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Magic and Spells in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)

Introduction

Many examinations of magic and witchcraft in film and television focus on the gender dynamics depicted and what these can reveal about attitudes to women and power in the eras in which they were made. For example, Campbell, in *Cheerfully Empowered: The Witch-Wife in Twentieth Century Literature, Television and Film* (2002) draws from scholarship such as Greene's *Bell, Book and Camera* (2018), Gibson's *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (2007) and Murphy's *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) to suggest connections between witch wife narratives and societal responses to feminism, exploring both the allure and fear of powerful women, who are often tamed (or partially tamed) by marriage in these stories. These perspectives provide important insights into cultural imaginings of witches, and this paper aims to use anthropological perspectives to further analyse rituals, spells, and cosmologies of screen stories of magic and witchcraft, asking how these narratives have engaged with witchcraft trials, symbols of women as witches, and rituals and myths invoking goddesses.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer a television series that ran for seven seasons (1997-2003) focuses on a young woman, The Slayer, who vanquishes vampires. As Abbott (1) explains, the vampires in seasons one and two are ruled by a particularly old and powerful vampire, The Master, and use prophetic language and ancient rituals. When Buffy kills The Master, the vampiric threat evolves with the character of Spike, a much younger vampire who kills The

Master's successor, The Anointed One, calling for 'a little less ritual and a little more fun' 'School Hard' (ep. 2003). This scene is important to Abbott's thesis that 'what makes *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* such an effective television program is that the evil that she battles is not a product of an ancient world but the product of the real world itself. *Buffy* has used the past four years to painstakingly dismantle and rebuild the conventions of the vampire genre and work toward gradually disembedding the vampire/slayer dichotomy from religious ritual and superstition.. what we describe as "evil" is a natural product of the modern world' (Abbott 5). While distinguishing the series from earlier books and films is important, I suggest that, nonetheless, ritual and magic remain central to numerous plots in the series. Moreover, Child (85-114) argues that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* disrupts the male gaze of classical Hollywood films as theorized by Mulvey (58-69) not only by making the central action hero a young woman, but by offering rich, complex, and developmental narrative arcs for other characters such as Willow, a quiet fellow student at Buffy's school, who initially uses her research skills with books, computers and science to help the group. Her access to knowledge about magic through Buffy's Watcher, Giles, and his library, together with her growing experience fighting with demons, leads her to teach herself witchcraft, and she and her growing magical powers, including the ability to conjure Greek goddesses such as Hecate and Diana, become central to multiple storylines in the series (Krzywinska 186-187). Corcoran (128-129), who explores teen witches in American popular culture in some depth, reflects on Willow's changes and developments in the context of problematic 'post-feminist' films of 1990s, suggesting ways in which each of these films offer viewers tropes of empowerment in the form of the 'make over' of witch characters, who transform, but often in individualized ways that elude more fundamental questions of societal structures of race, class, and gender. Offering one of the most fluid and hybrid

examples, 'Willow not only embraces magic as a conduit for power and self-expression, but, as the seasons progress, she occupies a host of identificatory categories. Moving from shy high school 'geek' to trainee witch, from empowered sorceress to dark avenger, Willow regularly makes herself over in accordance with her fluctuating selfhood' (Corcoran 151). Corcoran (151) also notes how Willow's character brings together skills in both science and witchcraft in ways that echo world views of early modern Europe. This connects her apparently distinct selves and, I suggest, also demonstrates how the show engages with magic as real within its internal cosmology.

Fairy Tale Witches

This liberating, fluid and transformative depiction of witches is not, however, the only one. Early in season one the show reflects tropes of witchcraft found in fairy tale and fantasy films such as *Snow White* (1937) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Both films are deeply ambivalent in their portraits of fascinating powerful witches, who are, however, also defined by being old, ugly, and/or deeply jealous of and threatening towards younger women (Zipes 115-117). The episode 'The Witch' (1003) reproduces these patriarchal rivalries, as the witch is the mother of a classmate of Buffy, called Amy, who has used magic to swap bodies with her daughter in an attempt to recapture her lost glory as a famous cheer-leader.

There are debates around the symbolism of the witches and crones and whether they can be re-purposed. For example, Rountree in 'The New Witch of the West' (1997) and

Embracing the Witch and the Goddess (2004) has conducted interviews and participant observation with feminist witches in New Zealand who use both goddess and witch symbols in their ritual practice and feminist understandings of themselves and society. By embracing both the witch and the goddess, feminist witches disrupt what they regard as false divisions and dichotomies between these symbols and the pressures of the divided self that they argue have been imposed upon women by patriarchy. In these conceptions, the crone is not only a negative symbol, but can be re-evaluated as one of three aspects of the goddess (maiden, mother and crone) depicting the cycles of all life, including women, and also enabling women to embrace the darker aspects of their own natures and emotions (Rountree 'The new witch of the west' 212-213) (Walker 'The Crone') (Greenwood 151-178).

