversible.

[32] In "Smashed" (B6009), Buffy embraces this sexuality, and her desperate gamble pays off handsomely. Buffy's affair with Spike represents her attempt to seize control of the pain, to mold it, to find a positive way in which she might express it. Her ultimate goal is to find her way back into the world. Terry Spaise has pointed out that the S/M games Buffy plays with Spike are a kind of "therapeutic exercise" which "constituted a necessary element of Buffy's emotional restoration and ability to re-embrace life" (761). Like many real world kinksters who have suffered abuse or other trauma, Buffy uses kink as a way to heal. For Buffy, whose second death was heroic and beautiful, the trauma lies not in dying but in *coming back.* Kink gives her a way to return to heaven for a night, while still remaining in this world. As such, it clearly serves a vital psychological role for Buffy. But Spaise's analysis, while convincing, relies upon a medicalized concept of S/M. As such, this analysis does not account for the possibility that Buffy and Spike practice S/M not only for therapeutic purposes but also because they enjoy it and find it satisfying.

[33] Spike revels in his newfound knowledge of Buffy. "I know where you live now, Slayer. I've tasted it" (“Wrecked,” B6010). Buffy has a harder time dealing with her new kinky self. She finds it easier to have sex with Spike if she's invisible (“Gone,” B6011), and she can't bring herself to tell her friends about her newfound sexual identity. But Buffy soon becomes more comfortable with Spike. "You were amazing," whispers Spike, after a scene which "hurt in all the wrong places" and left bite marks. "You got the job done yourself," Buffy says softly (“Dead Things,” B6013). Still, Buffy can't accept who and what she has become. Fearing that she returned from the grave "wrong," she has Tara check the resurrection spell which brought her back. When Tara assures her that nothing's wrong with her, Buffy cries "there has to be! This just can't be me, it isn't me" (B6013). Here Buffy finally confronts the painful fact that her sexuality is radically Other—or, in the heteronormative language of the dominant culture, that there is something wrong with her. In this context it is perhaps significant that Buffy first comes out to Tara, one of the program's explicitly queer characters. Buffy is able to come out to Tara because she knows that Tara is likely to sympathize with her predicament.

[34] The Buffy/Spike relationship continues to grow more intense. "He's not getting any gentler," Buffy observes (“As You Were,” B6015). Buffy tries to end the relationship (B6015), but Spike has a hard time accepting that decision. He becomes increasingly unstable and obsessive. In the highly disturbing episode "Seeing Red" (B6019), Spike expresses his obsession: "Great love is wild and passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes." Indeed it does, for this episode culminates in Spike's

attempt to rape Buffy. What is most striking about this scene is how profoundly different it is from Buffy and Spike's initial sex scene in "Smashed" (B6009), and from all their subsequent consensual scenes. Those scenes were filmed erotically, with appropriate music and low lighting. By way of contrast, the rape scene in "Seeing Red" is lit with painful brilliance (Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters* 35), and executive producer Marti Noxon decided to use no music in it at all because, as scriptwriter Steven S. De Knight says, "we wanted it not to have any fantasy element, to be nasty and violent" (qtd. in Kaveney, "Writing the Vampire Slayer" 127). Certainly the result is very unsettling. Spike's attempted rape is an egregious violation of Buffy, and the decision by the show's producers to include it might appear to be an equally egregious violation of the caring and consensual S/M relationship which Buffy and Spike had been on the verge of developing. But a more charitable reading is possible: frightened by the deafening cheers of the fan community as Buffy and Spike came out of the closet in the course of Season Six, Buffy's writers retreated once more to the subtextual. Spike's attempted rape is one of the most clearly wrong things that happens on the entire program. By filming it in such a uniquely disconcerting way, Buffy's creators were able to show, discreetly, that what Buffy and Spike had done before was *not* wrong. Furthermore, the heavy subtextual distinction between this rape and the previous scenes of erotic power exchange draws attention to the major difference between the two: consent. When Spike ignores Buffy's "safe word," play becomes rape. By highlighting the vital distinction between the two, "Seeing Red's" subtextual cues actually endorse the ethical values of the BDSM community.

[35] It is also vital to remember that although "Seeing Red" (B6019) marks the end of Spike and Buffy's *sexual* relationship, it is by no means the end of their *erotic* relationship. The rape was empty of ethics and erotics, and Spike knows it. He is so dismayed by what he has done that he goes to Africa and tortures a soul into himself. He returns in Season Seven a new man, but some things haven't changed. Spike's still all about the pain. He has a soul again, and "all it does is burn" ("Beneath You," B7002). And of course, he still likes to see Buffy on top. "Make it tighter," he says when Buffy, who fears he might be killing again, binds him to a chair ("Never Leave Me," B7009). But what's really interesting is the way that Buffy treats Spike when she has him chained up in her basement. Buffy cares for Spike, gently washing the blood from his wounded face. Buffy is very much the loving Mistress here. Spike's attempted rape was profoundly wrong, but he has done everything in his power to make amends, and Buffy has begun to forgive him. She knows that he is not responsible for his current violence, since he's being controlled by the First. And so she can be tender with him, even intimate.

