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Amy-Chinn, Dee

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Queering the bitch

Spike, transgression and erotic empowerment

Dee Amy-Chinn

Oxford Brookes University

ABSTRACT According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer exists when the constituent elements of anyone's gender or sexuality are not made (or cannot be made) to signify monolithically. By this definition Spike is the queerest character in the 'Buffyverse': both his gender and sexuality are fluid – neither is secure and both are based around excess. His gender switches from male to female and his sexuality from 'vanilla' to more varied and non-traditional forms of eroticism. The article argues that the character of Spike opens up opportunities for the resignification of what it means to be male or female, man or monster, dominant or submissive, 'vanilla' or an exponent of erotic variation – opportunities we need to seize if we are to challenge the all-pervasive binaries which govern our understanding of sex, gender and sexuality, and the interrelationship between these terms.

KEYWORDS *Buffy, eroticism, femininity, gender, liminality, masculinity, queer, sexuality, Spike, vampire*

'I may be love's bitch, but at least I'm man enough to admit it.' (Spike, 'Lover's Walk', 3:8)

Introduction

It is, of course, ostensibly an oxymoron for a man to be love's *bitch*: a bitch is, by definition, female. However, the vampire Spike – who came to dominate the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*), particularly in its later seasons – inhabits this paradoxical space. Indeed, as it will be argued here, Spike occupies a series of paradoxical and liminal spaces that make him impossible to categorize in any post-Enlightenment way. This existence outside our everyday categories of understanding suits him, ideally, for the appellation queer.

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick:

Queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be made*) to signify monolithically. (1994: 8; emphasis in original)

This article intends to argue that neither Spike's gender nor his sexuality can be made to signify monolithically. His queerness manifests itself not by virtue of the fact that he is a vampire with its traditional signifiers of perverse sexuality,¹ but because of the way that he transgresses the boundaries of acceptable gender and sexual behaviour. *BtVS* generally makes fun of Spike. Particularly in the early seasons of the show it delights in mocking and humiliating him and exposing his repeated failures, in order to reinscribe the value of dominant social norms. But rather than accept this state of affairs it is possible to propose that these eruptions of non-traditional sexuality are an inevitable part of an order that seeks to silence them and to suggest that the very grounds on which Spike is mocked are those from which he is able to draw his strength. His gender and sexual transgressions give him insights and abilities which are not available to other members of the Scooby Gang, who are constrained by their inhabiting of more rigid gender identities. As a result, Spike's queerness becomes the source of his power, particularly of his erotic power.

In making this argument this article intends to bring together, and to build upon, recent *Buffy* scholarship by Spicer and Burr. Spicer has argued, convincingly, that Spike's gender is hybridized – simultaneously coded both masculine and feminine – and that it is this liminality which empowers him in the 'Buffyverse', 'enabling him to navigate the complex gender inversions that mark a community oriented around a heroic, female Slayer' (2002: 1). While Spicer focuses on Spike's gender coding, Burr has addressed the way in which perverse sexuality (most notably sado-masochistic behaviour) is coded onto vampire characters in the series – again as a result of their liminal status – but this time their human/non-human liminality. As she notes, '*BtVS* makes visible, although does not endorse, non-normative sexual practices; it can only do this because those engaging in S[&]M practices are mostly presented as non-human' (2002: 358).

While Spicer focuses on Spike's gender and Burr on his (and other vampires') sexuality, a much more complex reading can be obtained by bringing the two together. This means viewing Spike neither as a hybrid nor as a liminal character, but as one who positively embodies the more controversial (and, to my mind, politically productive) notion of 'gender-fuck', a notion that enables a challenge to traditional notions of male and female without recourse to the neutral ground of androgyny (after all,

314 Spike is never neutral and could hardly be described as androgynous). June



Reich (1992: 125) argues that genderfuck is 'the effect of unstable signifying practices in a libidinal economy of multiple sexualities', that it destabilizes gender as an analytic category and that it 'subverts the possibility of possessing a unified subject position'. As she notes, 'sexuality and gender are interrelated but distinctive cultural constructions, and sexuality, in particular, must be thought of as irreducible to gender' (1992: 113). Such a destabilization is crucial to any effective analysis of Spike who, perhaps more effectively than any other character in popular fiction, exemplifies the postmodern subject with identities that are multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid (see Abbott, in this issue, for an analysis of the 'exponentially fragmented' persona of Spike in Season 7).

