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# Slashing the Slayer: A Thematic Analysis of Homo-erotic Buffy Fan Fiction

Meg Barker

## Introduction

This essay reports the research that I have carried out on Internet slash fiction based on the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* TV series. I became interested in this area when I stumbled across slash fiction on the web myself and found that I enjoyed it. As someone who studies sexuality I was intrigued by this new (to me) form of erotic fiction and began to read the academic literature in the area. As I became familiar with the main theories, I wondered how they would relate to slash fiction written about *Buffy*, since this series differs from many of the programmes that have been slashed in the past. There are strong female and gay characters in *Buffy*, emotional and relationship-based themes are directly addressed, and the interaction between vampires and humans adds an additional dimension to the plot.

In my study, I analysed both slash stories and my e-mail correspondence with the authors of *Buffy* slash. I come at the topic as both a slash reader and a psychologist, and I hope that I achieve a good balance between the position of mutual knowledge (as a fan) and critical distance (as a researcher) as recommended by Tulloch and Jenkins (1995). In the past, slash authors have been stigmatised by other fans and by convention organizers (Jenkins, 1992), and several of my participants felt that they had been misrepresented in previous research. I hope to be accountable in my research (Bannister et al., 1995) and to give a respectful and realistic portrayal of *Buffy* slash and its writers.

## What is slash?

'Slash' is a genre of fan fiction that portrays same-sex relationships between fictional characters from TV shows, movies or books. Generally the characters in slash are not involved in a relationship in the original fiction that the slash is based on, and they are frequently both male, although some slash is devoted to female-female or group interactions. The term 'slash' refers to the convention of using the slash punctuation mark to signify the relationship, for example Spock/Kirk (one of the first slash pairings) or Angel/Xander.

Early slash fiction was collected in fanzines, but the advent of the Internet provided a new forum for easy publication. It also meant that new authors and readers were not necessarily introduced to slash through mentors, as in Bacon-Smith's (1992) research, but could happen upon slash during web searches (Saxey, 2002). Back in 2000, Cumberland stated that there were 85 web rings devoted to slash, consisting of 1,261 individual sites containing over 15,000 stories and novels. There are likely to be many more now. Cumberland argues that the amount of slash on the Internet suggests that it is no longer a 'curious subset' of fan fiction, but one of the mainstream forms of Internet erotica. Slash generally takes the form of short stories, but some authors write stories following characters over time which can be as long as a novel. Also, some authors write poetry, song lyrics, fictional correspondence between characters, or post art, cartoons or photo-montages.

Most slash is written and read by women. Bacon-Smith (1986) estimated that 90% of the slash authors she studied were female, and Cicioni (1998) states that the authors of slash fiction are almost entirely female and predominantly heterosexual. Past research has found some common themes in slash. Bacon-Smith (1992) says that the vast majority of slash stories are 'first time' stories, in which the two main characters discover their mutual attraction for the first time, with or without genital sex. Another common theme in slash is the 'virtual marriage' story, depicting the progress of ongoing relationships between characters. These often involve characters making explicit exclusive monogamous commitments to each other. Hurt/comfort stories depict intimacy growing through one partner providing comfort to the other who is ill, or in physical or emotional pain. There are also 'get' stories which involve characters being 'hurt' but without the 'comfort'. And there are PWP (plot what plot?) stories which are purely sexual or comedic.

Theorists have debated whether slash is a form of romance fiction or pornography. Lamb and Veith (1986) take the former position, arguing that explicit sex is metaphorical, displaying the intensity of the emotional intimacy between the characters. The common 'first time' story generally has an unfulfilled desire developing through crises and delays to a happy ending with an intimate, satisfying, exclusive relationship, mirroring the structure of traditional women's romances (Lowery, 1983). Russ (1985), however, argues that slash is female pornography, emphasizing the graphic sexual descriptions and 'pornographic force' of many of the stories. She says that slash gives women what they deeply desire, but what is missing in traditional pornography: 'a sexual relationship that does not require their abandoning freedom, adventure, and first class humanity...sexual enjoyment that is intense, whole and satisfying...intense emotionality' (p90). Penley (1992) proposes that slash can be seen as both romance and pornography. It is an expression of female sexuality which has erotic scenes taking place in the context of intimacy, sharing, and emotional reactions.

