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## Crossing classical thresholds: Gods, monsters and Hell dimensions in the Whedon universe

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

# CROSSING CLASSICAL THRESHOLDS: GODS, MONSTERS AND HELL DIMENSIONS IN THE WHEDON UNIVERSE

Two clearly articulated goals of classical reception studies are “to yield insights into the receiving society” and “to focus critical attention back towards the ancient source” (Hardwick 2003: 4). When we engage with the introduction of classical motifs by movie makers and the creators of television programmes, we frequently find a Procrustean approach to the material that radically reshapes the ancient material to fit contemporary preoccupations and perceptions. Classicists congratulate themselves on identifying Greco-Roman heroes, monsters, gods and demons appropriated and reconfigured for each new cultural environment; but could a sociologist or an academic in Media Studies do this job just as effectively? What can a classicist offer and, to put it starkly, what’s in it for us as scholars of the Greco-Roman world and its texts?

One common response to the process of creative appropriation of ancient mythic material by a modern text is to talk of myths as archetypal and universal. This underlying mantra of reception studies can be a brake upon our critical horizons and has not gone unchallenged. Over fifty years ago, Barthes (1957) believed that myths (a heavily signified form of communication) could be called ancient but not eternal (i.e. each manifestation of myth is historically specific). More recently, Joshua (2001: xii-xix) argued that a myth is always in evolution and that “to read using an archetypal filter is to make a teleological imposition on the text: the text is only of value if it can be identified as, and perhaps moulded into, a predetermined pattern.” All the more reason to use the modern text to help us consider ancient writers and artists from a fresh and reinvigorated perspective, prompted to do so by the cultural trajectory of myth.

The inventive treatment of mythic material that we find in modern texts can highlight another, more methodological, legacy from the classical past. Many of the narratives were radically re-signified by those very ancient writers and artists from whom we receive them, bearing clear marks of “reception” in the Greek and Roman cultural context. As

classicists, we tend to justify our study of popular culture by exploring a debt to the classical world and its texts, but reception is more than lending *gravitas* to allegedly “light” entertainment because academic discourse has interpreted its Greco-Roman timbres.<sup>1</sup> It can be persuasively argued that delving deeper into the cultural layers of popular culture’s products is an intellectually worthwhile activity *per se*. So many seminal and canonical texts intervene along the way, as both accretions and filters, that studies of this kind force us to be both expansive and interdisciplinary. The works of Joss Whedon offer a good example. His creative genius (manifested across a range of television and film productions) has inspired a huge bibliography. His intertextual *jeux d’esprit* has enticed academics from just about every discipline to evaluate the cultural allusiveness of his output, from the original film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to the shortlived series *Firefly* and its cinematic summary and finale, *Serenity*.<sup>2</sup>

I should make an honest disclosure at this point that in the comparative study that follows I have brought two very different and distanced texts into dialogue without fulfilling the noble goal outlined above. The challenge of the slippery syncretism confronting the interpreter of Whedon’s richly textured universe in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the spin-off series *Angel* cannot be comprehensively met in a single chapter. Whedon is not alone amongst imaginative creators working in television in having a highly mediated relationship with mythical “types” drawn from the distant past (iconic films, for example, constitute part of the cultural layering). As Bowman (2002: 9) tellingly observes: “Buffy’s story is not, as far as I can tell, based on a specific Greek heroic myth. It is based instead on a THEORY of Greek heroic myth.”

This chapter will utilise two different approaches in classical reception studies to examine the interactions between antiquity and the Whedon universe. In the first part I shall experiment with the idea that Virgil’s hero, Aeneas, can function as a cultural companion to Whedon’s Buffy. I am interested in evaluating the Roman hero’s portrayal by borrowing

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Potter in Chapter 11 of this volume, who is researching audience responses to classical references in popular television.

<sup>2</sup> The bibliography on Whedon’s corpus is now usefully categorised by topic on Wilcox and Lavery’s “Slayage” website (<http://www.slayage.com>, accessed 20 July 2008). I have benefited from attending and participating in three Whedon conferences, where the papers have widened my theoretical perspectives and taught me something of the complexity that the study of popular culture entails in sociological and televisual terms.

modern discourse and its preoccupations and asking whether this approach reinforces or contests past readings of Aeneas' character and actions. I shall also demonstrate how classical motifs have enriched my enjoyment and critical responses to Whedon's series.

My second section focuses on Buffy's vampire lover Angel, who, in his own series, leaves Buffy's town of Sunnydale to fight the forces of evil in Los Angeles. His experience of alternate dimensions is more prolonged and problematic than Buffy's. Consequently, my use of classical figures to interpret certain aspects of *Angel's* narrative arc, and to illuminate the myth of Prometheus' punishment that it seems to evoke, leads to more nuanced conclusions.

## Buffy Background

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ran for seven seasons from 1997 to 2003. A programme like *BtVS* is now more canonical than contemporary in the area of popular culture, so its resonance for young students will lessen over time. There is a danger, then, that critical studies of even relatively recent films and television productions will seem "ancient history" if used in teaching. However, the proliferation of TV channels does prolong the shelf-life of past popular series. Combined with an active fandom and unflagging academic interest in Whedon's creations, *BtVS* is likely to retain its cultural cachet for some time. As Jowett (2006: 197) argues:

It is too early to evaluate how influential it might be on future television and whether or how its "open images" of gender will affect subsequent representations. The high, possibly unprecedented, academic interest in *Buffy* and even the many contradictory positions taken about its "value" indicate its success in exposing the difficulties in challenging conventional representation in a popular medium.

A series that deals in heroes and their missions is likely to attract the attention not just of classical scholars, but also of a wide spectrum of academics across arts and humanities disciplines. The content of *BtVS* both corresponds to and digresses from pagan and Christian norms in its construction of heroes and the demons and monsters they fight.<sup>3</sup> In the

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<sup>3</sup> Erickson (2002: 118), for instance, asks where a cultural phenomenon like *Buffy* fits into our spiritual epistemology: "*Buffy* creates a world of absence/presence, immortality, mortality, sacred/secular, where experience is always on the edge or in gaps of perception. It is an ironic world just this side of literal belief in demons

later seasons a more mature Buffy and friends confront evil as an apparently unbeatable force, taking on the forms of the dead (or undead) to achieve its nihilist purposes. On the way to this denouement, Buffy suffers loss and trauma of a more conventional kind: her mother's death from natural causes. She and her friends continue to face a number of apocalypses, and by the end of Season 5, Buffy has died for a second time.<sup>4</sup>

Buffy starts to crumble emotionally after the death of her mother in Season 5 and again when her Watcher, Giles (transparently a father-figure), leaves Sunnydale in Season 6. In this season Buffy and her friends felt that she had “come back wrong” from her heavenly resting place, and it took the heroine most of this season to reconcile herself to resuming her duties as a slayer of demons and vampires and a fighter against whatever other abnormalities the Hellmouth continued to throw in her way. So, like preceding heroic types, Buffy was tested, was found wanting, rallied and was victorious throughout her many labours.