Moreover, as Judith Butler (1994: 24) has noted, there is a need to move both beyond and against those methodological demands which have led to the separation of gender and sexuality, and to resist the urge to stake (no pun intended) territorial claims. Gender has been viewed too often as the preserve of feminists, and sexuality too often the preserve of gay/lesbian theory. But, as this article will demonstrate, while Spike clearly challenges both traditional constructions of masculinity and heterosexuality, neither a feminist nor a gay/lesbian reading will get us very far in understanding what it is that Spike signifies. To get beyond this conundrum this article will use the term 'queer' because it can be argued that it is the best site from which to seek to reconcile the competing claims of gender and sexuality studies.

Definitions and manifestations

The word 'queer' means across, coming from the Indo-European root *twerkw* – its origins link it to the oblique, the twisted. Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994: xii) uses it to mean 'multiply transitive', a configuration of possibilities that moves across genders, sexualities, genres and perversions. Queer's slang connotation as a colloquial term for homosexual men did not originally denote disdain. In 1920s New York, to be queer meant simply to be different. And although by the 1940s the term had become pejorative with regard to homosexuality it also (and interestingly in relation to Spike) came to have a second meaning. To be 'queer for someone' meant that you felt passionately about that person (be they of the same or opposite sex), that you were head over heels in love (Glover and Kaplan, 2000). In this respect, at least, there can be no question that Spike is 'queer' – first for Drusilla, the woman who turns him into a vampire, and later for Buffy, the vampire slayer. The multiplicity of meaning attached to the word has generated attempts to resignify it over the course of the 1990s and into the 21st century, and to appropriate queer as a statement of identity and assertion. It is in this vein of a postmodern, positive erotics of gender that the word is used in what follows.

But Spike is queer in a further sense. Both his gender and sexuality are fluid: neither is secure and both are based around excess. His gender switches from male to female, and his sexuality from 'vanilla'² to more varied and non-traditional forms of eroticism, giving him access to a broader repertoire of behaviours than anyone else in the 'Buffyverse'. Spike complicates his biological maleness with a performance of gender that switches between testosterone-fuelled masculinity and an extreme form of femininity. Indeed, it is the confidence that he gains from his excessive masculinity that opens up the space in which he can enact his femininity. With regard to his sexuality, Spike is queer not because he is fluid in relation to the gender of his erotic object choice (within the actual television series both masculine Spike and feminine Spike are attracted to women), but because of his ability to practise a politics of what Gayle Rubin (1992) calls radical sex, accommodating both normative and non-normative forms of sexual behaviour, and to play a variety of roles within the latter. Spike is an accomplished 'switch', able to take either the man's part or the woman's; he is comfortable being completely submissive or completely in control. Spike is both male *and* female, masculine *and* feminine, vanilla *and* erotically varied.

To explore more fully how Spike queers the notion of gender, it is important to establish a difference between the idea of femininity and that of effeminacy. Femininity is socially valued because it is associated with women and conforms to socially constructed definitions of gender-appropriate behaviour. In contrast, effeminacy is a pejorative term because it is used to denote inappropriate gender behaviour, condemned as unmanly because a man behaves as a woman might. Spike never behaves in any way which might attract the label of effeminacy – indeed, more than any other character in *BtVS* he appears hostile towards those who display such traits. He dismisses two vampires nesting in the downtown warehouse in 'Crush' (5:14) as 'a couple of poofers' and there is the (infamous) derogatory tirade against Angel in 'In the Dark' (A1:3) with its references to Angel's 'prancing away like a magnificent poof' and his 'Nancy-boy hair gel'.

It may be that Spike's hostility to effeminacy originates in his human life as William in which, as 'Fool for Love' (5:7) made clear, he was despised and mocked for his delicacy and sensitivity (as well as for his complete lack of talent as a poet).³ Whatever the reason, it is clear that Spike associates effeminacy with ineffectuality, which complicates a systematically progressive reading of his queerness (and adds a conservative flavour to the show's discourse on sexuality). He shares the prejudice that effeminate men are somehow less than men, and on becoming a vampire adopts a working-class persona in keeping with the romanticized notion that working-class men are the most masculine. So when he performs femininity, he does so with agency and is able to draw power from it. This, of course, is the discourse of post-feminism that seeks to recast traditional



feminine behaviours as positive and empowering, and as denoting female superiority rather than inferiority (see Brooks, 1997; McRobbie, 1999; Projansky, 2001). Indeed, there are clear parallels between the discourses of queer and post-feminism, as both seek to revisit and reappropriate terms of derision as sites of validation.