## Slash theories

Theories of slash have mainly focused on attempting to explain why heterosexual women would want to write and read about homosexual relationships between men, from which they would appear to be excluded. Beyond this, theories have often used slash to address the broader question of 'what women want' (Cicioni, 1998). The main theories have proposed that slash is not about homosexuality, but about women's desires concerning their own femininity or their relationships with men.

A common explanation of male/male slash has been the lack of strong or primary female characters in TV programmes and movies, meaning that slash authors have to rely on feminising or androgynising male characters. Bacon-Smith (1992) reports that slash authors are impatient with the images of women created by men. The argument runs that, because of the limitations in media and cultural representations of women, women cannot imagine themselves as heroes unless they imagine themselves as male.

A related theory explains slash as an escape from the constraints of traditional femininity. Through the male characters in slash, women can enjoy equal relationships free of cultural gender roles (Russ, 1985). Characters can initiate sex, seek out gratification, and enjoy dominance and/or submission because they are not constrained by the rules governing femininity.

Lamb and Veith (1986) argue that equal relationships are not possible in the patriarchal and highly gendered society in which we live. Slash gives women relationships between equals which they cannot experience in the real world or in the mainstream media. Cicioni (1998) also argues that slash fiction expresses desire for relationships that satisfy both participants' needs, and that this reflects writers' tensions about heterosexual relations which generally do not. She suggests that the sex in slash stories is what women really want, but rarely experience, with men: physical closeness and whole body sensual stimulation. Cicioni says that descriptions of anal intercourse represent penetration as the ultimate surrender of self and sign of trust.

Penley (1992) takes a psychoanalytic perspective on slash. She says that psychoanalytic accounts of fantasy propose two poles: being and having. Slash enables women both to 'be' and to 'have' each character, experiencing both sides of fantasy. Bacon-Smith (1992) agrees, saying that slash readers can imagine giving and receiving physical and emotional love from the point of view of one or both characters. She says that this tendency to identify with multiple positions can be seen in the work of less experienced writers who lose control of point of view in sex scenes, making them confusing to the reader. Many theorists have questioned who women are identifying with in male/male slash: whether they identify with one or both male characters or whether they position themselves as a voyeur, watching events unfolding. I find it interesting that such questions are rarely asked about the common genre of male pornography that depicts pseudo-lesbian sex. Slash fiction seems to be problematised in a way that male pornography is not.

Theorists like Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992) also propose that slash fiction allows women to question the dominant versions of masculinity in our culture and to reconstruct them in idealized versions. This seems somewhat similar to the argument made by Radford (1983) about readers of women's romance fiction. Radford argues that these readers use romances to escape from their day-to-day lives and female roles, and to negotiate alternative explanations for male behaviour. Slash may be another way of negotiating texts in a way that reflects female needs and interests. Men in slash stories can be open about their emotions, warm, intimate and loving in their relationships and sexual interactions, forging close friendships and relationships. It seems that slash may challenge patriarchal dominance and hegemonic masculinity, which is generally based on the subordination of the 'other' and the rejection of all things feminine or homosexual (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Gough, and Edwards, 1998). Slash fiction can be seen as particularly threatening to the dominant version of masculinity because it portrays masculine characters engaged in homosexual sex and displaying 'feminine' traits. It could be argued that slash challenges the binary oppositions that heterosexual masculinity is based on (male-female and straight-gay).