Buffy's brittle and gritty qualities come to the fore early in Season 7 of *BtVS*, once she realises the nature of her foe, the First Evil. There appears to be a sea change in her attitude from Season 5, when she would rather have seen the world destroyed than allow her sister to die. At that time, Buffy was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice by taking her place. In Season 7, Buffy frequently describes her defence of the world as a mission and has developed a ruthless streak in its fulfilment which isolates her in decision-making. Towards the Season's finale she is compelled by her disconsolate band to surrender her leadership, which allows her time to reflect on her role. In Season 7, Episode 19 (“Empty Places”), Anya, the vengeance-demon, tells Buffy that her superpowers as a slayer “don't make you better than us—they make you luckier than us.”

However, Buffy's bold strategy for defeating the forces of chaos and destruction relies on her deconstructing the *raison d'être* of the whole series, thereby overturning the familiar fictional world which the viewer has shared over seven seasons. She realises that she needs to relinquish

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but also one that is also close to the spiritual experience—praised by medieval Christian mystics and contemporary theologians—of gazing on a space where God is not”.

<sup>4</sup> I shall not be addressing the graphic novel continuation of *BtVS* after the show's finale, although it deserves attention for its ideological stance and continued preoccupation with opening hellish portals. I am treating the seven television seasons as the canonical cultural product.

total power and distribute it around the collective. Her rationale is simple: the idea of one slayer per generation is an old patriarchal story, a played-out scenario that everyone has accepted for far too long.<sup>5</sup> Anya's words have hit home.

## Classical Context

Virgil's portrayal of Aeneas, the heroic founder of Rome whose travels and travails are the subject of his epic poem, the *Aeneid*, seems a natural model for an agonised super-strong figure with a destiny. Aeneas takes wrong turns, especially after the death of his father and mentor, Anchises. Virgil's complex characterisation of the exiled Trojan prince inspires questions about duty, autonomy, divine interference and political expediency. As far as direct influences on modern popular culture are concerned, Latinists would probably agree that the hero of the *Aeneid* has lost ground to his Greek heroic forerunners; Odysseus, Achilles, Hercules and Jason are more often referenced than Aeneas. However, Aeneas is reinvented from the Greek heroic mould by Virgil and made to face new ethical dilemmas as well as big battles, in pursuing a mission foisted upon him by higher powers. For this reason, Aeneas contributes significantly to modern heroic models and theories of archetypal heroes, even if his own heroic narrative is not readily accessed or appropriated in modern culture.

The *Aeneid* is a story of "arms and the man" (1.1) and does not gloss over the casualties of war, whether suffered or caused by Aeneas and his band of Trojan exiles. Leaving the burning city of Troy, Aeneas sets sail, prompted by visitations from gods and the ghosts of loved ones towards a mission to re-found Troy in the West. Ultimately, and with personal sacrifices along the way, Aeneas reaches Italy, the promised land, only to have alliances with the local kingdom destroyed by the agency of the Fury Allecto. The goddess Juno summons her from Hell, which Aeneas himself has already visited to seek the advice of his dead father.

In the finale of the epic, Aeneas defeats in single combat the local prince Turnus who, goaded by Allecto, has opposed the settlement of the Trojan exiles in Italy. Turnus asks for mercy, but at the last moment Aeneas is incensed to notice him sporting the belt of Pallas, Aeneas'

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<sup>5</sup> Buffy turns the tables upon the First Evil (which manifests its malevolence by fragmenting its power across willing and unwilling vessels) by empowering women everywhere. This is a bold strategy and one that might be viewed, as Tony Keen has pointed out to me, as the full-on *Buffy*-as-feminist-tract.

young protégé whom Turnus had killed in battle. Dubbing Turnus a sacrifice for Pallas, Aeneas ends his rival's life. For a whole raft of commentators on Virgil, this ending undercuts the celebratory tenor of the epic and suggests anxiety about the cost of Rome's rise to greatness and the flawed nature of its first great leader. The ideological structure of the poem seems less secure with such a downbeat ending, even though Virgil has, throughout the epic, skilfully prefigured the rise to power of Octavian (who will be the first emperor, Augustus) and by predictions, prophetic nuances and metaphor portrayed his imperial patron as restorer and saviour of the empire.<sup>6</sup>

### **From Beneath You it Devours: Whedon's Hellmouth**

The core aspect of *BtVS*, the existence of something dark and dreadful beneath the bright Californian sunshine and an environment that could double as a modern pastoral landscape, also suggests the volatile geology of the San Andreas Fault and the unpredictability of the weather systems that surround the area.<sup>7</sup> In the Whedon universe there is such a thin layer between above and below, between civilisation and demonic chaos, that Buffy can sing in her verse of the ensemble piece in Season 6, Episode 7, "Once More with Feeling": "Apocalypse, we've all been there, the same old trips, why should we care?"

The demons that issue forth are as real as the hell-fiend Allecto (in the singing episode, a dancing and singing Lucifer-figure ("Sweet") comes to the surface to claim Buffy's teenage sister as his bride), but they are also manifestations of the "inner demons" the hero and her followers struggle to contain. Like the supernatural and divine machinery we find in epic, the

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<sup>6</sup> The two schools of thought on the *Aeneid*, optimistic versus pessimistic, crystallised as an academic debate in the 1960s (with the inevitable shades in between, particularly where Virgil's own literary motivations and his personal investment in the new regime come into play). Kallendorf (2007) gives a fascinating account of pessimistic readings of the *Aeneid* from the Early Modern period, as evinced in works modelled upon the epic which echo its dark side.

<sup>7</sup> I recommend Boyd Tonkin's article "Entropy as Demon" (2004: 37-53). Whedon (quoted by Siemann 2002: 127) observed that "so many kids feel like their high school is built on a Hellmouth. What makes the show popular is the central myth of the high school as horrific. The humiliation, the alienation you know—the confusion of high school is taken to such proportions it becomes demonic."

rich range of undead, demonic monsters and lesser gods in the Whedon universe work perfectly well as characters. This does not preclude them from functioning figuratively, as psychological probes enhancing our empathy for the human characters and accentuating responses of pity and fear.<sup>8</sup>

At moments throughout the series, the adolescent cast seem to be exhibiting youthful fantasy and paranoia about characters or situations; but all too often the nightmares become real.<sup>9</sup> Buffy's intuitive ability to see reality in metaphor (that the Hell beneath is in the World above, even in the most conventional situations) is a hallmark of her superior instinct, which arguably brings her closer to a divine perspective.<sup>10</sup> Although Buffy's visionary dreams guide her and her friends in their dealings with supernatural and mystical activity, her judgements on apparently everyday events (the plotlines echo soap-opera standbys, which Whedon both reproduces and subverts) are not always taken seriously by others.

At other times, Buffy is like a tragic hero who nobly attempts and fails to make sense of an unusual or unprecedented situation—the “can't be right for being right” aspect of the human condition, when abnormal circumstances sabotage appropriate action. This is the tragedy of (even heroic) mortals: the gods (usually) see the grander sweep of time and

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<sup>8</sup> For reconciling the gods as functions, forces and characters in the *Aeneid*, and pertinent comments on Allecto, see Feeney (1991), especially 131-140, 162-176.