Spike's biological maleness is never in doubt; more so than with any other male character in the 'Buffyverse', visual attention is constantly drawn to his crotch. His tight jeans and prominent belt buckle (a fetish prop that both offers and denies access and is a frequent prop in Spike fan-fiction) frequently work with the lines of a shirt worn open over a tight black T-shirt to direct our gaze downwards. In addition, Rhonda Wilcox (2002) has drawn attention to the significance of naming in *Buffy*, so we should note the self-adopted appellation 'Spike' – the most phallic name in the series. Spike also demonstrates a traditionally masculine sense of agency and authority. His supervision of Drusilla's restoration to health in the first part of Season 2 and the recovery of the Gem of Amara in 'The Harsh Light of Day' (4:3) both require considerable strategic planning and the services of lower-order vampires. Yet there are numerous ways in which the 'Buffyverse' queers Spike's gender: most notably his presentation as an object of erotic contemplation, his body image and his behaviour.

From the moment of his arrival in Sunnydale in 'School Hard' (2:3), Spike is presented as an erotic object for the female gaze. In the manner of the classic fetish shot, the camera's initial focus takes in Spike's feet and then tilts upwards until it reaches his face. But gratification is delayed – we see only his vampire visage, an unattractive prosthetic face which deflects the erotic presentation of his body. Not until the appearance of Drusilla do we see Spike's human guise. In the presence of femininity Spike immediately transforms from a macho posturing monster into a man of breathtaking beauty and erotic potential. The latter is emphasized when Drusilla cuts his cheek with her fingernail and licks the blood from his face – an exchange of bodily fluids that focuses attention from the outset on the sexual nature of their relationship. Later it is Spike's relationship with Harmony that reminds us of his sexual nature – and serves as a plot device that justifies his appearance without a shirt, his naked torso once again enabling him to be the focus of the gaze. Spike's highly sexual nature is showcased also via the spell device in 'Something Blue' (4:9), where he and Buffy believe they are in love and decide to get married; the dream sequence of 'Out of My Mind' (5:4) in which he asks Buffy to end his torment but where, instead of staking him, the two end up kissing passionately; and 'Family' (5:6) where (foreshadowing the events of 'Smashed', 6:9) a Spike–Buffy fight is the fantasy that fuels his sex with Harmony. These not only give us an insight into Spike's mind but also offer glimpses of the sexual chemistry between Spike and Buffy that comes to dominate his story arc (and, in the minds of some fans, the arc of the series).

However, it is the Season 5 episode 'Intervention' (5:18) that does the most to highlight Spike's erotic potential, not only in the scenes with the 'Buffybot' (a robotic lifesize Buffy sex toy) in which Spike is able to enact his sexual fantasies, but specifically when the Buffybot justifies saving him from the hell god Glory (the Big Bad of Season 5) on the grounds that 'He is evil. But you should see him naked, I mean really.' And in Season 6 we do – at least as far as pre-watershed TV and prevailing standards of taste and decency allow. Spike's physical nakedness in Season 6 is, of course, a metaphor for his emotional nakedness in the face of a sexual relationship with Buffy – and it is important in this context to note John Berger's (1972) distinction between nudity and nakedness (although this is another conceptual category that Spike seems to queer). Berger argues that to be naked is to be oneself, to be without disguise, and the diegetic nature of the situations in which we see Spike without his clothes indicates that he is naked, not nude. But clearly the number of times that he appears naked, and the way in which the camera displays as much of his body as decently possible, indicates that Spike's body is being offered up to the spectacle of the female gaze for no other reason than women *do* like to look. Even in Season 7, which the newly-souled Spike spends (mostly?) celibate,⁴ opportunities are deliberately created to enable the character to appear without a shirt. Indeed the show itself (in a typically self-referential nod) comments on his propensity to shirtlessness. When the First – in the guise of Buffy – uses Spike's blood to open the seal on the Hellmouth in 'Never Leave Me' (7:9), it does so commenting 'I was going to bleed Andrew, but you look a lot better with your shirt off.'

Casting Spike as the object, rather than the bearer, of the gaze, is made easier by the fact that he is physically the most feminine of men to inhabit the 'Buffyverse'. He is not as tall as the other regular male characters in the show, his frame is slight, his body toned but not overly muscular – in Intervention, Xander describes him as 'strong and mysterious and sort of compact but well muscled'. There is a notable absence of visible body hair – not just on his smooth chest, but on his legs and arms. Male body hair has been seen to hold considerable semiotic importance, locating man at the top of the ascending scale of body supremacies elaborated by the ancient physiologists, on the basis that hair is a sign of bodily heat and hence male superiority (Montserrat, 1996). Similarly, its absence might denote a diminished threat to the female and a suppression of aggressive male sexuality.