[36] This new intimacy culminates in the remarkable love scene in "Touched" (B7020). The night before an apocalypse is traditionally a very erotic time in the Buffyverse, but this beautiful montage of intercut sex scenes takes that tradition to new heights. Faith and Robin Wood have

steamy interracial sex, while Willow and Kennedy have pierced-tongue lesbian sex: the scene is relentlessly queer. And what are Buffy and Spike doing while all this is going on? She is sleeping peacefully, fully clothed, in his arms. The Buffy/Spike scene is not at all sexual, but it is stunningly erotic. Indeed, it has the feeling of the time beyond the scene, the "after care" time. Buffy feels safe with Spike once again. Just as she cared for him in the basement, he spends the night looking after her. The next day, Spike calls this the best night of his life, and when he asks Buffy if she was there with him, she assures him that she was, and speaks of the strength he gave her (“End of Days,” B7021). Their encounters throughout the brief remainder of the series remain tender and respectful. I must therefore challenge Justine Larbalestier's claim that Buffy and Spike's relationship "can't work," and that Buffy's night of having Spike hold her is simply "masochistic" (in, one presumes, a bad way) (216-17). The relationship does work. It gives them both what they need. What Buffy needed before going off to save the world was a night when she could be vulnerable, submissive, and safe. Spike needed to be caring, protective, gently dominant. So they did what they've always done. They switched into the necessary configurations and satisfied their mutual erotic needs. The fact that there is no sex here is irrelevant. There is power and there is love.

II. "It. . .Turns the TV into a Two-way Conduit with Direct Access to the Viewer!": Representations of Erotic Power become Increasingly Available to the Audience

"That's Why Our Kind Make Such Good Dollies": Vampire Kink in the Buffyverse

[37] Vivien Burr has argued that:

> vampire relationships are sadistic and explicitly SM, with violence as a sexual appetizer. But this sexuality is not really being offered to us as a viable choice; it is something only (bad) vampires do. The portrayal of vampire sexuality is therefore a covert confirmation of traditional sexual ideals and mores. ("Ambiguity and Sexuality" 351)

But this reading is mistaken, in much the same way that Buffy is mistaken when she assumes one cannot love without a soul. "Oh, we can, you know," Drusilla assures her. "We can love quite well. If not wisely" (“Crush,” B5014). Dru may be crazy, but she also happens to be quite honest about matters of love and power. Jennifer Stoy correctly describes Darla, Angelus, Spike and Drusilla as "a compelling vision of just how perverse a loving family can be" (226). I would only add that these vampires also show us how loving a perverse family can be. In the Buffyverse, vampire play is highly erotic, and frequently occurs within the framework of compassionate, caring power relations, some of which last for centuries.

[38] Darla and Angelus, for example, played mind games for over a century (“The Trial,” A2009). Sure, he killed her, but she's over that (“First Impressions,” A2003). In the Buffyverse, death is forgivable and frequently erotic; thus, the resurrected human Darla begs Angel for the bite (“Darla,” A2007, “The Trial,” A2009). At the textual level, Darla does this because she is dying of syphilis, but Darla desires more than mere eternal life. Why else would she tie Angel down and make him watch while she nurses blood from Drusilla (A2009)? Apparently this has the desired effect on Angel, who beats Darla senseless before having sex with her in "Reprise" (A2015). The immediate text calls this Angel's moral low point, but the long-term text says otherwise. Yes, their sex was violent, but they both wanted it, and this act initiates Darla's miraculous pregnancy. Darla stakes herself so that her child can be born (“Lullaby,” A3009). Angel names the boy Connor and loves him through the remainder of the series. Darla and Angel share a perverse love, to be sure, but it is a kind of love nonetheless.

[39] Darla and Angel play hard. In general, vampires play much harder than humans. Since they're practically indestructible, play which would be edgy or impossible for humans is standard for vampires. Vampires like to drink each other's blood (“Untouched,” A2004). The more exotic (and exciting) forms of vampire play involve those few things which *can* kill vampires. Vampires are fond of holy water play, for example (“ Reunion ,” B2010): in small doses, holy water is extremely painful without being lethal. They also enjoy sunlight play (“Destiny,” A5008; an elegant but non-consensual example can be seen in “In the Dark,” A1003). You can even stake a vampire, as long as she's wearing the Gem of Amarra when you do it (“The Harsh Light of Day,” B4003). But the most potent form of vampire play involves that thing which is most deadly to vampires: a Slayer. Spike and Drusilla show us that "the blood of a Slayer is a powerful aphrodisiac" (“Fool for Love,” B5007). Surely Slayer blood is so exciting because getting it is so dangerous. As with human kink, vampire kink derives much of its excitement from the element of risk. Since vampires in the Buffyverse have been known to come back to life after being staked or immolated in a pillar of fire, the level of acceptable risk is remarkably high.

[40] But vamps aren't just about the play. The erotic exchange of power is equally important to them. After Dru dumps Spike, he returns to Sunnydale, where he has a bit of an epiphany and decides to "find her, wherever she is, tie her up, torture her until she likes me again. Love's a funny thing" (“Lovers Walk,” B3008). Here's the really funny part: this is a perfectly sensible way to negotiate with a crazy sadomasochistic vampire. When Drusilla returns in "Crush" (B5014), she once again acts as Spike's Mistress. She tells him he can overcome his chip. When he complains about the searing pain, she tells him it's all in his head: "It tells you you're not a bad dog, but you are." Spike can take the pain for Mistress. The only problem is, he's taking pain for a new Mistress now: Buffy.