Witch Trials

On the other hand, Germaine (22-42) examining witches in folk horror films such as *The Witch* (2015) and *The Wicker Man* (1973), advises caution about these images. Drawing from Hutton's *The Witch* (2017), she explores grotesque images of the witch from the early modern witch trials, arguing that 'horror cinema can subvert older ideas about witches, but it also reveals their continued power. Indeed, horror cinema has forged the witch into a deeply ambiguous figure that proves problematic for feminism and its project to subvert or otherwise destabilize misogynist symbols' (Germaine 22). Purkiss's examination of early modern witchcraft trials in *The Witch in History* (2005) also questions many assumptions about the period. Contrary to Rountree's 'The new witch of the west' (222), Purkiss argues that there is no evidence to suggest that healing and midwifery were central concerns of witch hunters, nor were those accused of witchcraft in this period regarded as particularly

sexually liberated or lesbian. Moreover, the famous *Malleus Malificarum*, a text that is 'still the main source for the view that witch-hunting was woman-hunting' was, in fact distained by many early modern authorities (Purkiss 7-8). Rather, rivalries and social tensions in communities combined with broader societal politics to generate accusations, a picture that is more in line with Stewart and Strathern's cross cultural study, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip* (2004) of the relationship between witchcraft and gossip.

In the *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* episode 'Gingerbread' (3011) Amy has matured and has begun to engage with magic herself as has Willow. The witch trial of the episode is not, however, triggered by this, but is rather initiated by Buffy and her mother finding the bodies of two dead children. Buffy's mother Joyce quickly escalates from understandable concern to a full on assault on magical practice and knowledge as she founds MOO (Mothers Opposed to the Occult) who raid school lockers, confiscate books from the school library, and eventually try to burn them and Buffy, Willow, and Amy. The episode evokes fairy tales, because the 'big bad' is a monster who disguises itself as Hansel and Gretel. As Giles explains, fairy tales can sometimes be real, and in this case the monster feeds a community its worst fears and thrives off the hatred and chaos that ensues. However, his references to European Wicca covens are somewhat misleading. Hutton in *The Triumph of the Moon* (205-252) explains that Wicca was founded in the 1950s in England by Gerald Gardner, and its claims to be a continuation of older pagan witch traditions have largely been discredited. The episode therefore tries to combine a comment on the irrationality and dangers of witch hunts while also suggesting that (within the cosmology of the show) magic is real. Buffy's confrontation with her mother illustrates this. Furious about the confiscation of the library's

occult collection, Buffy argues that without the knowledge they contain young people are not more protected, but rather rendered defenceless, arguing that 'maybe next time the world gets sucked into hell, I won't be able to stop it because the anti-hell-sucking book isn't on the approved reading list!'. Thus, she simultaneously makes a general point about knowledge as a defence against the evils of the world, while also emphasizing how magic is not merely symbolic for her and her friends but a real, practical, problem and a combatant tool.

Spells

This tool takes considerable skill and practice to master as spells are linked to strong emotions but also need mental focus and clarity. Willow's learning curve as a witch is an important illustrator of this principle, as her spells do not always do what she had intended, or rather, she is not always wise to her own intentions. These ideas are also found in anthropological examples (Greenwood 37). Malinowski, an anthropologist of the Trobriand Islands, theorised that spells and magical objects have their origins in gestures and words that express the emotional states and intentions of the spellcaster. Over time, these became refined and codified in a society, becoming traditional spells that can amplify, focus, and direct the magician's will (Malinowski 70-72). In 'Witch', Giles demonstrates the relationship between spells and intention as, casting a spell to reverse Amy's mother's switching of their bodies, he shouts in a commanding voice 'Release!'. Willow also hones skills of concentration and directing her will through the practice of pencil floating, a seemingly small magical technique that nonetheless saves her life when she is captured by enemies and narrowly escapes being bitten by a vampire by floating a pencil and staking

him with it in the episode 'Choices' (2019). The pencil is also used in another episode to illustrate the importance of focus, and emotional balance. Willow explains to Buffy that she is honing these skills as she gently spins a pencil in the air, but as the conversation turns to Faith (a rogue Slayer who has hurt Willow's friends) she is distracted and the pencil spins wildly out of control before flying into a tree 'Dopplegangland' (3016). In another example, Willow tries to conjure lights that will guide her out of difficulty in a haunted house, but, unable to make up her mind about where the lights should take her, she is plagued by them multiplying and spinning in multiple directions like a swarm of insects, thereby acting as an illustrator of her refracted mental state, 'Fear Itself' (4004).

The series also explores the often comical consequences when love spells are cast with unclear motives. In the episode 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered' (2016) Buffy's friend Xander persuades Amy to cast a love spell on Cordelia who has just broken up with him. Amy warns him that for love spells the intention should be pure and is worried because Xander only wants revenge on Cordelia. Predictably, the spell goes wrong, as Cordelia is immune but every other woman that comes into proximity with Xander is overcome with obsession for him. Fleeing hordes of women, Xander and Cordelia have the space to talk, and impressed with his efforts to try to win her back, Cordelia rekindles the relationship, defying her traditional friendship circle. In this way, the spell both does not and does work, perhaps because although Xander thinks he wants Cordelia to be enchanted, in fact what he really wants is her genuine affection and respect. In another example, 'Something Blue' (4009), Willow also responds to a break up by reverting to magic. Despondent over her boyfriend Oz leaving town, she wants to accelerate her grieving process and heal more

quickly and casts a spell to have her will be done in order to try to make that happen. The spell, however, does not work as expected, but manifests her words about other things when she speaks with passion, rendering Giles blind when she says he does not see (meaning understand her plight) and causing Buffy and the vampire Spike to stop fighting, fall in love, and become an engaged couple. The episode therefore suggests the power of words to manifest unconscious intentions. Words may also, in the Buffyverse, have power in themselves.

