

"KINDA TWISTY AND WEIRD": QUEERING THE HETEROSEXUAL ROMANCE IN
BUFFY SHIPPER FANFICTION

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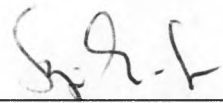
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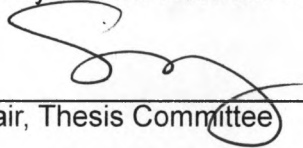
"KINDA TWISTY AND WEIRD": QUEERING THE HETEROSEXUAL ROMANCE IN
BUFFY SHIPPER FANFICTION

Katherine Ann Vogt
San Francisco, California

2017

Fanfiction, especially that which focuses on romance (otherwise known as shipper fic), has been so far mostly ignored by literary studies. However, shipper fic as a textual form can be rife with literary allusion, compositional complexity, and creative analysis worth examining. Instead of performing its analysis in essay form as literary criticism would, shipper fic creates narratives that add to, delete from, and transform already valued and rich hypotexts, combining the critical with the creative in a blurring of genres. By examining shipper fic about Spike and Buffy (or Spuffy) from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I argue that Spuffy shippers use their critical attention to heterosexual romance and their purposeful misreading of the canon hypotext as both creative (re)reading and (re)writing. The fic "West of the Moon, East of the Sun" does so to queer *Buffy* and the popular romance to fit Spuffy shippers' desires, and to make conventional structures subversive. But shippers can still perpetuate and create problematic norms and structures of their own. The fic "P-p-p-pick up a Plot for Vengeance" uses absurdism in its self-aware critique of its own fandom in ways that amplify the inevitability of dialogic influence. By examining these two pieces of shipper fanfiction, I hope to demonstrate the critical and creative depths and complexity of fanfiction, shipping, and popular romance. Both pieces work to "queer" their hypertext and its generic modes, showing that fanfiction and romance can have textual complexity worth more closely examining literarily, and that fanfictional shipping and readerly attraction to romance can be so much more than a simple misreading of the hypotext.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis


Chair, Thesis Committee

5/22/17
Date

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Introduction: “Your champion, your partner, your equal-opposite...made wrong, just for you, long before you were even born.”

In contemporary literary studies, few scholars, save for the most conservative, would dispute that pop culture media counts as serious narrative worthy of study. Some mediums and texts are more prestigious than others, and there may be arguments over whether individual texts are substantial enough to warrant scholarship, but almost no one would argue that a text being a film or a graphic novel inherently discounts it from being academically analyzed. In fact, some pop-cultural texts inspire copious and enthusiastic levels of academic engagement and publishing, and perhaps one of the best-known of these academic pop culture wellsprings is the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The show has inspired countless journal articles, books, theses and dissertations, and even has its own scholarly association (The Whedon Studies Association) with both undergraduate and postgraduate journals and a bi-annual academic conference. Despite some anxieties over the tensions between dual academic and fan roles (Burr 375), academic production and passion for *Buffy* continues even 20 years after the show started in 1997. And this intense interest is warranted; Whedon and his team of writers created a richly complex and transformative text that had a groundbreaking and subversive cultural impact from its inception. The show attempted (albeit only sometimes successfully) to push a radical feminist agenda in a cultural moment where the postfeminism of girl power had yet again relegated women in pop culture to sex objects in the guise of empowerment, and had mostly sidelined women

from having their diverse stories told front and center. It's not a wonder that fans and scholars alike have flocked to *Buffy* as the object of their obsession when there is so much to chew on, and praise and criticize accordingly.

Despite the vast amount of mostly accepted and sanctioned academic study on the cultural impact of *Buffy* and other pop culture media texts like it, there is substantially less scholarship (especially literary scholarship) on the creative fruits of this impact, namely *Buffy* fan works, and fanfiction in particular. This is not to say that fans have been wholly neglected; fan studies is a robust field that has produced plenty of work on fan response and production. However, the field stems more from the fields of sociology and anthropology and therefore usually attends more to what causes fans to write fanfiction rather than to the texts themselves. There have been moves to look at fanfiction more closely as texts themselves, such as in Sheenagh Pugh's *The Democratic Genre* or Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's excellent anthology overview *The Fanfiction Studies Reader*. But deep dives into particular fanfictional texts are rare, despite the many interesting and subversive characteristics that *Buffy* fanfiction shares with its hypotext,¹ including complex play with gender roles, generic conventions and tropes, and queer representation. And in what little literary scholarship that does exist on fanfiction, seemingly no one is writing about "shipper fic"²—one of the most substantial portions of all fanfiction written—unless it is to focus on slash (gay romantic pairings) or to

¹ In *Palimpsests*, Gerard Genette uses the terms *hypotext* and *hypertext* to mean referenced text and the referencing text respectively (5).

² Shipper fic is fanfiction that is focused on the romance between usually two (but sometimes more) characters.

examine the sociological aspects of “shipping” as a fan activity in general. Literary study remains generally uneasy and even a bit queasy about treating primarily romantic texts with any amount of seriousness or actual investment, despite romance being the one of the most commercially successful and widely read book genres in the English-speaking world, and a genre mostly read by college-educated people (Wendell and Tan 128). Shipper fic seems to be no exception to this stigma. Gendered biases about seemingly inherently feminine interests and communities are clearly affecting academic valuation of these texts.³ However, shipper fic is rife with literary allusion, compositional complexity, and creative analysis. Instead of performing its analysis through essay form as literary criticism would, shipper fic narratively rewrites the already valued and rich hypotext, combining the critical with the creative in a blurring of genres.

The Spike/Buffy, or Spuffy, “ship” in particular produces fanfictional texts that include unique queering elements that add to, delete, and transform the conventions of the hypotext, the popular romance novel as a genre, and shipper fanfiction itself. Spuffy is one of the most wildly popular ships in the *Buffy* fandom, encompassing the largest portion of *Buffy* fanfic in Archive of Our Own and fanfiction.net, two of the largest repositories for fanfiction on the internet.⁴ There are also several separate Spuffy-focused fanfiction archives, and even several award sites where judges or general readers vote on what were the best Spuffy fanfics in each category for that

³ Most shippers and fanfiction writers, in general, are women.

⁴ Archive of Our Own is run by the Organization of Transformative Works, and was, in part, created as a non-profit, fan-run alternative to the commercially-motivated content restrictions of fanfiction.net.

round. Spuffy is also the ship that I have been most dedicated to since I became a fan of *Buffy* fourteen years ago, so I have intimate and firsthand insight.⁵ Spuffy shipper fanfiction and shipper fanfiction in general include distinct literary mechanics that are worth examining critically, both because fanfictional texts borrow from or rely on traditional literary criticism and theory *and* because shipper fanfic combines and transforms literature's various conventions into new mechanics and aesthetic standards in ways that cannot be found elsewhere. Shipper fic examines the tropes and mechanics from popular romance *and* canonical literature, two types of writing that often seem antithetical in form and values. And yet shipper fic proves they can work seamlessly together.

Romance is taken seriously in shipper fanfiction, and in Spuffy shipper fic, equality and freedom in romance are valued above all. Most (popular) romance texts, feminist and progressive though they may be, often still fall prey to heteronormative impulses. Heteronormative relationships in popular romance operate within established hierarchies that value masculinity over femininity, and that value conformity to gender role ideals. Despite its attempts to defy patriarchal norms, *Buffy* both subverts *and* buys into heteronormativity. Spuffy shipper fic pushes an ethos of romantic equality in gender and other realms, and shippers attempt to especially queer *Buffy*—especially in those patriarchal and heteronormative moments when that canon hypotext fails in their eyes. Spuffy shipper fic performs its queering critique of popular romance and the canon hypotext by additionally queering and playing with textual structures and

⁵ I even wrote a couple of terrible Spuffy fanfics when I was thirteen years old.

heteronormative gender roles. By taking textual structures that connote heteronormative values from genres like the popular romance and the canon hypotext, and combining them into cultivated bricolage, shippers can create new, less heteronormative, aesthetic standards and structures. Shippers pick and choose what they like and dislike from a variety of genres and texts from all ends of the aesthetic spectrum, and the deconstruction and reformation they are performing brings the poles of a seeming binary (popular romance and canonical literature) together into a connected spectrum of working together rather than working against one another. These are complex textual dynamics that need sorting out; therefore academia should make some space for scholars to take romance and fanfictional texts seriously. Scholars should both praise and critique fanfiction on its own merits, and not just write it off as trivial, or stigmatize the people who produce and consume it.

“I will go down with this ship”: Shippers and “Misreading” Romance

Shipping is a subset of fandom, where the primary focus of fan activity revolves around the relationship (usually romantic, but sometimes platonic as well) between two characters in a particular narrative universe (and sometimes between characters across narrative universes as well). Pairings are treated as sacred and inviolable, with different phrases that indicate fans' adherence. Shippers use the labels One True Pairing (OTP), the platonic pun BroTP, and the polyamorous OT3 to identify their type of ship. Shippers also frequently proclaim, “I will go down with this ship,” a reference to the Dido song

“White Flag” that is usually comically paired with the visual pun of a photo or gif of a boat sinking. This generally means that shippers will never give up on their preferred pairing (or grouping) even if it ends in tragedy or if it ends up being canonically overruled, and also illuminates how “shipping” as a phrase derives both from relationship and worship. Shippers can favor everything from canonical pairings to completely outlandish uncanonical fantasy pairings and everything in between, and the canon hypotext doesn't have to involve any romance for shipping to occur.⁶ Indeed, shipping, except for the platonic outlier cases, is all about reading romance into a text as the primary focus and driving force of plot. Pamela Regis, in her description of the limits of what makes a romance novel in *A Natural History of the Romance*, provides eight essential elements of the the genre,⁷ and claims that

a reader sometimes constructs a romance novel from the love plot in a given book whether or not the book contains all eight essential elements of the form. His or her knowledge of the genre... guides such reading. This reading is often inaccurate. It may contain events that are not depicted or implied anywhere on the page. The reader, in other words, fills in missing romance novel elements. This reading is usually incomplete. The reader often discounts, skips, or otherwise disregards scenes that the writer did include but which contradict the

⁶ Some examples of outlandish pairings include Olaf/Sven from *Frozen*, Dean Winchester/his Impala from *Supernatural* (shipping a person with an inanimate object is called cargo shipping), and the Hogwarts Castle/the Giant Squid from the *Harry Potter* series.

⁷ Regis's eight elements of romance are a definition of society, the meeting, the attraction, the barrier, the point of ritual death, the recognition, the declaration of love; and the betrothal (14).

romance novel paradigm that the reader is using to work through the novel she is reading. (48)

I believe that shipper fanfiction is similar to what Regis describes above: a mode of interpretation that reads romance into texts where it does not necessarily exist, or that tries to reinterpret a text's pre-existing romantic elements. However, instead of being "incomplete" or an unintentional misunderstanding, shipper fic attempts to make the romance concrete and whole not through misreading but through creative rewriting.

Shippers queer their fandom's hypotext by making it generically more like a popular romance narrative, but Spuffy shippers in particular often additionally queer the (heterosexual) popular romance itself and their canon hypotext (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) by focusing on the power equality of both partners. Pamela Regis notes that within the literary and popular romance genres, the romance heroine's freedom and power at the end of most stories is pragmatic and compromised (29-30). Typically, romance does not result in a fully equal partnership, nor the blurring of each partner's gender roles and characteristics. *Buffy* itself queered many tropes and conventions of various genres, including romance, but only intermittently and to a limited extent. For example, while Buffy and Spike have a BDSM-style, mostly sex-based romance in *Buffy* season six, these subversive romantic elements were presented as destructive, unhealthy, and finally abusive instead of liberating and erotic. Spuffy shipper fic will often rewrite season six to make the representation of kink culture more positive, or they will rewrite the plot or Spuffy relationship dynamic so that it does not have to "devolve" into

an abusive relationship. Shipper fic, and Spuffy fic in particular, queers its hypotext's more normative and regressive elements while also further queering *Buffy's* more subversive elements.

“If the apocalypse comes, beep me”: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Queer and Normative Elements

Buffy the Vampire Slayer has been and still is hailed as prestige television that pushed the boundaries of medium and genre when it aired from 1997-2003, and indeed, Joss Whedon's postmodern feminist take on horror films, Gothic Literature, and the vampire mythos subverted many narrative and cultural norms.⁸ Whedon famously claims he created *Buffy* to subvert the “female-as-victim” stereotype in the horror/fantasy genres (Symonds para. 2), and Whedon's subversion of horror tropes is evident from the very first scene in the pilot episode, “Welcome to the Hellmouth.” In this scene, a blonde Catholic schoolgirl and an older bad boy break into his old high school for an ostensibly romantic encounter, and the girl acts afraid and nervous about breaking the rules and being seemingly alone in a big empty school. In a standard horror scene, this nervousness would be warranted, because the innocent blonde would be about to be murdered either by the sinister date that lured her into isolation or by some third party lurking in the darkness. However, when the boy reassures her that “there's nobody here,” when she hears a strange noise, the girl, instead of getting murdered for having

⁸ The plethora of tributes and think-pieces about *Buffy* during its twenty-year anniversary in March 2017 is evidence enough for how beloved and relevant the show still is today.

an illicit premarital makeout session, reveals her vampire face and murders her date instead, upending her status as predetermined victim. Whedon very intentionally references and uses horror tropes to make the upending of expectations even more drastic, and this opening scene serves as a kind of proclamation of the show's subversive feminist values.

Buffy herself of course also queers the blond-cheerleader-as-helpless-victim trope, because the seemingly weakest character—at least if going by appearances alone, given that Buffy is petite and feminine—is actually the one who with the most power. Buffy prevents the apocalypse as the primary hero countless times throughout the series, which is remarkable in a media landscape where female heroes are rare because they are usually the damsels to be saved and/or murdered. Buffy almost never lets herself become a victim, and on the rare occasions when she becomes mired in victimhood, she never remains there for long. Even when Buffy's boyfriend-turned-evil-fiend at the end of season two has her cornered with, as he puts it, "No weapons, no friends. No hope," and asks, "Take all that away and what's left?," Buffy doesn't hesitate to catch the sword that he lunges at her (with her eyes closed, no less) and answers "Me" ("Becoming Part 2"). Buffy refuses to give into the patriarchal violence that horror as a genre wants to inflict on her, and Whedon queers horror by subverting traditional gender roles and their corresponding characteristics. Buffy can be both feminine and masculine; she can be the hero and just a high school girl.

Buffy is incredibly reliant on pre-existing archetypes, tropes, characters, and mythos from the vampire tradition within folklore, literature, and film, and on Gothic literature in general. Vampires are still immortal, bloodsucking, averse to sunlight, and primarily killed by staking, and as such are readily recognizable as vampires. Both Spike and Angel, as vampire paramours of Buffy, also fit into the mold of the Byronic anti-hero, yet they each queer this trope in different ways. Indeed, the show queers, sometimes radically, many traditional textual roles or tropes of vampires, demons, and the supernatural. Angel doesn't fully transgress the Byronic ideal of "mad, bad, and dangerous to know," as he is initially tortured by the regret and guilt stemming from his cursed soul before turning turning violently evil when that soul is (temporarily) removed. However, unlike a Byronic anti-hero, he truly tries to remove the "anti" in anti-hero and sincerely seeks redemption through heroism. Furthermore, Angel also is objectified by Buffy's female gaze (and *Buffy's* camera angles); the show's constant display of his body further queers his position of power as a Byronic, vampiric sexual predator by making him, rather than his supposed female victim, the object for consumption.

Spike, however, queers the Byronic anti-hero even more than Angel does. Spike's hypermasculine vampiric characteristics are evenly mixed with highly feminine and emotionally sensitive traits. Spike was a hapless and socially awkward poet as a human who was turned and conquered by the insane female vampire Drusilla, who Spike worshipped and protected. With Drusilla, Spike inhabits both the roles of feminized devoted partner/love slave—a cuckolded one as well, since it's implied that Drusilla

constantly cheated on him while he remained faithful—and masculine knight in black armor saving Drusilla time and time again. Spike is both highly violent and emotionally sensitive, murdering all of his former tormentors in life without remorse but feeling immense regret and emotional pain when he has to stake his own mother, who became completely evil after Spike turned her into a vampire order to save her from tuberculosis. And when Spike loves someone, he straddles the lines between passionate and obsessive, tender and rough (Spicer para. 21). Dee Amy-Chinn goes so far to call Spike “an accomplished ‘switch,’ able to take either the man’s part or the woman’s” when it comes to relationships roles and sex (316). His masculine, messy punk rock appearance and persona (which alludes to the show’s postmodern “punking” of conventions and norms) is undercut by his meticulous obsession with his appearance—despite his lack of a reflection (Amy-Chinn 318). Spike’s look is cosmetically cultivated like a woman’s typically would be: he dyes his hair platinum blond (a high maintenance color that has to be touched up regularly) and slicks back his natural curls, he paints his nails black, and in the 1970s he wore eyeliner and copious amounts of jewelry. Spike’s persona exudes masculinity, but he does it by using the trappings of femininity.

Spike does fit the Byronic anti-hero trope in that he often hurts the ones he loves, but he isn’t as emotionally hard or closed off as the typical Byronic archetype, and Spike is always the more attached partner in a relationship, unlikely or unwilling to be the one to break things off like the Byronic anti-hero usually is and does. And unlike Angel, Spike resists becoming fully good for much of the series, occupying a moral gray area for most

of seasons four (when the character became a series regular) through six, and only striving to become fully good (with a soul) after attempting the morally reprehensible act of rape on the woman that he claimed to love, Buffy, near the end of season six. Even after he does manage to get a soul, Spike doesn't wallow in the same kind of tortured guilt that Angel does, reverting back almost entirely to his old personality halfway through season seven. Spike complicates both the Byronic anti-hero and gender roles in general, queering what it means to be an ostensibly heterosexual man and a vampire.

However, *Buffy* does not always remain true to its feminist subversive roots, and as a commercial enterprise still perpetuates problematic depictions of sex and undermines its own feminine interests. Firstly, the show itself isn't primarily focused on romance; it's a coming-of-age supernatural action story, which is typically about male heroes. While it subverts that typical story by replacing the male hero with a female one, making such an inversion alone doesn't propel enough change to the heteronormative power structures of the heroic coming-of-age narrative. Also, despite its groundbreaking depiction of lesbian romance through the characters of Willow and Tara, *Buffy* remains largely heteronormative in terms of gender roles and performance (Amy-Chinn 314). The show often undermines its own feminist values at times, especially with Buffy's friend Xander and boyfriend Riley often feeling emasculated by Buffy, a woman who is stronger than both of them combined; Xander and Riley each regularly lash out and blame Buffy for their anxieties instead of dealing with their own insecurities. Finally, Buffy's repeatedly disastrous love and sex life comes off as downright sex-negative, which

perpetuates negative stereotypes of slut shaming and victim blaming to those watching. Buffy always blames herself for her sexual mishaps, and so does the show; sex often leads to punishment for Buffy, from her first boyfriend Angel losing his soul after she loses her virginity to him in season two, to her magically-induced non-stop sex with her next boyfriend Riley powering a house full of poltergeists in season four, to her primarily sex-based relationship with Spike culminating in attempted rape in season six. The negative consequences of sex occur disproportionately to Buffy and not to her male partners. Therefore, the show perpetuates the paradoxically simultaneous female archetypes of both passive victim and active slut, instead of allowing Buffy to be a possible model for positively exploring and taking ownership of one's feminine sexuality.