<sup>9</sup> Giles makes the quirky comment that “the subtext is rapidly becoming the text” when Buffy takes against her mother's courteous too-good-to-be-true boyfriend (Season 1, Episode 11, “Ted”). Giles is a mentor/Watcher of mature years trying to rationalise Buffy's understandable, but “wrong-headed”, eagerness to find something sinister in this replacement “father”. Angel, Buffy's vampire love-interest in the earlier seasons, also brings his 200 years of experience to bear in reasoning with Buffy. She is right about Ted and they are wrong. Ted turns out to have robotised himself in order to work through a succession of ideal women. Modelled on Bluebeard, Ted is also Pygmalion with a twist. A similar story appears in Season 4 of *BrVS* (Episode 2, “Living Conditions”): Buffy's annoying college room-mate, Cathy, is a discontented adolescent demon masquerading as a normal student. None of Buffy's friends believes Buffy's suspicions about Cathy, assuming that she is simply resentful and has problems adjusting to sharing her space (which, naturally, she does).

<sup>10</sup> When Venus enables her son Aeneas to see the gods at work in Troy's destruction (*Aeneid* 2.604-625) she brings metaphors to life: the forces attributed to the gods give way to the gods *personified* wreaking havoc. This revelation lends dramatic irony to Aeneas' description of fire overwhelming Deiphobus' house at 2.311 (*volcano superante domus*): Vulcan, the god of fire, may well be present not just sylleptically but corporeally.

causation, but lesser beings cannot. In Season 5, Giles describes Buffy as a hero when she makes a risky judgement by sparing the life of Ben. Ben is the human “other” or body-sharer of the goddess Glory, who has precipitated the apocalypse Buffy must forestall—the return to a primeval chaos where all boundaries between dimensions are fluid and the cosmos is disordered.<sup>11</sup>

### “Opening Divine Portals is a Tricky Business”

In the first episode of Season 6 (“Bargaining, Part One”), Buffy is successfully summoned back from the grave. Buffy died to save the world (something her gravestone indicates she did “a lot”—a splendidly bald and laconic expression of the hero’s destiny) as she sheds her own blood and becomes a substitute sacrifice (replacing her sister Dawn) to prevent dimensions bleeding into one another. In jumping into the primeval and fiery chaos that was being created, she took a voluntary trip to an unknown sphere. This turns out to be a heavenly dimension where she is finished, complete and at rest. In Season 6, Episode 3 (“Afterlife”) she swears Spike the vampire to secrecy about the fact that she “was torn out of there, by my friends”.

However, as the series progresses, the fear articulated by several of the gang (including Buffy herself) that she has “come back wrong” becomes a *leitmotif* and ends with a revelation in Episode 7 (“Once More With Feeling”), in which all the characters exchange secrets through song. Buffy has a revelatory verse about living in Hell and being expelled from

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<sup>11</sup> Giles, Buffy’s Watcher and mentor, suffocates Ben/Glory. As a lesser mortal, Giles can afford to lose the moral high ground. He points out to Ben that because Buffy is a hero she cannot kill Glory in this human form. An interesting contribution from C.W. Marshall (“Aeneas the Vampire Slayer”: <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage9/Marshall.htm>, accessed 24 July 2008) compares and contrasts the finale of the *Aeneid* and the merciless dispatch of Turnus to the Underworld with this scene in *BtVS* (Season 5, Episode 22, “The Gift”). Giles explains to his victim almost gently in his ruthlessness that he has to die, just as Aeneas, more furiously, tells Turnus. Marshall concludes that the ethical conflict “provide[s] an opportunity for the audience to differentiate between a ‘Christian’ decision in a post-Christian context and a ‘Roman’ decision in a post-classical context, and this in turn echoes with a larger debate about the inherited values a culture possesses.”

Heaven.<sup>12</sup> Buffy's friends learn that her personality-change is not temporary jetlag from the journey back from a Hell dimension; she is in shock at being catapulted out of a kind of Nirvana and seeing her world anew as garish and hellish. Buffy seems to have been resting in the equivalent of the Elysian Fields. On returning, she grudgingly accepted her old role, but now slays demons and vampires on emotional autopilot, "going through the motions" as she sings in her opening song of the episode. In Season 3, Angel is also recalled from another "death" dimension in a highly traumatised state, although he suffered the torment that Buffy's friends believed she might have endured. The deep magical disturbance caused by Angel's restoration/resurrection introduces the First, the fount of all evil, and its eyeless acolytes the Harbingers, into Sunnydale.<sup>13</sup>

As a forerunner of the First in all its strength in the final season, there is a lesser demon in "Afterlife", more of a temporary, single-episode nuisance-factor but able, like the First, to take violent possession of various members of the gang, leaping from one host-body to another. Willow works out that this demon is an immediate product of her resurrection-spell, having ridden in on the revived Buffy: it is the price to be paid for removing a denizen from one dimension to another. Willow has to dispense with the creature by working another spell to make it materialise. This allows Buffy to slay it although, like the First, it was created by the deep disturbance of thresholds between worlds. Taking the mythic long view, Buffy is not the first hero or warrior of the people to cross between worlds and thereby cause a cosmic disturbance. There is always an element of exchange in this kind of process, and what goes around comes around, in more ways than one.

By Season 7, *BtVS*'s "Bocca del Inferno" becomes the focus for the First, the embodiment of any and all evil but incorporeal and conceptual, which has gathered strength and spawned a great mass of über-vampires ready for the final battle; their unprepossessing and undifferentiated appearance is indebted to *Nosferatu*. The First also takes the metaphor of

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<sup>12</sup> This connects her with Satan as fallen Angel in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Paradoxically, the dancing, singing Hades in search of a bride (a recurrent mythic motif) doubles for the Christian Devil and is presented through according imagery. See also Nikki Stafford (2002: 318) on the chaos-god Glory as a Miltonian Satan in Season 5. Whedon's concept of Underworld dimensions and its denizens is, not unexpectedly, as Dante-esque as it is classical.

<sup>13</sup> It takes a higher spiritual force with a strong Christian resonance to suppress the First, to exorcise it from Angel's consciousness and prevent his self-destruction at the end of Episode 10 ("Amends").

inner and outer demons to a new level, encompassing and subsuming every devil, large or small, raising Season 7 to allegorical heights. Ironically, the resurrection of Buffy in Season 6 had enabled the First to take shape for a second time in the series, albeit as a delayed reaction. This is where the breaching of the Hellmouth and the longer-term consequences of Willow's magic in manipulating life and death become clear.

The First constantly takes the forms of the dead, as victims haunting their reformed killers, or as the dear departed to grieving family and friends. In Episode 7 ("Conversations with Dead People") it imitates Joyce, the deceased mother who visits Dawn with misleading and demoralising advice. The First simultaneously impersonates Cassie, Dawn's dead schoolmate, and tries to convince Willow that she speaks as Tara, Willow's murdered lover. Willow's eyes are opened to the dangerous deception when "Cassie" advises her to commit suicide and rejoin Tara. The undead vampires are natural vessels for the First, but interestingly, in the same episode, Buffy's heart-to-heart with a college acquaintance-turned-vampire is more ambiguous. He may be the genuine article: not the First, but a vampire who retains his vocation as a psychology student. Buffy slays him with a tinge of regret, recognising that he analysed the contradictions of her superhero complex with some accuracy.