[41] All of the Buffyverse's vampire relationships emphasize power, but none do so more effectively than Spike/Angel. Roz Kaveney has correctly noted that "the homoeroticism that many fans have always seen in the relationship…is at the very least closely related to…[the] power dynamic between them" ("A Sense of the Ending" 63). And Spike asks, "how's that for a perversion?" ("In the Dark," A1003. In the text, Spike is speaking about Angel's love for Buffy; in the subtext, Spike and another male vampire are preparing to torture Angel's bound body.) Season Five of *Angel* reveals to us the deep history of Spike/Angel, and thus makes textual the longstanding subtextual power dynamic between them. They began as William/Angelus. Upon meeting William (freshly sired by Drusilla), Angelus immediately thrusts William's arm into the sunlight ("Destiny," A5008). As he holds his own arm into the searing sunlight, Angelus admits that lately he has begun to wonder what it would be like "to share the slaughter of innocents with another man. Don't think that makes me some kind of a deviant, hmm? Do you?" Clearly William does not, for he thrusts his own arm into the agonizing light once more, in proper masochistic fashion. These direct, physical negotiations establish this relationship as one of consensual power exchange from the beginning. How intimate is that relationship? Well, there was that one. . . ("Power Play," A5021). But again, it's not about sex, it's about power. Today Spike and Angel are both nominally straight (in a queer, identical all-black wardrobe kind of way). And yet they fall all over themselves to see who gets to drink from the cup of perpetual torment ("Destiny," A5008). Sure, they say it's all about the prophecy, but that's just a lot of Shanshu: it's clearly a form of play. "Here we are, then," Spike says with masochistic glee. "Two vampire heroes, competing to wet our whistle with a drink of light, refreshing torment." And even if Spike and Angel don't play like they used to, they can still keep each other company as they dash off to Italy in pursuit of their mutual Slayer fetish ("The Girl in Question," A5020). By the end of *Angel*, Spike and Angel can almost be honest about what they are: two longstanding members of a kinky vampire community who have always shared power and pain and who, despite their constant textual sniping, clearly need each other and clearly satisfy one another's mutual erotic needs.

"Pervert!/Other Pervert!": Human Kink in the Buffyverse

[42] The explicit kinkiness of the Buffyverse's vampire community should not distract us from the fact that *everyone* in the Buffyverse is kinky. Kink cannot remain safely contained within the "vampire ghetto." Nor is it the sole province of Slayers, who at least have the excuse that they must develop intimate relations with death if they are to do their job properly. In the Buffyverse, "normal" humans are every bit as kinky as vampires and demonically powered Slayers. Since their power relations are constrained by their relative physical fragility, human expressions of kink are often less dramatic than those of vampires or Slayers. Yet all of these power relations have one crucial thing in common: in the Buffyverse,

human relations of erotic power, like their vampire and Slayer counterparts, are consistently portrayed as consensual, caring and compassionate. The Buffyverse thus presents erotic power exchange not simply as an interesting illicit perversion of the inhuman and the superhuman, but as a realistic ethical and erotic option for actual human beings. Since these are precisely the sorts of people who make up the kink-friendly audience of *Buffy* and *Angel*, this may turn out to be the Buffyverse's most radical move.

[43] "Why couldn't Giles have shackles like any self respecting bachelor?" wonders Xander (“Living Conditions,” B4002). Giles may not have shackles, but he and Joyce don't hesitate to use handcuffs on top of a cop car (twice!)—and it's not just the band candy, because the band candy doesn't make anybody do anything that they weren't already thinking about doing. "*Never* tell me," Buffy tells Joyce—the one thing harder than coming out to your parents is facing the possibility that your parents might come out to *you* (“Band Candy,” B3006).

[44] Besides, Xander's a fine one to talk. His casual dating partners include a giant praying mantis, an Inca mummy girl, Faith (!), and an evil sorceress who tries to sacrifice him to open the seal of Danthazar. The erotic interests of these girls can hardly be called vanilla; in fact, the full consummation of any of these liaisons would have resulted in Xander's untimely death. Xander's serious dating choices are only slightly more safe and sane; they differ from his casual dates mainly in that they are consensual. There's Cordelia. Her erotic relationship with Xander is based initially upon their mutual dislike. Plus, as Cordelia notes, "we kept being put in these life or death situations, and that's always all sexy and stuff" (“Doppelgängland,” B3016). It turns out that ordinary humans find death erotically exciting too. Small wonder that Cordelia considers dressing up like a Slayer and putting a stake to Xander's throat (“Faith, Hope, and Trick,” B3003). (Xander: "Please, God, don't let that be sarcasm.")

[45] And then there's Anya. Anya is the love of Xander's life; his erotic relationship with her is by far his most serious. Anya also happens to be openly, outrageously, unapologetically kinky. Esther Saxey is quite right to argue that "the only couple to engage in kink unproblematically are Xander and Anya, and significantly this is in the most entirely committed couple relationship the show offers" (206). We know that Xander and Anya have enjoyed spanking (“The I in Team,” B4013), and she's been known to bite his ass (“Sleeper,” B7008). We assume that he knows about "tying someone up for sexy, funky fun" (“First Date,” B7014) from his time with Anya, and when he and Anya have their "last" sex, they both think "it's too bad Buffy took Spike's chains down" (“Storyteller,” B7016). But that's all just play. Xander and Anya are serious. After Joyce's death—a very serious, very real death, not the temporary kind you usually find in the Buffyverse—Anya gets philosophical about death and sex. "She got me thinking, about how people die all the time and how they get born too and how you kinda need one so that you can have the other. And when I think about it that way it makes death a little less sad, sex a

little more exciting" (“Forever,” B5017). Cordelia may have found the threat of death titillating, but Anya really gets the sex/death connection.