During the one instance when romance features prominently plot-wise in season two, Buffy still has to inhabit the feminine roles of victim and slut simultaneously. Buffy loses her virginity to her so-called soulmate, only for him to lose his soul entirely and turn completely evil. Whedon and the writers purposefully play out the trope of the boyfriend who was only nice to get in the girl's pants and then dumps her as soon as he gets what he wants, which comes off as very sex-negative and demeaning to Buffy. It may be a depiction of something that happens commonly enough in the real world, but the portrayal condemns Buffy more than Angel and makes sex for women seem like it inevitably leads to disaster and shame. Not only that, but the romance still isn't the primary point of season two's narrative; it's just a plot device to further the actually primary supernatural-action story. Buffy does not get a positive romantic ending at the

end of season two—one of Regis's key features for a narrative to be a romance—which further negates the possibility of arguing for *Buffy* as a romance. Yet again, the show subsumes feminine interests and perspectives, maintaining an unbalanced gender hierarchy instead of the (arguably queer) gender-balanced equality Whedon claims was his purpose in creating the show.

The show, restrained by network censors and commercial sponsorships, couldn't be very sexually explicit or positively transgressive either. Almost all of Buffy's depicted sexual experiences end up sex-negative, especially those she has with Spike. In season six, the show did get more sexually explicit and transgressive, showing Buffy and Spike having rough sex in a crumbling building and public sex on the balcony of a club. But Buffy is simply using Spike for sex, to make herself feel anything—in this case disgust, because of how numb and depressed she had become.⁹ This is not a healthy sexual relationship, and instead of transgressive kinky sex being shown as liberating or positively subversive, it's shown as shameful and dirty. Additionally, as mentioned before, Spike also attempts to rape Buffy on screen, and while the show doesn't blame Buffy for this incident, it's still yet another negative sexual experience for her. This creates an almost entirely negative heterosexual female sexual experience ethos for the show, a situation that Spuffy shippers, free of the commercial restraints of a network television show, attempt to critique and right/re-write. Spuffy shippers also push even

⁹ Willow (a powerful witch and one of Buffy's friends, aka the Scooby Gang) raises Buffy back from the dead at the beginning of season six. Willow's spell forces an unwilling Buffy from a heavenly dimension back to Sunnydale, causing Buffy to suffer from a bout of depression and anguish that lingers throughout the rest of the season.

further some of the show's more radical attempts to challenge gendered identities and behavior by rereading and revising Spike and Buffy's canonical sexual relationship (along with other textual/generic elements) and making it the primary narrative focus.

“Where Do We Go From Here?”: Chapter Outline

Spuffy shippers use their critical attention to heterosexual romance and their purposeful misreading of the canon hypotext as both creative (re)reading *and* (re)writing. They do so to queer *Buffy*'s canon and to make the conventional subversive. The primary piece of fanfiction my thesis will explore is “West of the Moon, East of the Sun” by KnifeEdge,¹⁰ a novel-length epic that rewrites *Buffy* season five to make the canon plot and themes focus on Spike and Buffy's love story. “West of the Moon” tries to queer the textual structures that make up the romance genre, the generic structures of *Buffy*, and the literary canon itself in order to question generic tropes, cultural taste, and the sexual politics of the romance genre. The fic also attempts to queer the structures of gender roles and performance within heterosexual romance and within the canonical iteration of Spuffy, all in an endeavor to liberate heterosexuality from heteronormativity. However, even shipper fic that takes its progressive ethos as seriously as “West of the Moon” can fall prey to the very normative impulses and conventional values they are trying to critique or change, and shippers can even create new, strictly enforced regressive norms of their own. So in my coda I look at a fanfic located on the polar

¹⁰ Following the conventions set by the Organization for Transformative Works, I will be citing fanfiction authors by their usernames/pen names.

opposite end of aesthetic and narrative modes from “West of the Moon.” Titled “P-p-pick up a Plot for Vengeance” (or as I will call it, “Penguins”), this fanfic by brutti_ma_buoni and quinara seeks to parody every shipper, romance, fanfic, and generic narrative trope possible, using chaos and absurdity as a purposely bad crack!fic to intensify and mock Spuffy shipper fic’s own problematic constructions.¹¹ Despite their vast differences, both fanfictional texts “misread” and reinterpret their hypotexts for their own desires and purposes, in a creative dialogic critique through the palimpsest of changes between the hypo- and hypertexts. With these two extremes, I hope to demonstrate the critical and creative depths and complexity of popular romance, fanfiction, and shipping. All of these are affective narrative modes working (in tandem or against one another) to push against norms that seek to trivialize and stigmatize anything non-normative, subversive, or emotion-based (rather than logic-based).

Chapter 1 discusses how “West of the Moon” queers and transforms romance as a genre, and how it also queers other normative textual structures in the hypotextual canon and the literary canon. “West of the Moon, East of the Sun” as a shipper fanfic text particularly queers the romance genre by covering all eight of Regis’s requirements for a romance novel, while also focusing on the extra-romantic canon mythos of the Slayer and vampires—which was the thematic focus for canon season five. By having all the textual features of a romance, “West of the Moon” fits the narrowest definition of a

¹¹ Crack!fic is fanfiction that 1) involves a premise or plot that would be impossible (or at least improbable) in the canon universe, and 2) is often humorous and written poorly on purpose. A common crack!fic trope in Spuffy shipper fic involves Spike and Buffy being magically compelled to have sex and unable to control themselves or their latent sexual desire for one another.

romance text; but at the same time, “West of the Moon” also defies singular categorization because it also contains enough textual features of *Buffy* season five to be additionally recognizable as the canon hypotext. KnifeEdge, its author, completely rewrites season five of *Buffy* to remove and add elements that make the Spuffy romance more affectively and narratively satisfying to shippers’ collective perception of what that romance should be.¹² Regis asserts that romance must be the primary focus of a text for it to be a popular romance (49), but “West of the Moon” in particular proves that the popular romance reading mode can equally coincide with the canon text. Regis’s assertions about romance reading and writing presume that shippers are misunderstanding their given hypotext, or that they are reading *too much* into a non-romance hypotext to force that hypotext into being a romance. Instead, shippers are asserting interpretive dominance over what both kinds of authorizing forces (genre and canon) claim a story should be focused on. In order to achieve this desired focus on romance, “West of the Moon” as a piece of fanfiction inherently plays with its source text, making alterations to the canon hypotext that inevitably change the way a reader views and interprets the canon. However, “West of the Moon” doesn’t change the hypotext and season five beyond recognition, which makes the overlay of canon and fan interpretation of canon nearly seamless, and blurs the lines between text versus subtext and the hypotext’s reality versus shippers’ fantasies. KnifeEdge also does more than just queer

¹² KnifeEdge also explicitly claims that in general, she wants all of her fanfictional texts to stick as closely to canon as possible, legitimizing the Spuffy romance’s existence in the subtext of canon season five while simultaneously critiquing it not being taken from subtext to text in a reciprocated and fulfilling manner.

the canon hypotext with palimpsest and dialogism; she also engages the literary canon at large in diverse ways, re-appropriating and recontextualizing revered literary poems and novels (as well as classical myth) to complement the shipper interpretation of Spike and Buffy's (fanfictional) romance. Additionally, "West of the Moon" queers fanfiction's mode by making it explicitly literary alongside the popular romance mode, defying the notion that the literary is automatically aesthetically superior or completely separate from popular forms like romance novels; if the literary was so different, its combination with the romance novel and fanfiction mode would cause so much dissonance that "West of the Moon" would make no sense. Popular and literary textual structures are homologous rather than antithetical—as are *all* textual structures—and examining shipper fic like "West of the Moon" deconstructs the false binary of textual aesthetics. KnifeEdge's expert weaving of all of these elements makes the story of *Buffy's* season five even richer and more aesthetically dense with reference and remix.

Chapter 2 argues that "West of the Moon"'s treatment of Spike and Buffy's romance also interestingly queers heterosexual romance without simply reversing their roles or mapping their relationship onto slash archetypes or conventions either.¹³ In the canon hypotext, Spike and Buffy occupy blended and complicated gender roles and traits. Spike's already canonical blended traits are taken further by being both Buffy's perfect equal partner in strength and agency *and* the damsel in distress that Buffy must save at the end of her quest narrative. Buffy is very feminine in her appearance and interests, but emotionally she is much more guarded and cold than a stereotypical

¹³ Slash is the fandom term for explicitly homosexual ships and fanfiction.

female. In fact, Spike is much closer to the archetype of the hysterical female than Buffy is, with his volatile emotional outbursts that occur especially when it comes to matters of love. Buffy also ends up being the knight/hero going on a physical and moral quest to save the captive Spike—who, despite being the seemingly passive victim in this situation, also *actively* resists the evil goddess who has been torturing him, buying Buffy more time to save the world. But when it comes to her family, especially when her mother dies, she displays monumental emotional vulnerability, eschewing the need to be strong all the time. Neither Spike nor Buffy maps perfectly onto the sexual roles of top or bottom, sub or dom, and neither do they inhabit clear masculine or feminine power positions in their romance and in their sex. The subversive sex depicted in the hypertext queers what popular romances usually depict as ideal heterosexual sex, because Spike and Buffy's sexual experience is depicted as positive and intensely pleasurable for both parties involved. Neither partner is ashamed about their intense sexual connection or experience, nor forced or pressured into having sex. Each partner gives full enthusiastic consent, and this sex-positivity subverts the *Buffy's* and the heterosexual romance genre's depictions of sex for females.¹⁴ Spuffy shipper fic like "West of the Moon" queers heterosexual romance with sex and blended, more equal relationship roles, which complicates and pushes against the ubiquitous, oversimplified, and patriarchal heteronormative romance.

¹⁴ Although romance novels no longer conform to (and often outright reject) the overwhelming rape-as-love trope of Old School romance novels of the 80s and 90s, they still have pretty heteronormative depictions of sex, and relegate the more subversive and kinky sex to the genre of erotica (Wendell and Tan 24-25; Regis 22; Pearce 525).

Finally, I end with a coda examining how “P-p-pick up a Plot for Vengeance” takes fanfiction’s queering process one step further, by parodying fanfictional and shipper tropes, as well as normative textual aesthetic standards. Inspired by an offhand line in a sarcastic fan manifesto on Livejournal about inter-shipper policing about what counts as “real” Spuffy and responding to the lack of inclusiveness in the Spuffy ship, the fic was collaboratively written by two authors.¹⁵ The fic inspired numerous fan art and fic spin-offs, prompting a mini subgenre of shipper fanfic that was entirely a joke. The fic reaches ludicrous heights of ridiculousness by writing a romance where Spike and Buffy, along with many characters from the Buffyverse,¹⁶ are penguins that follow both penguin and supernatural rules.¹⁷ The fic takes regressive tropes of Spuffy shipper fanfic (and fanfiction in general) and pushes them to their logical extremes, using what Genette calls “self-pastiche” (120) as a (loving) critique of when Spuffy shipper fanfiction falls prey to stereotyping. Angel, as Spike’s heteronormative (and homosocial) romantic rival for Buffy, goes from canonically brooding to melodramatically skulking and villainously scheming. Also, silly penguin romance and sex overshadows coherent plot or logic, and penguin Spike and Buffy are transported to a dimension unfamiliar to them but that is

¹⁵ The two authors, *quinara* and *brutti_ma_buoni*, wrote the first portion of the fic as a back-and-forth joke-riffing comment thread on the original blog post. When it got to be too long to follow easily, they copied and pasted the comments into a separate blog post on *quinara*’s Livejournal blog and added onto it to complete the story. I discuss more of the backstory of “Penguins”’s creation in my coda.

¹⁶ The Buffyverse is the shared canonical universe of *Buffy*, *Angel*, and any spin-off comic series supervised or sanctioned by Joss Whedon.

¹⁷ This fic was published in 2010, near the tail end of penguins’ cultural popularity spurred by movies like *March of the Penguins* in 2005 and *Happy Feet* in 2006, so this fic seems to be a commentary on this trend as well.

instantly recognizable to readers as the canon universe. The text uses humor to point out normative tropes gone wrong by taking them to their logical extremes, and also queers even fanfictional standards of acceptability and aesthetics. This fic was written terribly on purpose but was still met with glee by shippers who read it (though the same cannot necessarily be said of non-shipper fans who may read it). Henry Jenkins notes that subversive fans (and therefore also shippers) see “a rejection of conventional aesthetics as simultaneously a rejection of conventional politics. Here, the fans’ pleasure lies in distancing themselves from the text, in holding it at arm’s length and laughing in its face” (64), and indeed, Spuffy shippers distance themselves from conventional, serious shipper fic like “West of the Moon” and shipper fandom’s sometimes problematic politics through subverting aesthetic conventions of taste. Shippers like brutti_ma_buoni and quinara can and do find pleasure in laughing at themselves and their own sometimes normative romantic interests, proving their own point that shipper fic does not have to exist in a particular way—that it can both critique and co-exist with types of fanfiction on the polar opposite scale of taste and narrative style. Spuffy shipper fic does not signify monolithically. In other words, it does not have a fixed set of meanings nor a fixed mode of expressing those meanings. Spuffy shipper fic, like all fanfiction, instead exists within a spectrum of almost infinite multiplicity of meaning and taste. That spectrum can encompass seemingly incongruous values and styles, including the values of loving self-awareness and self-critique of Spuffy shipper fic as an institution with discordant (but co-existing) liberating and repressive characteristics.

Chapter 1: “And it's 'queerist', not 'strangest', pet”: KnifeEdge's Queering of *Buffy* and Popular Romance

“West of the Moon, East of the Sun” is a novel-length fanfiction by KnifeEdge that “queers” its *Buffy* hypotext. The fanfictional text does so by re-envisioning *Buffy* as a popular romance, and also by re-envisioning popular romance as a radically genderqueer genre.¹⁸ Popular romance as a genre celebrates the freedom and power of women to get what they desire, but literary critics have noted that for “the heroine of the romance novel, the freedom at the end of the book is often provisional” (Regis 16).¹⁹ Because that freedom remains within the bounds of heteropatriarchy, female characters in most popular romance novels rarely achieve a fully equal balance of power with their male romantic partners and often remain trapped within hierarchies that repress women and femininity. KnifeEdge’s fanfictional retelling of *Buffy*’s season five makes readers re-encounter general romance tropes and structures as well as canonical series moments. “West of the Moon,” I argue, is transformative, critical, and intensely literary in

¹⁸ Anne Jamison in her book *Fanfiction: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World* notes that all fanfiction “blurs a whole range of lines we (mistakenly) believe to be stable: between reading and writing, consuming and creating, genres and genders, authors and critics, derivative and transformative works” (6-7). “West of the Moon” does this in particular ways, but it is not wholly unique in the realm of fanfiction overall.

¹⁹ In their survey of the modern popular romance *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan corroborate Regis’s assertion about female power only going so far in romance: “The power imbalance becomes one of the crucial conflicts of a romance, as the characters seek to rebalance that power, either with the heroine gaining the required experience, or by making peace with the fact that her power will stem from other sources. Either way, the happy resolution of the relationship needs to restore balance in the world after its deliberate disruption in the beginning. But the fact that it’s overwhelmingly the chick who is in a position of virginity, inexperience, or limitation says something about how comfortable romances are with depicting women at an advantage over the hero, and how readers perceive a power deficit on the hero’s side as an emasculation” (41).

its use of shipper fic to make fan readers question and dialogically reinterpret what *Buffy* as a text means as a feminist commentary on gender and textuality.²⁰ Despite utilizing genres (shipper fanfiction and romance) that are renowned for their formulaic repetition, “West of the Moon” uses queerness to disrupt the seemingly unified meaning of static gender hierarchies present in both the heterosexual romance and canonical narrative.²¹

Shipper fic like “West of the Moon” takes the hypotext of *Buffy* season five and purposefully “misreads” it to focus on its romance elements.²² However, this “misreading” explores a kind of transgressive romance that does not and often cannot be depicted in commercial settings, and that does not completely predominate over the canon hypotext’s original foci. “West of the Moon” takes the Spuffy relationship and places it through the looking glass in order to show both Buffy’s and Spike’s perspectives fully, queering the heterosexual romance by elaborating upon the characters’ canonical gender instability and also making each partner the other’s perfect opposite-but-equal in ways that extend beyond their canonically “queer” gender identities. “West of the Moon”

²⁰ Jamison also asserts that (shipper) fanfiction is literary: “Fics that center on romantic and sexualized relationships also explore innovative narrative, representational, and psychological territory. These fics serve to remind us that romance, largely ignored by major review outlets and derided by literary writers, can be literary in its telling and engage a wide range of topics and motivations, as can works with erotic content” (55).

²¹ Anne Jamison argues that “fic increasingly offers a space where gender, like sexuality, is not an either/or phenomenon, and gender and sexual dissent, even rebellion, has long been part of fic’s story... Fanfiction transforms assumptions mainstream culture routinely makes about gender, sexuality, desire, and to what degree we want them to match. Sometimes not matching is precisely the point—there are all kinds of possibilities we might like to imagine or look in on” (19).

²² I take my idea of “misreading” from Pamela Regis’s seminal work on romance reading and writing, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. As mentioned in the introduction, Regis believes that readers who read romance into primarily non-romance texts are “inaccurate” in their interpretation (48). I consider *Buffy*’s primary generic foci to be supernatural horror and action/adventure rather than romance.

as Spuffy shipper fic therefore works to queer the unequal gender roles and hierarchy inherent in normative heterosexual romance. In doing so, "West of the Moon" subverts many of the hypotext's familiar elements, as well as many familiar generic romance tropes that lead to power imbalances and hierarchy.

When I suggest that "West of the Moon" performs its fanfictional intervention by *queering*, I use the term queer in terms of both aesthetics and process. Queer can refer to a way of being as well as a representation of alternative, hybrid, nonconforming identities and relationships. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book

Tendencies:

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

Queerness is a mode of existence where a person, object, or text, is unable to be neatly put into one category or box. Queerness radically pushes outside the boundaries of convention through erasure, addition, and purposeful internal contradiction. While Sedgwick's definition here explicitly applies to gender and sexuality—and can also be applied to other forms of forms of personal identity²³—it can also apply to textual structures as well as to generic and taste boundaries, which are all tightly bound up into

²³ Sedgwick goes on to praise other intellectuals and artists who "[spin] the term [queer] outward along dimensions" of "race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses" (9, emphasis original). I aim to spin "queer" even further outward, beyond identity-based discourses and structures, to apply to text-based ones.

norms and categories that are arguably as carefully regulated and entrenched by social conventions as gender and sexuality are. For example, fanfiction as a textual form can be considered queer because it transforms a hypotext's canonically-regulated meaning by deleting, adding, and contradicting. Queering can thus also be a narrative and structural process. To queer can be to play with textual structure, to subvert usual generic form and narrative content, to enact a process of transgressing, subverting, and hybridizing both narrative and social archetypes.