However, the most harrowing of the episode's successive final scenes is the death of Jonathan, an always half-hearted and now totally repentant villain from Season 6. Andrew, the second of the Trio who teamed up to take over Sunnydale, is deceived by the First (masquerading as Warren, lynchpin of the team while alive) into sacrificing Jonathan over the seal in the basement of the rebuilt school, Sunnydale High.<sup>14</sup> The First relishes "playing" the weak and vulnerable (a term that Buffy and friends use more than once to describe the First's methods), but the stronger characters, too, are all tested by the appearance of deceased family and friends.

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<sup>14</sup> One of Warren's bullets, intended for Buffy, killed Tara; Willow subsequently flayed him alive in an Apolline moment of vengeance. The First has been working upon Andrew in Mexico, where Andrew and Jonathan fled before Willow could kill them. They excavate a trench to reveal the seal to the Hellmouth portal. Since they also need (Jonathan's) blood to open the conduit, the scene is reminiscent of Odysseus summoning the dead (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.20-50). Buffy and her friends eventually close the seal with Andrew's tears of remorse; this takes us out of the classical realm of ritual and into the Christian.

The First can take on Buffy's form (as Buffy has "died twice") and does so to manipulate both Spike, the reformed and ensouled vampire and Buffy's ex-lover, and Caleb, a misogynist acolyte of evil who twistedly preaches "love" and "hate", rather in the style of Robert Mitchum's character in the film *Night of the Hunter* (dir. Laughton 1955). The destruction of this super-strong adversary, whom Buffy finally slices down the middle (a neat metaphor for his deeply disturbed and divided psyche), is a prelude to the last big battle in which the novice slayers take on the amassed forces of evil. The last season therefore demonstrates that Buffy is still the most powerful and the most heroic leader, but that she earns that status by breaking the rules of heroic individualism, once again "flunking the written".<sup>15</sup>

### ***Facilis descensus Averno: Easy is the Descent to Hades***

Aeneas, too, travels a rocky road in regard to his heroic status and personality. Like Buffy in the early seasons, he actively resists and then takes some convincing about his role. In Book Two, the violent and tragic toppling of Troy, his instincts are primarily Homeric: he believes the only path open to him is a glorious death in the battle he cannot win. However, Hector's ghost tells him in a visionary dream to flee the city with the icons of its gods, and not to attempt to save Troy, as its destiny was sealed with the death of Hector, its only possible saviour.

Despite becoming a precursor of ethically driven heroes for centuries to come, Virgil's hero is not always steadfast in his purpose. He is seriously sidetracked from his mission by his love for Dido, queen of Carthage, who becomes one of several sacrifices to the mission of founding Rome. (Aeneas obeys the gods and departs from Carthage; Dido commits suicide, condemning Aeneas as a betrayer and cursing his future

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<sup>15</sup> When the Master (one of the oldest and strongest of the vampires, whom Buffy must defeat at the end of Season 1) reminds her she should have died, uttering the words "it was written" in a nonplussed way, she retorts "Hey, I flunked the written". This instinctive response becomes a more conscious strategy during Season 7. As noted, she deconstructs the mantra of every show that "into each generation a slayer is born; she and she alone etc". Buffy redefines her mission, choosing to share her privileges and duties as hero. Laurel Bowman gave a fascinating paper on this entitled "'I Flunked the Written': Prophecy in the Buffyverse" at the Open University and Maynooth, National University of Ireland conference, "Greeks and Romans in the Buffyverse", at Milton Keynes, January 2004.

descendants in Italy.) Similarly, Buffy had to dispatch Angel, the love of her life, to a Hell-dimension in order to save the world.

In *Aeneid* 6, Aeneas voluntarily makes a crucial yet terrifying journey to the Underworld to consult his dead father about establishing the Trojan race anew in Italy. Anchises shows his son a glorious fate for his descendants. Aeneas and his band of followers are destined to start a momentous historical process by founding Rome, a future empire without limits. Anchises does a promotional job, complete with a pageant of famous Romans to come (a sort of “I’ve seen the future and it works”), recharging his son’s heroic batteries. As Aeneas also meets old acquaintances along the way, including Dido, this episode could be mischievously dubbed “conversations with dead people”, although in the case of the queen of Carthage, the exchange is one-sided; she shuns Aeneas and ignores his attempt at reconciliation.

As a living being, Aeneas has to travel through the internal dimensions of the Virgilian underworld with a guide (the Sibyl) and a special pass (the golden bough), and he returns through the gate of ivory, the portal which, we are told, issues forth false dreams for humankind.<sup>16</sup> If (and this is a big “if”) the lines are correctly placed in the poem, their function at this point is potentially significant. Virgil emphasizes both the descent to and the ascent from the Underworld and focuses the reader’s attention upon the significance of crossing these portals. This is not just an intimidating and ritualistic activity for the hero; despite its divine sanction and positive outcome, boundary-breaching has dangerous consequences. Virgil may not intend to undermine Aeneas’ experience or Anchises’ pageant for his Roman reader with the ivory gate, but he may want to qualify the vision of the Underworld allowed to the living hero with a reminder that it is a location of chthonic and unspeakable horrors.

Although Aeneas returns to the upper world with renewed courage and confidence in his mission, the honeymoon period he enjoys with the local Italian tribes is to be short-lived. Virgil embarks upon an interesting narrative strategy in *Aeneid* Book Seven by having Juno call upon the Fury Allecto to stir up war between the Trojans and the local Italian tribes. Aeneas is recently arrived back from the Underworld (Book 6) and so the summoning of Allecto from the same place is significant. The goddess, witnessing the success of Aeneas’ visit to Avernus and the friendly

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<sup>16</sup> Jönsson & Roos (1996: 21-28) propose relocating lines 893-896 to follow 6.284, where they would function as Virgil’s commentary upon the shady elm-tree not far from the gate of the underworld.

reception he has from Latinus, decides that her only course of action is to stir up something fiendish from Hades. Is Juno's opportunism inspired by the fluidity in boundaries that Aeneas' journey to the Underworld has highlighted? Juno brings forth the Fury Allecto as a supernatural goad to the negative passions already simmering in Turnus and Amata:

When she had spoken, Juno came down to earth, horrific  
 And haled forth from the infernal regions, the home of the terrible  
 Deities, Allecto, maker of grief, who revels  
 In war, in open and underhand violence, in damaging quarrels.  
 Even her father, Pluto, and her hellish sisters loathe  
 That fiend Allecto, so manifold her aspects and so ferocious  
 Each form she takes, such a nest of vipers swarms in her black hair.  
 Now Juno began to speak, whetting this creature's appetite.  
 (Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.323-330, trans. C. Day-Lewis).

Juno's soliloquy at 7.293-322 justifies the tactic of summoning the hellish elements of the underworld on the basis that she can find no support from the gods of Olympus. It is of course dangerous to second-guess the unspoken intentions of a fictional figure, but Juno does imply that Hell is a source of even greater energy. Aeneas has certainly been invigorated by his visit to Hades, which gives the narrative what Hardie (1993: 61) calls "a fresh blast from Hell". The downside of the experience is that he has prompted the release of some very unpleasant hellmouth denizens along the way. On a more mischievous note, bringing Buffyspeak to bear upon the post-Hades Aeneas, he too could be viewed as "coming back wrong", since his ultimate act is to dispatch Turnus ruthlessly on a non-heroic trip to the world of the dead.