Overbey & Preston-Matto explore the power of words in the series, using the episode 'Superstar' (4017) in which Xander speaks some Latin words in front of an open book that responds by spontaneously bursting into flames (Overbey and Preston Matto 73). They therefore argue that 'the materiality of language in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [means that] words and utterances have palpable power and their rules must be respected if they are to be wielded as weapons in the fight against evil' (Overbey and Preston Matto 73). However, in drawing upon Searle's *Speech Acts* (1970), they emphasize the relationship between speech acts and meaning, but there are also examples with the idea that the sounds in themselves are efficacious, even if the speaker does not understand them, such as when Willow tries to do the ritual to restore Angel's soul to him and explains to Oz that it does not matter if he understands the related chant as long as he says it 'Becoming part 2' (3022).

The idea that words in themselves have power is also present in the work of Stoller, an ethnographer and magical apprentice to Songhay sorcerers living in the Republic of Niger.

He documents a complex and very personal engagement with magic that he found fascinating but dangerous, giving him new powers but also subjecting him to magical attacks (Stoller & Olkes 109-119, 217-232). This experience helped to cultivate his interest in the often under-reported sensuous aspects of anthropology, including the power of sound in spells, which he argues has an energy that goes beyond what the word represents. Moreover, skilled magicians can 'hear' things happening to the subtle essence of a person during rituals (Stoller 113-122).

Seeing Other Realities

Sight is also key to numerous magical practices. Greenwood, for example, has done participant observation with UK witches, including training in the arts of visualization. Linked to general health benefits of meditation and imaginative play, such practices are also thought to connect adepts to 'other worlds' and their associated powers (Greenwood 26-27). Later seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also depict skills in meditation and concentration, such as in the episode 'No Place Like Home' (5005), in which Buffy, worried about her sick mother, uses a spell supposedly created by a French sixteenth century sorcerer called 'pull the curtain back' to try to see if the illness is caused by a spell. She uses incense and a ritual circle of sand to put herself into a trance and in that altered state of consciousness sees that her sister, Dawn, was not born to her mother, but has been placed into her family by magic.

In another example, 'Who are You?' (4016) Willow has begun a relationship with fellow witch Tara and wants to introduce her to Buffy. However, the rogue Slayer, Faith, has escaped and switched bodies with Buffy, and Tara realises that something is wrong. She suggests doing a spell with Willow to investigate by seeing beyond the physical world and travelling to the nether realm using astral projection. This rather beautiful scene has been interpreted as a symbolic depiction of their sexual relationship (Gibson 177) but it is also suggesting that, within the context of the series, alternate dimensions, and spells to transport practitioners there, are not purely symbolic.

Conclusion

The idea that magic, monsters, and demons in the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* act to some extent as metaphors for the challenges that young people face growing up in America is well known (Little 282-293). While this is certainly true, at least some of the multiple examples of magic in the series have clear resemblances to witchcraft in numerous social worlds. This depth is potentially exciting for viewers, but it also makes the show's more negative and ambiguous tropes more troubling. Willow and Tara's relationship can be interpreted as showing their independence and rejection of patriarchy, but Willow identifies as lesbian from this point in the series, obscuring her earlier relationships with men and her potential identification as bi-sexual, suggesting a need on the part of the show's writers to 'contain her metamorphic selfhood' (Corcoran 158-159). Moreover, the identity of lesbians as witches in a vampire narrative is fraught with potentially homophobic associations and stereotypes (Wilts 41-44) and one of the few positive depictions of a lesbian relationship on television was ruined by the brutal murder of the Tara character, and Willow's subsequent

out-of-control magical rampage bringing the storyline back in line with murderous clichés (Wilts 41, Gibson 176-179). Moreover, storylines where Willow cannot control her powers or they are seen as an addiction to evil make an uncomfortable comment on women and power more generally, a point which Corcoran (146-150) highlights in relation to Nancy's story in *The Craft* (2009). Ultimately, representations of magic and witchcraft are representations of power, and this makes them highly significant for societal understandings of power relations, particularly given the complex relationships between witch-hunting and misogyny. The symbols of woman-as-witch have been re-appropriated by fans of witch narratives and feminists, and perhaps most intriguingly, by people who regard magical power as not only symbolic power, but as a way to tap into subtle forces and other worlds. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers something to all of these groups, but all too often reverts to patriarchal tropes. Audiences (some of whom may be magicians) await what film and television witches come next.

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