"West of the Moon" takes the *Buffy*'s own attempts at subversion in romance, sexuality, gender roles, taste, and genre, and moves them into an even more fully queer mode. This fanfictional queering has the paradoxical effects of allowing a heterosexual couple to avoid signifying monolithic heteronormativity *and* of proposing fanfiction to be as, if not more, canonically authoritative to readers than its hypotext. While *Buffy* contains romantic moments and plotlines, as a whole it is not explicitly a popular romance story; it is missing many of the key elements that typically define popular romance as a genre.²⁴ However, "West of the Moon" reads romance into non-romance plot points in the canon hypotext while still allowing the hypotext be recognizable. While *Buffy*'s preexisting queer themes and messages may be recognizable within the fanfictional text, "West of the Moon" denies its hypotext an implicitly accepted, unified

²⁴ As mentioned in the introduction, Pamela Regis's eight essential elements that define a romance text are a definition of society, the meeting, the attraction, the barrier, the point of ritual death, the recognition, the declaration of love; and the betrothal (14). While *Buffy* includes many of these elements, *Buffy*'s romantic entanglements often end in tragedy and separation rather than in betrothal and happily ever afters.

definition of gender and heterosexual romance. Additionally, the fanfictional hypertext redefines what constitutes popular romance as a genre because it undercuts, intensifies, and recontextualizes *Buffy's* ideas of gender, romance, and textuality. KnifeEdge's fanfictional hypertext overlays so many different meanings (and also many different hypotextual references other than from *Buffy's* canon) in ways that defy dominant modes of interpretation. "West of the Moon" builds on *Buffy's* already existing postmodern queerness and actively transforms, erases, and adds on to *Buffy* where it does not go far enough (in the eyes of Spuffy shippers) in its queering of romance and gender roles. The fic also adds additional referential layers from the mythical and literary canon onto *Buffy's* canon in order both to queer *Buffy* with new possible textual interpretations and to dialogically reinterpret those referenced literary hypotexts by fitting them into the context of a fully-queered *Buffy* canon. Further, as a queer fanfictional shipper text, "West of the Moon" seeks to correct the power imbalance implicit in heterosexual popular romance—in particular, how heterosexual romance is typically depicted in *Buffy*—while still celebrating what is freeing and affectively pleasurable about romance in general and romance in the canon television show in particular. "West of the Moon"'s multiple queering modes (textual queering and gender/hetero-romance queering) attest that fanfiction and romance can have textual complexity worth more closely examining literarily, and that fanfictional shipping and attraction to romance elements in any text can be so much more than a kind of misreading.

I. "The Slayer's Knight. Like a ... knight in tarnished armor, I suppose":

"Mistranslating" (Popular) Romance as a Genre

"West of the Moon, East of the Sun" by KnifeEdge creates an epic, alternate version of the entirety of season five of *Buffy*. Each *Buffy* episode of season five is re-written in one or two chapters of the first part of the narrative, told from Buffy's first person perspective, then the same timeline is re-told again in the second part from Spike's perspective in the form of journal entries. In Part 3, which entirely departs from the hypotext, the story returns to Buffy's first-person POV, and Buffy travels through Spike's past with four spirit guides on a quest to save him from an icy hell dimension. Some points from the fanfictional plot coincide almost exactly with the hypotext, down to the exact same dialogue, while other points are significantly altered.²⁵

Part 1 starts in the summer between the end of season four and the beginning of season five. Buffy, believing she's having a prophetic Slayer dream, finds herself in a pitch black room with a silent vampire who she cannot see. The fanfiction carries on from there very close to the canon storyline of season five: as in the first episode of season five, Buffy fights Dracula; as in subsequent episodes, she goes on to fight a troll god (among a myriad of other demons); further, she deals with many other emotional traumas and challenges from season five, such as her mother's cancer and eventual death, growing distant from and being dumped by her boyfriend Riley, and trying to discover more about her powers and what it means to be the Slayer. However, these

²⁵ When she uses or adapts any dialogue directly from a canon episode, KnifeEdge credits each episode and episode writer in the author's note for that chapter.

canonical plot points are intercut with non-canonical scenes that occur in the pitch black dream dimension space, where Buffy grows increasingly close with the silent vampire she calls Mr. Gordo (after her childhood stuffed pig). Buffy shares vulnerable thoughts and feelings with Mr. Gordo, ones that shippers like KnifeEdge interpret that Buffy has but that aren't always expressed explicitly in the hypotext. In the *Buffy* canon, Buffy doesn't express her feelings to her friends or even her boyfriend; Spuffy shippers often interpret this reticence as indicating that Buffy believes her friends and family will view her as weak if she shares her vulnerable side, and that she, as the Slayer, has to be the strong and assured one. KnifeEdge takes this particular shipper interpretation and makes it explicit through Buffy's first person narration in "West of the Moon." Outside of the dream dimension in the hypertext, Buffy grows increasingly suspicious of Spike, as he starts to try to help her (something that also occurs in canon). Despite his increased help, Spike still won't answer any of her questions about why Sunnydale, a town in Southern California with sun in its name, is turning icy cold and why it's being overrun with demons that usually live in wintry Northern Europe (all non-canonical additions). Also deviating from canon, Buffy learns of a prophecy about "the Slayer's Night" that predicts her role in fighting the demonic force that is causing Sunnydale to freeze over, and the prophecy also divines a gift that she will receive that will help her in that fight. Her unwillingness to trust Spike (despite his repeated demonstration that he wants to help her) along with her deep curiosity to discover if Mr. Gordo *is* Spike leads her to use magical means to turn the lights on in the dream dimension, and she (and the audience)

discover that Mr. Gordo is indeed Spike.²⁶ He frantically kisses her, confesses his love, and makes her promise to read his journal before he is taken away by Louhi, an icy hell goddess who wants to use Spike's unique human emotions and superhuman strength to power her permanent escape from her hell dimension prison.

Part 2—Spike's journal—relates Spike's perspective on the events of Part 1, and some additional moments that occur outside Buffy's experience. Buffy and the audience find out that at the beginning of Part 1, Louhi attempted to forcibly take Spike to her hell dimension as her vampire consort and torture toy.²⁷ In order to avoid this horrific fate, Spike challenged Louhi for his freedom from her capture, and Louhi sets up a test designed to be nearly impossible for him to pass: he and Buffy have to go to a pitch black dream dimension every night, for a year and a day, and in this dimension he is not allowed to speak nor to kill Buffy. Outside of the dream dimension, Louhi magically restrains him from verbally sharing any information about the challenge or her interference in Sunnydale, and any attempts he makes to visually share what he knows (including the journal) are also magically obscured with a "do not look here" spell. Through the journal entries in Part 2, Buffy sees Spike's emotional journey from absolutely hating Buffy to loving her and wanting to change into a less evil being for her.

²⁶ Buffy has her friends enchant a yin-yang shaped sun and moon amulet to turn on the lights (which appears in the fan-art banner for the fic), yet another symbol of "West of the Moon"'s equal-but-opposite ethos.

²⁷ Louhi is only able to escape her prison for short periods of time, and she needs supernatural amounts of pain to break free forever. Torturing Spike (physically and emotionally) would allow Louhi to permanently open the portal between her hell dimension and the Buffyverse's reality, aiding her revenge plot to take over the Buffyverse's dimension, from which she was banished.

The shipper readers also see how Spike begins to behave differently from his canonical season five self because of his interactions with Buffy in the dream dimension.

In Part 3, the story switches back to Buffy's perspective, and veers wildly from canon season five (though not from Spike's canonical backstory). The Slayer's gift in the prophecy is revealed by Whistler, an emissary of the Powers that Be, to be Spike, the Slayer's *Knight* (not the Slayer's Night, as it was mistranslated in Part 1). Whistler offers Buffy a chance to make amends for her lack of trust in Spike/Mr. Gordo through a challenge of her own. She goes on a spirit quest through Spike's past with the four most important women in his life: Nikki, the Slayer Spike killed in 1977; the unnamed Chinese Slayer that Spike killed during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900; Drusilla, his sire and lover for centuries; and Spike's mother, Anne. Each woman shows Buffy an aspect of Spike, his worst and best moments, and each time, Buffy must watch and still choose to save him. Buffy has to prove that she believes Spike can change and has changed, and after all her emotional labor, she is transported to Louhi's icy wasteland of a hell dimension. Buffy trudges through the snow for several days, retrieves a battered and emaciated Spike, fights off Louhi's attempts at stopping them (with Spike's help), confesses her love for Spike, and escapes back to Sunnydale with herself and Spike still intact. Buffy and her friends come up with a plan to defeat Louhi, and through a magical spell joining Buffy's and Spike's "life forces" together, the Scoobies all save the day.²⁸ Spike and Buffy discover that their link makes each of them essentially immortal and invulnerable to

²⁸ The Scoobies (or the Scooby Gang) are Buffy's group of friends that help her fight the forces of darkness with research, magic, and tactical support. Xander, a member of the group, named them after the mystery-solving group of friends from the cartoon *Scooby-Doo*.

most mortal harm, giving them a “happily ever after” that literally means forever.

“West of the Moon” fulfills all eight of Pamela Regis’s narrative element requirements for a romance novel as it refocuses the canon hypotext on the courtship and (queer) coming together of Spike and Buffy. While Regis, one of the most prominent scholars critically theorizing popular romance as a literary form, claims that the kind of reading that shippers do is “incomplete” and “inaccurate” (48), and that stories that depict “the courtship and betrothal, but [do] not focus upon them” are not generically romance (49),²⁹ such analysis ignores the fact that there can be more than one narrative focus for a story. The extra-romantic canon focus can symbiotically co-exist with and even serve the romantic focus being read into the hypotext. But despite being one of the most prominent scholars trying to critically theorize popular romance as a literary form, what Regis fails to recognize is that there can be more than one mode of romance writing and reading. Shipper fic completes the ends of both Regis’s conception of romance and the canon focus on the Slayer mythos by *adding* the missing parts of the eight elements of romance into the canon season five plot, most notably giving the hero and heroine a happy ending where they remain together. KnifeEdge still maintains a recognizable canon *Buffy* season five—to the extent that it helps the Spuffy romance—while also still preserving season five’s narrative focus on the Slayer mythos. But KnifeEdge also transforms the canon and Slayer mythos to make season five into a romance that fits Regis’s requirements. Regis defines the eight elements of the romance

²⁹ Instead, the eight elements of romance “are preconditions for the story that follows rather than being, themselves, the story” (Regis 49).

novel as:

a *definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the *meeting* between the heroine and hero; an account of their *attraction* for each other; the *barrier* between them; the *point of ritual death*; the *recognition* that fells the barrier; the *declaration* of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their *betrothal*. (14)

According to Regis's definition, a romance must illustrate the difficult context in which a hero and heroine meet, and the primary focus of the story should be how the couple overcomes the obstacles to their "happily ever after" set up within that context. "West of the Moon" represents each narrative element of romance in its story (whether or not that element appears in canon), and often combines season five's Slayer lore plot into the romantic narrative elements. "West of the Moon" utilizes the exploration of the Slayer mythos as both a barrier *and* an asset to Spike and Buffy's romantic commitment: Spike and Buffy are mortal enemies by default according to their positions in the Slayer mythos (Vampire vs. Vampire Slayer), but KnifeEdge's alterations to that Slayer mythos is what makes it possible for the two to eventually create their queer "happily ever after" with one another. Spuffy shippers' alterations to canon through reading romance into the canon plot does not make that reading "incomplete." Instead, shipper fic like "West of the Moon" creates more textual complexity through the combination of the canon mythos and shipper romantic desire. "West of the Moon" complicates the Spuffy courtship with the Slayer mythology and complicates the Slayer mythology with popular romance elements,

in a way that allows shippers to satisfy their desire for canon *Buffy* to conform to their Spuffy-focused romantic interpretation.

Pamela Regis believes that audiences that read romance into non-romance focused texts are mistaken, and that a text has to be primarily focused on romance and courtship for it to qualify as a romance at all. She uses *Gone with the Wind* as one of her primary examples, stating that it

is a love story, and love is the emotion on which the romance novel is predicated. But not every love story is a romance novel... *Gone with the Wind*, despite its inclusion of the eight essential elements, never manages to deliver a barrierless relationship between the heroine and hero... Love plots abound. Sometimes they can drive the reading of a book. Nonetheless, only some of these love-driven books are romance novels. (50)

Because the plot of *Gone with the Wind* is more about Scarlett O'Hara's coming-of-age and not just about her romance with Rhett Butler (and because Scarlett does not end up with him in the end), it does not fit Regis's definition of the romance genre, and she believes that instead it should primarily be classed under the historical fiction genre (48). However, this definition of the romance genre does not leave room for texts that have more multiplicitous foci, where romance and another focus can serve each other (and the plot as a whole). Shipper fanfic like "West of the Moon" proves that a text can encapsulate both romance and a hypotext's original focus.³⁰ Shippers' rewriting is an

³⁰ Wendell and Tan make an argument that contradicts Regis's notions of what makes a romance (and that affirms my argument about romance's multiplicity): "Romance deals with one of the most elemental blocks of human relationships. Just as any work of fiction can have a romantic

additive and combinative process, rather than one that's erroneous or that detracts from a hypo- or hypertext. Regis does concede that romance plots and narrative elements can symbolize themes beyond the courtship or romance itself, explaining that the narrative elements can include "larger ideas that the romance interrogates" such as how upbringing affects adult psychology or how to overcome emotional problems (43). But "West of the Moon" goes beyond this notion and queers Regis's conception of the popular romance, transforming the genre into fanfiction that cannot be made to symbolize one unified system of meaning or generic structure. The Spuffy romance does not just mean courtly love or marriage, nor perfect adherence to expected generic structures of popular romance.

"West of the Moon" makes it so that romance as a primary thematic focus can co-exist with the original focus from the hypotext, which in canon season five is the Slayer mythos and the development of Spike as a character. The romance is in fact served by the Slayer mythos and vice versa, integrating them into a hybrid dual theme. This integration enhances and progressively furthers both foci by altering them to be more subversive. For example, according to the augmented vampire mythos of the "West of the Moon," Spike is purposefully identified as special and different, more human than most vampires and capable of more emotion and integration of his human/demon sides. He is also destined to be the Slayer's Knight, and the aforementioned prophecy

element, any romance can include the elements of other popular fictional genres. The genre is huge, creative, evolving, and a multiavenue [sic] crossroads of just about every other type of fiction" (9). While they do not cite her directly in this assertion, Wendell and Tan do reference Regis throughout their book, leading me to believe that they are (at least indirectly) addressing Regis's limiting construction of (popular) romance.

from the Powers that Be (the vague greater power of good in the Buffyverse) states that he is a weapon made to protect his equal in strength and specialness: Buffy. Spuffy shippers like KnifeEdge read Spike in the canon hypotext as being different than other vampires, but the canon hypotext never fully realizes Spike's queer potential as a vampire (or as a romantic partner). By creating a prophecy wherein a higher power makes Spike into a "wrong" vampire just for Buffy, shippers justify their interpretation of Spike as queer for a vampire, and justify their desire that Spike and Buffy should be in a romantic relationship.

However, as a shipper KnifeEdge *also* simultaneously subverts conventions of destiny and soulmates in popular romance, queering fated love by giving both partners equal agency in deciding to be romantically committed to one another, instead of one or both partners passively conforming to others' (hetero)normative expectations of them. The romantic ideal of soulmates and fated love get queered by the rewriting of the Slayer mythos. In *Buffy's* canon season five, Buffy goes on a vision quest to better understand the depth of her Slayer powers. Out in the California desert, Buffy receives a vision of the First Slayer, who presciently declares that death is Buffy's gift, foreshadowing Buffy's eventual choice to die in order to save her sister and the world in the canon season five finale. "West of the Moon" augments that prophecy, and reinterprets it as a gift Buffy is receiving rather than one she is giving. Spike ends up being her gift of death. He is literally (un)dead and brings death upon others as a bloodthirsty vampire, the opposite of Buffy's protection of life and justice, and he is the one who eventually kills Louhi at the

end of the story instead of Buffy. He is prophesied as the Slayer's Knight, coming to her "tarnished and black, sheathed, but still sharp and thirsty for the blood of its foes, and the Slayer's hand will bring it to the light" (Ch. 32), meaning that Spike is meant to be her perfect equal partner, the balanced darkness to her light.

Despite their fated partnership, the conventional idea that Spike and Buffy are destined romantic soulmates is explicitly ruled out by the text, and disparaged as forcing passivity and conformity upon a relationship that is too queer to fit that heteronormative paradigm. For starters, Spike is lacking a soul and therefore cannot be a soulmate; part of his queerness is his ability to love and try to be good even without the soul, defying the notion that romance has to be completely pure and good in order to be real. But additionally, the idea that love is just something passively forced upon you, that disempowers you, gets subverted by characters in the text. When the prophecy is finally revealed to be about Spike, Whistler mentions that,

Love is one of those unpredictable factors—the PTB [Powers that Be] can't make it happen. They can stick you with whoever they want, for however long, but they can't make you fall in love... Destiny always gives you some kind of choice, you know. Prophecies always tell you what, but almost never how. And more often than not it's the how that matters. It's the choices we make that determine fate.

(Ch. 52)

So despite the romanticized notion of having a pure and fated love, because Spike and Buffy's queer relationship is founded on a basis of perfect equality, they both have to

have agency in their courtship and commitment to one another. Predetermined soulmates are not permitted the radical freedom that Spuffy's queer relationship allows, and this queering of the popular romance genre is a subtle critique of romance's idealization of submissiveness and compliance. The canon Slayer mythos gets utilized and expanded upon because it is needed to bring the two romantic partners closer together plot-wise, but that mythos also gets twisted to criticize romance for limiting those partners' agency in their relationship. Thus both narrative elements, romance and Slayer mythos, can be primary and intertwine together while still fulfilling the requirements for a romance text.

Spike's contemptuous reaction to the prophecy possibly stripping him of all agency reflects Spuffy shippers' anti-hierarchy ethos within (heterosexual) romance. When he finds out about the prophecy and his role in it, Spike explicitly decries that he's become Buffy's "personal Powers designated lapdog" and he disgustedly wonders, "Did they [the Powers that Be] do that to me too? Made me fall in love with you? Like some sick, twisted guarantee that I'd be on your bloody side? Don't I even get a choice in my own fucking fate?" (Ch. 62). Spike clearly indicates that he feels his love isn't even real if he's been made to feel it; he believes he wouldn't be equal to Buffy if he had been forced to submit to some other power's will, subjugating and relegating him to the same unequal and overly feminine role that he was in with Drusilla. By writing Spike this way, KnifeEdge is also signaling to shippers what they should think about fated love while still reflecting the shipper desire that Spike and Buffy deserve each other. The way Buffy

counters his anger at seemingly being made to conform is to assure him, “I don’t want a lapdog[...] But... I’d like a friend. A partner. And equal. You’ve always been my equal, Spike. But you don’t have to stay, if you don’t want to. I won’t make you” (Ch. 62). Buffy resolutely chooses Spike instead of simply submitting to her so-called fate, and Spike and Buffy choosing each other is what makes their romance and relationship deserved and earned. The ethos of this shipper conception of romance and canon runs counter to hierarchical and heteronormative elements of popular romance and of *Buffy*’s canonical depictions of romance as well.

II. “I dreamt... I was invisible, somehow, and...you were on this tower and going to jump and I kept wanting to tell you not to. But you wouldn’t listen”: Queering the Canon Hypotext

While “West of the Moon” (and other shipper fic like it) queers *Buffy* as a non-romance by making the romance more central to the story, it also queers the canon plot itself by rewriting it to be different but still recognizable as season five instead of a completely Alternate Universe (AU) story. All of the changes made to canon (additions, transformations, and erasures) are to remove obstacles to a Spuffy romance developing and better facilitate the romance focus overall, but KnifeEdge explicitly mentions in her author’s notes and on her fanfiction author profile pages that she tries to stick to canon as closely as possible. Her method of changing as little as possible, for very specific reasons, creates two overlaying versions of the same story that each signify different

meanings and different goals but that are recognizably homologous. This overlay of hypotext and hypertext can be encapsulated into Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, and more specifically dialogic intertextuality (Kristeva 37). Bakhtin explains that,

the speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is— no matter how accurately transmitted— always subject to certain semantic changes. The context embracing another's word is responsible for its dialogizing background, whose influence can be very great. Given the appropriate methods for framing, one may bring about fundamental changes even in another's utterance accurately quoted.
(340)

Even if the hypotext is being directly quoted, its meaning changes because it is being placed in a new context in comparison to its previous one. Readers cannot unsee the differences between the derivation and the original, and fanfiction like “West of the Moon” utilizes dialogism to create a new, mythos- *and* romance-based reading of *Buffy*, especially because of the selectively minimal revision to the canon hypotext.

