

“Fears and Femininity at the Fin-de-siecle: Of Vampires and Vampire Slayers”

Carla Kungl

The figure of the vampire in popular culture is an apt metaphor for many things, as critics have pointed out. Nina Auerbach has rather famously noted in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* that every generation creates its own vampires; we make our vampires what we need them to be.¹ Gordon and Hollinger, in their introduction to the collection *Blood Read*, build on this notion of our own relationship to vampires: “contrary to the old legends that vampires have no reflection, we do indeed see many diverse reflections—of ourselves—as the vampire stands before us cloaked in metaphor.”²

Two of the more timeless concerns that vampires can reflect for us, or in us, according to Gordon and Hollinger, are “sexuality, of course” and “power.”³ In relation to women, these fears remain as potent today as they did at the end of the 19th century, when images of the female as vampire, or at least as vampiric—sucking the life out of healthy manhood—were widespread. Metaphorically, these female vampires can be seen as a representation of society’s fear of women’s growing role in the public sphere at the perceived expense of their child-bearing duties. Thus, literary female vampires threaten both by seducing men into abandoning their duty and by trying to release other women from their roles and duties as proper wives and mothers.

In contrast, one of the most popular figures at the turning of the 21st century is a woman who slays vampires, a seeming reversal of fortune for the female character. Now the woman warrior instead of the draining virago, Buffy (from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) works like many fantasy women characters of popular culture, who provide a site to contest the dominant imagery and ideology of womanhood.

In this paper I want to turn on its head a commonplace which has been stated about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—that the show, in depicting its metaphorical battles against the demons of growing up, promotes a healthy counterpoint to images of women as frail and weak; that Buffy specifically is an excellent role model for girls to look up to.⁴ I find this ready-made “female empowerment” slogan a little too easy: for me, Buffy, as a signifier in popular culture for women’s strength, inhabits a very uneasy position between her vampiric predecessors and what would seem to be women’s new-found glory.

Popular culture itself has long been aligned with the feminine; the strained relationship came to a peak in the 1860s and 1870s with women writers of sensation fiction. As mass-produced literature designed to evoke emotions, it became contrasted with fiction deemed “masculine” by the current gendered critical discourse: a solitary work of genius, meant to inspire, the “high literature” produced by men.⁵ At the same time, because its subject matter and heroines often disrupted traditional patterns of accepted women’s behavior, it was “also feared and censured as a non- or even anti-feminine form.”⁶

Women’s uneasy relationship with mass culture continued as print culture escalated in the 1880s and 1890s. In common perception, women became aligned with mass culture, extending from the same reasons that they had been aligned with earlier sensation fiction: there were more women writers than in previous decades; they wrote for a much wider audience, since compulsory education created a whole new generation of working class readers; and because women had the leisure to read, they were seen as primary “consumers” of this new literature: cheaply produced, written for the masses, throwaway, popular. As Goodlad writes: “the massification of fin-de-siecle culture was defined and experienced as a process of *feminization*.”⁷ Wicke draws an even tighter connection between women and vampiric activity, which she associates with mass culture, and the changing relationship of women to this culture: “it is its [the mass cultural’s] seductive invasion of the home that allows the domestic to become the site, the opening puncture wound, for all the techniques of mass culture.”⁸

In this atmosphere, it is not hard to recognize women as metaphorical vampires: consumers, those who drain others. Thus, the intersection of vampires in 19th century literature with women’s increasing entrance into the public sphere through mass culture is not surprising. Bram Dijkstra, in *Idols of Perversity*, examines representations of fear of women through the art created during the fin-de-siecle, the vitriolity of which is so pronounced that it documents a “veritable iconography of misogyny.”⁹ Reiterating the connection other theorists have made between consumption, commodification, and womanhood, Dijkstra argues that by 1900, as a mode of representation, the vampire specifically “had come to represent woman as the personification of everything negative that linked sex, ownership, and money.”¹⁰

