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**“What Would Buffy Do?”:
*Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s “Storyteller” and the Hagiographic Genre***

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Into each generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer.¹

Buffy Summers, protagonist of television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) is a secular saint, and the entirety of the series itself can be read as a hagiographic text. The phrase “secular saint” may appear a paradox, the two terms in conflict with one another. However, it is from the friction and tension produced from this paradox that meaning is produced. As medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum articulates, “a paradox is, as Nicholas of Cusa put it, the ‘coincidence of opposites.’ It is not a combination or synthesis of differing aspects, nor is it a violation of the integrity of opposing concerns through compromise. It is the simultaneous assertion and performance of opposing values.”² Following this line of thought, Buffy Summers, as a secular saint, is a paradox. She is a young woman from a capitalist society, absolutely “secular” in that she lives in the world (especially the material world of shopping) and seemingly does not belong to any established religious order.³ But Buffy, as The Slayer, a mystically chosen defender against the forces of darkness, is also a moral exemplar devoted to her sacred calling. In other words, a “saint.”⁴ These qualities, when combined, establish Buffy as “secular saint,” as an individual of the world that is also supernaturally selected as a protector for the forces of good; she possesses the necessary qualities of each and is thus simultaneously both. The television series, which documents Buffy’s life in an episodic fashion, is, then, the “sacred writing” or hagiographic text.

For context, the cult teen horror-dramedy *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tells the story of sixteen-year-old Buffy Anne Summers, the latest Slayer or Chosen One. She is the “one

¹ Throughout the rest of Season 1 each episode begins with a voice-over of this Slayer mythology summary while featuring clips of Buffy, the Vampyre manuscript, Buffy’s cross, and the cemetery. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 1, episode 1, “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” directed by Charles Martin Smith, aired March 10, 1997 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD. Series creator and sometimes director/writer Joss Whedon is only mentioned in this article when necessary. While he may have majorly influenced and inspired modern television storytelling, I do not condone any of Whedon’s sexist, misogynistic, or racist behavior that has come to light in the past few years.

² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 268.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “Secular” (adj. and n.), accessed June 16, 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/secular_adj#eid.

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “Saint” (adj. and n.), accessed June 16, 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/saint_adj#eid.

girl in all the world” who has been “called” by Fate to protect humankind from “the forces of darkness.” Buffy lives in the small, unassuming town of Sunnydale, California, that happens to be built on top of the *Boca del Inferno*, or Hellmouth, a nexus between earth and all hell dimensions.⁵ This proximity to the Hellmouth proves to be problematic, as the Hellmouth lures darkness and evil like a magnet. Each season, Buffy, and her friends, known lovingly as the Scoobies, face ever stronger and more challenging “Big Bads”—enemies usually seeking to either end the world or send the world into a hell dimension.⁶ As the series progresses, Buffy and the Scoobies move beyond the apt metaphors of “High School is Hell” into the “real world” obstacles of university, careers, and major life choices burdened with the consequences of mortality and morality.

Buffy may seem like the last place to investigate the influence of the Middle Ages in American pop culture, let alone argue for secular sainthood. However, *Buffy’s* relationship to religion lies in its creative use of the religious and horror cultural lexicon. “Religion,” in the context of this article, refers to a vague, pseudo-Christian (especially Roman Catholic) ideology. This is seen via the inconclusive existence of an almighty God paired with the existence of infinite Hell dimensions and an abstract “heaven”; Higher Beings, demons, and Hell Gods but no angels or mystic prophets; and the utility of religious objects. It is religion that provides the fear of demons and the possibility of possession; religion that has established the horrors of Hell; and religion that has inspired the possibility of life after death, either as revenant, zombie, or divine figure. Likewise, it is a belief in religion and the supernatural that provides the tools for combating these dark forces: the rite of exorcism, prayer, the cross, and confession. To cite Religious Studies scholar Wendy Anderson, “although religion is not necessary for the characters on *Buffy*, the show *itself* is ultimately far from secularized but also far from sacralized.”⁷ The series then exists between these two spheres, establishing another paradox between two competing

⁵ In late Classical through late medieval iconography, the entrance to Hell has been depicted as “jaws of Hell” or a “Hellmouth” to a great beastly monster, often appearing in depictions of the Last Judgment and the Harrowing of Hell. See Gary D. Schmidt, “The Monastic Revival and the Formation of the Hell Mouth Image” in *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eight-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century* (Slingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 13-31, 13-16. *Buffy*, “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” DVD.

⁶ The original Scoobies were composed of tech-savvy Willow, nerd Xander, Watcher Giles, and occasionally queen bee Cordelia and ensouled vampire Angel (Angelus). As the seasons continue, the group is joined by (ex)vengeance demon Anya, Buffy’s feisty (and mystical key) little sister Dawn, timid yet tender witch Tara, and sultry, sensitive, and sardonic Big-Bad-Gone-Good vampire Spike. The Big Bads include the centuries old Master; a turned Angelus; Sunnydale’s Mayor Richard Wilkins; a military created bio-mechanical demonoid known as Adam; Hell Goddess Glorificus; a group of nerds known as The Trio; and the First Evil.