Green, Jenkins and Jenkins (1998) provide an extensive critique of past slash theories. They make three points they make which I feel are particularly pertinent:

1. Theories fail to take account of fans' own ideas even though fans themselves tend to be highly self-reflexive, questioning why they are drawn to slash.
2. Theories are preoccupied with male/male slash written by women even though there is an increasing amount of 'femslash' depicting female/female relationships and there are also lesbian, bisexual and male heterosexual slash authors.
3. Past theories tend to look for one single theory to account for slash, and consider slash to be static and unchanging, rather than examining it in the context of the other forms of popular culture it is based on.

I tried to address these issues in my research by grounding it in fans' own understandings of slash and slash writing, by addressing the issues of slash authors' sexualities and femslash, and by considering how slash authors have responded to one particular series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the implications this has for the various theories that have been put forward.

### **Buffy slash**

Saxey (2002) reported that there were at least 100 slash websites devoted to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (or *Angel*, its spin-off series). She focused on aspects of the series that make *Buffy* so slashable. My research concentrated on the explanations and understandings of the people who write slash. I was particularly interested in how they responded to a series which has such strong female and gay characters and which addresses issues around relationships and masculinity so directly. I also wanted to examine how authors used the relationships between humans and vampires in their slash.

My research focused on one archive of *Buffy* related slash. I sent open-ended e-mail questionnaires to all the people whose stories were included on this web-site asking them about their experiences of writing slash in general and of *Buffy* slash in particular. I then conducted a thematic analysis on the slash stories themselves and the questionnaire responses.

All but one of the 32 authors who responded to my questionnaire were female, reflecting the gender ratio reported in past research (Bacon-Smith, 1992). The authors were aged between 16 and 44. Over half defined themselves as 'bi-sexual' or 'open' in their sexuality, 3 described themselves as lesbian and the rest as heterosexual.

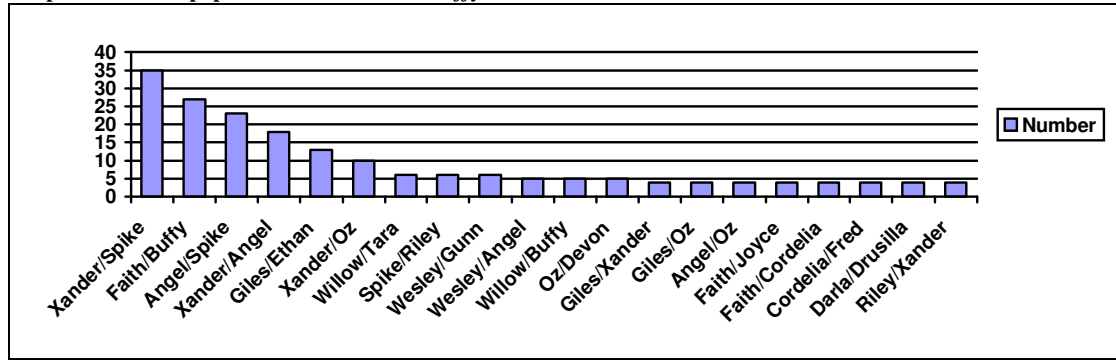
I will now summarise the main results of my analysis.

### **Common characters and pairings**

The majority of the authors on the site wrote mostly male/male slash (2/3). However a significant minority wrote mostly female/female slash (1/4), and others wrote group scenarios. Over a half of the authors wrote mostly slash involving humans with other humans or with vampires or werewolves in their human form. Over a third wrote about humans with vampires or werewolves in their monstrous form and over a tenth wrote mostly about relationships or interactions between vampires.

Overall, Xander was most slashed character, followed by Spike, Angel, Buffy and Faith. The most popular male/male pairings were combinations of Xander, Spike and Angel, whilst the most common female/female pairings were Buffy/Faith and Willow/Tara. The graph below displays all the most frequent pairings and the number of stories written about each.