And yet, forgotten in the passing of time, in part because of Dracula’s overbearing shadow, is this

preponderance of female vampires in lesser-known literature and short stories from the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, in Richard Dalby's collection of vampire stories, thirteen of the first seventeen stories, written between 1867 to 1914, feature a female vampire.¹¹ "The Stone Chamber" by H.B. Marriott Watson (1899) seems to exemplify this time period's "natural" alliance between fear and the female. The ancestral home of Marvyn Abbey had a bloodthirsty past, as our narrator reads in an ancient volume recounting the legend. Two brothers and the wife of one of the brother's all died strangely and tragically on the same night. Our narrator writes that "The names of Sir Rupert Marvyn and Priscilla, Lady Marvyn, shook me strangely, but particularly the latter."¹² There were rumors of an affair between Lady Marvyn and her brother-in-law, and while the narrator speculates that this foreign lady of unknown parentage was drawn into the dissolute ways of the Marvyn family, he reads that "according to a second rumor, chronicled by the author, there was some doubt if the woman were not the worst of the three."¹³ She is then described by the narrator as the woman whose "infamous beauty had brought a terrible sin between the brothers."¹⁴ We find out at the end of the story, that while all three were buried in the stone chamber which served as the family vault, only two were really dead; Lady Marvyn in bat form continues to bite and weaken, literally drive to insane anger, anyone who sleeps in room located above the chamber.

Many common tropes of late 19th-century female vampires are brought up here: the woman is the interloper; the woman cannot be successfully contained by her current generation and is only able to be defeated in a later one (the more scientifically advanced fin-de-siecle); the discovery and eventual defeat of this vampire is often as accidental as it is purposeful; the hand that defeats her is male; her prey is both male and female; she is usually either aristocratic or foreign and often both; in some way she is figured as decadent, an outsider. Carmilla, in the short novel of the same name by J. Sheridan LeFanu, is a more famous example of the aristocratic vampire preying on newer generations; Dijkstra claims that this story, along with Stoker's *Dracula*, "are central documents of the late 19th-century war on women,"¹⁵ direct expressions of the dualistic belief that designated women either virgin or whores, angels or devils.

"Good Lady Ducayne" (1896) portrays a different vampiric situation from the sensual relationship found in "Carmilla," in many ways more modern, as her creator, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, was herself a paragon of the popular. In this case, the good Lady Ducayne and her Italian doctor prey on young companions, who have been hired because of their strong constitutions, by slowly draining their blood. These girls sicken and die in her employ, and Bella Rolleston is on her way to doing so as well until rescued by a doctor friend who has fallen in love with her and notes quite emphatically that those are not mosquito bites on her arm. Bella is released from her duty, bought off with a check for 1000 pounds and an admonishment to "go and marry your doctor."¹⁶ Braddon's short story can be read particularly as an economic indictment, as Lauren Goodlad's article contends; to take her argument a step further as it intersects with the specific fin-de-siecle concern of women's employment, the story is exceptionally brutal: in this case, even the lowly and despised position of paid companion, one of the few acceptable jobs for poverty-stricken middle-class women, becomes dangerous work; as always, the lesson seems to be that women should marry and be taken care of, by their husbands and by money handed to them regardless of the circumstance. Women's paradoxical relationship to the public sphere—asked to remain home and yet aligned with the popular—becomes even more pronounced during the late 19th century; they struggle to inhabit the mass culture they both create and consume, a mass culture which Goodlad writes is "at once experienced as monstrous, feminine, and (increasingly) ubiquitous."¹⁷

What do these popular female vampires have in common then with Buffy, the 20th century vampire slayer? At face value, nothing much. My interest in this topic first began when I tried to figure out why there were so few female vampires on the show, especially given my interest in the metaphorical use of vampires to represent late 19th century fears of women's burgeoning role in the public sphere. So if these vampires weren't "popular," who was? Buffy, who had the strength to slay them. And then I wondered about Buffy's popularity, and came to the strange conclusion that her character is imbued with traits even more alarming than the bloodsucking fiends she fights against. I want to complicate what seems to have become a fully documented assertion that Buffy serves as an excellent role model, a premiere example of society's new warrior women, or what Frances Early has termed a transgressive "open image," making Buffy "inherently unsettling" as she creates the "potential for intentional social change."¹⁸

Yet I think all of these critics would agree with Sherrie Inness' argument in *Tough Girls* (1999), that this portrayal doesn't necessarily translate into a sign of women's rising influence in real life. Inness writes: "the ever-

changing depiction of the tough girl has offered women an illusion of freedom and power but has, simultaneously, operated to support the gender status quo.”¹⁹ This ambivalence is not surprising: images from popular culture usually lag far behind society’s changing norms, holding on longer to those stereotypes that are comfortable to the majority of viewers.

So it is in this intersection that I want to place *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: between a medium desirous of maintaining status quo and the “new” image of toughness that *Buffy* promotes and indeed seems to be rewarded for—the show succeeded beyond anyone’s dreams, going from a 12-episode mid-season replacement on the ratings-basement WB Network to a both wildly popular and critically-acclaimed series. So, the line goes, in society’s changing mores, we now accept and even look up to women who are tough, who have strength.