[46] Anya is one of the program's most reliably honest characters. Her relationship with Xander features an astonishing amount of open, direct negotiation. This is partly due to the fact that Anya is "newly human and strangely literal" (“Into the Woods, B5010). As a result, she says what she wants, in no uncertain terms, from the beginning: "Sexual intercourse. I've said it like a dozen times" (“The Harsh Light of Day,” B4003). Xander, who has been badly used by women (and demons) who do not acknowledge the importance of negotiation, finds this oddly refreshing. "And the amazing thing. . .still more romantic than Faith" (B4003). Yes, she's romantic, and resourceful, too. When the Gentlemen render Sunnydale speechless in "Hush" (B4010), Anya and Xander communicate more effectively than most of the Scoobies. When Xander thinks Spike has attacked Anya, he beats the vampire silly. Xander discovers that his lover is OK, and the two kiss passionately. Delighted to see how much he cares about her, Anya makes a circle with her thumb and forefinger and thrusts the index finger of her opposite hand in and out of the circle repeatedly. Her lack of subtlety disgusts the other Scoobies, but it's the right move for the circumstances. Their negotiations complete, Anya and Xander move to off-screen bliss, and their relationship advances. Though it may be taboo in vanilla circles, Anya's blunt honesty teaches Xander how to negotiate. The two may bring each other plenty of pain, but they do it consensually. And even though Xander eventually leaves her at the altar, he loves her to the end of her life and beyond. Like Buffy/Spike, the Xander/Anya relationship "ends" in a formal textual sense in Season Six, but remains erotic, and specifically kinky, through Season Seven. Xander and Anya play "good cop/bad cop" when they interrogate Andrew (“Never Leave Me,” B7009)—a scene of potentially sterile "political" torture, except for the fact that Andrew is in many ways a willing participant (Andrew later calls Anya "the perfect woman," “End of Days,” B7021). Anya develops a taste for multi-partner scenes; shortly after the original interrogation, she and Dawn (!) co-top Andrew (“Bring on the Night,” B7010). Xander and Anya may have "broken up" in vanilla terms, but their Season Seven relationship has the structure of many committed kink relationships: sexually, they are basically monogamous, though they do play with others.

[47] Meanwhile on *Angel*, Wesley Wyndam-Pryce is showing us that erotic power isn't just for Xander. On *Buffy* he was insufferably effete, but on *Angel* he's a whole new Wesley. We've known since “Over the Rainbow” (A2020) that Wesley has handcuffs he doesn't want to tell anyone about. But it's Dark Wesley who comes out of the closet. At the end of Season Three, Dark Wes takes up with Lilah Morgan, the seductive evil attorney. Lilah is unsurprisingly kinky. Like many professionals, she switches her toppy professional persona for a submissive one in the bedroom. She seduces Wes by asking him what it was like when Justine cut his throat. By way of reply, Wes grabs Lilah's throat. "You terribly anxious to find

out?" (“Tomorrow,” A3022). The punchline is that yes, she *is* anxious to find out. These intense negotiations land Wes and Lilah immediately in bed; she brags that she has experienced several "little deaths." Season Four opens with a bang. Wes and Lilah are shown in bed again, but what is much more urgent is the revelation which viewers receive after Lilah leaves: Dark Wes has a girl in a cage, and her name is Justine. Season Four of *Angel* (which corresponds to Season Seven of *Buffy*) represents a late Buffyverse narrative moment. The kink is textual; the Sadeian system is expressed in its own terms and with its own name intact. Dark Wes has no concern whatsoever for Justine; she is, at most, an animal to him. (He also claims, at this point, to have no feelings for Lilah, though this is belied by affectionate subtextual gestures and his later textual affection for her.) Dark Wes experiments with the Sadeian system of ethics and finds that this system, with its utter lack of interest in consent, lacks eros. He releases Justine. His experimentation immediately resumes (this time with Lilah) in a consensual, erotic mode. Lilah positions herself on the bottom: "Shut up, Lilah./Make me!" (“Ground State,” A4002) She thus offers him a consensual alternative to his ethically problematic use of Justine. In fact, Lilah turns out to be remarkably service-oriented. She has phone sex with Wes, and he is firmly in dominant mode: he orders her to take her panties off while she's in a meeting (“The House Always Wins,” A4003). She even impersonates Fred to give Wes his ultimate Texas schoolgirl fantasy (“Apocalypse, Nowish,” A4007). She teaches Wes how to play safely, sanely and consensually—for somebody who's "evil," she actually gives him a tremendous boon. Does he understand this? He is the first to refer to their "relationship," thus losing his one dollar bet with Lilah (“Slouching toward Bethlehem ,” A4004). When evil Cordy kills Lilah, Angelus drinks from the corpse. Thinking that Angelus killed her, Wes must decapitate Lilah, lest she rise as a vampire. As he prepares to sever her head, she (or her ghost) begins to speak in his mind. She reminds him about the dollar bet and says "you knew how I felt" (“Salvage,” A4013). If this ghost is more than a figment of Wes's grief-stricken imagination, then the relationship was as important to her as it was to him. When Wes tells her he's sorry, she tries to lift that burden from him: "Oh, Wes, we don't have that word in our vocabulary. Not people like you and—" But there is no longer a "me" to complete that sentence, and so Wes's axe comes down. Of course, no one is ever really dead in the Buffyverse. Lilah's still around ("standard perpetuity clause," “Home,” A4022), and even though she doesn't appear after Season Four, she has made her mark. Wes has learned something about power; thanks to Lilah, he has completely redefined his concept of the erotic. "It's not always about holding hands," he tells Fred (“Players,” A4016), in a futile attempt to explain what he and Lilah had shared. Poor little Fred will have to become an ancient blue goddess before she really understands what he's talking about.