“West of the Moon” as Spuffy shipper fic draws on the pre-existing textual and gender queerness in *Buffy* and amplifies it, but “West of the Moon” also adds on new queer aspects when shippers feel the canon hypotext hasn't been explicit enough or when the canon hypotext has been too normative or regressive. Spuffy shippers, in their fanon, desire that Spike and Buffy have a romance that transcends boundaries of identity—both in terms of gender and as vampire versus Slayer.³¹ KnifeEdge, as a Spuffy

³¹ Fanon is fan canon, revisions that fans and shippers will often adhere to over actual canon in fanfiction and other fan creations.

shipper, transforms and corrects the hypotext, so that instead of being in an inherently power-imbalanced, heteronormative relationship, Spike and Buffy are co-equal partners both mythically and romantically. According to the canon hypotext, Buffy was also mystically chosen by the Powers that Be to be the Slayer; she also acts “wrong” for a Slayer—paralleling Spike’s vampiric wrongness—by working with a team and trying to have a normal life. “West of the Moon” magnifies both characters’ “wrongness,” responding to the ways in which Spuffy shippers believe that Buffy’s canonically queer gender performance (as strong yet vulnerable) make her the perfect match for Spike’s canonically queer gender performance (as tender yet violent). However, their canonical romance in the hypotext does not reach what many shippers believe is its queer potential because of the heteronormative elements in the text, such as the patriarchal origin of the Slayer and the obsessive, destructive violence of Spike’s romantic desire for Buffy. “West of the Moon” thus deliberately alters or removes many of the patriarchal and heteronormative elements of the Slayer mythos and the canonical Spuffy romance. For example, in the canonical Slayer mythos, the First Slayer was created by a group of shadow men who forced demonic powers onto an unwilling girl (“Get it Done”). This information given in season seven is elided in “West of the Moon,” which instead focuses giving Buffy on the power of darkness as a gift willingly accepted and chosen, in the form of the Slayer’s Knight. Also erased in the hypertext is Buffy and Spike’s abusive, violent, and mostly sexual relationship in season six, in favor of an emotionally healthier, more equal romance. The fanfictional text’s conception of romance as equal-but-opposite

partnership queers the patriarchy of male dominance and female submission, and the focus of the canon story (the Slayer mythos) and of shippers (romance) are made to serve each other's purposes narratively.

The fact that Spike and Buffy can occupy queer, hybridized romantic roles comes from the opportunities that canon provides, and their queer romance adds onto and elaborates on the pre-existing canon Slayer mythos. As Amy-Chinn and Spicer each point out, Spike can already be considered queer in canon (Amy-Chinn 314, Spicer para. 1), and the romance of "West of the Moon" capitalizes on and furthers this queerness; Spike narrates his perspective on Part 1 through his journal, which is considered feminine affective mode of expression, and this allows shippers to explore the depth of his emotions and to enhance their understanding of why Spike loves Buffy. His first person POV journal entries fill in one half of the romance in much richer detail than *Buffy* as a television show could execute as a medium. The audience gets to hear an unfiltered and detailed version of Spike's thoughts and feelings about Buffy, and about how those feelings develop from hate to lust to undying love over an extended amount of time. For example, the readers get to see fully realized interpretations of how Spike felt during canonical moments from season five that aren't made explicit in the dialogue or visuals. In the season five episode "Into the Woods," Spike shows Buffy that her boyfriend Riley has been sneaking off and paying vampires to bite him. In the show, Spike's motivations for these actions are ambiguous: it could be for selfish reasons to make Buffy more available as a romantic partner or it could be that Spike genuinely

cares about Buffy's welfare and believes that she deserves to know that her boyfriend is lying to her. KnifeEdge decides to pick the more generous of these two interpretations and fanfictionally authorize it through Spike's explicit monologue in the journal. Spike genuinely is conflicted about what to do, and comments, "Pretty sure this is one of those things where a soul might come in handy, but since I don't have one I'm a bit at loose ends" (Ch. 42). And when Spike eventually shows Buffy where Riley has been sneaking off to, he explicitly tells his journal (and therefore also the reader) "I won't forget the scent of her tears in the air, or the anguish in her eyes. Won't forget the feeling that came over me then: *I put that there.*" (Ch. 42, emphasis original), showing just how much he cares for Buffy, and how his motivations were not purely selfish (though not purely selfless either).

Spike's canon position as a morally ambiguous vampire also allows for Spike to be strong enough to be Buffy's equal and dark enough to satisfy her edgier, more stereotypically masculine Slayer side. Buffy's queerness comes from her canon position as Slayer, imbuing her with masculine-coded physical strength and saddling her with a destiny that she both embraces as a hero and rejects as teenage girl with conventionally feminine interests. Buffy's touches of darkness and masculinity makes her edgy and strong enough to be with Spike and to satisfy his demon side, while her feminine beauty and interests make her soft enough to satisfy his poetic side. The canon plotline focuses on each character's queerness: Buffy discovers more about her Slayer side and her darkness and Spike reveals his transformation from poet to monster. The shipper

romance revision of these already-queer canon plotlines creates a prophecy that is meant to queer the couple even further and justify shippers' conception of the Spuffy romance—even as the story (and shippers) simultaneously (and paradoxically) critique prophecy as an oppressive romantic and canonical norm.

In addition to adding on new elements to *Buffy*'s canon and the Slayer mythos, "West of the Moon" also erases elements that KnifeEdge as a shipper believes obstructs the Spuffy romance, queering the authority of a holistic, univocal canon. One of the most noticeable differences between canon season five and "West of the Moon"'s fanfictional version of it is that Dawn, Buffy's younger sister who is suddenly added in canon season five, is completely removed from the plot. Dawn is integral to the narrative of season five, where she is an embodied "magical key" for a portal that opens to all the hell dimensions in the universe that magical monks send to Buffy for protection. But many fans, especially Spuffy shippers, did not like the sudden insertion of Dawn into the series, and shippers did not like what they considered as her characterization: a whiny teenage brat whose existence got in the way of Buffy spending time and being open to Spike. So KnifeEdge's removal of Dawn from "West of the Moon"'s version of season five indicates "fan service"—the explicit attempt to respond to an audience's desires by giving them exactly what they want. Now usually, the term "fan service" applies to canon creators indulging their fan audience, but it's also applicable to fan writers doing what they want with canon, as if they were the canonical content creator instead. Fan service by fans, like KnifeEdge's fanfictional erasure of Dawn, queers the authorial expectation of a passive

audience that never questions the interpretive authority of canon—despite that audience's displeasure with it—by allowing fans to influence and correct that interpretive authority through creative rereading and rewriting. Shippers like KnifeEdge take over the mantle of author and the narrative power that comes along with it. Fanfiction writers and readers now dialogically layer their own “what if?” fan canon (“fanon”) upon the canon, allowing them to imagine what would've happened in season five without Dawn. Removing Dawn provides shippers with the romance between Spike and Buffy that they desire, and when they rewatch the canon version of events, they can imagine how much better (in their eyes) the canon story would be without Dawn there. This dialogism in the form of fan service queers the *Buffy* to make it include new interpretations, and prevents the hypotext from being interpreted in one unified way that excludes romance in general.

But because shipper desire generally calls for the removal of Dawn—who is the lynchpin to the plot of canon season five—the driving force behind what causes a hell goddess to come to Sunnydale must also change as well.³² Not all shipper fic removes Dawn nor do all Spuffy shippers equally desire her removal. But because of KnifeEdge's particular shipper desires, in “West of the Moon” Spike now becomes the object of desire (instead of Dawn) for the newly revised hell goddess, Louhi, and the challenge that he wagers to buy himself some time inevitably alters season five's canonical romantic outcome for Spike and Buffy. Spike's challenge also provides the opportunity for fan

³² In the canonical version of season five, Glory is a hell goddess trapped in a human body. Glory specifically comes to Sunnydale looking for the Key (who Glory does not realize is Dawn) that would allow her to open a portal to all the dimensions in the universe, including her home dimension to which she wishes to return. Glory serves as the “Big Bad” of the season, meaning she is the main villain and plot catalyst of the story.

service and reader gratification. The challenge of having to inhabit a dream dimension with Buffy every night—while not speaking or allowing her to know his identity—provides Spike unguarded time with Buffy in which she is unbiased and unprejudiced. This intimate and vulnerable time at least partially satisfies Spike's romantic impulses towards Buffy; therefore in "West of the Moon," he does not take any desperate actions that could ruin the romance, thwarting the mistakes he makes in *Buffy* season five. Again, this revision of season five allows readers to imagine how season five could have been better written for the Spuffy romance, satiating many shippers' desires by unavoidably changing the way season five can be interpreted. *Buffy* is queered through dialogism because romance finally gets emphasized and prioritized within canon, and Spuffy shippers get the season five they believe Spike and Buffy, as well as they as the readers, deserve.

And yet despite all these differences, "West of the Moon" is clearly recognizable as a version of *Buffy*'s season five because of what plot points and themes it keeps; the canon becomes queer because it cannot be written off as something entirely different or separate from romance, and romance cannot be as easily othered. As mentioned before, some things from season five remain exactly the same. However, there are also situations that happened in season five but are augmented due to the contextual revision of the fanfic: Buffy still kisses Spike in thanks for suffering a lot of pain to protect her loved ones as she does in the season five episode "Intervention," but who he saves (Buffy's friend Xander instead of Dawn) and from whom he saves them (Louhi instead of

Glory) is changed; Spike's ex-girlfriend (and sire) Drusilla returns to Sunnydale for the same reason as in the canon episode "Crush" but Spike's reaction to her return is drastically altered.³³ But what about these elements, altered or not, makes "West of the Moon" recognizable as a direct descendant of *Buffy* season five and not some alternate universe or a complete veering from the canon of the show? According to Mafalda Stasi in "The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest":

Canon is constructed through a repeated collective fruition and interpretation of the initial text. Despite canon being a construct, it is regarded as normative by most authors and readers: even when it is turned on its head or flouted, it is hardly escapable... It is thus not surprising that the strong frame of reference created by the intertextual relationship between the [fanfictional] narrative and its canon heavily shapes the discourse at all levels, and it lends some peculiar characteristics to the [fanfictional] text. (121)

So the relationship between canon and fanfiction, especially in this case, can be seen as collectively determined through dialogism, queering the idea of a univocal authoritative canonical narrative.

Referencing canon is a normative impulse, one that cannot ever really be avoided. But in this case, canon is embraced and then transformed by KnifeEdge in

³³ In "Crush," Drusilla returns to Sunnydale to convince Spike to reunite with their old vampire family (known as "The Whirlwind"). In the episode, despite the chip implanted in Spike's head which prevents him from hurting humans, Spike gives into Drusilla's seduction and temptation, and feeds off humans that she kills for him. In "West of the Moon," Spike outrightly rejects Drusilla's advances because he sees a better opportunity in becoming good (so that he can romantically pursue Buffy).

order critique that canon, and to make canon work towards their own queer and subversive ends. KnifeEdge keeps Drusilla's return to Sunnydale in "Crush," but instead of using it to reinforce Spike's weak position in an inverted heteronormative relationship as the canon episode does, KnifeEdge uses it to show the reader how much Spike has grown as a character, and how his love for Buffy has given him self-respect and strength that he was missing in the canon version of events. Spike is no longer desperate—and therefore no longer forced into the overly-feminized role in romance. Also, KnifeEdge alters the canon scenario so that Buffy also secretly witnesses Spike's revised reaction to Drusilla, so that Buffy can also see how much Spike has genuinely grown and become more equal to her in emotional strength. So collectively, KnifeEdge and Spuffy readers pick out which elements in the canon they interpret as most important, and alter those which may get in the way of the romance. Without the revisions to "Crush," Spike would not be worthy of Buffy's love and respect, and Buffy would not get to witness a clear reason to start trusting Spike more. Through these queering revisions, Spuffy shippers attempt to critique heteronormativity and the backgrounding of romance and affective pleasure.

By making the queer Spuffy romance that is denied by the canon writers seem plausible, shipper writers like KnifeEdge are also queering authorship and interpretive authority; "West of the Moon" makes readers question who is writing, and where each element of the text (if the fanfictional additions reasonably fit within the canon hypotext) comes from. From all of this fan interpretation and layering of fanon onto canon, "West of

the Moon” can be seen to “encourage interpretive play between the fan fiction texts and their source texts... [It] also play[s] on the disjoint between canon and fan” (Kaplan 150) which allows the queering and multiplicity of meaning to occur. Fanfictional texts like “West of the Moon” will always be compared to and influenced/shaped by the main source text’s canon, but now the hypotext also gets viewed in a new light; shipper readers get the non-heteronormative romance that they wanted, and they get to expand upon the Slayer mythos that they love from the canonical hypotext.

III. "Met him once... That Cummings, bloke. Was before he wrote that. Never ran into him again but I always wanted to ask": Queering the Literary Canon

Heavily intertextual texts like “West of the Moon” also dialogically misread and transform interpretations of the canonical literary texts that it references. Fanfiction like “West of the Moon” can queer taste as well as genre by blending the low with the high: romance and fanfiction with the mythological and literary canon. For example, KnifeEdge states in her author’s notes that the entire structure of the story is an adaptation of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, where Psyche must endure a test of patience and trust by not looking at her mysterious lover in the dark every night when they go to bed. When she fails, she has to go through multiple trials of impossible tasks in order to make up for her mistake. Buffy goes through a similar process, being trapped in complete darkness in a dream dimension every night with Spike due to his challenge pact with Louhi. She then endures spiritual trials to redeem her mistake of turning on the lights and making

Spike lose his challenge, in order to be worthy of him. By transforming something from the pantheon of Greek myth, "West of the Moon" self-consciously "elevates" itself to the level of high culture. By associating popular romance and the canon television show with Classical myth's focus on destiny and god-like powers, "West of the Moon" can accentuate the world-destroying power of Louhi, the ice demon goddess and Big Bad of the fanfic. It can also make the Spuffy romance seem all that more mythic and therefore can confirm the desires of Spuffy shippers, who mostly read Spuffy fanfic to fulfill their belief that Buffy and Spike are massively important and meant to be together. Because of myth's aforementioned association with powers beyond human understanding and ability, prophecy and destined events are common features. Myth helps humans explain the nature of larger concepts like Love, framing it as being designed by higher powers for reasons beyond humanity's control, through fate or destiny. Add in the association with Cupid and Psyche—and Cupid's status as a god of creating destined lovers, and the actual prophecy used in the plot of "West of the Moon" could seem all the more mythic and about grandiose romantic love. This contradicts "West of the Moon"'s explicit ethos against fated love and passive destiny that I mentioned earlier, but this tension between destiny and choice coexist throughout the text and work to prevent a monolithic or unified interpretation of what romance is or should be. According to KnifeEdge's shipper conception of Spuffy's queer romance, love can be both fated and chosen, willful and passive. Romance can be helped along by passive circumstance—like being Spike being anonymously trapped in a pitch black dream dimension with the person he thinks he

hates the most and Spike using that as an opportunity to start anew with Buffy and build her trust. But ultimately the final romantic commitment must be willfully chosen by both partners involved, otherwise the circumstances are actually manipulation instead of opportunity. In the other direction, the myth of Cupid and Psyche being used by a fanfictional text also queers the venerated hierarchical aesthetic position that Classical myth holds in Western culture; myth gets “tainted” by association with and use by denigrated forms like popular romance and fanfiction. “West of the Moon” and its intertextual reference of Greek myth are queered because the mixing of the two negates the possibility of signifying genre and taste monolithically.

In addition to harnessing Greek myth, “West of the Moon” also borrows from Greek philosophy and Plato’s conception of love in his *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes makes a speech about the origins of humanity and love (or Eros). The story conjectures that humans were once “One Out of Two,” two people in one body, either male/male, female/female, or male/female (androgynous). When the gods separated these entities, the feelings of loss in each half created homosexual and heterosexual love in equal measure, with one type of love not being any better than the other. “West of the Moon” uses a similar conception of love, because Spike and Buffy are the perfect “equal-but-opposite” partner for the other; they are two mixed halves of a whole yin-yang of light and dark, good and evil, and masculine and feminine. Buffy even thinks when sparring Mr. Gordo (before she knows he’s Spike), “We’re predator and prey, slayer and vampire, male and female, darkness and light, sun and moon, fire and

ice" (Ch. 12), emphasizing how mixing opposite halves that are equal in power creates balance. When Buffy does discover that Mr. Gordo is Spike, and that they each know all of the others' secrets, she contemplates, "We're even now. There's no one else in the universe who could hurt me as badly as he could, I realize. No one who could ever love me as completely, either. And the same is true in reverse. I have the same power over him. We're equals, opposites. Yin. Yang. Balance" (Ch. 63). This Spuffy shipper conception of heterosexual romance as equal-but-opposite partnership queers the patriarchy of male dominance and female submission, as well as the supposedly inherent supremacy of heterosexual over homosexual or queer. Shippers are utilizing well-regarded concepts from the classical and literary canon for to reinforce their own queer ethos and ideals, and to revise the mythos of the canon hypotext. In "West of the Moon," mythology and philosophy are constantly weaved into popular romance and the supernatural of the Buffyverse, as well as supernatural elements from other fantasy texts, blurring the boundaries of both genre and origin.

The fanfic's title itself is an allusion to "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," a Norwegian fairy tale with ties to the previously mentioned Cupid and Psyche myth as well as "Beauty and the Beast," bringing in romantic connotations again, as well as more magical and supernatural ones. But it is also a more direct quote of a line from JRR Tolkien, in a song at the end of *Return of the King* when Frodo is travelling to leave Middle Earth forever and enter the extremely difficult to reach (and Heaven-analogue) land of Aman (369). In the fanfic, this phrase uses the same meaning as Tolkien; it

signifies a place that is nearly impossible to reach because it is beyond the reach of nature. But KnifeEdge twists and alters the heavenly connotations, and makes it refer to Louhi's hellscape: a hostile, frozen wasteland of a kingdom and dimensional prison. This aligns the reference more with the original fairy tale, where the main protagonist, a young girl, has to travel to a troll's distant and hostile castle. Clearly, even just from the title, there is a tangled web and continuum of multiple references that add varying connotations and contexts all interacting with each other. These references to fairy tale and classic fantasy literature work to legitimize the fanfictional text as a "real" piece of literature and not just stigmatized erotic fluff or pop cultural drivel. Additionally, since all the hypotexts have to do with fantasy and magic, it can create a feedback loop of contextual references that layers the different mythoi over one another; this could mean that "West of the Moon" could seem like a fairy tale and like epic fantasy, or that the heavenly Aman in *Lord of the Rings* could be more sinister than it seems, or that a reader imagines the troll queen's castle as being in a frigid wasteland like Louhi's—especially because Louhi herself is a reference to a powerful witch and possible goddess in Finnish mythology. The rabbit hole of references are infinite, linking together like the more modern, technological definition of hypertext; hypotextual references dialogically affect one another and a reader's interpretations of the hypertext, queering texts' original contexts and preventing each text from being interpreted in only one way. This dense intertextuality opens the televisual hypotext, literary hypotexts, and the fanfictional hypertext up to endless reinterpretation through association and hybridization

of tropes and thematic foci. Reading and interpretation are queered, because each new reference affects and alters each text's status and meaning; this queering destabilizes any possible normative, hierarchical status stasis, and helps prevent any dominant interpretation from completely overshadowing other interpretive possibilities.