I want to posit a different way of looking at that strength and argue that it is society’s fears about women’s strength, rather than acceptance of it, that have as much to do with *Buffy*’s popularity as it did with 19th-century female vampires. Sherrie Inness provides examples throughout her book of the ways that toughness in women is “limited, confined, reduced, and regulated.”²⁰ Such is the case, I would argue with *Buffy*: modern-day fears are potently distilled and contained in her, as the “one girl in all the world, a Chosen One, one born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires.”²¹ Thus, 19th-century fin-de-siecle fears of either woman’s strength (as the New Woman) or her ability to drain the strength of men (as a vampiric image) are both reified and re-imagined in *Buffy*: after all, it is *Buffy*’s preternatural strength that makes her “a freak,” as she puts it. If 19th-century female vampires were created to be killed, a distillation of fears of their society, then ultimately our society has performed a similar act: localized in *Buffy*’s body, contained in one vessel, this strength has been made innocuous through its uniqueness. *Buffy* succeeds, not just narratively on the show but more importantly as a pop icon, because no one else can do what she does. Society has nothing to fear from a proliferation of super-strong female slayers; there will only ever be one. Hence, *Buffy* is a modern-day example of the way that anxieties in popular culture are still imagined around fear of women’s strength; we have simply found a different way to make this strength safe.

In comparing these two sets of popular images, we end on a similar note, though in an entirely different mythological landscape: strength in women is alienating, something that causes or promotes fear. Bram Dijkstra would have no problem with this connection, for he points out that while society has perhaps forgotten the “specific content” of fin-de-siecle images of feminine evil, they continue to influence us today because they have had “a fundamental influence on the development of our preconceptions regarding the nature of women; as anyone familiar with the imagery of the popular arts of our own time can attest, their legacy still festers among us, kept alive by Hollywood and the world of advertising.”²²

One might argue that this season’s story arc, with its army of Slayerettes, works to counter this “One Girl in all the world” image; there are a multitude of Potentials, and Faith, whose strength equals *Buffy*’s, has returned. But the text of the show in several episodes this season has made it clear that Slayers work alone, whether it is *Buffy*, or Faith, or Nikki, Robin Wood’s mother.²³ And, as *Buffy* herself notes, we pretty much use that girl up until she dies, whereupon another takes her place, completely automatically, without fanfare, in secret. As the show has gotten darker over the past seasons, far from thinking her a role model, I ask myself: who would want to be *Buffy*?

Don’t get me wrong: I’m a huge *Buffy: the Vampire Slayer* fan. I find the show satisfying on many levels, and I love watching *Buffy* kick some demon ass, as she is fond of saying. But as a professor who uses popular culture in the classroom, I have become a bit alarmed at my students’ inability to see inherent contradictions in the texts we use; the shows and movies that are most popular are so because of their ability to intrigue while remaining at their core socially conservative. At best, such shows offer enough ambiguity to allow audience members space for invention; but the mere proliferation of what one of my students called “woman empowering” shows” doesn’t mean we’ve ushered in a new era. This student, in response to an article on how good characters like *Buffy* and *Sabrina* (from *Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch*) were for girls’ self-esteem, wrote in her reading log that “these types of shows are ridiculously fake and have nothing to do with girls’ everyday lives. Using magic [referring to *Sabrina*] to help themselves out in their every day lives is just fine for them but every other girl in this world does not have magical powers.” I would say, exactly.

I don’t want to dismiss those aspects of the show that shed light on the rigidity of gender roles; Joss Whedon, the show’s creator, clearly wants it to be about turning the tables, and this season especially seems concerned with the illuminating the failure of patriarchal models in society.²⁴ But to glibly talk about the ways *Buffy* empowers girls by inspiring them to fight their own demons is to gloss over too quickly the inherent premise of the

show: Buffy is the Chosen One, the one girl in all the world. No one else can do what she does.

So while I'm attempting to draw at least metaphorical parallels between 19th-century female vampires and a vampire slayer, I do want to make clear that I'm examining Buffy as a trope, an image that I think is important we deconstruct to find the myth beneath. Critics need to continue to examine society's popular images to gain insight into the paradoxes surrounding established female forms and the ways their popularity can be read. As a model for female strength, I find the ultimate conclusion for Buffy slightly scary. Maybe I should argue that *Buffy* is an accurate reflection of current status of women: they can only enjoy the freedom generated by their strength in genres that have their basis in fiction, not in fact, and that very element that makes them stand out—their strength—is the same element that forces them to stand alone.