Spike's frequently chipped black fingernail polish may be meant to indicate that he is less than meticulous in his grooming routine, but the fact that he paints his nails at all testifies to the conscious attention he pays to his appearance. Then, of course, there is the high-maintenance hair-style. Spike's appearance in the Season 7 première 'Lessons' (7:1) with much longer hair and visible root growth serves as evidence that, even though dead, his hair does grow and that his peroxide look requires



regular upkeep. Peroxide blonde is a colour that signifies to excess, drawing attention to its artificiality. It is also very time-consuming to maintain. Spike's image-consciousness as a vampire imitates women's performance of femininity. He works at meeting some external standard of what it means to be a vampire in the same way that women have traditionally groomed and dressed themselves to conform to some external standard of womanhood. But the signifiers he adopts play to both his masculinity and his femininity; his fitted black clothing highlights both the masculinity and muscularity of his body, while his hair and nails highlight his feminine artificiality (see Abbott, in this issue, for an analysis of the significance of Spike's costuming and make-up in Season 7).

So queer, so far

Having queered Spike's body image we can also queer his behaviour. It is a commonplace assertion of the post-Cartesian world that whereas men are governed by reason, women are governed by emotion. In 'Lover's Walk' (3:8) we see clearly the bipolarity of Spike's masculine and feminine behaviours. He veers from the rational to the emotional. Initially he has a plan to kidnap Willow and threaten her until she performs a spell that will make Drusilla love him again, only to break down, drunk, and (literally) cry on Willow's shoulder. Later he bonds with Buffy's mother, Joyce, over hot chocolate as he again laments the fact that his girlfriend has left him. Spike is cast as the abandoned lover, desperate to be taken back at any cost, and as one who will go to any length to achieve this. But Spike's real narrative function in this episode is to be the teller of truth about love. For who else has either the experience or the intuition to confront Buffy and Angel (both of whom are trying to rely on reason) with the truth of their relationship? Only Spike, the 'Buffyverse' equivalent of Tiresias, the blind seer (blind, of course, to an understanding of his own relationship problems) who knows what it is to be both man and woman, and who bases his analyses of the situation on what his emotions tell him, rather than the dictates of reason.

Perhaps it is also Spike's enthusiasm for daytime soap opera that helps give him a female perspective on the world. From its inception, daytime television has been recognized as a genre which attracts a largely female audience and speaks to a female experience (see Brown, 1994; Brunsdon, 2000; Geraghty, 1991). Certainly within the adult world of Buffy, watching daytime TV is gendered behaviour. It is a shared interest in the supernatural soap opera *Passions* that forms the basis of the bonding between Spike and Joyce in 'Checkpoint' (5:12). By contrast, earlier in Season 5 ('Real Me', 5:2) when Buffy asks Giles just how bored he was in the previous year he answers, with disdain, that he watched *Passions* with Spike and that they are 'never to speak of it again'.

Spike's empathy with the feminine is made clear in Season 4. During 319

the 'impotence' scene with Willow in 'The Initiative' (4:7), Spike's pre-occupation with his inability to 'perform' is momentarily sidetracked when Willow begins to blame herself for his problem; faced with her lack of self-confidence he seeks to reassure her that she is attractive to men. Spike is subsequently the only character to empathize with Willow sufficiently to see her pain. While in 'Something Blue' (4:9) both Giles and Buffy think that she is 'coping better' and 'dealing' with having been left by her werewolf boyfriend, it is Spike who sees that 'she's barely holding it together'. And at the end of Season 6, when Anya is seeking vengeance against Xander for having left her at the altar, it is Spike who is able to help – not because he makes the wish that will enable the former vengeance demon to punish Xander, but because he is able to bond with her over rejection by a lover for whom one was prepared to change one's entire life. The source of comfort for the 1000-year-old demon, whose vocation had been to punish men for their treatment of women, turned out to have a man's body. One might also note the double gendering of the way in which Spike's chip works. He is made 'impotent' (a masculine condition) because any attempt to hurt a human results in a violent headache – a traditionally female excuse for avoiding sex.

Spike's ability to take the woman's part becomes a key feature of his sexual behaviour in his relationship with Buffy. Unlike Riley, and to some extent Angel, Spike feels no need to assert his masculinity constantly, no need to demonstrate his strength and ability to take care of her. He understands what it means for her to be the Slayer (after all, he has killed two of her predecessors), and more than any other character in the show Spike addresses her by her vocation. He is happy to be her back-up, to 'help her out'. As Spike asserts, Buffy may need some monster in her man, but for a woman whose life calling is based around penetration – around being the one who wields the stake – she also needs quite a lot of woman.