**Graph of the most popular combinations in *Buffy* slash**



Most of the slash authors stick with one combination or a small number of combinations that they particularly like, although some specifically enjoy trying new combinations. One author said she wrote about ‘whoever strikes my fancy, usually in pairings I haven’t thought about before’. Many of the authors told me that they wrote about combinations where there seemed to be some subtext in the series itself, or even an actual relationship in the case of Tara/Willow. Slash stories often filled in the history between two characters such as Giles/Ethan or Angelus/Spike or proposed futures between characters such as Dawn/Kate. Jenkins (1992) reported that such expansion of the timeline is common in slash and that alternate universes are also sometimes used to explore potential relationships. These universes may be created by the authors but, in the case of *Buffy*, authors often draw on alternative realities from the actual series. This occasionally even enables them to slash a character with another version of themselves, for example, Willow and vampire Willow from ‘Doppelgangland’ (series 3, episode 16) or the two Xanders from ‘The Replacement’ (series 5, episode 3). *Buffy* has also been slashed with the Buffybot from the end of series 5.

Some stories are written in such a way that the identity of one of the characters being slashed is only revealed at the end of the story, or the reader can imagine whichever character they want in the roles. In some stories one of the characters is not even present, such as the series of stories involving Faith’s reflections on her relationship with Buffy whilst she is in prison. Some authors write ‘crossovers’ with other series, with such combinations as Joyce and Beverly Crusher from ‘Star Trek: The Next Generation’ or Ethan Rayne and Professor Snape from ‘Harry Potter’.

### Themes in *Buffy* slash

As in Bacon-Smith’s (1992) research I found that the stories that slash authors most enjoyed writing were ‘first time’ ones. Nearly half of the respondents said they liked these. One described such stories as ‘men accepting and admitting that they find another man attractive, without feeling it affects them negatively as a person, and having the opportunity to act on it’. Another author wrote that there was ‘nothing like a well-written cherry popping’, suggesting that she enjoyed the sexual element of ‘first time’ rather than the romantic side of it. Several authors wrote about ongoing relationships in their fiction, rather than focusing purely on first times, and some also used hurt/comfort themes.

Over a quarter of the authors said that they liked writing ‘angst’ stories which place characters in emotional situations and/or deal with their conflicted feelings. The idea of getting into character’s heads and exploring feelings and thoughts that were not shown in the series was common. A similar proportion of writers said that they wrote stories with vampire or ‘bloodplay’ themes. These stories often involved someone being ‘turned’ into a vampire, for example William becoming Spike or Xander becoming a vampire in ‘The Wish’ universe (series 3, episode 9). Vampire slash stories often involve ‘sire-child’ relationships between the vampire who turned someone (the sire) and the person they turned (the childe). However, many authors did not write vampire scenes. One said ‘the only thing I refuse to write is vampire bloodletting fic because it’s just too Anne Rice for me’.

Authors differed markedly in their views on two aspects of slash: sex and violence. In relation to sex, a few authors said they enjoyed writing purely sexual stories, whilst many expressed the view that the relationships were of primary importance and any sex had to be in context. Some authors said that they would never include violence in their fiction, whilst a small number stated that they preferred violent, dark fiction or that they made a point of exploring themes of bondage, domination and sadomasochism (BDSM). Many of these authors made the point that vampire or BDSM themes do not necessarily imply violence, for example, one said ‘there is occasional bloodplay in my fics...it’s generally done with bonding in mind’.

A subgenre of slash that is not mentioned in much of the previous research is comedy or parody. For example, there is a website which publishes cartoon strips starring Buffy and Vampire Willow. This follows the timeline of the series and makes jokes based on the events that happen. I found some good examples of comedic slash on the web archive I analysed. One story, ‘it won’t fit’, plays on expectations of slash readers. Xander and Spike are having a conversation in the dark about something not fitting, and it turns out to be the key to their hotel room. Another author picks up on a joke that Joss Whedon made about doing an ‘all naked, all gay episode...with goats’. She writes a slash version of the musical episode of *Buffy* entitled ‘once more, all naked, all gay’. My favourite story in the comedy genre is ‘Buffy Woke Up Gay’ which plays with the plot of *Buffy* and the distinction between the characters and the actors, as well as popular stereotypes around sexuality:

‘No more pastel coloured coats, no more sub Charlie’s Angels gold lame halter tops, no more Gypsy Rose Lee earrings, no more Maybelline 2-in-1 Express make-up. Buffy Summers was gay, she realised as she threw back the covers...As she peered out the window, admiring the beautiful rainbow that arced over Sunnydale, Buffy also realised why she’d been having so much trouble with men recently. Riley just hadn’t been woman enough for her.’