[48] Wes/Lilah is part of *Angel*'s ambitious, ongoing project to normalize kink. Because the first three seasons of *Buffy* were already complete when *Angel* first aired, the latter program was able to move towards much more explicit textual depictions of erotic power. From the

beginning, *Angel* conveys the feeling that the Buffyverse has done about as much as it can do with subtextual representations of kink. On *Angel*, kink grows up, comes out of the closet, and begins to celebrate itself as a valid and viable erotic system. The dualistic nature of *Angel*'s protagonist makes it very easy to place moments of kink in the program as a matter of course. The basic structure of these moments is established in Season One: whenever Angel's associates suspect that he may have reverted to Angelus, they must bind him. For some mysterious reason, the job of chaining up Angel generally falls to Cordelia; for some even more mysterious reason, she likes to wear leather pants while she's doing it (“Eternity,” A1017). Tying up Angel becomes such a routine part of life at Angel Investigations that it starts to seem tedious. Cordelia actually complains that putting the boss into bondage has become part of her workload: "I get to make the coffee *and* chain the boss to the bed. I've gotta join a union" (“Expecting,” A1011). We sure aren't in Sunnydale any more. It took Buffy and her friends seven years to come to terms with erotic power; when they finally did, the town was destroyed. Things are different in the City of Angel(s) . In L.A. , kink is a normal part of both home and workplace. When Knox gives Fred a tour of the facilities at Wolfram and Hart, the first thing he offers to show her is the dungeon (“Home,” A4022).

[49]The introduction of kink into business life is a sure sign of its normalization. *Angel* also presents erotic power exchange as a strategy by which overworked professionals may relieve the stress and tension of their working lives. When Angel and Groo visit a demon brothel, they find a well-dressed man shackled to a wall. The well-meaning but clueless Groo tries to "rescue" the man. "Groo, I think he's happy there," says the slightly less clueless Angel. "As a slave?" replies Groo, shocked (“Couplet,” A3014). Of course, on Groo's homeworld, the major form of slavery was always the non-consensual, economic sort (recently abolished by Princess Cordy, “There's No Place Like Plrtz Glrb,” A2022). He finds it hard to understand that someone might deliberately embrace slavery's erotic form. Yet he must face this difficult fact. "Don't judge me," says the willing slave. In L.A. (if not in Pylea), erotic slavery does exist, slaves may insist upon their right to be enslaved, and high-powered professionals may turn to dominatrices as they seek to invert the power relations which obtain in their work environments (just as toppy attorney Lilah Morgan chose to submit to Dark Wes).

[50] Although kink is accepted and tolerated throughout *Angel*'s narrative, the normalization of kink reaches its highest expression in Season Five. Here the representations of erotic power become remarkably creative, fanciful and elaborate. There is the demon Archduke Sebassis, who keeps a slaveboy on a leash. This demon slave is fitted with a cork in his wrist, so that he may bleed into a glass on command, to satisfy his master's darkest thirst (“Life of the Party,” A5005). Blood remains a major fetish throughout Season Five, and the show maintains a clear space for ethical blood play. As far as we can tell, the relationship between Sebassis

and his slave is consensual. (The slaveboy is allowed to "safeword" by unhooking his chain and running away when the Halloween party gets too heavy for him, A5005.) Angel does impose a "no human blood" policy on Wolfram and Hart's vampire employees, but like all moral prohibitions in the Buffyverse, this one is not absolute. When Harmony tests positive for human blood, Fred tries to console her: "You slipped, had some human blood. Maybe it was consensual" (“Harm’s Way,” A5009). By this point, the idea that humans might consent to have vampires drink their blood is a well-established concept in the Buffyverse, and it's clear that the ethical status of such consensual blood play is very different from that of the old-fashioned, predatory vampirism. The moral message is clear: if Harmony or another vampire drank from a willing "victim," Angel and company would not regard that as a major crime. (Angel himself drank reluctantly from the willing Buffy, “Graduation Day,” B3022; Angelus drank eagerly from the secretly willing, drugged Faith, “Release,” A4014.)

[51] In order to get a complete sense of *Angel*'s attitudes regarding erotic power, however, we need to consider not just the elements of demon and vampire kink which are clearly present in Season Five, but also the aspects of human kink. What meaning does erotic power hold for the ordinary humans who inhabit *Angel*'s Los Angeles ? *Angel*'s fifth season answers this question in no uncertain terms, through the remarkable device of the Wolfram and Hart "holding dimension." Season Five "Little Bad" Lindsey MacDonald spends some time in this extra-dimensional prison; so does conflicted champion Charles Gunn. The structure of the prison is remarkably explicit. On the surface, it is a reductionist stereotype of suburbia, featuring rows and rows of identical houses with identical manicured lawns. Each morning, long lines of identical suburban husbands march out their front doors with clockwork precision, retrieve their identical newspapers, and wave to their identical neighbors. But in this dimension (as in real world suburbia), things are not quite as they seem. Each day the prisoner (first Lindsey, then Gunn) is subjected to a recurring torment. Every day his pleasant, attractive, vanilla wife sends him into the basement on a routine chore. But the basement turns out to be a fully equipped medieval dungeon. Here the victim has his heart ripped out of his chest, each and every day, by what the ever-textual Spike refers to as a "juiced-up S and M demon" (“Underneath,” A5017). The victim then forgets this horror and returns upstairs, to live out another identical day.

[52] The "S and M demon" is relentlessly precise and mechanical. It exists only to torture; it is the pure essence of sadism. When Gunn begs to know why he is being tortured ("Listen, please. . . .What did I do?" “Time Bomb,” A5019), the demon silences him with a gesture. Here there is no why; there is only suffering. There is thus a certain purity to this dungeon, and that fact is not lost on its victims. After his comrades rescue him, Gunn meditates on the nature of this strange hell: "Do you know what the worst part of that place was? Wasn't the basement. At least there, you knew where you stood. Demon was gonna cut your heart out