Just as KnifeEdge purposefully misreads the canon hypotext and mythological hypotexts to foreground and revise romance, she also misreads the Spuffy romance—as well as her fanon season five plot—into “serious” works of literature. Spike’s canonical position as a “bloody awful” poet when he was a human lends itself to an abundance of poetry and literary references. However, “West of the Moon” harnesses such high culture texts to the low culture ends of romance and fandom. KnifeEdge misreads the Spuffy romance into the literary canon in order to deepen the meaning of the fanfictional romance and canon Slayer mythos plot, while also creating new interpretive horizons for those literary hypotextual references. Spike’s journals often end in poems that he’s transcribed, because the poem reminds him of whatever the journal entry was about. Spike changes the title of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 141 (a poem about being a slave to love in spite of the love-object’s obvious flaws) to “Fuckin’ Bitch” when he’s still torn up about being love with Buffy. The transcription of the poem is interrupted when Buffy bursts into his crypt to physically force Spike to provide her information about how he killed previous Slayers, proving Spike’s point about Buffy not being an ideal love (Ch. 39). KnifeEdge takes a poem by a culturally revered figure of the literary canon out of its canonically-sanctioned historical context, and overlays it with the context of *Buffy* season

five and with the plot of "West of the Moon." She creates a palimpsest of high and low art, and uses dialogism to twist the traditional interpretations of this sonnet to symbolize themes in this fanfiction: the queer possibilities for heterosexual love and romance, moral queerness, and the importance of equality and balance. It also provides ways of interpreting Spike's perspective on Buffy and the plot of Part 1, since diegetically he is the one who chose this poem and he's the one who's making the connections and interpretations. This literary recontextualization for romantic and fanfictional purposes queers aesthetic value and repudiates the binary hierarchy of canonical literary taste; along with queered taste and value, interpretation and context is queered and opened up to more possibilities, allowing a canonical literary text to be used for popular, lowbrow means that the literary canon would impugn.

Spike also utilizes poems in his interactions with Buffy, and to further the plot. After Buffy turns down Spike's birthday gift offer of patrolling for her (because Buffy believes he's up to no good), he quotes Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice." His recitation helps him express how frustrated and pissed off he is about Buffy not trusting him, and his willingness to burn from his fiery, passionate love for her anyways (Ch. 19). Thus he employs the poem's usual interpretation but applies it to a fanfictional scenario. But Spike references the poem later as being by Jack Frost instead of Robert Frost (Ch. 22), a deliberate misquote meant to obtusely hint that it was Jack Frost who had beat him up (because Louhi has magically gagged him from being direct). A high-culture text is used for advancing a popular romantic and supernatural plot; this process therefore queers

the hierarchy of taste and interpretation by deepening both the meaning of the fanfictional story and of the poem, while destabilizing the taste status of each through association with one another.

The history of texts get fictionally rewritten for fanfictional ends as well, queering even the historical context of canonical texts. In Part 3, after rescuing Spike and realizing that she loves him back, Buffy recites part of an e.e. cummings poem, "gee I like to think of dead," that reminds her of Spike and his charisma and attractiveness while representing death. Then Spike comments that he "[m]et him once... That Cummings, bloke. Was before he wrote that. Never ran into him again but I always wanted to ask" (Ch. 66), basically implying, jokingly or not, that the poem is literally about him and not a figure of imagination. With this historical alteration, cummings's poem takes on a vampiric connotation that's grounded in the *Buffy* canon, legitimizing an interpretation that could exist extradiegetically from the fanfiction but that may not have occurred to a reader without the fanfictional diegetic context. A similar process happens with the poem "Summer's Farewell" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. The poem hypotextually tells the metaphorical story of summer personified as an unnamed man's female fling, who joyfully frolics with him in the summertime and flees with tears and a kiss when autumn comes. But hypertextually, this poem references Buffy's last name, Summers, making her the summer personified in the poem. This poem also comes after Buffy kisses Spike in thanks for saving Xander, before fleeing from Spike's car, allowing for a parallel interpretation alongside the hypotextual one (Ch. 49). This poem also uses the word

“effulgent,” which is a word, according to his canonical backstory, that Spike is ridiculed for trying to use in a poem of his own when he was human. These connections create new kinds of interpretations for a literary poem written 100 years before *Buffy*—let alone “West of the Moon.” These connections queer the historical context by allowing a *Buffy*-based interpretation to be read alongside the literary interpretation simultaneously instead of hierarchically, undermining the dominance of the literary meaning by dialogically imprinting the possibilities of fanfictional meaning upon it.

In “West of the Moon,” KnifeEdge deconstructs binary definitions of what is and is not canon, and what is and is not literary. She also rewrites definitions of popular romance as a genre, and how romance is meant to be read and interpreted by an audience. Shipper fic like “West of the Moon” does not fully escape textual structures like genre and canon; the hypertext by definition must make reference to other authoritative texts. But “West of the Moon” does manage to point out that *all* hypotexts are subject to dialogic reinterpretation, that the horizon of possible interpretations of those hypotexts spans beyond the bounds of structural norms. However, KnifeEdge critiques more than just textual structures and boundaries. She performs her critiques of textuality in order to critique structures and boundaries of gender and heterosexuality, and how they limit a Spuffy romance. KnifeEdge attempts to rewrite the popular romance to include more a equalized heterosexual partnership (rather than a hierarchy of masculine above feminine), and also to provide a space for queered gender performances and identities to more freely exist and flourish. Instead of forcing them to conform to repressive gender

roles, "West of the Moon" allows Spike and Buffy the queer possibility of being heterosexual *without* being heteronormative.

Chapter 2: “My kind of normal. Stuck in a cave, in a frozen pit of hell, guarded by a bear, holding hands with a vampire”: Queering Gender in the Heterosexual Romantic Relationship

KnifeEdge in “West of the Moon” queers *Buffy*, the literary canon, and textual interpretation, all in order to queer the Spuffy heterosexual romantic relationship. Spike and Buffy’s gender positions and heterosexual romance were already queer in *Buffy* to begin with, but “West of the Moon” reinterprets their queerness and pushes it further by making their blended gender roles and romantic archetypes more explicit. KnifeEdge (re)writes the canonical Slayer mythos to further explicate a shipper interpretation of how Spike and Buffy as characters don’t map perfectly onto either gender role, as well as to redress heteronormative wrongs that both Spike and Buffy endure in season five. She also furthers and rewrites the popular romance elements of season five to queer the unequal romantic archetypes of hero and heroine, and to queer the gendered sexual dynamics within heteronormative sexuality. KnifeEdge does all this in order to create the more equal partnership that many shippers believe Spike and Buffy deserve and did not get on the show. “West of the Moon” queers heterosexual romance with a more equal relationship and hybridized sexual roles, which complicates and pushes against ubiquitous heteronormative romantic norms.

Buffy season five sets up both queer and heteronormative elements in Buffy’s and Spike’s characters and in their relationship with each other. The season’s opening episode, “Buffy vs. Dracula,” plays with Buffy’s queerness as the Slayer while also

reinforcing her heteronormative positioning among the patriarchal forces in her life. The episode also acts as a piece of fanfiction itself that utilizes the canon and mythos of several Dracula hypotexts in order to serve *Buffy* season five's thematic focus on the Slayer mythos. The episode explores Buffy's budding curiosity about the nature of her power as the Slayer, and brings Dracula into her life as a storied character who can unsettle her surety in the pure "goodness" of her powers' origins. When Buffy disputes Dracula's claim that she's a killer, Dracula counters, "But your power is rooted in darkness. You must feel it" (10:26-10:30). Dracula reinforces the murky morality of Buffy's powers when he later eggs her into biting him, entreating her to "Find it... the darkness.... Find your true nature" (35:38-35:43). Buffy's seemingly simple heroic nature is queered here, and she begins to question the inherent moral essence of the Slayer. Buffy finds pleasure in Dracula feeding from her and finds empowerment from tasting Dracula's blood herself (because it fuels her resistance of him and her desire to train more as the Slayer), two queer acts of questionable morality, given that Buffy is supposed to slay vampires, not intermingle with them so intimately.³⁴

However, Buffy's exploration of the Slayer mythos in "Buffy vs. Dracula" is forced rather chosen, because Dracula uses his thrall to will Buffy into letting him bite her, and to make her bite him. Buffy's revelation about her queerness as the Slayer in this

³⁴ Buffy was intimate with her vampire boyfriend, Angel, in previous seasons, and their relationship arguably contains queer elements as well. She even lets him bite and drink her blood in season three ("Graduation Day Part 2"). However, Buffy had a clear moral imperative for letting Angel bite her: Angel was a "good" vampire with a soul, and Buffy was trying to selflessly save Angel's life from a deadly poison. His bite reads as sexual on the screen, but Buffy never bit Angel back and did not attempt to tap into the dark side of her power as she does with Dracula.

episode comes through patriarchal coercion that removes her agency in the matter, turning her for most of the episode into stereotypical feminine victim of the monster. Additionally, Riley, Buffy's boyfriend, feels incredibly jealous and unsettled about Buffy's intimacy with vampires like her ex-boyfriend Angel and Dracula, and how that queers her gender and position in their heterosexual relationship. Finally, at the end of the episode, Riley tries saving Buffy from Dracula, but at this point Buffy does not need his help; the taste of Dracula's blood breaks the hold Dracula has on Buffy, and her Slayer strength yet again interrupts the heteronormative paradigm of masculine hero and feminine victim. Riley thinks she's a damsel in distress with no control over the situation, and tries to act as the hero he thinks she needs (and that he wants to be for her). But Buffy has much more power and control than Riley ever had of the situation, so much so that she can save herself *and* her friends who had also fallen prey to Dracula's compelling thrall.³⁵ This heteronormative impulse, while thwarted by the show in this particular instance, still remains a frame of (hetero)normative, patriarchal forces within which Buffy feels pressured to conform.

"Buffy vs Dracula" also shows Spike having to deal with the outside gender pressures of patriarchy's construction of masculinity. In this episode, the audience sees Spike feel the need to diminish other men in order to affirm his own masculinity. When Riley comes to Spike looking for information on Dracula, Spike positions himself as an

³⁵ Towards the beginning of the episode, Xander falls under a trance that compels him to do Dracula's bidding. And near the end of the episode, Giles falls under the sexual trance of Dracula's three sisters/brides. When Buffy defeats Dracula, she saves her friends from his psychic hold as well.

old rival to Dracula to put himself on the same level as the legendary vampire. And yet Spike also writes off Dracula's special powers as "showy Gypsy stuff" (18:42) and calls him a "poncy bugger" (18:12), using racial and homophobic slurs to emasculate Dracula and elevate himself. Spike also emasculates Riley, setting Riley even lower than Dracula on the scale of masculinity. When Riley comes to Spike for information on how to defeat Dracula to save Buffy, Spike diminishes Riley's attempt at heroics, commenting to Riley that "You're out of your depth on this one, boy" (19:30-33). There are indications from the beginning of the scene that Spike feels emasculated himself. Riley taunts Spike's inability to defend himself from humans because of the government-installed chip in Spike's brain. Also, Spike's bragging about his rivalry with Dracula gets undercut when Riley reveals that Dracula is after Buffy and not Spike.³⁶ Due to the pressures of patriarchal expectations of masculinity (and his emasculation), Spike feels the need to create a masculine hierarchy (through masculine posturing) where he is on top. However, this is not a healthy or liberatory paradigm, as Spike has to repress and diminish others for not being masculine enough in order to be considered masculine enough himself. *Buffy's* patriarchal gender norms trap Spike into behaviors that perpetuate toxic masculinity, and his conformity to those norms causes him to implicitly reject his own feminine-coded emotions (and also his hybrid gender identity). All of these situations from the season five opener "Buffy vs. Dracula," both the subversive and the

³⁶ In season four, Riley works for a government organization called The Initiative, who are tasked with fighting and researching the supernatural. Near the beginning of season four, they captured Spike and implanted him with a chip that prevents him from directly, physically harming humans, though Spike can still fight demons and other non-human entities.

normative, set up season five's focus on the Slayer mythos, and KnifeEdge picks and chooses from them in order to construct the genderqueer Spuffy romance that she desires.

I. "Balance is everything... Hot and cold, light and dark, female and male, good and evil. They're all just opposite sides of the same coin": Righting/(Re)Writing Canonical Gender Role Wrongs Through Queering the Vampire/Slayer Mythos

"West of the Moon" takes both the queer and normative gender elements of season five that "Buffy vs. Dracula" sets up, and emphasizes the queer, subversive elements of the Slayer mythos, while eliminating or correcting elements that shippers perceive as heteronormative or regressive. KnifeEdge reinterprets the show to help Spike and Buffy achieve their fully-queer potential as individuals and as a heterosexual romantic couple. KnifeEdge's transformations and erasures of *Buffy's* gender problems (which are exemplified by "Buffy vs. Dracula") help shippers get their desired queer romantic Spuffy outcome, and addresses the undesirable heteronormative pressures to which Buffy and Spike have been forced to conform in the canon hypotext.

In both *Buffy* season five and "West of the Moon," Buffy starts out in a conventional heterosexual—and ostensibly heteronormative—relationship with Riley that slowly falls apart. The shipper fanfic more explicitly magnifies the doomed nature of their relationship in *Buffy*, and the fanfic more explicitly blames it on Buffy's incompatibility with heteronormativity. Riley, Buffy's boyfriend from season four, is repeatedly

represented as a bad match for her in *Buffy*, which “West of the Moon” amplifies even further; in a nutshell, he represents the heteronormative and patriarchal society that Buffy feels she needs to conform to, but that doesn't actually fit her queer, hybrid identity. “West of the Moon” works to emphasize the incompatibility of Buffy and Riley portrayed in the hypotext, utilizing and transforming dialogue and character traits taken directly from *Buffy* to explore why they don't work romantically. On the small scale (and based on canon), they have different interests—something viewers of *Buffy* could recognize from the show but which Buffy herself expresses explicitly in “West of the Moon”: for instance, Riley loves going for drives, while “Buffy and cars are non-mixy things”³⁷ (Ch. 2), and she likes dancing to fast songs but can't when he's around because he's not a very good dancer (Ch. 1). But on a more fundamental scale, shippers like KnifeEdge believe that Riley wants to put Buffy into a much more passive and feminine role than she actually inhabits as the Slayer, and that he wants to be the hero that Buffy is actually fated to be. This belief is supported by the canon hypotext, bolstered by moments such as Riley's ineffectual and unnecessary attempt to rescue Buffy in “Buffy vs. Dracula.” But KnifeEdge makes this interpretation of canon much more explicit by having Buffy state her perceptions of Riley's actions. In “West of the Moon,” Buffy explicitly reflects on why she and Riley broke up, something she never does out-loud in the show. She states, “He [Riley] needed to be needed...and I couldn't do that for him. What I needed from him wasn't a hero” (Ch. 17). Buffy believes that Riley

³⁷ In the canon season four episode “Something Blue,” Buffy says something similar to Riley when they first start dating: “cars and Buffy are like - unmixy things” (10:44-48).

views their romantic relationship as hero and damsel-in-distress, and she also knows that their relationship didn't work because she could not conform to those heteronormative expectations. In "West of the Moon," Buffy also explicitly observes Riley's reactions to her resistance to heteronormativity while they're still together. In both *Buffy* and "West of the Moon," Riley repeatedly wants to protect Buffy when she doesn't need it, but only in "West of the Moon" does Buffy consciously notice (in a way the audience can directly observe) that Riley gets frustrated when she wants to protect him instead—despite it being her sacred duty to do so. Using elements from the season five episode "The Replacement," Buffy also notes that Riley feels disappointed when she gives him the less dangerous location to search for their friend Xander and assigns herself the more dangerous supernatural (Ch. 3).³⁸ And despite insisting that he loves all of her, including the Slayer parts, Buffy reads distance in Riley's body language, indicating to her (and to shippers) his true (and seemingly canonical) feelings about her queer Slayer side (Ch. 3).

In "West of the Moon," Riley is described (using direct language from *Buffy*) as a former Army soldier, "white bread," a "normal" guy, the paragon of ideal masculinity without being explicitly misogynistic.³⁹ But shippers interpret Riley as wanting Buffy to

³⁸ This chapter in "West of the Moon" draws from the season five episode "The Replacement," where the Scooby Gang believes Xander has an evil doppelganger, when really he has been magically split into two entities.

³⁹ Spike calls Riley "white bread" in the episode "Shadow" and in his journal in Chapter 43 of "West of the Moon." Buffy and Riley get into a fight about his normalness not being enough for her in "Out of My Mind," which is reproduced in Chapter 4 of "West of the Moon." Additionally, Spike calls Riley "Captain Cardboard" in "No Place Like Home," which is also referenced in a poem Spike writes in his journal in Chapter 34.

match his ideal masculinity with an ideal, passive femininity, something that she cannot do as someone whose fate forces her to constantly take action and protect everyone in the world. KnifeEdge shows this by having Buffy consciously notice how flawed their relationship is in "West of the Moon," and Buffy's analysis reflects the Spuffy shipper interpretation of how flawed the canon hypotext's construction of their heterosexual romance is. When Riley claims to love all of her, Buffy reflects,

I want to believe him. I really do. But I can't help but think about the expression on his face this morning when we were talking about the demon. I feel like... like he's far away from me, sometimes. Or, or like he's watching me and wishing... wishing I were something else. Being the Slayer has changed me in so many ways, but... even if you separated out the Buffy half from the Slayer half... I'm not sure either would be able to survive on it's [sic] own. The Buffy part of me... is just a silly blonde girl with no other ambition in life other than to be pretty and have a perfect boyfriend. The Slayer part of me is strong, but hard, cold. A machine. Together, the two parts kinda balance each other out, I guess. (Ch. 3)

Buffy's gender performance does not fit into heteronormativity because she cannot ever be just that silly blonde feminine ideal, desperate for a masculine ideal boyfriend; she's too different, too physically and emotionally tough to fit that standard or to ever be that dependent on someone, even as part of that feminine side does still exist inside her. Buffy cannot be conventionally feminine with her masculine-coded traits as the Slayer, and therefore she cannot be the stereotypical feminine girlfriend that Riley seems to

idealize in both *Buffy* and “West of the Moon.” In both texts, Riley wants to be her strong hero, but as “West of the Moon” makes even clearer, Buffy cannot make herself be the weak damsel-in-distress.

In both *Buffy* and “West of the Moon,” Buffy and Spike are queer because they defy the gender definitions and roles that heteronormativity enforces, while still identifying as heterosexual. Spike and Buffy’s relationship at the beginning of season five, however, is anything but romantic. Spike and Buffy despise each other, with neither party fully trusting the other. Only Spike’s government-installed chip that prevents him from hurting humans, and Buffy’s uneasiness about slaying someone she perceives to be harmless, prevents them from fully acting on their enmity towards one another. “West of the Moon” starts with Spike and Buffy’s canonically antagonistic relationship, as well as Spike’s canonical romantic history with his sire, Drusilla.