It is clear in the sexual relationship between Buffy and Spike that Buffy is in control. The sexual dynamic between them is different from their dynamic with previous partners. We know that most of Buffy's earlier sexual experiences have followed the traditional pattern of heterosexual intercourse – Buffy is generally underneath with her partner on top. This traditional patterning is reflected in Spike's relationship with Harmony. Yet in his relationship with Buffy, Spike spends a great deal of time on his back. Under Willow's spell in 'Something Blue', the culmination of the Spike/Buffy 'romance' sees Buffy straddling Spike in a crypt; in 'Intervention' we see the Buffybot straddle him in a graveyard – an indication that, even in his fantasies prior to the start of their sexual relationship, Spike is comfortable being underneath. In both the episodes that precede 'Smashed' (6:9), we again see Buffy astride Spike's prone body. Clearly, these two episodes are leading to the climactic encounter that ends in the consummation between Slayer and vampire – with the Slayer calling all the shots. Unlike any of her previous 'first times' this is not a mutual



decision to have sex. Not that Spike is unwilling – far from it – but it is Buffy who initiates the move from violence to sex. And she controls the pace – both against the wall of the collapsing building and when they have fallen through to the floor below.

But this is sex born out of violence, not a tender, loving encounter between two people who have made a mutual commitment but a hard, fast, frenzied, encounter between two people whose desire is excessive and out of control – an encounter that began with Spike's words to Buffy, 'I wasn't planning on hurting you . . . much'. This is every anti-sex feminist's nightmare come true – sex as violence, fuelled by a desire for domination and control. If we believe the domino theory of sexual peril (the idea that one 'bad' act necessarily leads to other 'worse' acts), a relationship that starts out like this can only deteriorate (Rubin, 1992).

As the show's producers made clear in the numerous mid-season interviews, Spike was Buffy's 'bad boyfriend' decision. But what exactly made Spike the bad boyfriend? After all, in Season 2 he was presented as the perfect boyfriend to Drusilla: loving, attentive, forgiving and willing to take untold risks for the woman he loved. Even with the shallow and annoying Harmony – the staking over the Gem of Amara (a talisman that renders the wearer immortal) aside – he demonstrated a resigned patience that few could equal. And although, up to the end of Season 6, we are constantly reminded of his evil nature, his absence of a soul, and the occasions on which he has tried to kill Buffy and her friends, Spike does claim to have changed. As Tara points out in 'Dead Things' (6:13), he has 'done a lot of good' (indeed he has saved all their lives more often than he has tried to kill them) and he does love Buffy. Spike is the 'bad boyfriend' primarily because of his actions in Season 5 – the season in which he obsessed over Buffy, stole photographs, clothes and underwear to create a private, stalker-like shrine to her, and when rejected, commissioned a robotic lifesize Buffy sex toy programmed to act out his fantasies. Clearly, the narrative here is trying to show that Spike's sexual interest in Buffy is both unhealthy and deviant, so that nothing good can possibly come from its actualization.

This depiction of Spike relates to Gayle Rubin's (1992: 281) ideas about the sex hierarchy – 'the charmed circle' versus 'the outer limits'. Rubin proposes that what is in the circle – heterosexual, vanilla, private, procreative, same-generation, relationship-based, bodies-only sex – is good, normal, natural and blessed. What is outside – homosexual, casual, non-procreative, cross-generational, in public, with manufactured objects, sado-masochistic – is bad, abnormal, unnatural and damned.⁵ This attaches considerable importance to ensuring that nothing dangerous is allowed to cross the erotic border from 'bad' to 'good', lest the entire edifice crumbles. By this account, all sex acts at the bottom of the hierarchy (such as any link between sex and violence, however consensual) must be considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuance. If we use

Rubin's hierarchy to map the relationship between Spike and Buffy it is all too clear how abnormal, unnatural and damned their relationship is. How it must be doomed because of its very nature. In contrast we might note the extent to which the relationship between Willow and Tara (despite its same-sex nature) falls within 'the charmed circle', indicating that Tara's death at the end of 'Seeing Red' (6:19) should not be seen as justifiable punishment for lesbianism.