and show it to you. Nah. It was the fake life they gave you upstairs. The wife, kids, all the icing on the family cake" (A5019). This speech is likely to produce a remarkable sense of vertigo in the vanilla viewer (if, indeed, any such viewers remained by the end of *Angel* Season Five). We must not underestimate the radically transgressive nature of Gunn's comments. Gunn has just returned from a world whose tidy, repressed vanilla exterior hides a profoundly kinky interior. In this way, Wolfram and Hart's extra-dimensional suburbia resembles our own: the kink is there, but it is deeply closeted. Because this dimension was created by an evil law firm, the kink is non-consensual and ethically irredeemable. And yet when Gunn returns from this hell, he does not criticize the S/M demon or its actions. Gunn's experience has taught him something profound: *the basement is not the problem*. The basement is honest. In the basement, the S/M demon does what it was made to do, and so does the victim. *The problem is the closet*, represented in this case by the fictitious vanilla life upstairs. This life is terrifying precisely because when one is in it, one cannot identify, articulate or discuss the elements of power which exist in every erotic relationship. Negotiations are one-sided and purely implicit. Consent is neither sought nor granted. "Trish," the vanilla housewife, sends Lindsey to his fate each day by asking him to go downstairs and get a light bulb. When he hesitates, she walks over to him, places her hand on his shoulder significantly, and says "I kinda need it now" (“Underneath,” A5017). This is the very model of vanilla power relations. In this scenario, Trish has all the power; Lindsey has none. There is no open negotiation. Lindsey's consent is assumed; there is no way for him to refuse his "wife's" command. Perhaps worst of all, Trish sends Lindsey downstairs so that the S/M demon can provide what she herself cannot: a frank and open scenario in which the roles are clear and the power relations are explicit. The structure of the S/M dimension thus mirrors that of some vanilla marriages, in which the husband turns to a professional dominatrix or the wife retreats into online kink, since the vanilla spouse is unable to fulfill the erotic needs of his or her partner. What is scandalous about *Angel* Season Five—in a good way, from the viewpoint of the fan and Buffy Studies communities—is precisely its critique of the power dynamics which obtain in typical vanilla relationships.

III. "It's About Power. Who's Got It. Who Knows How to Use It.": Kink and the Ethical Negotiation of Power within the Slayer Community

[53] As we have seen, early season *Buffy*'s conversations on and around the problem of power remained largely subtextual. Explicit statements about power in general and erotic power in particular were relatively infrequent, and were typically made not by Buffy but by Faith. Faith thus played a vital role in the Buffyverse's early narrative of power. Because she was the "bad" Slayer, she was authorized to say things which early season Buffy could not say. Faith is the Slayer who is always honest about the erotic nature of her power. Faith thus seizes control of the erotic

potential which the Slayer's power clearly contains. "Isn't it crazy how slaying just always makes you hungry and horny?" Faith asks during her first appearance (“Faith, Hope, and Trick,” B3003). Here she shows a remarkable degree of openness and honesty, considering she has known the Scooby gang for about ten minutes at this point. Faith also practices what she preaches. After a particularly exciting fight, Faith takes Xander back to her motel room. She tells him that the demon "got me really wound up. A fight like that and...no kill...I'm about ready to pop" (“The Zeppo,” B3013). She then takes his virginity. Faith also begins to educate Buffy about the erotic nature of Slaying: "slaying's what we were built for. If you're not enjoying it, you're doing something wrong" (“Bad Girls,” B3014). At this point (mid Season Three), Buffy resists Faith's arguments; early season Buffy doesn't "get it" yet. But Faith has planted the seeds.

[54] This is also the moment when the ethical risks inherent in Faith's concept of power become evident. Faith begins to view herself and Buffy as superhuman beings, unencumbered by inconvenient systems of human ethics. She accidentally kills a man and refuses to accept responsibility for her action. She rejects the concept of community, and she refuses to abide by any ethical standards other than her own, which are increasingly minimalist. Faith has another encounter with Xander. She pretends to honor his desire and respect his limits: "Lights on or off? Kinks or vanilla?" Xander, however, is not interested in negotiating another scene, regardless of the level of kink involved. He tries to continue their conversation, hoping that he can help Faith: "I thought we had a connection." Faith insists on proceeding with erotic power play, even though Xander has most certainly not consented to it. "I could do anything to you right now, and you want me to. I can make you scream. I could make you die." Faith turns to breath play—the edgiest of the edge games—and chokes Xander into unconsciousness. Only the timely arrival of Angel saves Xander from serious injury or death (“Consequences,” B3015).

[55] It is at this point that Faith abandons both the ethical and the erotic. It is easy to assume that Faith's break with ethics occurs when she kills the deputy mayor. However, *Buffy* consistently argues that acts of lethal violence such as this are not irredeemable. (By Season Seven, Andrew could point out that "confidentially, a lot of [Buffy's] people are murderers. Anya and Willow and Spike" “First Date,” B7014.) The real problem here is that Faith has turned her back on her community and its standards. In the Buffyverse as in real world BDSM communities, the exchange of erotic power between humans is held to be ethical if and only if it is safe, sane and consensual. The killing of the deputy mayor was accidental; had she sought help within her community, Faith could have recovered from that. Her assault on Xander, however, was quite deliberate. Faith tries to justify this attack to Angel: "The thing with Xander; I know what it looked like, but we were just playing." Angel responds by explicitly invoking the major mechanism of consent for sadomasochistic scenes: "And he forgot the safety word. Is that it?" Faith's reply constitutes a seriously disturbing renunciation of the basic

standards of erotic power exchange: "Safety words are for wusses" (“Consequences,” B3015). Here Faith positions herself at the very margin of the margin. Her open advocacy of erotic power has already located Faith on the fringe of erotic behavior. She is now identifying herself as an "edge" player who need not follow the "safe, sane and consensual" standard. The problem, however, lies in the fact that even edge play has its own accepted standards and practices. It is possible to play without safe words, but such edge play requires a very high level of negotiation and informed consent. Such play typically occurs only within the framework of well-established erotic relationships. Xander and Faith had no such relationship. In any case, Xander lacks experience in erotic power exchange. For Faith to take advantage of a "newbie" in this way is entirely unacceptable, even by the standards of the "edge play" subculture. Her non-consensual "play" is, fundamentally, an act of rape.