While Spike’s relationship with Drusilla in *Buffy* edges close to queer, it still displays inequalities for both partners: some stemming from Spike’s hybridized gender behavior and identity, and some from Drusilla’s stereotypically feminine madness and initial weakness.⁴⁰ When Spike and Drusilla first appear in season two, Spike fulfills the role of masculine authority and agency by taking care of Drusilla—a stereotypically feminine and weakened victim of an angry mob (Amy-Chinn 317). Therefore their

⁴⁰ Angel psychologically tortured Drusilla before turning her into a vampire. Drusilla had visions of the future even before being turned, and when combined with Angel’s torture her visions twisted her mind into madness. Drusilla often speaks in riddles, to voices in her head or the stars, or to tea parties of blindfolded dolls. She is initially weak when she first appears in *Buffy* because an angry mob in Prague assaulted her to the point of near-undeath, and Spike takes her to Sunnydale in order to heal her body.

relationship presents at least on some level as heteronormative. But when Drusilla regains her full strength halfway through season two, while in the same episode Spike becomes the weakened victim from having a church organ dropped on him by Buffy, the audience sees the power dynamic in their relationship change. Drusilla becomes the masculinized power of the pair, while Spike increasingly becomes emasculated, displaying emotional and physical dependence on her. But instead of being monogamously devoted to her weakened, wheelchair-bound partner (as Spike was with her), Drusilla consistently cheats on him with the newly evil Angelus.⁴¹ Spike and Drusilla's relationship turns more queer in a kind of gender-binary swap, but that relationship still perpetuates inequality—especially towards the more feminized partner. Spike becomes more feminine (and Drusilla more masculine) in their relationship, which does disconnect each gender role from its corresponding biological sex in ways that queers that binary association. But Drusilla as the masculinized partner has more power and she abuses that power, punishing Spike for his perceived feminized weakness. Their relationship still preserves the patriarchal hierarchy of masculine over feminine, and so while it is queer in some aspects, their relationship still upholds other oppressive norms of inequality.

In his romantic relationship with Drusilla, Spike isn't allowed to have a hybridized gender identity because Drusilla denigrates the feminine aspects of Spike's personality and performance; she breaks up with him in season three for not being "demon enough"

⁴¹ Angel, Buffy's boyfriend in season two, is a vampire with a soul and Drusilla's sire. Angel loses his soul midway through season two, turning into his evil persona, Angelus.

for her (“Lovers Walk” 20:09-11), which can be read as not masculine enough (Spicer para. 10). “West of the Moon” takes this literally when it alters canon vampire mythos to show that Spike was specially chosen by the Powers that Be to retain more of his humanity than other vampires. Many Spuffy shippers read Spike as being unique among vampires: a queer anomaly because of the ways in which his sensitivity and romanticism—which the demon in him should’ve wiped out when he was turned and lost his soul—mixes with his love of violence and vampiric “evilness.” KnifeEdge even gives Anya a piece of non-canon dialogue that reflects this Spuffy shipper feeling when she notes that “he’s [Spike] always been a little weird for a vampire” (Ch. 24).⁴² Because *Buffy* never makes explicit the how and why of Spike’s queerness in the canon mythos (as a man and as a vampire), KnifeEdge corrects the canon season five by adding a prophecy that spells out and explains how and why Spike is special and queer both as a vampire and as a man. As the Slayer’s Knight, he is fated to be both masculine—strong and violent enough to fight with Buffy as her ally—and feminine, retaining enough of his feminine emotions to be able to sincerely care for and love Buffy.⁴³ By adding the “Slayer’s Knight” prophecy, KnifeEdge uses recognizable elements of *Buffy*’s Slayer mythos to explain Spike’s gender queerness in *Buffy* and to justify how shippers believe this gender queerness makes Spike a perfect, parallel match for Buffy.

⁴² Anya, a member of the Scooby gang, is also a former vengeance demon. Having her say this line (over another character) makes it carry more weight, as she has over a thousand years of experience with vampires and demons.

⁴³ Prophecies make various appearances in *Buffy* (“Prophecy Girl,” “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date,” “A New Man,” “The Gift”), making a non-canonical prophecy involving Spike and Buffy reasonable and believable within the canonical mythos.

Spike's romantic partner forces him into a heteronormative paradigm—albeit an inverted one—that he is unable to conform to because he is queer in gendered ways (and in demonic ways as well). As a piece of shipper fic, “West of the Moon” attempts to accentuate Spike and Drusilla's flawed relationship. As described in the previous chapter, Spike's encounter with Drusilla in “West of the Moon”'s version of the season five episode “Crush” goes very differently than it does in canon because fans want Spike to embrace his queerness and reject the emotional desperation he's subjected to in *Buffy*. When Drusilla comes to Sunnydale in both the canon and in “West of the Moon,” she wants Spike to rejoin their original evil family unit, but not as an equal member. Dru knows that Spike has been incapacitated by the chip, and unlike in canon, in “West of the Moon” Spike recognizes that if he were to go with her without the ability to hunt or feed himself, that he'd “just have been Dru's lapdog again, and possibly Angelus' whipping boy” (Ch. 47). Like with Buffy's reflections on Riley, KnifeEdge critiques *Buffy*'s heteronormative paradigm by having Spike explicitly express what shippers believe are his canonical interpretations of Drusilla's true feelings in “Crush.” KnifeEdge constructs Spike's reflections to demonstrate her shipper interpretation of Spike and Drusilla's relationship: that Drusilla only wants Spike as a pet for her to play with at her beck and call (with no consideration for his feelings), and that she views Spike as a (feminized) object that she has full mastery over. However, instead of just making Spike's feelings more explicit, KnifeEdge in this case also rewrites how the scene goes and most importantly, how it ends. In the canon version of the episode, Spike gives into his

frustrated desperation to be his pre-chip self and into Drusilla's manipulation of his old feelings for her, and he lets Drusilla kill for him so he can feed on humans again. But in "West of the Moon," Spike has more self-respect and self-discipline than he does in *Buffy* because he fully rejects Drusilla's offer to give into his desperate impulses. In "West of the Moon," Spike resists the inverted heteronormative hierarchy that *Buffy* tries to force him into and confidently embraces his gendered queerness instead.

Spike is able to firmly reject Drusilla's advances in "West of the Moon" because he feels he actually has a romantic chance with Buffy, and that he has a reason to try to be good instead of impulsively evil. As Mr. Gordo in "West of the Moon," Spike doesn't feel hopeless in his pursuit of Buffy, a correction that Spuffy shippers like KnifeEdge desire, possibly because they believe that the canon storyline doesn't give Spike and Buffy's romance a fair chance at fully developing. Because of his more positive interactions with Buffy as Mr. Gordo, Spike isn't blinded by despair, and consciously understands that Drusilla, unlike Buffy, does not view him as an equal. "West of the Moon" makes a Spuffy shipper interpretation of the canon explicit through character narration when Spike reflects in his journal that "the fact that Buffy still treats me like the enemy means she still respects me... something I never got from Dru and the others" (Ch. 47). In KnifeEdge's interpretation of canon, Drusilla wants Spike to inhabit a stereotypically submissive feminine position in their romantic relationship, where he would not be considered an equal and where his masculine persona and agency would be completely denied. KnifeEdge alters what she and other Spuffy shippers see as

heteronormative (albeit gender-inverted) wrongs. In *Buffy*, Spike has no self-respect or strength because he's overly-desperate to be loved, and because he's been conditioned by Drusilla to believe that his desires are not equal to hers, but "West of the Moon" gives Spike opportunities to grow out of his emotional dependence and to defend his right to equality in a romantic relationship. "West of the Moon" critiques what Spuffy shippers see as an abusive relationship in *Buffy*, in order to give Spike the treatment shippers believe he deserves rather than what he ends up with in canon. Instead of being desperate and emotionally dependent as he is in *Buffy*, Spike rejects being subjected to unhealthy, inverted heteronormative and power-imbalanced relationship. He instead opts to keep exploring the queer romantic possibilities that pursuing Buffy provides.

KnifeEdge alters the Buffyverse's vampire mythos to explain how and why Spike is unique as a vampire and how mythically queer his identity is, and KnifeEdge also adjusts the Slayer mythos to explain why Buffy is an anomaly as a Slayer. KnifeEdge plays with the canon's mythic focus for romantic reasons: she makes Buffy parallel Spike's split personae (supernatural *and* human)—therefore paralleling his queerness—to open up the queer possibilities of their relationship and make them even more equal partners. Buffy has a prophetic Slayer dream halfway through Part 1 that ends with a vision of three different Spikes all together: his human self (William), the 1977 punk rock version of himself that represents his demon self, and Spike's current persona which represents a hybrid of his human and demon sides. Buffy narrates her dream as it happens, explaining that,

As I get closer I see that the middle one is Spike, dressed as usual in his uniform of black and leather. He's covered in ice, and under it, his eyes are closed as if he's sleeping. To one side of him paces another Spike. This one is punked out in torn jeans, a black sleeveless shirt held together with safety pins, and his white hair stands straight up in rock star clumps. He's in vamp face. To the other side of statue Spike is a brown haired man dressed in old-fashioned clothes. His hair flops over his forehead, and he pushes a wire-rimmed pair of glasses up on his nose. He looks familiar, but I can't quite place him. He's also kinda transparent; I can see the room through him. (Ch. 20)

Buffy's vision confirms Spike's inner monologue in his journal—where he often refers to his demon and William as separate entities from himself—and parallels Buffy's referencing of her Slayer side as separate from her young adult girl side. This recognition, again, reinforces how queerly positioned and unique each partner's role and identity is, and suggests that they're the only ones who can really understand each other. Buffy is the alpha heroine, a hybrid of violent and fierce Slayer and caring, loving friend and daughter. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan describe the alpha heroine as tough but not as sociopathic as male heroes in similar roles (58), and Buffy fits this queer paradigm, with feminine emotions and masculine strength. Spike is also an incredibly violent demon who seeks feminine and emotional fulfillment (Spicer para. 16), again seeming much less sociopathic than his vampire villain counterparts of Angelus and Drusilla. Both partners grow to recognize that they're actually not polar opposites, but

are actually incredibly similar hybrids of masculine and feminine: Buffy notes that she and Spike are “a study in contrasts and opposites that somehow totally balance and fit together” (Ch. 75). They have to recognize how they balance each other in order to overcome the multiple barriers in the way of their “betrothal,” their romantic commitment to one another as immortal life (or undead) partners.⁴⁴

II. “Your knight. Not to save you, but to fight at your side. But there had to be some balance, you understand. Darkness to match your light, yadda yadda yadda...”: Queering Gendered Romantic/Sexual Dynamics and Archetypes

Within their balanced queer romance, Spike and Buffy also inhabit narrative and romantic roles that subvert and blend traits of what it means to be a hero or heroine, further queering their gender positioning within their romantic relationship and their generic roles within a romance text. For example, in popular romance and in chivalric quest romances in general, it is typically the female heroine who is captured and left passively to await the rescue from the male hero (Regis 35). However in “West of the Moon” it is Spike who confesses his love before being captured by the evil ice goddess Louhi, and it is Buffy who must come and save him. KnifeEdge makes sure this doesn’t read as a kind of simple gender role swap; Buffy and Spike both exhibit gender traits that match their designated sex, along with ones that contradict their supposedly essential

⁴⁴ In another revision to the canon Slayer lore, the emissary of the Powers that Be, Whistler, also reveals at the end of the fanfic that Buffy is essentially immortal, due to her Slayer powers slowing her aging process. No Slayer has ever lived long enough to discover that she won’t age much past the age of 20, but the addition of Spike and his incredible fighting skills to her heroic partnership/arsenal seems to guarantee that she will survive longer than the typical Slayer.

gender-sex roles. Buffy has to fulfill her promise to read Spike's entire journal from the year, which was Spike's parting entreaty to her, and has to come to accept Spike's feelings for her before she can be ready to save him. She then has to go through a spirit guide quest from the Powers that Be that makes her view the hard truths of Spike's pre- and post-vampire past, which makes her commit emotionally and metaphysically to the idea that Spike is worth saving—that Spike's love for her can outweigh the complexity of his dark past. Buffy's heroism is both masculine and feminine, queering the role of the heroine; she must physically trudge through the icy wasteland and fight off demons to save Spike from the tall tower of a fortress castle, but in order to get there, she must perform feats of emotional work and strength through introspection and empathy. And Spike, despite his hero-status, is the one cast in the usually feminine heroine role of a passive, captured victim; but instead of perfectly switching into the passive female role, he actively resists Louhi's torture and temptation of evil, placing himself in a queer, hybrid position: he still has to be saved, but he also uses his strength to keep himself alive long enough to be saved in the first place. KnifeEdge as a shipper modifies and expands Buffy's and Spike's already unusual canonical gender positions; she provides the opportunity for them to be fully hybridized, in order to get the non-heteronormative but still heterosexual romance that fans desire to see—and that shippers believe the two characters deserve.

KnifeEdge also provides opportunities to prove that Spike's romantic attraction to Buffy in the canon hypotext can be considered queer, further solidifying this queerness

by making Spike more explicitly express and explain his emotionally intense romantic attraction through the conventionally feminine mode of journal entries. Spike, for the majority of both *Buffy* season five and in “West of the Moon,” admits an attraction and an emotional dependence on the object of his attraction. Implicitly in canon but explicitly in “West of the Moon,” Spike writes poetry about Buffy and constantly mopes and obsesses about how Buffy behaves towards him. Throughout his journal entries in Part 2 of “West of the Moon,” Spike also sifts through his social interactions for any mistakes on his part, and for any crumbs of hope that Buffy might reciprocate his romantic attraction, all of which are remarkably feminine-coded ways of thinking and feeling. Well-known Spuffy fanfiction writer Nautibitz even believes that “Spike was a lot like a lesbian [in canon]. The Buffy/Spike relationship was arguably a queer one—their roles were so often reversed, Spike so open with his emotions and Buffy so guarded” (qtd. in Jamison 142). Spike may have a masculine appearance, but despite a masculine facade, Spike still displays massive amounts of feminine-coded emotion and romantic attraction. Spike’s emotional attraction to Buffy combines elements of toughness and softness, hybridizing and queering what romantic attraction consists of for a masculine-presenting heterosexual man.

Yet Spike’s expressions of *sexual* attraction to Buffy are coded primarily in male ways, especially from Buffy’s perspective. Right before they have sex for the first time, Buffy notes that Spike’s “smirk is arrogant, proud, and entirely male. He reaches down and wraps one hand around his...[sic] and then he strokes it, watching me. ‘See

something you like, pet?' he asks" (Ch. 64). Spike displays masculine-coded confidence and sexual desire, but at the same time he puts himself on display to be gazed upon like a sexual object, which is usually a more feminized position. Spike purposefully puts his body on exhibit for Buffy to view, and Buffy explicitly notices when Spike "lifts his arms over his head and stretches under my gaze, totally male and pleased with himself" (Ch 70). Spike intentionally invites an objectifying female gaze, queering the boundary between subject and object because Spike as a subject has agency in choosing to take on the role of sexual object. "West of the Moon" pulls this subject/object queerness from *Buffy*, because the canon hypotext constantly invites sexual objectification of Spike's body; in the show, the camera regularly pans Spike's body, and he's frequently shirtless or naked with flimsy premise or reason for it (Amy-Chinn 317-318). For example, in the season four episode "The Harsh Light of Day," Spike is needlessly shirtless while looking over sheets of schematics, and it seems he's only shirtless to foreshadow his seduction of his then-girlfriend Harmony later in the scene. It's not like he needs to be shirtless in order to read, and the reading scene seems to be more of a flimsy pretense for the later seduction rather than a serious plot point. In season five, Spike is even shirtless in his own dreams: during a dream sequence in the episode "Out of My Mind," Spike rips off his shirt and tells Buffy to kill him, only to suddenly start making out with her—and then the real Spike (still shirtless) wakes up horrified in bed. Buffy never loses any clothing in the dream (in fact, she's dressed in her everyday street wear), and so isn't treated as eye-candy by the audience (or by Spike's subconscious). "West of the Moon" takes the

canon hypotext's sexual objectification of Spike and amplifies it with Buffy's explicit observations of Spike putting himself on display for her. "West of the Moon" furthers Spike's canonical objectification, but interprets it as an intentional act of agency rather than as gratuitous eye-candy thrown in by the writers and producers of *Buffy*. The Spuffy shipper interpretation of Spike's mixing of masculine and feminine coding and traits in *Buffy* queers sexual desire and objectification, and KnifeEdge makes that queering more visible through Buffy's actions and Spike's dialogue in "West of the Moon."

Spike's sexual objectification in "West of the Moon" can be seen as a form of fan service done by fans themselves (rather than by canonical authors)—where shippers get to construct and experience their ideal fantasies about Spike as a sexual object—but it's also an implicit critique of the hierarchy and imbalance between representations of male and female sexuality. In *Buffy*, Spike presents as a sexual object, but he chooses this role of his own volition rather than having it forced upon him. In contrast, women, especially feminine-presenting women like Buffy, usually get sexualized and objectified against their will. Having Spike be the hypersexual character and Buffy the prude does in some ways reinforce some regressive clichés about male and female sexuality—that men's sexual appetite is out of control and that women have no distinctive sexual desire of their own (or that their desire doesn't matter). Spike's constant sexual innuendos about Buffy and about his own body could make it seem like his interest in her is primarily sexual, or like he only knows how to express his desire through machismo posturing about his sexual prowess. But in "West of the Moon," Spike clearly shows that

he cares just as much about her feelings as he does her body. Spike explicitly reassures Buffy that his desire for her is not contingent on her physical appearance or grooming. While hiding out in a cave after escaping Louhi's clutches, Buffy protests that she's embarrassed because she hasn't showered in three days and looks (and smells) a mess. But Spike still desires her anyways, countering, "It's my nose, yeah? And it says you smell like Buffy. Warm, and golden, and delicious... You're gorgeous... Most beautiful, bright thing these old eyes have ever seen. Nothing wrong with you, pet" (Ch. 64). Spike doesn't just want to have sex with Buffy—though that certainly is *one* of his motivations; Spike wants Buffy to know that his love for her goes deeper than just physical appearances, and that he cares enough to help her combat her emotional insecurities before engaging in physical sex.

On the other hand, Buffy's prudishness about Spike's overt sexual displays in "West of the Moon" could make her silence her own sexual desires. However, Spike's bodily displays of sexuality are viewed from Buffy's POV (a female perspective), and the audience sees through Buffy's reactions to Spike's sexual exhibition that her sexual desire has not been silenced at all. For example, when Spike asks, "[S]ee something you like, pet?" while stroking himself, Buffy responds by thinking, "*Everything*" and launching herself at him, wrapping "my [Buffy's] legs around his waist and pull[ing] him toward me, hard enough that he yelps and manages to put his hands out on either side of my head to catch his weight" (Ch. 64, emphasis original). Buffy may not verbally express her desire to Spike, but she enthusiastically acts upon it. Buffy's actions show Spike (and the

reader) that she isn't ashamed of her sexual desire nor of her active pursuit of fulfilling it. Instead of being a passive, non-desiring feminine object, Buffy balances out Spike's expressions of sexuality with her own. Buffy gets to have and express sexual desire while choosing not to be hypersexualized by Spike, even as Spike hypersexualizes himself. In "West of the Moon," Buffy gets to be an active agent of her own desire, and while Spike willingly objectifies himself for Buffy's pleasure, he still has agency over his own sexual desires as well. Stereotypically, masculine sexual desires are valued over female ones, but in "West of the Moon," each character gets to express their sexuality in whatever mode they want, voiding a heteronormative hierarchy with the equality of agency and choice. "West of the Moon" does more than just subvert gendered clichés about sexuality and the power of the male gaze; the fic complicates and questions gender roles and sexual objectification by queering their possibilities and gender coding, which helps provide the queer, equalized romance that fans desire.