The story continues with Buffy considering a hair cut, coming out to Joyce and the Scooby Gang and encouraging Xander to leave Anya for Giles. At the end of the story:

‘Willow and Tara beamed proudly at Buffy. Having recruited another one, this meant they got the toaster oven... Nothing could tarnish their happiness, not even when they spotted Spike wearing one of Dru’s dresses...’

Many slash writers said that it was important that stories were believable in the context of the series, although a small number were less concerned with this. Most authors said that the emotions and circumstances in slash had to be appropriate to the characters and that writing in the characters’ voices was vital. So, for example, Spike will refer to people a ‘pet’ and Faith calls Buffy ‘B’. However, there is a lot more to writing believably and many authors felt that this was a particular challenge when writing slash. One said ‘I have to ask myself, does that sound like something Buffy would say?’

Some writers enhanced the believability of their stories by spinning off actual dialogue from episodes and many used ‘missing scenes’ from the series. For example, slash is interwoven with actual scenes and dialogue in the story ‘Hush’, which is based on episode 10 of series 4 but from Xander’s first person point of view. The story begins with the dialogue between Spike and Xander in that episode, but adds in Xander’s erotic thoughts as he lies in bed with Spike tied to the chair next to him. After this, the moment in the programme when they wake up and can’t talk is described, but this is followed by a scene where Xander tries to rape Spike and Spike joins in. The story then goes back to the original episode for the scene between all the characters, and finally includes another ‘missing scene’ where Spike and Xander get their voices back. Xander tries to apologise for what happened:

‘I went on for a while, Spike’s expression growing more and more amused by the second, until he got tired of my ramblings and leaned over to kiss me firmly on the mouth. Effectively shutting me up.

‘Hush pet,’ he said simply.

‘So you mean...’ I faltered, a blush creeping into my cheeks much to my humiliation. ‘You mean, maybe this could work out or something. We could do this again?’

Spike laughed at the child-like hope in my voice. He reached out and slowly stroked a finger down my thigh.

‘I have to admit, don’t like you much pet,’ he said. My heart fell. ‘But, if it’s more shagging you’re looking for, I’m right here.’

He leered at me. I grinned. Fine, he didn’t have to like me.

‘Besides,’ he murmured, getting up and coming over to straddle my thighs. He ran his tongue slowly up my neck and whispered in my ear, ‘this time, I want to hear you scream.’”

### ***Buffy and Slash***

In the questionnaire I asked what about *Buffy* particularly appealed to the slash writers. The most common response (of half the respondents) was that the characters in the show were particularly interesting and complex, with pasts that were hinted at and could be expanded on. Many authors felt that there was existing chemistry between characters in the series, and some said that they found the characters easy to empathise with and that they related to the issues they were dealing with.

Over a third of the authors said that, although other factors might also be important, the attractive appearance of the actors on *Buffy* was part of their inspiration to slash them. Responses included: ‘the eyecandy issue’, ‘the pretty men’ and ‘Hello! Have you seen the shows? Cordy, Faith, Buffy and Kate are gorgeous’!

Several authors also commented that the flexible nature of the Buffyverse helped with their slash because the existence of alternative universes and magic meant that anything was possible. Many of the writers of vampire-based *Buffy* slash said that the vampire themes in the series particularly appealed to them. These authors spoke of vampires being generally erotic with interesting issues around blood-drinking, sexuality and redemption. Immortality meant that vampire characters had long histories that could be filled in. One author said that vampires have ‘a huge number of issues to explore such as the length of their memories, their experiences over the years, the contrast between how they look as young men, but their personalities having been formed so long ago’.