In his 1993 book *The Epic Successors of Virgil*, Philip Hardie discusses the conflation of Underworld and overworld in Roman epic and the repercussions of their psychological and cultural intercourse. He raises the issue of boundary-crossing and the dangers of the process. Hardie connects Allecto's emergence from Hades with Aeneas' heroic descent to the Underworld and argues that Allecto is parodic on a number of counts.<sup>17</sup> In his journey through the land of the dead Aeneas is aware of its horrors but still has a sanitised and protected view of its denizens. He returns through Elysium, bypassing Tartarus, home of the Furies.

Allecto's departure from Hades to do Juno's dirty work is described laconically ("At once Allecto went, steeped in her viperish venom", 6.341)

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, he argues that Allecto's appearance to Turnus in Book 7 parodies the appearance of the ghost of Hector to Aeneas in Book 2 (Hardie 1993: 59-61).

perhaps to emphasize the speed, energy, enthusiasm and sheer relish with which Allecto attacks her task. She is unlikely to have followed Aeneas through the gateway of false dreams, but whatever demonic conduit she breaches, the Fury distorts—or alternatively, restores—the appropriate functions of the chthonic world when it encroaches upon the mortal one.

### **Allecto as Actual and Allegorical**

As a chthonic influence Allecto is the counterpoint to Anchises, but I would argue that her release from Hell is a *quid pro quo* for Aeneas' visit to his dead father. Allecto goes in disguise to work her evil upon key characters in the epic. In taking on a misleading form to gain access to the local Italian leader, Turnus, that of a weak old woman, she mimics and distorts the divine-encounter motif in which deities arrive to help favoured mortals in times of crisis. Allecto thrusts her burning torch and poisonous snakes of hostility and hatred into Turnus' bosom and into the heart of the queen Amata. There is no suggestion that Turnus or Amata can fight this fiend and hinder her devastating and destructive effect upon them. This is because she engages with them on the most visceral level of their own resentments.

In her book *The Madness of Epic* (1998: 48ff.), Debra Hershkowitz produces a splendid study of Allecto as the embodiment of insanity and how the extreme passions she inspires in her victims fuel the action after Book 6, over-determining the enmity of Aeneas' opponents to make it truly graphic and epic. Turnus and Amata become victims of Juno's mischievous evil. The telling simile Virgil uses for Amata is an out-of-control spinning-top (7.378-384). The Fury Allecto is, by implication, uncharacteristically compared to the boys who are surprised by the prolonged and violent effect the whipping produces on their plaything.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In Season 7, Buffy realises that The First is “playing” the vampire Spike. His bloodlust is “triggered” by the traditional English folk song “Early One Morning” (a memory of the mother he “turned” and destroyed) and he resumes his murderous rampage in spite of regaining his soul and becoming reformed. Spike is eventually able to resist the demonic power tormenting him. He revisits his moment of matricide with a considerable dose of humour and realism in Episode 17, “Lies my Parents Told Me”. Spike sacrifices himself as the willing hero of the hour in the final confrontation with the First's subterranean army.

Virgil gives an exact geographical location for Allecto's return to the Underworld (7.563-571) and focuses on the fissure used by the Fury. Fighters of demonic forces in *BtVS* learn the hard way that when Hellmouths are opened, forces flow in both directions, with big risks of chaos and destruction.<sup>19</sup> Obviously the two *auteurs* Virgil and Whedon operate in vastly different cultural contexts, but they may share more techniques (especially in narrative motivation) for tapping into nightmare scenarios, and their attendant social tensions, than we might first expect.

The Sibyl predicts blood and war in Italy at 6.83ff, before Juno's grand plan and the advent of Allecto. The foreknowledge of the prophetess does not compromise the cause and effect of Juno's actions. The role of the Fury simultaneously determines and dramatises the conflict in which she participates, and Allecto continues to lurk at the edges of the textual picture.<sup>20</sup> I suggest that the vivid portrayal of these powerful and destructive figures in *BtVS* can intensify our engagement with Allecto's appearance and the impact this may have had upon Virgil's readership. The power with which film and television can portray the unequal relationships between gods and mortals in on-screen epiphanies can intensify our response to divine encounters in the ancient text.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Claudian (*In Rufinum* 1.126-133) gives Megara a much more dramatic and detailed upward onslaught: see James (1998: 165-166). I still share Gnilka's view (1979: 159) in regard to supernatural intervention in the epic (quoted by James 1998: 152, n.3) that "It is hard for us today to see in such figures any more than rhetorical constructions intended to have a purely superficial effect."

<sup>20</sup> Allecto as a figure of insinuating evil, hovering around her victims, captured the imagination of early artists illustrating Virgil. I have learned a great deal from Chris Boyden Spillane, who is researching the extent to which visual representations, particularly 14th and 15th century Vatican illustrated manuscripts and the Brant woodcuts of 1502, can aid interpretations of Virgil's text.

<sup>21</sup> The portrayal of divine encounters (epiphanic and demonic) in the *mise-en-scène* of cinema and television can be highly effective. A good illustration of small screen techniques for conveying the fear and excitement of divine encounters is the first appearance of Glory exhibiting a Junoesque gate crashing tendency in *BtVS* Season Five. Heralded as 'the Beast' this god, banished from an unnamed hell dimension, condenses supernatural strength in the form of a bimboesque blonde. A later, even more disturbing, manifestation is the moment when the human Ben who shares Glory's body metamorphoses into his divine and destructive 'sister' with the terrified words: "She's coming! She's here!" *Venit* and *adest* are the classical and literary equivalents of such a moment of menace and excitement; see Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3, 528, the arrival of Bacchus in Thebes which will have devastating consequences and also the dropping of her disguise by Minerva before Arachne, *Met* 6, 42-45. For Ovid as 'cineaste' see Simone Viarre 1994.

Responding to poetic strategy at moments like these (which are on one level a succession of special effects, a precursor of the action movie) does not have to marginalise ideological and literary readings of Virgil. Importing the apparent superficiality of cinematic or even small-screen shock-horror scenes into the poetic text can give added value to a work of great artistic vision and vividness. On a more reflective level, using today's (or even yesterday's) television to tease out the narrative arcs and aesthetic considerations of the ancient text is a way of enriching our experience of both. *BtVS* can send us and our students back to Virgil in a new spirit of enquiry, and the journey involves a number of fascinating cultural stops on the way.