When Spike and Buffy do finally come together romantically in "West of the Moon" after Buffy rescues Spike from Louhi's icy fortress, their physical reunion almost immediately evolves into a sexual one. Their sexual encounter is literally heterosexual but avoids heteronormativity and patriarchy in depicting each partner as equally deserving and desiring of sex, and in the sex itself being non-normative, and subversive. The sex itself never fully treads into BDSM or what would be usually considered kink, but their coming together is much more aggressive and forceful than what would be usually considered "vanilla" sex: they both fight for dominance and fall into submissive positions

throughout their entire first encounter. The sex itself isn't described very graphically with the "purple prose" so common to popular romance; KnifeEdge even claims in her Author's note that "I, personally, don't consider the contents of this chapter to be *graphic* since Buffy is something of a mental prude and we are in her POV" (Ch. 66). The sex, while not completely obscured or cut away from, doesn't fall squarely into the remarkably explicit and perverse paradigm either. Buffy narrates that "for a moment we wrestle for the dominant position again. Difficult since as much as we both want it, neither of us seems to mind losing" (Ch. 66). Their equal fight for dominance queers the sexual roles of sub and dom, and also queers the heterosexual binary of the male/masculine partner having to be dominant and the female/feminine partner being submissive. The aftermath of their searing first time also results in Spike feeling like his back "went a few rounds with a mountain lion," while still suggesting "Wanna go again, kitten?" and with Buffy immediately noticing that "Deliberately, he rotates his hips against mine, sending more sparks arcing through me" (Ch. 66). Clearly there is a fantasy element at work, since no human man would be able to sustain what Spike claims is 8 hours of on and off sex, but "fantasy is the most important element in the appeal of popular fiction" because heightened emotion lends itself to taking liberties with reality (Seidel qtd in Regis 20). However, the fantasy is what allows the extension of heterosexual possibilities and the queering of heterosexual sex. Despite the violent, non-normative nature of their sex, it's portrayed as incredibly powerful and positive, and afterwards they can even be playful about the physical marks left from their intense

engagement. This sex-positive portrayal is in complete opposition to Spike and Buffy's kinky but destructive sexual relationship in season six, where their non-normative sex results in emotional abuse (and eventually attempted rape) instead of deep abiding love. "West of the Moon" both critiques and writes over *Buffy* season six in order to show how non-normative sex can be a positive element in an equalized queer romance. "West of the Moon" portrays sex-positivity and liminal sexual identities and actions that lie in the realm of queer heterosexuality (instead of in the certainty of clear-cut normative and hierarchical categories and conventions), to prove that Spike and Buffy can be equals in both strength and pleasure without shame, and that they can—without compromise—achieve the queer romantic culmination that shippers desire.

Even Buffy and Spike's happily ever after and "betrothal" are unconventional because "West of the Moon" does not end with a decision to marry. While Spike gives Buffy a ring that does symbolize commitment and love (the ring had originally belonged to his beloved mother), it is more of a symbolic engagement than a literal one. More recently published popular romances do not require an explicit proposal, "as long as it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together" (Regis 38), so "West of the Moon" still fits into the happily ever after required for a text to be a romance novel. However, for two supernatural beings that could live forever, the human (and therefore inherently limited, at least time-wise) convention of marriage cannot encompass the queer and transgressive status of their relationship. Buffy even comments that, "Willow says I should write it all down because it's like a fairy tale—only weirder and true. I suppose

people will want to know if we lived 'happily ever after.' I'm the Slayer. Spike's a vampire. We don't always get the 'happily' part. But I think, together, we might manage the 'ever after' (Ch. 75). They can't have a perfectly fairy tale ending when there could be an apocalypse to fight around the corner at any moment; any uncompromised happiness they have is fleeting and contingent, and both Spike and Buffy have their own demons, both literal and figurative, still left to battle after their courtship is completed. But they are still committed to each other seemingly unconditionally, no matter the unhappiness to come in the future. Much like their identities and roles, their romantic success and ending is also hybrid and compromised into a queer form. And without conventions regulating what happens in the relationship or who plays what role, both partners have to more consciously navigate their so-called "happily ever after" in ways that heteronormative identities and relationships don't have to (but maybe should).

The two-halves-of-one-whole argument that "West of the Moon" makes about Spike and Buffy could arguably still fit within heteronormative conceptions of romance, and Buffy and Spike are both complementarily male and female. But the fact that Buffy and Spike are written as parallel co-equals, that the masculine does not inherently overpower the feminine in the hypertext, and the fact KnifeEdge represents both characters as a yin-yang blend of gendered characteristics, reinforces how in "West of the Moon," Spike and Buffy are queered characters that through their romance, queer what it means to be in a heterosexual relationship. The canon hypotext attempts to force both Spike and Buffy into heteronormative roles and archetypes which they do not

comfortably fit, and “West of the Moon” attempts to redress some of *Buffy*’s more damaging normative impulses. “West of the Moon” gives Spike and Buffy opportunities to more explicitly express and affirm their hybrid gender performances and queer desire, and rewrites *Buffy* and popular romance to accommodate the shipper desire for a queer Spuffy romance.

Coda: “Kaaaark!”: Critiquing Normative Shipper Desires with Fan Absurdism

While “West of the Moon” criticizes hierarchies and binaries inside the canonical hypotext of *Buffy*, other types of fanfiction set their critical eyes on fanfiction itself. Absurdist parodies like “P-p-p-pick Up a Plot for Vengeance” (or as I will refer to it, “Penguins”) critique fan writing extradiegetically—out in the fandom between fans. This thesis claims that “West of the Moon,” as an exemplary piece of shipper fic, is transgressive and critical. However it still falls prey to many problematic structures and tropes that exist in romance, in *Buffy*, and even in Spuffy fanfiction itself. Indeed, despite its attempts to create its own more liberating and subversive mode, Spuffy shipper fic cannot escape all of the problems of the genres and texts it aims to critique. “West of the Moon” and other Spuffy shipper fic like it are not, I would argue, an entirely queer utopian wonderland. In referencing or using popular romance and *Buffy*, even to push against them, fanfictional texts like “West of the Moon” often retain problematic norms they’re not as focused on—or that fans actually subconsciously desire—and can also create new problematic norms of their own. For example, while KnifeEdge amplifies Spike’s gendered queerness in “West of the Moon,” she doesn’t correct his use of homophobic or patriarchal slurs, such as “poofter” and “wanker,” to insult anyone he considers weak or feminine, including himself.⁴⁵ Shippers do not usually attempt to

⁴⁵ In “West of the Moon,” Spike denigrates his more emotional former human self, commenting that “Cecily’s rejection left me sobbing like a complete poof” (Ch. 39). And Spike writes “WANKER” over a journal entry about his thoughts on each character in *Pride and Prejudice* (Ch. 40), indicating self-disgust over his enjoyment of a (feminine) romance.

revise this regressive aspect of Spike's character, and shippers themselves often perpetuate problematic hierarchies that go beyond what some might argue is simply sticking to canon characterization.

An example of shippers perpetuating problematic norms is how fans often fetishize Spike's body in both canon *Buffy* and "West of the Moon." Despite Spike's demonstrated willingness to be objectified, one could argue that this is not subversive because a thinking and feeling being is still being reduced to an object—and a purely sexual object at that. When the canon hypotext and shipper fic perpetuate Spike's bodily objectification, they reduce a sentient (albeit fictional) being to his disembodied washboard abs rather than his feelings or intelligence and dehumanize him (even if Spike isn't human to start with). The fetishizing of Spike's body in both canon and shipper fic stems directly from fan desire and is a result of fan service. The same shipper impulses that can produce a progressive queered heterosexual romance can *also* (re)produce (albeit invertedly) the inequality in popular romance that shipper fic attempts to combat. Fans want Spike to be an object for their consumption, so even if diegetically he chooses to objectify himself for Buffy, he's primarily written that way for extradiegetic reasons that problematically pose men as sexual objects for audience consumption. Inverting the hierarchy of male/female does nothing to solve inequality; it just produces a different kind of unequal power differential.

Fanfiction is an inherently referential genre in which canon texts are inescapable, and therefore those canon texts' generic structures and connotations have normative

influence over shipper fanfiction. Problematic values and interpretations from the canon text can be unconsciously carried over into fanfiction, and they can work to undercut or complicate the subversive elements of a fanfictional text. Shipper fic specifically uses structures from popular romance as well, and elements of heteropatriarchy and heteronormative romance can and often do still remain in fanfictional texts. Yet fanfiction is a textual medium that is intently and very consciously aware of its sources, and the structures of those sources. "West of the Moon" is very aware of the gender politics and heteronormativity present in both *Buffy* and heterosexual popular romance, and very consciously plays with them to their advantage. But "West of the Moon" isn't always aware of all the fanfictional and shipper tropes and norms that it perpetuates, problematic or not. Since all texts make references to other sources, whether they be specific texts or more general generic structures, this dialogism means that no text, fanfictional or otherwise, can fully escape all of the norms, structures, tropes, and connotations enmeshed within its references. However, readers can at least consciously recognize those structures, even if they can't be avoided. "Penguins" suggests that it takes the magnification and undermining of absurdity and parody for shippers to notice more of the regressive and normative tendencies present within their own fan texts.

"Penguins," as absurdist shipper fic (also known as crack!fic) fondly mocks problematic fan hierarchies and desires with a critical reflexiveness rivalling that of metafictional literature.⁴⁶ Whereas "West of the Moon" as Spuffy fanfiction wants to

⁴⁶ As mentioned in the introduction, crack!fic is fanfiction that 1) involves a premise or plot that would be impossible (or at least improbable) in the canon universe, and 2) is often humorous and written poorly on purpose. "Penguins" can be considered crack!fic because animal transformation

transform and correct *Buffy*, “Penguins” wants to transform and correct Spuffy fanfiction and fans themselves—but both kinds of fan responses also want readers to enjoy the various hypotexts too. Instead of (re)writing over problems in the hypotext like “West of the Moon” does, “Penguins” places problems in fan texts through a fun-house looking-glass to magnify and blow them up. “Penguins,” with its humor and purposefully bad taste, lovingly makes fun of fanfiction’s shipping tropes and clichés, and consequently of shippers themselves. The authors of this fic, brutti_ma_buoni and quinara, satirically amplify problematic Spuffy shipper tropes and use stylistic burlesque to comically shame what they see as normative and regressive fan preferences. They show that shipping and shipper fic, like the hypotexts they work to transform, can also have can also have patriarchal and reductive textual issues that should be laughed at rather than fought over. Despite its crass and vulgar humor, the textual and critical moves that “Penguins” makes are sophisticated and literary. Looking at this absurdist text that literarily occupies opposite end of the spectrum from “West of the Moon” reveals the decidedly heterogeneous, queer textual possibilities of fanfiction.

“Penguins” came about in response to a sarcastic fan “meta” by gabrielleabelle on her Livejournal, that in turn was a response to inter-fan regulation and gatekeeping over who counts as a “real” Spuffy fan.⁴⁷ In the post, gabrielleabelle does not name any

would be a highly impossible premise on *Buffy*, and because the prose emphasizes camp and absurdity over serious romance (or even common sense).

⁴⁷ Meta is a fan term, used mainly on Livejournal, for critical fan essays about fandom, fanfiction, or about their fandom hypotext and characters. gabrielleabelle is well-known in the Spuffy fandom for her numerous meta essays and commentary on inter-fan regulating behaviors and shipping Spuffy.

particular people in the Spuffy shipping community who are policing others, but fan policing is a common occurrence in fandom and shipping. Anne Jamison observes that “the world of fanfiction is not all happy anarchy. Academics can tend to emphasize fanfiction’s potential for collaboration, nonhierarchical relations, dissent, and resistance... but communities and individuals can police these worlds and their boundaries with tremendous vigilance” (20). gabrielleabelle does mention in the comments of her post that she was writing to reassure “some Spuffy shippers [that were] feeling left out because they didn’t enjoy the canon as much as some others did and prefer the Spuffy in fanfic.” This implies that she was observing a hierarchy between canon and fanon Spuffy fans, where canon fans were more highly valued over fans of versions of Spuffy that deviate farther from canon. Like the reductive patriarchal norms that shipper fic sometimes reproduces, shipper fic can also reflect exclusionary fan behaviors and elitist values. In her “meta,” gabrielleabelle writes against attempts to narrow and police who counts as a Spuffy shipper, by claiming that almost anyone can participate in Spuffy shipping and that any variation of Spuffy is valid. She defines Spuffy shippers variously and inclusively as:

A person who likes/is fond of/gets turned on by/fantasizes about/is a fan of the character Buffy Summers (in any seasonal incarnation or AU variation⁴⁸) and Spike (in any seasonal or series incarnation or AU variation) together in either a canon or fanon manner (or some combination of the two). This person is required

⁴⁸ AU stands for alternate universe, which means that the fanfic takes place in world or timeline outside of the canon hypotext’s

to enjoy at least one of the following: the canon angst, the canon potential, fanon possibilities, S1 Spuffy, S2 Spuffy, S3 Spuffy, S4 Spuffy, S5 Spuffy, S6 Spuffy, S7 Spuffy, post-series Spuffy, all-human AU variations, non-canon possibilities between the two, happily ever afters, crappily ever afters, twisted fucked-up Buffy/Spike, saccharine shippy Spuffy, naked!Spike, naked!Buffy, naked!Spike and naked!Buffy doing naked!things together, clothed!Spike and clothed!Buffy doing clothed!things together, *Buffy and Spike in an all-penguin AU*, what happened in canon, what should have happened in canon, what didn't happen and shouldn't have happened in canon, what happens in fanfics, what happens in the daydreams of every person who likes the combination of the two characters in any variety of fashions. (gabrielleabelle, emphasis added)

In her meta post, gabrielleabelle pointedly includes every variation of fanfiction and Spuffy relationship dynamic she can think of, even offhandedly adding some variations that had never been explored, like an all-penguin AU. Her post's sarcastic inclusiveness pushes back against—and works to subvert—the exclusionary taste policing within shipping that she was witnessing online, and fans gleefully took to her joke about something as non-canon as a penguin AU still counting as Spuffy fic and made it a concrete reality. In the comments following this meta post, brutti_ma_buoni wrote a few lines of this hypothetical penguin Spuffy story, where Spike and Buffy are penguins unsure of their feelings for one another, who later get turned into their canonical humanoid selves by a resentful Angel. quinara continued the story in the comments and

later posted the whole collaborative story up on her own LiveJournal blog, and it spun out into a trend of fan art, stories, and photo manipulations that all seek to gently correct the problematic norms that fandom claims to be subverting but often continues to perpetuate, like regressive shipping tropes involving problematic gender construction, character diminishment, and sexual fetishization.

I. “Only ponces went with the same bird a second time”: Satirical Amplification of Hypotextual Gender Trouble

“Penguins,” like “West of the Moon,” critiques the canon characterizations of Spike and Buffy, but it does so by amplifying (instead of rewriting) some of the canon hypotext’s failures to break out of the gender binary. “Penguins” reuses characterization clichés that Spuffy shipper fics carry over from canon to exaggerate how their continual repetition means that Spike and Buffy sometimes get flattened and diminished by fans. In the TV show, Buffy is explicitly called out for “having an inferiority complex about having a superiority complex” (“Conversations with Dead People”), meaning that she feels incredibly insecure about having superpowers—and about feeling better than everyone else. Buffy also has a perpetually disastrous love life (and according to some viewers, tragically bad taste in men). These are not the only aspects of Buffy’s life and personality, but because shippers tend to hone in on romance more than the canon hypotext does, her bad love life and her insecurity about her Slayer duties getting in the way of romance is what dominates story and characterization in shipper fic.

"Penguins" begins with Penguin!Buffy fighting a killer whale instead of keeping watch over her and Penguin!Spike's eggs.⁴⁹ After defeating the killer whale, she turned back to the huddle, belatedly hoping that the eggs were all right with Dawn. Knowing her real duty she waddled back with a sigh, expecting another fight with Spike about this. She just wished he'd understand that she wasn't cut out for motherhood. (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni)

Buffy laments that her desire to fight and the satisfaction that she derives from it prevents her from fulfilling her designated gender role, which interferes with her potential romance with Spike. She feels incredibly insecure and guilty about being a superpowered penguin because she can't conform to heteronormative romantic ideals. Spike is furious with Buffy when she returns from her slaying, and the narrator explains that "She couldn't bear to look at him, still incapable of articulating why she couldn't sit all day with all the other female penguins... it hurt her that she caused him so much pain" (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). "Penguins" transforms Buffy's gender trouble into an overwrought melodrama, heightening the romantic barrier that shippers fixate upon and showing how it reduces Buffy to a whiny, insecure people (or in this case, penguin) pleaser. In "Penguins," Buffy *is* pushing against heteronormativity and is seemingly trying to push for her queer identity that defies conventional gender norms. However, Buffy still gives into the guilt and heteronormative desire to please her male romantic partner instead of him needing to change and accept her (or *both* partners needing to mature

⁴⁹ Putting an exclamation point between a descriptor/trait and character name (like Penguin!Buffy) is a discursive convention in online fandom. Fans use the convention as a shorthand label for the kind of characterization in or genre of (in the case of "Penguins," crack!fic) a fan-made work.

and grow); this heteronormative shaming is built into the canon hypotext and into heterosexual popular romance as a genre, and shipper fanfiction often does not or cannot avoid it.

The barrier to Buffy's romance in "Penguins" is both her insecurity and queerness, and Spike's (and heteropatriarchal society's) inability to accept her queerness; the barrier (one of Pamela Regis's eight essential elements of romance) cannot help but be carried over into shipper fiction, yet shippers are not always aware of the normative aspects of the barrier they carry over as well. As discussed in Chapter 1, Regis believes that freedom for the heroine in popular romance is always provisional and incomplete because there is no fully escaping the barriers of society, particularly those of gender (Regis 16). If the Spuffy shipper fic tropes that "Penguins" references were truly liberating and queer, Buffy would not feel the need to change to please her romantic partner, and she would feel fully free to inhabit her queer gender performance (with or without a romantic partner). She is instead flattened, and the heteronormative part of her, her feminine insecurity and need to please, is amplified, pointing out how problematic this construction is in popular romance, *Buffy*, and in other works of Spuffy shipper fic. Additionally, having heteronormative gender roles be penguin-based rather than human-based makes the roles seem ridiculous, and mocks how those roles' are transferred into Spuffy shipper fic.⁵⁰ Taking these roles out of a human context reveals

⁵⁰ Ironically, most penguins species do not assign one gender to incubate eggs and the other to hunt for fish. Male and female penguins usually co-equally share egg incubation and fish hunting duties (Numata, Davis, and Renner 227), a non-hierarchical partnership more akin to the one seen in "West of the Moon." And in the one species of penguin that does not equally share incubation duty, the emperor penguin (as depicted in *March of the Penguins*), it is the *male* that

how constructed they are, and putting them in a context as ridiculous as anthropomorphized penguins humorously chastises shippers for, consciously or not, often buying into problematic, normative archetypes of femininity.

Spike's character is also both flattened and amplified, but his paradoxical combination of machismo and heightened emotionality are what dominate his characterization. Spike "stomps manfully" when Buffy doesn't fulfill her female gender role duties, and he is visibly upset that Buffy undermines his masculinity by going off and fighting when he is trying to catch fish and be the breadwinner—or in this case, fish-winner (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). Stomping manfully comically amplifies his masculine posturing and attempts at machismo performance. This demonstrates to shippers that in canon and in shipper fic, Spike can be incredibly hyper-masculine and misogynistic in ways that shippers glorify or willfully ignore. He also thinks misogynistically about Buffy, thinking "only ponces went with the same bird a second time" (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni), using a homophobic slur against himself to deride his own feminine-coded desire for intimacy, domesticity, and monogamy. Spike may be passionate and tender in his emotions, and queer in his performance, but sometimes his masculine and feminine aspects are incongruous and lead to normative self-loathing rather than freedom. Exaggeratedly repeating phrases and tropes seen in canon and in Spuffy shipper fic makes obvious to shippers how these normative and regressive

has to stay with the eggs while the female hunts for food. It's hard to tell whether quinara and brutti_ma_buoni are trying to queer emperor penguins' gender binary, make the usual penguin co-equality more heteronormative, or some combination of both.

gender ideas insidiously permeate Spuffy shipper fic, and makes fun of how fans seem to celebrate the regressive parts of Spike as well.