Interestingly, one author felt that vampire themes enabled them to explore issues around masculinity. She said the vampires allowed her to ‘explore man’s baser instincts and repressed feral behaviour’. It seems possible that the vampire themes in the series enabled some slash authors to write scenes that would otherwise be taboo. For example, one author pointed out that vampires generally have to hurt others in order to feed, and that they have no souls. These facts could legitimise sadomasochistic scenes which some authors may be reluctant to write otherwise. Another author said that vampire characters made it easier for her to write homoerotic scenes because ‘some of the less attractive aspects of male ‘gay’ sex can be avoided, given they don’t eat (!)’

The issue of whether the *Buffy* series intentionally encourages slash is a topic of debate in the slash community. Half of the authors felt that *Buffy* deliberately encouraged slash or gave ‘the nod’ to slash authors. The rest were less sure or thought that fans just read things into the show. One said there would be slash whether or not there was subtext and commented ‘I think writers in this genre simply tend to look at the world through slash-coloured lenses. We’re scavenging for innuendo’. Another commented ‘I watch my teenagers and believe me, they DON’T see what I see’.

I collated a list the evidence provided by the authors who did believe that there was intentional slash subtext in *Buffy*. Many of them pointed to the chemistry between characters and ‘missing scenes’ or hinted-at histories like that between Giles and Ethan. The good slayer/bad slayer dynamic between Buffy and Faith was mentioned by several people, as was the actual relationship between Willow and Tara. Xander/Spike slash authors wrote about the scene in ‘Hush’ and the one in ‘Intervention’ (series 5, episode 18) when Xander describes Spike as ‘compact and mysterious’ and Buffy says ‘I’m not having sex with Spike, but I’m starting to think that you are’. Several authors commented on the scene in ‘Beneath You’

(series 7, episode 2) when Nancy asks whether any of the Scooby Gang *haven't* slept together and Spike and Xander exchange a 'meaningful look'.

Some authors reported that the writers and actors involved in *Buffy* were aware of slash. For example, Nicholas Brendon is reported as saying that he is aware of what is happening on the web regarding 'the whole Giles and Xander love fest'. The author who mentioned this said that the fact that he acknowledges the slashing of his character and is OK about it gives her 'permission' to write about him. One slash author concluded 'I honestly do believe that the writers are aware of what slash is and don't mind playing with the concept just enough to make all us 'slashers' salivate'.

### **Motivations for writing slash**

In order to compare academic theories to fans' own theories about slash, I asked authors to tell me about their motivations for writing slash. Over a third of them said that their main incentive was subverting the series itself. They said that they liked the sense of power and fun of expanding on minor scenes or pairing characters who would not have relationships on the show. There is an interesting tension between this motivation and the idea that the series intentionally encourages slash. Are slash authors transgressing the designs of the series-makers or working alongside them by picking up on deliberate cues and suggestions?

Many slash authors said that they just wrote slash because it was fun or a form of stress relief. One said that slash 'allows me the ability to occasionally escape the day-to-day stress of work/home etc. I can create another world that is tailored to suit my likes', perhaps reflecting Radway's (1983) theories about women's use of romance fiction. Some authors said that slash was a creative outlet and a way of developing their writing skills. Several wrote other fiction as well and found slash a good exercise because it raised challenges like writing in character, or because it was not constrained by publishers.

Several of the male/male slash authors questioned what it was about this dynamic that they liked. Some simply said that 'two guys getting it on is a turn on'. One pointed out that slash is 'no different to all the het porn out there for men with lesbian scenes in it, just not as widely visible or accepted...yet'. Another gave the explanation that since she wasn't attracted to women herself she didn't include them in her stories. As well as the sexually arousing aspect of male/male scenes, some authors mentioned that they found these combinations particularly interesting or romantic because they liked to see men being forced to be emotional and open and to overcome barriers. This theory echoes those of Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992) which propose that slash is a way for women to challenge traditional masculinity and replace it with a preferable version. In addition, some female authors said they liked male/male slash because it was a way of exploring something they could never experience themselves.