### **Aeneas Flunks the Written<sup>22</sup>**

This last big battle of *BtVS* sees the Slayer sharing her superhuman strength with all the Potentials, and Spike making the ultimate sacrifice. For once, this means the irreversible destruction of Sunnydale's Hellmouth (although the graphic novel sequel reopens all kinds of wounds, Hell-portals included.) Aeneas' single combat with Turnus highlights the isolated fate of the hero, who is solely responsible for some much-needed closure in a last great battle. He kills his foe in a supreme act of vengeance. Turnus ostentatiously but not surprisingly wears his victim's armour, which is the decisive factor in Aeneas' snap decision to slaughter his enemy on the spot. This is what Virgil tells us, and we would be foolish to reject it as motivation.<sup>23</sup> In any case, vengeance was considered a perfectly justifiable, indeed a dutiful, response to injury in the ancient world:

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<sup>22</sup> Adler (2003: 281) observes that: "The peculiarity of Aeneas' experience is that what the dead and the gods tell him is at odds with all of poetry and ancestral tradition." Her chapters on the 'Education of Aeneas' are illuminating. See also the discussion on real and symbolic journeys to hell dimensions in *BtVS* and *Angel* in Chapter 7 of Pateman (2006) and Falconer's 2004 work on *katabasis* in literature.

<sup>23</sup> For sacrifice as *Leitmotif* in the *Aeneid*, see Hardie (1993: chapter 2); Bandera (1981). For an alternative and sensitive reading of Aeneas' sacrifice of his own humanity and the "death" of his Trojan heroic self in killing Turnus, see Gross 2003-4.

Aeneas fastened his eyes on this relic [the baldrick of Pallas], this sad reminder

Of all the pain Pallas' death had caused. Rage shook him.

He looked frightening. He said: 'Do you hope to get off now, wearing the spoils

You took from my Pallas? It's he, it's Pallas who strikes this blow,  
The victim shedding his murderer's blood in retribution.'

So saying, Aeneas angrily plunged his sword full into

Turnus' breast. The body went limp and cold. With a deep sigh

The unconsenting spirit fled to the shades below.

(*Aeneid* 11.945-952, trans. C. Day-Lewis).

Readers ancient and modern have found this ending uncomfortable and speculated that Aeneas' state of *furor* (rage) is disproportionately ruthless (though it could be said that *furor* serves *pietas* at this point).<sup>24</sup> With a groan, Turnus' life-spirit flees to the shadows "*indignata*", translated by Day-Lewis as "unconsenting" but a word that surely conveys angry complaint, as if the death is unjust. The epic ends with a glance at the Underworld, evoking memories of Dido's death, Aeneas' own journey to Hades, and Allecto's subterranean origins.<sup>25</sup> It is as if, to borrow the Buffy phrase, Aeneas has "come back wrong" in acting as he does. According to Aeneas' own words, Turnus should imagine that Pallas is the foe who confronts him and strikes the fatal blow: one last conversation with dead people perhaps? In that case, the death of Turnus also represents the final ejection of the fiend Allecto's demonic legacy from the proceedings, although it is Aeneas who seems to have become the vessel for an Allecto-style *furor*.

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<sup>24</sup> See the nuanced discussion in Hershkowitz (1998: 113-124, 200-201). She shows Jupiter's complicity in Aeneas' act and that his use of the Dirae, with their particular brand of *furor*, ensures Trojan victory and ultimately the fulfilment of fate for Rome. I am indebted to Kate Hammond for her observation that Willow's flaying of Warren is a similarly traumatic moment in Season 5. Buffy has to convince her friends that Willow's grief-stricken vengeance is not appropriate, but despite their shock at her actions, several onscreen characters (and the viewer?) can barely conceal their satisfaction that justice has been done. Willow's words to Warren might allow us to tap into the pain and the power of Aeneas in his moment of truth with Turnus.

<sup>25</sup> The Sibyl's utterance "*facilis descensus Averno*" ("easy is the descent to Hades") must be ironic when we recall how painful a struggle Dido suffered in dying at the end of Book 6. Turnus protests his fate and is a very unwilling sacrifice to Roman hegemony.

This is closure insofar as Turnus' death marks the end of one phase in the prolonged and great labour to found the Roman race (*Aeneid* 1.33). Aeneas' act could also signal that, for the time being at least, the Hellmouth has been sealed up with the crossing of the threshold by a heroic figure. More mischievously, it could be argued that in not sparing the suddenly meek Turnus, Aeneas has graduated into autonomy and refused to accept what Anchises identified as the Roman way, that the submissive would be spared (the famous lines 6.851-853). Of course, Anchises also prophesies that the founding of Rome will have a high cost in horrors and the loss of human life, but that does not resolve the ideological ambiguities surrounding the hero's last act raised by scholiasts and scholars of Virgil.

I would like to speculate about a further Virgilian voice at work by suggesting (partly inspired by the Buffy factor) that Aeneas finishes the epic with an appropriate personal flourish. He demonstrates a decisiveness that reinstates him as a Homeric hero without compromising his destined status as a Roman heroic role-model. Aeneas closes the Hellmouth; he finishes the fight on his terms. At the end of Season 3, on the eve of the High School Diploma ceremony, during which the mayor will metamorphose into a giant student-devouring snake, Buffy is upbraided by Wesley, representative of the paternalistic Watchers' Council, for ignoring their advice and working out her own strategies and solutions in this near-apocalyptic situation. She replies, "I see it as graduation". Could we say the same for Aeneas?

### **Punishing Prometheus in Pleasantville: A Classical Connection in *Angel* Season 5**

Never quite as extensively reviewed or deconstructed in such detail as *BtVS*, the spin-off series *Angel* is increasingly attracting analysis. Writers on *Angel* have identified its (literally and metaphorically) darker world as a critical dystopia, a series blending elements of noir, fantasy and Armageddon. There are plenty of stimulating interpretations available that address the narrative arcs of *Angel*, identifying the show's ability to remap themes of corporate control, power and powerlessness, redemption, and

the function of champions.<sup>26</sup> As in *BtVS*, its characters regularly engage with a hidden demon underworld and huge destructive forces. Ultimately the powers of evil (the Senior Partners of the law firm Wolfram and Hart, whose spheres of influence and control straddle worlds and dimensions) can only be temporarily shaken by the last-ditch suicidal stand of the Angel agency in an apocalyptic finale.

The last season of *Angel* finds the team doing a deal with the forces of evil by taking over the firm of Wolfram and Hart, but battling to preserve their integrity as saviours and protectors of humanity. Destiny's dice are always loaded against them, as the Senior Partners are apparently all-powerful. At a critical point Angel Enterprises need insider knowledge about this core of Wolfram and Hart's power and their apocalyptic intentions, and seek this vital information from their old enemy Lindsey MacDonald, whom the Senior Partners are punishing for a moment of rebellion and other acts of non-cooperation. In Episode 17 ("Underneath"), Angel needs to discover the Hell dimension Lindsey is suffering in, and Charles Gunn is able to take him and his sidekick Spike on the rescue mission.<sup>27</sup>

Angel, Spike and Gunn discover Lindsey (the television audience has had a sneak preview) in an idyllic suburban house with pretty wife and bright little child. He has no memory of his previous life or of reality but is locked into the lie of the "soap opera" scenario. Observing the cosy kitchen and nuclear family, Spike makes direct reference to legendary American soap characters (hence my allusion to Gary Ross' 1998 movie *Pleasantville*): but the illusory nature of the "set" or setup is perhaps more reminiscent of Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (released in the same year).