[56]A full season later, Faith still doesn't understand the ethics of kink. In "Who Are You?" (B4016), Faith has taken possession of Buffy's body, thanks to a magical device bequeathed to her by the late Mayor. Faith tries to negotiate with Buffy's boyfriend, Riley: "What do you wanna do with this body? What nasty little desire have you been itching to try out? Am I a bad girl? Do you wanna hurt me?" Although she is wearing Buffy's body, Faith's explicit invocation of kink convinces Riley that this is not the Buffy he knows and loves. "What are we playing at here?" Riley demands. "I'm Buffy," Faith insists. "Okay. Then I'll be Riley," he decides. Faith's reply illustrates her disturbing inability to take no for an answer. "Well, if you don't wanna play. . ." she huffs. "Right. I don't wanna play," Riley agrees, and gives her a gentle kiss. When Faith initiated this scene, she made a number of unfounded assumptions about the form of Riley's desire. It never even occurred to her that he might not consent to her play agenda. Faith does have sex with Riley, but it's doubtful that this (presumably vanilla) sexual encounter satisfies her erotic needs; it seems likely that she does it mainly to hurt Buffy. As bad as all of this is, however, it is only on *Angel* that we see the full consequences of Faith's departure from the community of Slayers and its system of ethical kink. Faith arrives in Los Angeles and falls in with Wolfram and Hart. She captures and tortures Wesley, her former Watcher (“Five by Five,” A1018). This represents the culmination of the trend which began with her attempted rape of Xander. What she had proposed to do to Xander—torture him non-consensually, for her own pleasure, and without regard to his desire or consent—she actually does to Wesley. Here Faith enacts the ethically irredeemable Sadeian system, in which the pleasure of the torturer is always paramount, and the concerns of the victim irrelevant. The ethics of the Buffyverse, however, are *sadomasochistic* rather than sadistic. Like real world BDSM communities, the Slayer community incorporates the standard of submissive consent developed by Masoch to produce ethical S/M. Of course the non-consensual torture represents a trauma for Wesley, but what is really interesting about this scene is the devastating impact it has on Faith. Her complete abandonment of ethics breaks through her last psychological

defenses. By the end of "Five by Five," she is begging Angel to kill her (A1018).

[57] Following "Restless" (*Buffy*'s Season Four finale, B4022), the Buffyverse's meditations about power become increasingly explicit and textual. In "Restless," Buffy encounters the Primal Slayer, ancient mother of the Slayer line. Buffy then wakes up—from the dream in which the Primal Slayer appeared, and also from that dream of an innocent world, in which representations of power remain beneath the textual threshold. This is the moment when Buffy and *Buffy* get serious about power. In the very next episode, the legendary Dracula tells Buffy that her "power is rooted in darkness" (“Buffy vs. Dracula,” B5001). Dracula may be evil, but he's not wrong. At the end of the episode, Buffy tells Giles that Dracula understood her power better than she does. But her understanding soon improves. In "Checkpoint" (B5012), Buffy confronts the Watcher's Council, that eminently dislikeable collection of tweedy patriarchs who controlled the Slayer line until Buffy quit working for them. The Council once again tries to assert its authority over Buffy. The conclusion of the episode represents a breakthrough for Buffy (and is also deeply satisfying to the audience). Having realized that without a Slayer the Watchers are "pretty much just watchin' Masterpiece Theater," Buffy begins to speak about power differently. "Power. I have it. They don't. This bothers them."

[58] Having passed through the "Checkpoint," Buffy and *Buffy* are in a new ethical universe. Buffy understands that the power is hers. She is now free, in a way which she was not before. Similarly, *Buffy* understands itself to be in a discursive position from which open textual discussions of power are now possible. In the remarkable "Get It Done" (B7015), Buffy encounters patriarchal power once again. This time it happens through a re-enactment of the event which created the Slayer line. Buffy returns to the dreamtime, where she meets the ancient patriarchs who made the first Slayer. They chain her to a rock and release tentacular demons, which quickly descend on her. The shadow patriarchs tell her that this demon energy is her "truest strength." To her horror, Buffy suddenly realizes that this is her origin. Her heritage began here, with an unspeakable act of demon rape. But Buffy has already shown that she is a different kind of Slayer from her primal ancestor, and this time the origin story has a very different ending. Buffy says "no" to the demon rape. "You violated that girl, made her kill for you because you're weak, you're pathetic," she declares. She breaks her chains, and turns those chains into a weapon which she can use against the shadow men. She defeats them and breaks their staff. ("It's always the staff," she points out, and the critique of phallocratic power isn't getting any less explicit.)

[59] Buffy will not endorse the ancient rape which made the Slayers, nor will she submit to such a violation herself, even if it might give her more power. Jennifer Crusie is right to say that "the creation of the Slayer was a violent sexual sacrifice to death. . . . But the myth of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has never been the myth of the Slayer; it's the myth of Buffy Summers, the Slayer who is different" ("Dating Death" 95). Buffy

will not participate in a patriarchal power system; she rejects patriarchy's ancient tribal form (Shadow Men) as well as its modern bureaucratic form (Watcher's Council). But this does raise an important question. If Buffy rejects this coercive type of power, then what *is* the source of her power? We get a hint of the answer at the end of "Same Time, Same Place" (B7003), when Buffy shares her strength with Willow to help Willow heal from her injuries. Buffy's power is the kind which can (and perhaps should) be shared. This turns out to be a major theme of Season Seven.