A few authors explicitly countered the notion that slash is similar to standard romance fiction by saying that the differences between slash and traditional romance were exactly the reasons they enjoyed it. One said she liked the fact that men don't have to have 'romantic declarations and the whole being swept away by a hero scenario'. It seems that this author is specifically not questioning traditional masculinity, but putting it forward as preferable to the version of femininity prevalent in heterosexual fiction. This different perspective supports Green, Jenkins and Jenkins' (1998) suggestion that slash may not be explainable by one overarching theory.

The lack of gender difference in slash was mentioned by three authors, supporting Lamb and Veith's (1986) theory that slash can be a response to the lack of equality between men and women in society. Two authors said that they could write aggressive, bloodplay or rough sex scenes between two males that they would be uncomfortable writing between a man and a woman. Another author wrote that 'putting oneself into the position of a man having sex with Spike may be unusual at first glance, but it also eradicates some gender-related baggage, i.e. the relationship is about two beings who's power over the other is not defined by gender'. In relation to Penley's (1992) theory it is interesting that this author is clearly identifying with one and not both of the characters in her stories.

Finally, two authors suggested that slash could have a positive impact on societal beliefs, opening people's minds and reducing prejudice about homosexuality. One said 'before I started reading slash I have to say I was a little weird about the gay/ lesbian thing. I mean I had friends that were that way but it just seemed weird. I guess reading slash kind of helped me see that they would just like anyone else just have more problems due to society.' She felt that slash could be a 'way to change society. Showing more people that what they think is not weird'.

Several authors also wrote about the importance of the slash community, saying that getting feedback, making friends and communicating with people with similar interests was an important part of slash. Some authors felt uncomfortable about being seen to be asking for praise or encouragement, and some were nervous about receiving criticism, but most reported extremely positive experiences of receiving feedback from others in the community. One author concluded her questionnaire by saying 'slashers are generally good people with a common kink. There are great writers who can bring you to tears, make you laugh out loud and titillate you with their tales. They've given me endless enjoyment, and they continue to inspire and challenge me on many levels.'

### **Conclusions**

As I said at the beginning of the essay, there are several aspects of *Buffy* that set it apart from previous series that have been slashed. I will conclude by returning to four of these in the light of my analysis of the experiences and explanations of *Buffy* slashers.

First, *Buffy* has many strong female characters. Despite this, two *Buffy* slash authors said that they wrote male/male slash because 'there's still damn few convincing female characters on television'. However, it seems that there is much more femslash based on *Buffy* than there has been in slash based on previous series. This lends support to the argument of Bacon-Smith (1992) and others that the prevalence of male/male slash in the past was due to the lack of strong women. However, despite the female characters in *Buffy*, the majority of the authors still write male/male slash. Some authors suggested that this was because they were used to close female/female relationships and therefore found them less interesting. One author

said that she wrote male/male slash because she knew what happened in female/female sex and this made it less easy to go with the flow when reading a femslash scene.

Secondly, *Buffy* is interesting because it includes explicitly gay characters and relationships. This raises the question of whether Willow/Tara stories actually count as slash. Some authors argue that they don't because slash is all about relationships that do not occur in the original series. However, many Willow/Tara authors argue that what they write is slash because it fills in scenes that are absent in the series due to censorship. One said 'It was all those little missed opportunities, their first kiss, first time making love, first real conversations about how they felt about each other, that were never shown onscreen that tempted me at first to write W/T fic.' Many slash authors regard slash as being about picking up on cues and missing scenes in the series rather than completely subverting it, as they place a great deal of importance on believability. There is an interesting comparison to be drawn here between slash readings and the way lesbian women read movies. Theorists have argued that lesbian viewers in the past had to 'fill in the gaps' with films, since there were very few overt depictions of lesbian relationships or sex. Now that there are explicitly lesbian films, it is argued that lesbian viewers still read by 'filling in the gaps' because this is what they have learnt to do and/or because gaps still exist due to censorship. Translating this to slash, it is possible to argue that early slash was about 'filling in gaps' that were certainly not deliberately intended. In recent series like *Buffy*, however, there may be a slashy subtext or even overtly homosexual relationships. Slash authors continue 'filling in the gaps', but perhaps they are engaged in a more active interaction with the programme-makers than previously, and they may have to go further down the line of parody or extreme sexuality if their aim is to be transgressive.