Yet Spike's feminine side gets exaggerated for comic effect as well; "Penguins" makes fun of how Spike is overly-controlled by his emotions and volatily passionate. In the same paragraph that displays Spike's misogynistic comments, he also reflects that "he couldn't stop thinking about her... Every time he dived for fish it was like he could hear her far away, like the sound of the water was her laughter. He never wanted to surface, just wanted to drown in the sound of her voice" (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). In "Penguins" and often in fanon within Spuffy shipper fic, Spike constantly makes poetic, romantic metaphors (if sometimes rather clunky ones) to describe his beloved Buffy, and cannot stop emotionally obsessing over the object of his passion. Contradicting his seemingly self-assured, masculine posturing, Spike needs to work up "the nerve to speak to her, waddling across the ice to see if she'd care to give him another go," (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). His romantic insecurity and overflowing passion are coded feminine, and are exaggerated in a way to make fun of how Spuffy shipper fic over-romanticizes William and Spike's poetic side—especially for how it "softens" Spike's bad boy (read misogynistic) side.⁵¹ However, depth of feminine emotion does not negate or cancel out internalized homophobia and misogyny, and shippers who claim that Spike

⁵¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, William was Spike's name and persona when he was human in the 1880s. William was a highly effeminate, terrible poet who was roundly mocked by his peers, and Spike's hypermasculine "bad boy" punk rock persona can be seen as self-retaliation against his previous feminine passivity and insecurity.

is a perfect character, or just misunderstood, are willfully or subconsciously turning a blind eye to the gender troubles with both Buffy and Spike.

II. “Oh, great Penguin on High! What had he done?”: Mocking Character

Diminishment and Oversimplification in Spuffy Shipper Tropes

In addition to mocking tropes from the canon hypotext, “Penguins” satirically amplifies and diminishes romantic and sexual tropes from Spuffy fanfiction. The push and pull of magnifying and undercutting reveals just how regressive or problematic some common Spuffy tropes can be, especially in terms of gender and character. The humor that results from “Penguins” demonstrates that such tropes deserve to be mocked, even if shippers take serious affective pleasure out of desiring and viewing those tropes. The most obvious and common shipper trope that is amplified in “Penguins” is the diminishment of Angel as a romantic rival so as to affirm the Spuffy ship as the ideal scenario, the One True Pairing (OTP). The trope of diminishing romantic rivals isn’t exclusive to Spuffy fanfiction; it’s something common to all shipper fic. Anne Jamison, in her book *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, describes the diminished rival archetype as

a stock character in fanfiction... [a] punishing characterization generations of fan writers have inflicted on the hapless (if often canonically successful) rivals that threaten their One True Pairing. I’ve read this character—this same character,

with minor adaptations—as Angel *or* Buffy, Bella *or* Jacob... again, and again, and again. (35)

This flattening of a romantic rival into a cardboard cartoon villain can happen to any character who shippers of a particular pairing consider a threat to their OTP, and no ship is immune to this reductive tendency. “Bangel” (Buffy/Angel) shippers diminish Spike, just as much as Spuffy shippers diminish Angel, just as much as “Spangel” (Spike/Angel) shippers diminish Buffy. Spuffy shippers are not any better or worse than any other ship, and “Penguins” brings that reality into sharp clarity by comically exaggerating the worst parts of the diminishment trope.

Angel, instead of being a complex (albeit melodramatic) vampire as he appears in *Buffy*, is caricatured in “Penguins”: he is self-righteously superior and overly melodramatic in his Byronic antihero woe and angst. Penguin!Angel has an icy castle fortress that he plots and broods in like a stereotypical mustache twirling villain, and the narrator further notes that his fortress “was rather sparkly,” (*quinara and brutti_ma_buoni*) a setting that possibly emasculates Angel and by degrading Angel’s legitimacy as a vampire through a tangential reference to *Twilight*’s sparkly vampires.⁵² His virility is jabbed at because in the story, he and Buffy have never conceived any penguin babies despite mating together; Angel seethes over this because Spike has succeeded in fathering penguin children with Buffy. Angel maliciously imagines “the runt’s [Spike’s] face, smirking all the while he fathered those stupid little fluffballs they

⁵² *Buffy* fans of all ships usually agree that *Twilight*’s vampires are a hackneyed, watered-down version of all the literary and filmic vampires that came before *Twilight*’s publication, including *Buffy*’s vampires.

called their children. God, he hated that bastard” (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). Angel then decides that if he can’t have Buffy, then no one can and that he’ll freeze them into icicles, exaggerating the canon trope of Angel being perfectly capable of evil, even with a soul. Yet that soul tortures him when he commits evil, and he bemoans, “Wasn’t it best to encase them in ice? Wouldn’t that stop the hurt? He had forgotten, of course, the one missing link in the chain of hurt. Himself. Oh, great Penguin on High! What had he done?” (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). His melodramatic guilt over his wrongdoing is magnified to hilarious heights, making his ultra-serious archetype of the Byronic antihero seem overwrought, two-dimensional, and laughable. Instead of being a fearsome, brooding vampire wracked with guilt, Angel’s guilt is infantilized and belittled, and he falls “once again onto his squishy behind, penitent tears streaming from his eyes” as he weeps fiercely (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). One can almost imagine cartoon streams of water gushing from this overly dramatic, caricatured, and comically diminished version of Angel.

In Spuffy shipper fic, Angel and other romantic rivals often get diminished specifically to idolize and amplify the ship of Spike and Buffy as ideal and fated. Bangel is characterized as doomed throughout the text, because Angel cannot “be perfectly happy with her” knowing that (as in *Buffy*’s canon) his romantic happiness with Buffy makes him at risk of losing his soul and becoming Angelus (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni).⁵³ Instead of doing the right thing and letting her go, penguin!Angel still

⁵³ Romani gypsies cursed Angelus with a soul for killing the Elder’s daughter, and the only way to break the curse is for Angel to experience one true moment of happiness.

selfishly covets Buffy for himself, which in Spuffy shippers' eyes makes Angel just as problematic a romantic partner as KnifeEdge's exaggeratedly patriarchal and heteronormative version of Riley in "West of the Moon." In contrast, Buffy and Spike in "Penguins" are so connected and fated that they can recognize each other even in their penguin bodies. The narrator notes that Spike and Buffy's "eyes met comfortably, their heights perfectly compatible" (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni), emphasizing the cliché of Spuffy being perfect for each other even physically.⁵⁴ To shippers, Spike and Buffy's physical similarities is another signal that they're fated soulmates.

While "West of the Moon" also pushes back against the soulmate trope, it too falls prey to language describing Spuffy as perfectly fitting each other physically, especially in sexual situations. During the sexual culmination of their relationship, Buffy thinks that Spike is "the perfect height for kissing like this, and our bodies seem to curl into one anothers' [sic] perfectly" and that "for once it doesn't feel like I'm being invaded. It's more like a missing piece is finally in place... God, he feels perfect inside of me" (Ch. 64). And when they don't match exactly the same, they're shown to be two opposites that coincide. Spike exclaims that Buffy is "So, so, so hot. God, I'm going to dust" and Buffy thinks in response that "By contrast, he's the perfect level of cool inside me, soothing my seriously swollen, achy flesh" (Ch. 64). The prophecy may not force them to be together romantically, but it still perpetuates the notion that Spike and Buffy perfectly balance each other out; this is what makes Spuffy the perfect, idolized relationship in

⁵⁴ In *Buffy*, James Marsters, who plays Spike, is shorter than an average male and Sarah Michelle Gellar's Buffy is also small in both stature and figure.

Spuffy shippers' eyes. However, this overpraising of Spike and Buffy also reduces the complexities of their relationship, and normalizes a practically unachievable perfection in romance. Most popular romance as a genre is guilty of deifying romantic couples and of oversimplifying romantic rivals. Shipper fanfiction, even when it's being critical of heterosexual romance, cannot escape all of popular romance's problems. It takes blowing this reductive trope up to massive proportions of melodrama and absurdity in order for readers to notice that the reductive trope has been carried over.

III. "He knew their love wasn't strong enough to overcome the barriers between them. Even though their sex was the Hottest Thing Evah": Mocking Sexual Glorification in Romantic Spuffy Tropes

As noted earlier, Buffy and Spike's sexual relationship is usually the centerpiece of most Spuffy fanfiction, to the point where the sex can overpower all other themes or foci. In its attempt to be transgressive and sex-positive, Spuffy fanfiction can go overboard and oversexualize the romance in Spuffy. This reduces Spike and Buffy to simpering piles of lust for one another to be consumed by the shipper's gaze, sexually objectifying each character. "Penguins" satirically echoes this reduction through undercutting and comical exaggeration of Spike and Buffy's uncontrollable lust and acrobatic intercourse. "Penguins" starts out with Spike and Buffy mating for the first time, and *quinara* and *brutti_ma_buoni*, instead of describing it, link to a picture of penguins copulating with a note that it's Not Safe for Work (NSFW)—that is, "if you think penguin

sex is porn” (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). While this undercuts the purple prose that is the hallmark of sex scenes in both fanfiction and popular romance, the photo is actually more explicit and pornographic than the typical hazy erotic description. It also completely undercuts the usual intensity and passion that surrounds the act of sex in shipper fic with the absurd and unsexy image of two penguins getting it on. This ridiculous animal sex image thwarts any fervid sexual consumption by shippers, and it’s only by using absurdity to thwart problematic objectification and consumption that fan readers notice this is happening in the first place, and that it’s problematic at all.

Everything Spike and Buffy do sexually in “Penguins,” even in their canonical forms, is described through the penguin terms, further undercutting (and therefore pointing out the existence of) the usual sexual fetishization and objectification of Spike and Buffy in Spuffy shipper fic. When Spike and Buffy are transported to the show’s canon dimension and transformed into humans by Angel’s evil magic, their hands are described as appendages with “five small tentacles,” and Buffy recognizes the strange creature (who is canon vampire Spike) in front of her as Spike because his touch “belonged to a wing, smoothing across her back,” making the penguin alternative universe the familiar and the canon universe the foreign. They touch flat beaks, not lips, and the kissing itself is “like nuzzling necks, but more intimate, more involved; her tongue met his and it felt strange that he was not a fish” (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni), mocking how even in alienating and strange “new” bodies, Spike and Buffy cannot keep their hands off of each other. Instead of prioritizing figuring out what happened to them

or trying to get back to their penguin dimension, they can't help but sexually experiment with their humanoid bodies instead. Even after Buffy exclaims, "What are we doing here?" clearly showing her distress, she still "thought she recognised the besotted look on his face. She smiled wryly; he wasn't going to get anything done very soon" (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). All of these penguin-lensed interactions use that distancing language to draw attention to how uncontrollable lust and sex in Spuffy fanfiction often overrides narrative plot or even common sense. Yet despite that distancing, sexual and romantic Spuffy shipper tropes remain recognizable, and these shipper tropes' recontextualization also makes it obvious how absurd and fetishistic they are.

Even plot heavy, non-PWPs are guilty of the uncontrollable lust trope, including "West of the Moon."⁵⁵ Spike and Buffy's first time also occurs right on the edge of danger, after escaping a massive attack from Louhi's demonic minions and during a vicious blizzard that Louhi magically summons in an attempt to kill them after that initial attack fails. Instead of trying to figure out their best course of action to escape—or even just resting up to heal from their battle injuries—Spike and Buffy engage in acrobatic and athletic sex, unable to control their lust after over 400 pages of building unresolved sexual tension. Now, after this extensive amount of build-up, the sexual release can seem justified, even given their hostile environment and completely unsexy state of injury. However, once a situation like this has been condensed into a much shorter story, the absurdity of uncontrollable lust in the face of mortal peril is identified and magnified.

⁵⁵ PWP stands for Porn Without Plot or Plot? What Plot?, and is a category of fanfic that primarily focuses on sex between characters, with flimsy to no premise at all.

It isn't logical to the plot and story that two characters would be completely unable to resist having sex (unless magic is involved), and the fact that shipper desire overrides logic and survival instinct shows just how ridiculous, regressive, and single-minded shippers' consumptive desire is. When comparing the two texts, "Penguins" indirectly makes "West of the Moon"'s fetishization of Spike and Buffy as consumable sex objects explicit, and "Penguins" laughs at this construct, while also denying its legitimacy. In "Penguins," Spike and Buffy do lose control and make out in their transformed canon forms—which is usually the form that fans want them to consummate their love in, even when they've been transformed during the story—but they only have sex as penguins, denying any erotic payoff or voyeurism. While the reader could be into bestiality or animal sex, Spuffy shipper fic is focused on humanoid sex and romance, and so not depicting that sex undermines Spuffy shippers' erotic or pornographic expectations.

"Penguins" mocks the excess of fan desire that often constructs a romance that can become problematically only about glorifying and consuming sex. Another way it does this is by undercutting the dirty talk and purple prose typical Spuffy shipper fic and romance at large. In "Penguins," Spike and Buffy only speak in penguin noises, and this makes fun how Spike and Buffy, in some Spuffy fic, can be flattened to the point where the dialogue doesn't even matter. In their penguin universe, all the characters only speak variations of "Kaaaaark" in their direct dialogue, with their English meaning translated in free indirect discourse or in a third-person narrator's description of their actions or feelings. However, the lack of direct dialogue, especially emotionally charged or

important, moments, leads to those moments becoming comical and absurd. When Buffy and Spike mate for the first time at the beginning of the fanfic, Buffy attracts Spike to her with a penguin sound without an English translation afterwards: “‘Kaaaark,’ she said, sexily, and bowed deeply. It was time for copulation” (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). What should be a sexually charged and affective fulfillment of fan desire is undercut and made silly with the thought of a grating penguin screech ever being sexy. Here, “Penguins” reveals the extent of oversexualizing in shipper fic through undermining and purposeful absence. The lack of distinguishable dialogue also demonstrates how generic and meaningless the dialogue before a sex scene often is in actual Spuffy fanfiction. For example, when Spike and Buffy are in the canon universe, Buffy reflects that “She missed the banter of home, the flurry of endearments tripping off Spike's tongue. These strange sounds - ‘love’, ‘pet’, ‘gorgeous’, ‘slayer’ [sic] - they meant nothing to her, and no matter what she tried she could never say what she wanted” (quinara and brutti_ma_buoni). Now the “Kaaark” problem is working in reverse; Spike is saying all the endearments that he would typically say in a Spuffy fanfic, particularly during amorous moments, but they mean nothing to Buffy's penguin brain, and in their constant repetition they start to mean nothing to fan readers as well. The dialogue isn't what matters, and isn't what affectively pleases fans; it's only the flimsy pretense that leads to the sex that they (fans and Spuffy) desire, much like in pornography.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with pornography or erotica, Spuffy shippers often glamorize and overly emphasize sex's role in romantic relationships,

leading to unrealistic expectations and false conflation of sex and love. Wendell and Tan argue that “the conflation of sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy is explosive” (151) in popular romance stories, and sex and love’s combination does yield compelling and fulfilling storytelling. But because this combination is repeated over and over again as a primary focus in fanfiction, it inscribes love and sex as inseparable: that love cannot be real without sexual culmination, and that (good) sex always has to include love. And depending on the fanfic, sex can play the most central role in forming or maintaining a romantic relationship, over other important values like communication and friendship. Buffy and Spike’s excessive sex scenes and sexual lust in Spuffy shipper fic problematically flatten them into (exotic) objects for shipper sexual consumption. Spike and Buffy may be fictional characters who won’t suffer any real consequences from shippers’ reduction of them, but the trope of overeroticizing even fictional female (and male) characters stems from extradiegetic, systemic sexual norms that flatten real people.

“West of the Moon” mostly avoids this conflation because Spike and Buffy’s relationship is built up emotionally well before they have sex and its sex scenes are not excessive in number and description; the sex does not take over the whole story. However, the entire plot of first two parts of “West of the Moon” are all in pursuit of the physical culmination of Spike and Buffy’s unresolved sexual and emotional tension. Their sexual union is even fated in the text, with both Spike and Buffy having prophetic dreams of their first time with each other well before the scene actually occurs in the story. The

sex must happen, and the regressive archetype of fated love (or in this case, fated lust) gets reinscribed in the values of the text. The primacy of sex in shipper fic, while subversive and liberating in some aspects—as with Spike and Buffy’s non-heteronormative sexual dynamics in “West of the Moon”—can be misleading and regressive in other ways. “Penguins” amplifies the glorification of sex in Spuffy by making it the only driving force in their relationship, pointing out shipper fic that glorifies sex over everything else in romance also collapses the characters’ and the romance’s complexity.

Conclusion: “Curtains close/on a kiss, god knows/we can tell the end is near”:

The Dialogic Impact

“Penguins” may be absurd and low-culture crack!fic, but it’s still complex and clever in its critique of shipper tropes and desires. “Penguins” uses its poor taste and purposely terrible aesthetics to subvert the dismissal of fanfiction as derivative and self-indulgent. It cleverly magnifies and undercuts tropes and archetypes that can be found everywhere, from other pieces of Spuffy shipper fic, to the canon hypotext that shipper fic draws from, to the general romance and literary fiction structures that shipper fic appropriates. Regressive norms, ridiculous characterizations, and nonsensical plot points can be a part of any type of writing, fanfiction or not. All writing, no matter how complex or transgressive, can include derivative and self-indulgent elements, and fanfiction should not be the scapegoat for all textual woes. In fact, fanfiction just makes

more obvious the inevitable intertextual dialogism and problematic structures and metaphors present in writing and language.

My argument is not meant to be a comprehensive or conclusive overview of shipper fic, or even of Spuffy shipper fic. Rather, I mean to demonstrate the extremes and possibilities of shipper fanfiction as a form, and to explain how two incredibly disparate modes of expression can both be performing similar textual moves under the same umbrella of romantic fanfiction. While fanfiction is complex and can be incredibly subversive on aesthetic and political levels, fanfiction and shippers are nowhere near as perfect or as utopian as some fan studies scholarship makes it out to be. Fanfiction generally seeks to lovingly critique its hypotext, and sometimes that hypotext includes itself. When a piece of fanfiction references, alters, or undercuts a source text, the dialogic effect does not just occur in one direction, fanfiction to source text. Even in critique, fanfiction's creative re-writing/righting of perceived wrongs cannot escape the problematic implications and structures of the hypotext it seeks to correct. Like a perpetual game of whack-a-mole, when one regressive norm is smacked down, another one immediately appears. Shippers may claim to be subversive and liberated—and in some aspects fan works can really challenge gender, heterosexual, and aesthetic norms. But shippers (and fan culture in general) can also create and enforce regressive norms of their own, ones that may be entirely different from the ones they're critiquing, and it's also important for scholars (and shippers) to examine all the complexities of shipping, and how shipping's problematic constructions affects how shipper fic is

constructed and read. Shipper fic *can* create unusual and liberating gender and textual structures: a heterosexual couple that avoids much of heteronormativity's inequality, and a non-romance hypotext that can also be a popular romance—while still retaining that hypotext's original non-romance focus. The dialogism inherent in all texts, not just in fanfiction or shipper fic, indicates that these gender and textual structures can be affected in reference to one another, sometimes for the better, but sometimes for worse as well. More individual fanfictional texts should be closely read and literarily analyzed to determine what other kinds of unusual structures, liberating *and* regressive, can come from and be revealed by other (both contemporary and historical) fandoms, hypotexts, and shipping pairings.

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