[60] By the late seasons of *Buffy* and *Angel*, explicit textual discussions about power were becoming so common that it was even possible to recuperate Faith as a positive symbol of power's erotic potential. Faith spends some time in prison, pursuing a redemption which mainly occurs off-screen. By the time we see her again (in *Angel* Season Four), a remarkable reversal has occurred. She has returned to ethics once again. In fact, she is now able to claim the moral high ground over Dark Wes, whose own system of ethics has undergone considerable revision. "You crossed it back there, Wes," she says after Wes tortures a female informant. Wes reminds her of her own ethically problematic past: "Oh, you have a problem with torture now? I seem to recall a time when you rather enjoyed it" ("Release," A4014). But Faith has confidence in her own transformation: "Yeah, well, it's not me anymore."

[61] This remarkable transformation eventually permits Faith to rejoin the community of Slayers. In *Buffy* Season Seven, Faith joins Buffy and the potential Slayers in their fight against the First. From the moment Faith returns to Sunnydale, she finds that the moral categories which seemed so clear to everyone before have become confused. "Are you the bad slayer now?" she asks Buffy. "Am I the good slayer now?" ("Dirty Girls," B7018). It would be more accurate to say that Buffy has become the Slayer who is consciously aware of the operations of power, much as Faith always was before her "fall." As for Faith, she has returned to her community and embraced its ethics. Because she now respects the community and its values, Faith is again permitted to play erotic games and push erotic boundaries. In short, her kink is now authorized. And it is authorized precisely because Faith is now articulating her views on erotic power within the ethical framework provided to her by the Slayer community. In a playful scene with Spike, Faith mentions that "this one guy I ran with, he liked me to dress up like a school girl and take this friggin' bull-whip, and I'd be like. . .?" (B7018). Faith considers "looking up" the guy with the bullwhip. We know she won't do it, but the message is clear. She has forsaken the non-consensual, unethical use of her power. She has returned to the fold of ethics. She has always known that her power contains profound erotic potential; now she understands, at last, that this potential can only be realized if she employs it according to the ethical standards of her community.

[62] The season (and *Buffy*) conclude when Buffy decides to share her power with all of the Potentials, making every Potential into a full-fledged Slayer ("Chosen," B7022). Here *Buffy* subverts its own

foundational myth. "In every generation one Slayer is born because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule," Buffy declares. "They were powerful men. This woman [Willow] is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule. I say my power should be our power." Having renounced patriarchy, Buffy is free to experiment with a new form of power, one which is based upon community and consent. "Make your choice," she tells the Potentials. "Are you ready to be strong?" At the end of her journey, Buffy comes down in favor of a form of power which is consensual rather than coercive, a type of power which is negotiated and shared. By doing so, she initiates a new community and possibly a new race of women, much to patriarchy's dismay.

[63] Jennifer Crusie has recently wondered why "the Good Girls Gone Bad of the Whedon Universe—the Bad Willow, Buffy from Cleveland, Cordelia the Beastmaster and Blue Fred—always wear too much eyeliner and dress like dominatrixes? Where's the subtext, the humor, the subtlety?" ("Assassination of Cordelia Chase" 193). Since Crusie draws most of her examples from the late season Buffyverse, the answers are clear. The subtext is where it belongs, in early season *Buffy*, where it retains great historical importance. The humor is still there; if anything, it is more thoroughly present than ever. (*Angel* Season Five may well be the most hilarious of the Buffyverse's twelve seasons.) The subtlety is gone, a necessary casualty of the maturation process. After twelve remarkable seasons, the Buffyverse has reached adulthood. Its kink is out of the closet, and that kink has become a normal, healthy part of life. Erotic power no longer needs to hide in the subtext. This form of power has been emancipated at last. To be sure, this liberation represents a great boon for those who inhabit the Buffyverse. More importantly, it represents a remarkable historical opportunity for those who watch that universe. *Buffy* and *Angel* have presented their audience with a practical, ethical model of erotic power exchange. By doing so, they have authorized that audience to deploy this model in the real world. Human erotic relations can only benefit from this much-needed dose of honesty, openness and ethics.

A Note About Dialogue Quotations

All dialogue quotations are taken from the excellent Buffyverse Dialogue DataBase at http://vrya.net/bdb/index.php. For a complete listing of all *Buffy* and *Angel* episodes, see http://vrya.net/bdb/ep.php.

The dialogue quotations which form the titles of this essay, its sections and sub-sections are taken from the following episodes: Anya says "Sounds like kinky business to me" in "Storyteller" (B7016). Giles says "I believe the subtext here is rapidly becoming text" in "Ted" (B2011). Willow says "Did we not put the 'grr' in 'grrl'?" in "Living Conditions" (B4002). Buffy sings "Give Me Something to Sing About" in "Once More,

With Feeling" (B6007). Fred says "It. . .turns the TV into a two-way conduit with direct access to the viewer!" in "Smile Time" (A5014). The First as Drusilla says "That's why our kind make such good dollies" in "Bring On the Night" (B7010). Anya says "Pervert!" and Xander replies "Other Pervert!" in "The Gift" (B5022). Buffy says "It's about power. Who's got it. Who knows how to use it" at the beginning of "Lessons" (B7001).

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[1] See Vivien Burr's Sartrean interpretation of *Buffy* (Burr, "Ambiguity and Sexuality").

[2] As Kevin Andrew Murphy has noted, the BBC considers science fiction and fantasy to be children's viewing; as such, they are typically scheduled for the "teatime" slot and rigorously censored (142).

[3] In the Buffyverse as in real world kink communities, erotic activity is typically considered ethical only if it is "safe, sane and consensual." For more on this, see the discussion of Faith in section III below.