Another interesting point relating to sexuality is the fact that the largest proportion of slash authors in my study defined as bisexual or 'open' in their sexuality. Back in 1998, Cicioni found that slash authors were predominantly heterosexual. My data would suggest that the 'new school' of young slash authors are particularly likely to identify as bisexual. I find it interesting that bisexuality is not explicitly dealt with in the *Buffy* series, despite this being a potential sexual identity for Willow after her intense relationships with Oz and Tara. There is much debate over Willow's sexuality amongst those who write Willow slash, with very strong opinions on both sides of the argument. Those who argue that Willow should be read as bisexual point to the general invisibility of bisexuality in the media because of the binary construction of sexuality which does not allow for a position 'in between' gay and straight (Ochs, 1996). Willow herself does not help matters by describing herself as 'gay now', but also describing the vampire version of herself as only 'kinda gay'! Despite the number of slash authors identifying as bisexual, slash stories rarely explicitly address bisexuality. Rather, most depict characters as discovering their homosexuality. However one author does confront the issue of bisexuality in her story based on 'The Zeppo': Xander is left in the car with Jack by Katie after saving them from the police.

Jack 'smiled at Xander as he straightened again. "Thought you weren't gay."  
Xander only shook his head, exhaling shakily, but still not opening his eyes. "I'm not," he responded after a moment.  
"Then why..." Jack cut off and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He gave his companion another winning grin. "Then why'd you wanna make Katie happy?"  
It was Xander's turn to grin. "Bisexual." He leaned in for another kiss.'

In addition to the strong female characters in *Buffy* and the depiction of gay relationships, two other themes in the series seem to be important to slash. First, as mentioned before, the vampire themes may enable slash authors to explore sadomasochistic and homoerotic scenes that they would otherwise find difficult. However, it seems that there is more going on in vampire slash than this. There is certainly scope for more research into this aspect of *Buffy* slash in relation to the general eroticism of vampires and vampire-based subcultures like blood fetishists and lifestyle vampires. Secondly, themes of masculinity are explicitly explored in *Buffy* in a way they were not in previously slashed shows. The series often represents masculinity in crisis. For example, in series 6 Giles feels that he isn't needed, Warren uses his 'magic balls' to gain power over women, Xander feels ineffectual and Jonathan wants to be a supervillain if he can't be a superhero. Some slash authors argued that *Buffy* was particularly slashable exactly because the masculinity on the show was 'non-macho' and displayed several versions of masculinity, not just the dominant 'hero' kind. This relates to previous theories of slash as a reaction against hegemonic masculinities (e.g. Jenkins, 1992). It seems that slash authors engage with the ways masculinity is questioned in the series and this encourages them to play with these ideas further. Having said that, it could be argued that series 6 does resolve the masculinity crises that arise with Giles' vital final role and the possible reading of the finale as Xander saving the world from an evil lesbian with his simple man's love!

In conclusion, *Buffy* can be seen as differing in many ways from the shows that have traditionally been slashed, and the impact of this is clear in the writing and explanations of slash authors. It seems that slashers are still 'filling in the gaps', but that there is also a high level of engagement with the subtext of the show. Issues around vampire slash and femslash require further investigation, and there is a need for existing theories to combine and expand in order to explain the diversity of a genre that is constantly evolving and reinventing itself.

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