NOTES

1. Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), Acknowledgements.
2. Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger, eds., *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 1997), 3.
Ibid, 3.
4. Rhonda Wilcox, for instance, mentions *George* magazine's nomination of Sarah Michelle Gellar, who plays Buffy, as one of 1998's "20 Most Fascinating Women in Politics" for her portrayal of "healthy strength," compared to the girls described in Mary Piper's popular book *Reviving Ophelia*. To me, this lack of distinction between a real person and a character from TV emphasizes the importance of examining popular culture and its importance in image-making in our society. See "There Will Never Be a 'Very Special' Buffy," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 16+.
5. Lynn Pykett provides a full account of the rise of sensation fiction and women's paradoxical role in it, as well as the ways this paradox continued into the New Woman writing of the 1890s. See *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Women Writing* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
6. Ibid, 34.
7. Lauren M. E. Goodlad, "'Go and Marry Your Doctor': Fetishism and 'Redundance' at the *Fin de Siecle* and the Vampires of 'Good Lady Ducayne,'" in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, edited by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 225.
8. Jennifer Wicke, "Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and Its Media," in *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, ed. John Paul Riquelme, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism (Boston: Bedford/St.Martins, 2002), 587.
9. Bram Djiskerka, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), viii.
10. Ibid, 351.
11. More specifically, I am referring to the first seventeen stories that feature "human" vampires; thus I've not included the stories about man-eating trees and reconstituted ghostly fingers. See Richard Dalby, *Dracula's Brood* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987).
12. H. B. Marriott Watson, "The Stone Chamber," in *Dracula's Brood*, ed. Richard Dalby (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), 211.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid, 212.
15. Djiskerka, 341.
16. Braddon in Dalby, 170.
17. Ibid, 226.
18. Frances H. Early, "Staking Her Claim: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as Transgressive Woman Warrior," *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 3 (2001): 12. For a similar type of argument see also Michael Ventura, "Warrior Women: Why Are Shows Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *La Femme Nikita*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* So Popular, Especially Among Teens?" *Psychology Today* 31, no. 6 (1998): np. *EbscoHost*, Academic Search Premiere (13 June 2002).

19. Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 1999), 27.

20. *Ibid.*, 178.

21. *The Buffy Dialogue Database*, 8 May 2003, <<http://www.vrya.net/bdb/clip.php?clip3150>> (14 May 2003).

22. Djiskerka, viii-ix.

23. In the episode "Lies My Parents Told Me" (US air date 25 March), both Spike and Robin Wood, the son of the New York Slayer whom Spike killed, realize ultimately that Slayers need to be alone, to fight alone. While they are fighting, Wood accuses Spike of stealing his childhood by killing his mother:

Wood: She was all I had. She was my world!

Spike: And you weren't hers. Doesn't that piss you off?

Wood: Shut up! You didn't know her.

Spike: I know Slayers. No matter how many people they've got around them, they fight alone.

Life of the Chosen One. The rest of us be damned. Your mother was no different.

After talking to Buffy, who reiterates that the Mission is what matters, and the Mission is ultimately solo, Wood realizes that Spike (and Buffy) are right.

In last week's episode, "End of Days" (US air date 13 May), this theme of solitude was reiterated by Faith, talking to Buffy after leading the Potentials into a trap:

Faith: My whole life I've been alone . . . no ties, no buddies, no relationships that have lasted . . .

Faith: . . . the point: me, by myself, all the time. And I'm lookin' at you, everything you have, and I don't know, jealous. Then there I am, everyone's looking to me, trusting me to lead them, and I've never felt so alone in my life.

Buffy: Yeah.

Faith: And that's you, everyday, isn't it?

Buffy: I love my friends, I'm very grateful, but that's the price, being a Slayer . . .

Buffy . . . I guess everyone's alone, but being a Slayer—there's a burden we can't share.

Faith: And no one else can feel it.

Authors note: This paper was delivered before the season finale of the show; obviously, the plot line giving all the potential slayers their full slayer strength addresses my criticism in some way. Yet to dispense with the show's entire slayer mythology in a few episodes seems too quick to fully counteract what seven seasons has set up. It would be interesting to see how Whedon and the show's other writers would continue this storyline of "an army of Slayers" into another season. My guess is that they couldn't, for the exact reasons this paper discusses.