Season 5 behaviours prepare us to view Spike as the 'bad boyfriend' choice, as Buffy increasingly becomes separated from her friends because of her relationship with him, as well as her participation in a range of sex acts which put them both outside of Rubin's 'charmed circle'. The show offers evidence of rough sex, indicated by the bruises and bitemarks we see on Spike's body (serving as a clear indication that the aggression in this relationship functions both ways), bondage involving the use of handcuffs and public sex – notably the balcony scene in the Bronze in 'Dead Things'. And there is Spike's invitation to Buffy in 'Wrecked' (6:10) to teach her how to use candles in foreplay (not by throwing them at one's partner, but by the strategic dripping of hot wax).

Making it perfectly queer

Does all of this make Spike's sexuality queer? It certainly pushes it beyond the vanilla. But it is important not to confuse Spike taking what he can get with getting what he wants. In 'Wrecked' Buffy assumes, on the basis of the previous night, that what she describes as 'perversion' is Spike's style. Previously, in 'Smashed', her allegation had been that Spike is in love with pain, a point with which Larbalestier (2004: 216) agrees. But neither are entirely correct. When in 'Gone' (6:11) Buffy suggests to Spike that he is finally getting what he wanted, he attempts to explain that their current relationship is not what he wants, but he gives up because he knows that Buffy does not want to hear what he has to say. Indeed, throughout the course of their relationship it continues to be Spike who takes the 'woman's part' with his persistent desire to talk through what is happening between them, and it is Buffy who takes the 'man's part' with her repeated compulsion to leave immediately after sex. Spike, in contrast, describes 'the best night of my life' as the night he spent simply holding Buffy and offering comfort while she slept ('End of Days', 7:21). This is not simply an effect of Spike's soul, it is also a reflection of the intimacy he has been seeking all along.

Spike is not in love with pain. Spike is in love with love, which truly does make him love's bitch. He is also in love with power, but in the case of sex, not the power of pain – either in terms of giving or receiving – but the power to give pleasure. If that involves pain, so be it, but only as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Although Burr (2003: 350) has argued that within the 'Buffyverse' vampire relationships are character-



ized by sadism and aggressive sexuality, Spike himself notes in 'What's My Line: Part 2' (2:10), that he was never one for what he calls 'the pre-show'. Indeed, Angel taunts Spike in this scene, suggesting that he is unable to satisfy Drusilla, and in 'Lovers Walk' Spike tells Willow that Drusilla left him because he 'wasn't demon enough for the likes of her'. Unlike the other vampires that we encounter in the series (both *BtVS* and *Angel*), Spike has no interest in torture for the sake of torture. In the episode 'In the Dark' (A1:3) Spike hires another vampire, Marcus, to torture Angel and quickly becomes impatient when this does not yield the information that Spike is seeking, even though Angel is clearly in excruciating pain.

Consent is critical to Spike in terms of his sexual relationships – and not just with Buffy. From the glimpses we have of his relationship with Harmony (someone he clearly does not love) he never forces, only suggests. So when Harmony expresses a distaste for the use of chains in 'The Harsh Light of Day' (4:3), or a threesome in 'Crush' – 'unless it's boy/girl/boy or Charlize Theron' – he takes her rejection in his stride. He loses interest in Harmony, but not because she will not play his games – after all, she makes up for these with games of her own (including her role-playing of Buffy, complete with stake). With the exception of the scene in the bathroom at the end of 'Seeing Red', Spike's relationship with Buffy is based on consent and trust, which is why so many Spike fans found this scene of attempted rape jarring and out of context. Indeed, as Heineken (2004) has noted, co-executive producer Marti Noxon has stated that Spike's attack on Buffy was a deliberate device to counter fan readings which saw him as worthy of Buffy's love. But up to this point in the season, Buffy wants what Spike is able to provide – as much as he wants to provide it. As he tells Riley in 'Into the Woods' (5:10), 'The girl needs a little monster in her man, and that's not in your nature to provide no matter how low you try to go'. So although Buffy may say 'never' and 'no' she means (*contra* feminist theory) 'always' and 'yes'. While this may not be the act of the empowered woman that we want Buffy to be, it would be an error to impute from her token refusals that Spike is forcing her into acts in which she does not want to participate; there is never any coercion. This, indeed, is the essence of consensual S&M relationships, where 'stop' and 'no' are never acceptable safe words. And, as Pat Califia (1997: 96) has noted, there is a strong ethic of care existing within the S&M community.