Earlier we were shown Lindsey testing his "son" on his homework. Significantly, as it turns out, this task is about naming the layers of the

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<sup>26</sup> See Abbott (ed. 2005). The Huddersfield University conference of 2005, "The Genius of Joss Whedon", offered a range of thought-provoking papers on *Angel*.

<sup>27</sup> *Angel's* narrative arc has not always been satisfactorily sustained. The television companies compromised its coherence and characterisation by insisting that popular actors re-appeared (James Marsters as Spike, singer Christian Kane as Lindsey.) The basement that is Hell is a startling storyline and it is plausible that both Gunn and Lindsey, endowed with special knowledge, would survive their ordeals. Gunn remains a relatively well-rounded figure but Lindsey's role ebbs and flows throughout the five seasons. Like Gunn, he came from humble beginnings but his elevation is achieved through being a skilful trickster reconciled with his own moral liminality. Unlike Prometheus, neither is of divine lineage and both are flawed and fallible mortals. Kaveney (2005: 65-69) critically assesses the inconsistencies of Lindsey's characterisation and his place in the narrative.

earth's core. "Father" and "son" bond affectionately, as Lindsey cajoles the final answer out of him with the question: "and underneath that?" Then Lindsey's "wife" asks him to fetch an oven light bulb from the basement ("on the shelf by those thingies"). Lindsey makes excuses and tries to suppress his fear of what he will face "underneath" (although he does not remember the nature of the horror, he knows he does not want to be in the basement). Lindsey's memory is restored when a talisman and chain are ripped from his throat. Angel and his companions escape the violent machine-gun attacks of Lindsey's false family and the whole constructed community by diving into the basement.<sup>28</sup> It is full of torture implements and the floor is littered with human hearts (successively cut from Lindsey, as he recalls in a matter-of-fact way.) It would seem that Lindsey's rogue relationship to the ruling supernatural hierarchy, and his brief defence of humanity and its principles earlier in the series, has placed him temporarily in a Promethean imprisonment.

After fighting the super-strong demon that tortures Lindsey daily, Angel, Spike and Lindsey leap through the Hell-fires behind the railings in the basement. The third member of the escape team, Gunn, puts on the talisman of forgetfulness that Lindsey wore and takes his place to enable the escape. Like Lindsey, Gunn's access to the inner sanctum of the Senior Partners, plus the fact that he has been willing to serve them but not sacrifice humanity to them, makes him an appropriate replacement Prometheus. It is also his choice to stay as a personal atonement for his disastrous bargain with Wolfram and Hart.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This is another neat example of Whedon transforming nightmares and reality back and forth. The gun culture of America makes the idealised community's machine-gunning of the interlopers believable: suburbia as hell-dimension. Gunn later says that the real horror is not the agony of his heart being torn out on a daily basis, but the lie of the life above.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Gunn's character has developed from under-privileged black street kid with a vendetta against the vampires who killed his sister to a trusted member of Angel's team. The Senior Partners have bestowed exception legal knowledge and brainpower upon him but in order to retain his status and kudos he signs for the suspect coffin containing the ancient goddess Illyria's spirit. Fred's scientific curiosity leads her to open the fatal container and this episode proves a tragic derailment of the team's happiness. Illyria subsumes the soul and life of Fred and the girl's slender body becomes a vessel for a dark, destructive and hopeless being who only gradually takes on some human qualities. Gunn has played both Epimetheus and Prometheus for this narrative arc and Fred is an innocent Pandora, Illyria a demonic and baneful one.

In the subsequent episode (“Origin”), Gunn, with memory erased, replays the kitchen scene and the viewer is shown more of the horror in the basement. On the surface an “American dream” of family life, the house and its basement are gradually revealed to the viewer as a Hell-dimension with a torture chamber in the basement. The punishment undergone as the *coup de théâtre* is indeed Promethean, although of itself the carving out of the heart so it can grow anew is not necessarily an exclusively classical allusion. Afterlives and Hells in many mythologies involve recurrent tortures for the sinful in which the tormented body-part grows back each day to be ripped out or eaten afresh.<sup>30</sup>

The glimpse of the fires that skirt the basement underline that this place is a composite of cross-cultural hells, but in *Angel* it is designed by Wolfram and Hart to trap the living in timeless pain, which makes it a more Promethean concept. The torment endured by two characters in *Angel* Season 5 (one fundamentally good, the other ultimately evil) strongly evokes the myth of Prometheus and his punishment.<sup>31</sup> Here however the victim does not suffer horrors on an isolated crag, as Prometheus did daily, but in a cosy American suburban setting.

Viewing the psychological and physical anguish portrayed in the two episodes prompted me to rethink the powerful impact of Aeschylus’ tragedy *Prometheus Bound* as a play about suffering and the cost of rebellion. The situation of the victims, Lindsey McDonald and Charles Gunn, both of whom are rescued, also suggested Aeschylean attitudes to special knowledge, and the bargains and compromises apparently sworn enemies have to make in the grander scheme of things. The hellish basement does convey something of the anguish Prometheus suffers, chained to the rock by Force and Violence. The demon combines a

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<sup>30</sup> The fate of sinners in the Christian inferno is elaborated upon by Danté but similar details of torments are to be found in Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Taoism and Buddhism (even appearing in the Chinese death dimension, Di Ju which functions as a staging post for the soul’s next incarnation). In Islamic Hell the skin of disbelievers is roasted and then replaced for an eternity, (*Quran* 4.56). The horrors of Hell are cross cultural; all major faiths can ‘boast’ detailed scenarios of punishments that are deemed appropriate to the sin and sometimes made everlasting by a cruel renewal of body parts. (In Promethean style, gluttons can have livers replaced for constant and conspicuous consumption by vultures.) By the 4th century CE a wide variety of Netherworlds were acquiring distinct geographies and becoming sites for ‘payback’ in the afterlife and graphically illustrated Hells were to develop into an artistic tradition. See Van Sant 1999.

<sup>31</sup> In Virgil’s *Aeneid* this underworld torture, among those best known to modern culture, is inflicted on Tityos (6.595-600).

Hephaestean enthusiasm for his various tools with crude strength and mercilessness. Hamilton, the new PA sent by the Senior Partners to replace Eve (Lindsey's lover, who has affinities with the mythical Pandora) talks admiringly of the demon's skills and the extent of his torture repertoire.

The poet Ted Hughes allows Prometheus objectivity and admiration for his tormentor:

Prometheus on this crag  
 Began to admire the vulture  
 It knew what it was doing

It went on doing it  
 Swallowing not only his liver  
 But managing to digest its guilt

And hang itself again just under the sun  
 Like a heavenly weighing scales  
 Balancing the gift of life

And the cost of the gift  
 Without a tremor

As if both were nothing. (Ted Hughes (2003), *Prometheus on the Crag*).