24. Concerning the creation of the movie version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon has remarked that it was "my response to all the horror movies I have ever seen where some girl walks into a dark room and gets killed. So I decided to make a movie where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and kicks butt instead." See Elizabeth Tracy, *The Girl's Got Bite: The Unofficial Guide to Buffy's World* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1998), 6.

Frances Early comments that while Whedon sees the show supplying a role model for young women, he also is attempting to teach young men to be comfortable with strong women figures. A recent interview with Whedon about the ending of the series *Buffy* supports this. When Whedon was asked if he could believe the impact the show has had on popular culture, he responded: "I always intended it to have the impact on popular culture that it did. I wanted Buffy to be a pop icon. I wanted her to be remembered. I wanted her to be in people's interior lives. I wanted her to be a hero to kids and she was designed very specifically for that . . ." In "Joss Whedon Interview—Ending Buffy," *Action.adventure.about.com*, 21 April 2003, <http://www.buffy.nu/article.php3?id_article=728> (15 May 2003).

As for the show's depiction of the failure of patriarchal institutions, I can document several examples this season. One, though organized religion has never been a feature of the show, it is no coincidence the vessel for the First Evil is a misogynistic and evil preacher-man named Caleb, a representative of an institution whose teachings

have often been mis-used to endorse the suppression of women. Two, not only did we see The Watcher's Council's destruction (which is a powerful enough symbol), even more disturbingly, we saw its creation. The first Watchers, the Shadow-Men, basically stole a teen-age girl, had a demon rape (impregnate?) her, and have used her ensuing power ever since to fight their war against evil. Buffy, when presented with what they call a similar "gift" to increase her power, angrily refuses, rips out the chains she's held down with, and uses them as weapons against them instead. Even Giles, the one male figure in the show who has been Buffy's main support since she began as a Slayer, has disappointed and betrayed her, not necessarily as her Watcher but more importantly as a father-figure. Buffy told Giles several times after his complicity in Spike's attempted murder that she feels there is nothing left he can teach her, that he has lost her trust.

Thanks to Klytaimnestra, from the Tabula Rasa Website, for her insights into this topic. She calls this a season "dedicated to throwing off the chains of patriarchy."

WORKS CITED

- Auerbach, Nina. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. "Good Lady Ducayne." In *Dracula's Brood*, edited by Richard Dalby, 145-170. New York: Dorset Press, 1987.
- The Buffy Dialogue Database*. 8 May 2003. <<http://www.vrya.net/bdb/clip.php?clip3150>> (14 May 2003).
- Dalby, Richard, ed. *Dracula's Brood*. New York: Dorset Press, 1987.
- Djiskerka, Bram. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Early, Frances H. "Staking Her Claim: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as Transgressive Woman Warrior." *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 3 (2001): 11-27.
- Gordon, Joan, and Veronica Hollinger, eds. *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*. Introduction. Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 1997.
- Goodlad, Lauren M. E. "'Go and Marry Your Doctor': Fetishism and 'Redundance' at the *Fin de Siecle* and the Vampires of 'Good Lady Ducayne.'" In *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, edited by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie. 211-233. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000.
- Inness, Sherrie A. *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 1999.
- "Joss Whedon Interview—Ending Buffy." *Aaction.adventure.about.com*. 21 April 2003. <http://www.buffy.nu/article.php?id_article=728> (15 May 2003).
- Klytaimnestra. Review of "Lies My Parents Told Me." *Tabula Rasa*. 27 March 2003. <<http://btvs-tabula-rasa.net/episodes/season7/kly/7-15kly.html>> (14 May 2003).
- Pykett, Lynn. *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Women Writing*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Tracy, Elizabeth. *The Girl's Got Bite: The Unofficial Guide to Buffy's World*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1998.
- Ventura, Michael. "Warrior Women: Why Are Shows Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *La Femme Nikita*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* So Popular, Especially Among Teens?" *Psychology Today* 31, no. 6 (1998): np. *EbscoHost*. Academic Search Premiere (June 13, 2002).
- Watson, H. B. Marriott. "The Stone Chamber." In *Dracula's Brood*, edited by Richard Dalby, 190-216. New York: Dorset Press, 1987.
- Wicke, Jennifer. "Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and Its Media." In *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, edited by John Paul Riquelme. 577-599. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism. Boston: Bedford/St.Martins, 2002.
- Wilcox, Rhonda. "There Will Never Be a 'Very Special' Buffy: Buffy and the Monsters of Teen Life." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 27, no. 2 (1999): 16+. *EbscoHost*, Academic Search Premiere (13 June 2002).