Spike instinctively knows Buffy better than she knows herself. This has been clear since 'Lover's Walk', when he confronts Buffy and Angel with the truth about their relationship that they were unwilling to acknowledge: that their passion for each other would never allow them to settle for being just friends. We know from numerous previous instances just how good his intuition is when it comes to emotional and sexual matters. This includes his instinctive understanding of the sexual nature of Willow and Tara's relationship. Unlike Buffy, Giles or Xander, he does not need to be told that the two are lovers – he is able to deduce it from their

interaction. Buffy wants Spike because he offers a more varied form of eroticism than any of her previous sexual partners. Spike can do vanilla – but he can do more. He can improvise and deliver whatever the situation requires because he is not constrained either by his sense of what his masculinity requires or by conventional notions of ‘acceptable’ sexual behaviour. He can match her stamina (in ‘Out of My Mind’ (5:4), Buffy tells her human partner Riley that she has ‘the endurance of ten men’) *and* accommodate her polymorphous desire. To adapt Spike’s own metaphor from ‘Fool for Love’, he can ‘dance’ in different tempos and in different styles. To change the metaphor, set the scene and Spike can play the role.

As the Spike–Buffy relationship develops in Season 6, what Buffy is playing out is her need to do penance, to feel shame for her inability to come to terms with her return from the grave. But Spike refuses to acquiesce with this self-abasement, refusing to consider their sexual behaviour inappropriate. In the wake of the events of ‘Smashed’, when Buffy hurls at him the accusation ‘You’re bent’ (obviously not using this term as a colloquialism for homosexual), his response is not to deny it but to reappropriate the intention behind the words with ‘Yeah ... and it made you scream’. Later in the same episode (‘Wrecked’) when she claims, ‘Last night was the most perverse, degrading experience of my life’, again he refuses to be abjected by this but resignifies the utterance with a reflective and thoughtful ‘Me too’. When Buffy claims that what they did together was not her style, Spike again turns this around with the retort, ‘No. It’s your calling.’ And it can be his – together they do, as Spike recalls in ‘End of Days’, ‘things I can’t even spell’.

Of course, this momentary self-assertion is shortlived. Spike may announce that his relationship with Buffy has changed, that he is no longer her whipping boy, now that he knows the truth about her – that she too has her dark side and that she wants what he can provide because, unlike Riley, he can go low enough for her. But in the end it is Buffy that holds all the aces in this relationship. A combination of Spike’s love for Buffy and his lack of self-esteem (a traditionally female character trait) condemn him to be a participant in a relationship in which he is both used and abused. When finally rejected he wants nothing more than to be taken back and used some more. When Buffy finally ends their relationship in ‘As You Were’ (6:15), saying ‘I can’t love you. I’m just [pause] being weak, and selfish’, Spike responds: ‘Really not complaining here.’ His willingness to provide Buffy with whatever she needs is reinforced in the final episode of the final season (‘Chosen’, 7:22). The night before the climactic battle with the First, Buffy hints that she would like to share Spike’s basement bed. Spike, having just seen Buffy and Angel kissing passionately, seems to reject this suggestion, saying ‘I’ve got my pride you know’. But when Buffy says she understands and turns to leave, Spike quickly cuts off her retreat with the words: ‘Clearly you don’t, ’cause the whole “having my pride” thing was just a smokescreen.’



It is this imbalance of power which makes their relationship unhealthy, not their failure to conform to the gendered sex roles which define an acceptable sexual relationship or the fact that they engage in a series of sexual acts which conventional society finds unacceptable and incompatible with a mutually rewarding relationship. As Gayle Rubin proposes:

A democratic morality should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, *the level of mutual consideration*, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of pleasures they provide. (1992: 283; emphasis added)

At least as far as Season 6 is concerned, it is *this* test that Spike and Buffy fail. Buffy does not show Spike the consideration that he shows for her. She is not concerned about the quantity and quality of pleasure she provides for him. For Buffy, it is always all about Buffy.

Conclusion

For Spike, biology is destiny: he cannot change one until he has changed the other. As Simone de Beauvoir (1983: 295) said, 'One is not born, but rather becomes'. Whereas women's destiny was traditionally determined by the presence of a uterus, in the 'Buffyverse' a vampire's destiny is determined by the absence of a soul. Yet in the past the inferior status of women has been linked, if not to the total absence of a soul, then at least to their inability to master the needs of the body and establish the correct balance between body and soul. From a feminist perspective, Spike's destiny resonates with that of women. He suffers in a way that reflects back to 'the second sex' their historical condition, being despised on the basis of his physiology, dependent on others for his welfare, and used to provide sexual services to someone he loves but who gives him no respect in return. Indeed, within the mythology of the show, Spike needs to change his ontology to fit the prevailing ethos that only those with a soul can even be considered as equals – in much the same way as women's equality is all too often dependent on their willingness to adopt masculine values and behaviours.