Gunn's suffering demonstrates the power of the moving image to convey the heroic choices of Promethean characters and the costs with which they come. Hamilton plays the part of Aeschylus' Hermes, offering Gunn reinstatement in Wolfram and Hart and reconciliation with the Senior Partners who run the firm. Refusing to free himself at the price of betraying his friends and as the daily round of torture is about to begin, Gunn prefaces his screams of pain with the words "Let's go, Sparky, this heart ain't gonna cut itself out". The latex-wearing monster is not an eagle, but the sort of servant typical of the Angel and Buffy universes. Gunn's acceptance of the pain redeems him as a character; he is (paradoxically) soon to be rescued by Illyria, the demonic goddess.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Illyria puts the talisman on the demon torturer in order to honour the substitution rule by which the hell dimension operates. The scene ends, leaving the rather intellectually-challenged monster chopping his own heart out since he cannot stop following orders and fulfilling his role.

Other than her superhuman strength and ability to cross dimensional boundaries with ease, Illyria is a shaky parallel to Hercules (Prometheus' rescuer in most variants of the myth), though she demonstrates larger-than-life heroic appetites for violence and suffering (her own and other people's). Illyria also has Promethean propensities as she is, like the race of Titans, from an ancient race of divinities. Like Prometheus, she is equipped with superior knowledge in that she can identify the instability of the human memories around her. She grieves angrily for her loss of godlike status: "You don't worship me at all", she says bitterly to Wesley as they talk on the rooftops of Wolfram and Hart (Episode 18, "Origins"). From this vantage-point she observes Los Angeles with contempt, criticising a world where everyone takes a small piece and shuts themselves into rooms and routines. Illyria initially has no care or concern for humanity and no desire to improve their lot.<sup>33</sup>

Illyria makes a good modern match for the Titans in brute strength and in suffering usurpation by new supernatural hierarchies. Ultimately Illyria is a wildcard among deities and humans alike, with some similarities to the capricious Glory (Glorificus) whom Buffy confronted in Season 5 of *BtVS*. In Episode 5 ("No Place Like Home"), an exasperated Glory, a drama queen without Illyria's brooding tragic timbre but equally trapped in the small world of Sunnydale gave a more succinct critique of her exilic status with the classic line: "I could crap a better existence than this".

Lindsey swings back and forth, capable both of siding with humans or the cause of humanity and of throwing his lot in with the hellish forces represented by Wolfram and Hart. He cannot be allowed a heroic death since there is too much negative baggage to his role; he is killed on

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<sup>33</sup> Illyria performs the rescue of Gunn as a service (with strings) for Wesley, the accomplished researcher into the arcane, who was in love with Fred but is learning to accept Illyria on her own terms. In the next episode ("Time Bomb"), Illyria starts to disintegrate and can only be saved by an energy-drain from Fred's body, which cannot contain her power. Illyria's mental and physical breakdown plays havoc with temporal dimensions: amid telescoped time frames, she learns from Angel that she has more than one option for survival. It is fitting that she learns the lesson of commitment to humanity from Angel, who functions as a Promethean figure in his protective stance towards ill-equipped and vulnerable mortals. Eventually, Illyria decides to fight on the side of Angel Enterprises. She moves on from being a raw destructive force to a supernatural being with some inchoate ethical anchoring. I am reminded of Dodds' interpretation of *Prometheus Bound* (1951: 1-44). He discusses the evolutionary character of the gods in the minds of the Greeks: from Aeschylus' viewpoint, even Zeus has to mature over time and learn by some hard knocks to exercise his power in accordance with the general interest of the cosmos.

Angel's orders after co-operating with Angel Enterprises to overthrow the Circle of the Black Thorn. Gunn dies fighting cataclysmic forces alongside Angel (the final episode of Season 5, "Not Fade Away"). With Wesley already dead, Spike, Illyria, Gunn and Angel take on the Senior Partners in the alley behind the Hyperion Hotel. This desperate last act of defiance is perhaps not so different from Aeschylus' ending in *Prometheus Bound*, in which the chorus of Oceanids seem to be cataclysmically overwhelmed by Zeus for ultimately siding with Prometheus.

The Promethean experiences of both Lindsey and Gunn in the later episodes of Season 5 have prompted me to ask further questions about this seminal figure in Greek and Roman myth. My work in progress on the onscreen resonances of the Prometheus-Epimetheus-Pandora triangle has benefited from analysing *Angel*, as I believe that these figures are closely connected, and often simultaneously refracted through their postclassical descendants. For instance, later Pandora personas (like Eve, Lindsey's loyal but equally evil lover in *Angel*) can be "knowing" if not "all-knowing"; they also borrow and problematise the positive and powerful attributes of Prometheus.<sup>34</sup>

## So What?

Both the *Buffy* and *Angel* series have encouraged me to re-visit Greek and Roman texts and reshape my engagement with them in the light of the classical resonances introduced into the modern heroic models of Whedon and his talented team. I have found their contemporary and artfully constructed discourse for the 20th and 21st century a productive way of talking about the tensions in the *Aeneid* in particular. *BtVs* has prompted me to enter into the lively debates about the nature of Virgil's epic and to engage in a new way with the subtlety of his signifying techniques when dealing with the dilemmas of destiny and power. *Angel* has brought to the surface a slightly troublesome dialectic I have been tentatively applying to the reflective aspects of Pandora and Prometheus and this has implications

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<sup>34</sup> I have an article in progress on the resonances of the Pandora and Prometheus myths in Aldrich's 1955 film of Mickey Spillane's novel, *Kiss Me Deadly*. The attributes of Pandora, Prometheus and Epimetheus are fragmented across the main characters, revealing a rich pattern of inter-relationships that could be teased out of the ancient texts with due deference to their specific social and cultural context.

for their negative and positive roles in the origins and sufferings of humankind.

On a final note, I would link the impact of *BtVS*' and *Angel*'s most successful and intense treatments of suffering, trauma and the anguish of heroic choices with my earlier point about the relationship between onscreen special effects and the power of metamorphic, epiphanic and emotional moments in classical texts. Whedon knows how to harness the trauma of metamorphosis, manipulating his audience accordingly. The "genre" scenes that have survived in postclassical literary and artistic traditions still push our buttons: not a new observation, but a telling one. There are all kinds of ways in which the aesthetic repertoire of the modern media can refocus our responses to strongly visualising ancient texts. For instance, we could expand the debate about the direct portrayal of ancient epic on the screen and how this might work cinematically.<sup>35</sup>

Greek and Roman poets demonstrate the immense power of the word in describing supernatural forces, divine and demonic, and their manifestations in the epic and mythic worlds they inhabit. In a different, but equally powerful way, the techniques of television and film can help us experience ancient narratives of gods, monsters and mortals with some of the tension and suspense (even humour) that may have surrounded its contemporary reception.

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<sup>35</sup> In his article "Film Sense in the *Aeneid*" (2001: 219-232), Fred Mench demonstrates skilfully how Virgilian similes might translate to montage, but confines himself to composition shots that simply show Virgil's visual image. The comparison of Dido to a wounded deer at 4.68-73 is an interesting case in point. To realise the subtlety of this simile, especially as a foreshadowing of events, I suggest that it would be a better use of film technique to cut or dissolve (or even split-screen) to Ascanius' hunting and killing of Sylvia's sacred stag; even better, to focus fleetingly on Dido as a spirit in Hades actually wandering the wood, with her fatal self-inflicted wound. This is the poignant moment when Aeneas meets the queen and realises he was inadvertently responsible for her death. The image from Book 2 comes into its own at this point and the camera could prefigure this in Carthage.