Yet Spike continually refuses to allow himself to be cast as victim. Rather than contribute to his supposed 'impotence', Spike's embrace of minority, marginalized and abjected practices in terms of his performance of both gender and sexuality, empower him to act in ways that work to the benefit of the other characters. They enable him to fulfil a positive role which is not available to those who can only operate within the heteronormative matrix. But the series has it both ways. Spike's queerness allows alternative ways of performing gender and sexuality to be showcased and given visibility. But locating them in a character who, until Season 7, by his very nature represents everything that is evil and disgusting, allows

the show to disavow any allegation that it promotes socially and morally unacceptable behaviours. So Spike's location as queer is confirmed by his regular fate, a fate that reflects that of queers in contemporary society – subject to violence at unexpected moments for no other reason than that he is what he is, living on a knife-edge between life and death with the possibility that his very existence could be erased at any time, with no excuse necessary.

Of course, all of this changes once Spike has earned his soul. But the addition of a soul does not entirely banish Spike's queerness – although it does modify it. His love for Buffy and self-disgust at his attempted rape of her means that he spends the final season of *BtVS* celibate, despite expressions of sexual interest from Anya in both 'Sleeper' (7:8) and 'Get It Done' (7:15). But in the libidinal economy dominating today's world, perhaps putting oneself outside this economy is the queerest position of all.

In the Preface to the second edition of her highly influential work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler wrote:

Gender Trouble sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions. The text also sought to undermine any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimize minority gendered and sexual practice. This doesn't mean that all minority practices are to be condoned or celebrated, but it does mean that we ought to be able to think them before we come to any kinds of conclusions about them. What worried me most were the ways that the panic in the face of such practices rendered them unthinkable. Is the breakdown of gendered binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender? (1999: viii)

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. In the process he transforms transgression into empowerment, potential weakness into actual strength and demonstrates the power of being both/and, rather than simply either/or. From this we can conclude that there is nothing wrong with being love's bitch – as long as you *are* man enough to admit it.

Notes

1. Linda Williams suggests:

The vampire film offers a clear example of the threat this different form of sexuality represents to the male. The vampiric act of sucking blood, sapping the life fluid of a victim so that the victim in turn becomes a vampire, is similar to the female role of milking the sperm of the male during intercourse. (1984: 89)



2. 'Vanilla' is a term denoting conventional heterosexual behaviour, where the partners adopt traditional gender roles with the male as active and the female passive.
3. In a nice rounding out of the Spike story arc the final episode of *Angel*, 'Not Fade Away' (A5:22) showed Spike choosing to spend what he believes will be his final day performing his poem to Cecily (for which he is mocked in 'Fool for Love') to rapturous applause at a poetry slam.
4. Symonds (2004) states that after the attempted rape in 'Seeing Red', Buffy and Spike never have sex again, other than the metaphorical sex that occurs at the end of 'Chosen' when their joined hands burst into flames. This is a wonderfully ambiguous scene, where Buffy finally declares that she loves Spike (thus fulfilling the prophecy made by Carrie in 'Help' that 'one day she'll tell you'), but Spike reads the declaration as a mollifying parting gesture. At the same time, however, their conjoined hands burst into flames, harking back to Spike's statement in 'Seeing Red' that great love 'burns and consumes'. It is Spike's love for Buffy that, in the end, literally does burn and consume him. In contrast to Symonds, Larbalestier (2004: 217) assumes that Buffy and Spike do have off-screen sex in the final episode, when Buffy goes to the basement for the final time the night before the final showdown with the First. The scene ends ambiguously with Buffy and Spike walking towards each other purposefully, but cuts before they meet. In the DVD commentary to this episode, Joss Whedon states that he left the scene ambiguous because he 'wanted the audience to fill in the blanks'. Whatever the audience wants to have happened, happens: 'The viewer has earned that.'
5. Rubin (1992) also suggests that the sex hierarchy assumes what has been referred to earlier as the domino theory of sexual peril.

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Biographical note

Dee Amy-Chinn is a senior lecturer in communication, media and culture at Oxford Brookes University. Her research focuses on representations of gender and sexuality in popular culture, with a particular interest in challenges to the heteronormative matrix. Her work has been published in *Women: A Cultural Review* (Routledge, 2001) and her article on *Angel*, 'Good Vampires Don't Suck: Sex, Celibacy and the Body of Angel', was published in *Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (Inter-disciplinary Press, 2003). ADDRESS: Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes University, Harcourt Hill