⁷ Wendy Love Anderson, “Prophecy Girl and The Powers That Be: The Philosophy of Religion in the Buffyverse” in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, ed. James B. South (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 212-26, 226. Emphasis mine.

powers to produce meaning.⁸

Thus, I must clarify that my goal is not to prove *Buffy* is a Christian text; theological meanings in the series are beside the point. Instead, this article intends to articulate that reading *Buffy* through or as hagiography matters because such a perspective brings together the medieval cultural and religious inheritance throughout the series and establishes moral and mythical meaning. In other words, it rightfully places *Buffy*—the woman, the human, the superhero—within a legacy of strong women venerated for their strength, fortitude, and steadfast belief within a framework that provides a basis for recognition in mass culture, with religion providing a symbolic shorthand via an established cultural lexicon. This article will look at the *Buffy* Season 7 episode “Storyteller” and the medieval virgin martyr Saint Margaret of Antioch to investigate the common aspects and shared sensibilities between *Buffy*, hagiography, and (secular) sanctity.⁹

Much like how hagiography offers a glimpse into the Middle Ages, *Buffy* also captures a particular cultural moment. *Buffy* not only attempted to break out beyond the anticipated boundaries of what a teen-oriented horror series can do, but also successfully reflects the language, fashion, desires, values, and experiences of the late twentieth-early twenty-first century. Instead of being the little blonde girl who goes down the alley and gets killed in every horror movie, *Buffy* was created to subvert that idea by establishing her as not only the heroine, but the hero.¹⁰ *Buffy*, then, is situated as a text that touches upon themes that are real and relatable, perhaps to an extent even imitable, while also being a window into late 1990s–early 2000s’ popular culture, much like how medieval saints’ lives were not only educational stories about morals or faith but were also entertaining and often sensational.

I have chosen Saint Margaret of Antioch (c. 289–c. 304) and the Season 7 episode “Storyteller” for specific reasons. Saint Margaret of Antioch is a Catholic virgin-martyr from the Roman era of Christian persecution who eventually became popularized as patron saint of childbirth due to her feat of bursting forth from a dragon by making a sign of the cross, an episode metaphorically associated with the blood and gore of parturition. Margaret is also known for viciously beating a devil directly after her defeat of the dragon, presenting her as a morally and physically steadfast figure.¹¹ Such strength is articulated

⁸ Greg Erickson, “‘Religion Freaky’ or ‘A Bunch of Men Who Died?’: The (A)Theology of *Buffy*,” *Slayage: The International Journal of Buffy* 4, no. 1-2 (2004): paragraph 10, https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/erickson_slayage_4.1-2.pdf.

⁹ “Storyteller,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 7 Episode 16, directed by Marita Grabiak, aired December 4, 2003 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

¹⁰ “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” *Buffy*, Joss Whedon voice over commentary, DVD.

¹¹ Margaret is known as “Marina” in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where her iconography often features

in Isidore of Seville's highly influential seventh-century etymological encyclopedia, *Etymologies*. Seville writes that the word "virgin" is sometimes said to have been

derived from lack of corruption, as if the word were formed from 'heroic maiden,' because this figure has no knowledge of female desire. A 'heroic maiden' (*virago*) is so called because she 'acts like a man' (*vir* + *agere*); that is, she engages in the activities of men and is full of male vigor. The ancients would call strong women by that name. However, a virgin cannot be correctly called a heroic maiden unless she performs a man's task. But if a woman does manly deeds, then she is correctly called a heroic maiden, like an Amazon.¹²

As such, I have chosen Margaret to be read alongside Buffy because both women are known as "demon slayers," an immediate identity link that establishes them both not only as physical fighters, but also as virtuous defenders against the demonic forces of evil. Furthermore, both women are "heroic maidens" who "act like men" and as such, are fierce and strong like the mythological Amazons.¹³

Margaret is one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers—a group of saints venerated together by the Catholic Church because their intercession is believed to be especially effective. In one litany to the Holy Helpers Margaret's intercessory prayer specifically requests "That through the intercession of St. Margaret / Thou preserve us from Hell."¹⁴ By preservation from Hell, the prayer asks Margaret, as holy individual, to intercede on behalf of the devout, that they shall suffer no evil, meaning sin as well as demonic interference. Similarly, Buffy not only provides protection from demons but is likewise a type of secular

her with a raised hammer in one hand and the other tightly wrapped around the head or neck of a demon in the other; Margaret is usually shown emerging, standing on top of, or piercing, a dragon with a spear adorned with a cross. Wendy R. Larson, "Three Thirteenth-Century *Lives* of St. Margaret of Antioch," in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York, London: Routledge, 2001), 675-709, 675.

¹² *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. by Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), XI.ii.21-23, 242.

¹³ I am fully aware that Buffy does not remain a virgin throughout the entirety of *Buffy*. In fact, she loses her virginity relatively early on, in the Season 2 episode "Surprise" (S2.E13). However, I mention the etymology of "virgin" because it gestures to the origins and legacy of the attractive yet strong young female trope, from the Amazons to the Gothic heroine to the Final Girl to Buffy.

¹⁴ Sherry L. Reames, "Introduction," in *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, ed. Sherry L. Reames (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/reames-middle-english-legends-of-women-saints-introduction>. Rev. Bonaventure Hammer, O. F. M., "Litany of the Fourteen Holy Helpers," in *Mary, Help of Christians and the Fourteen Saints Invoked as Holy Helpers: Instructions, Legends, Novenas and Prayers with Thoughts of the Saints for Every Day of the Year* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1909), 239-44, 243, <https://archive.org/details/MaryHelpOfChristians>.

intercessor and protector of the world from the Hellmouth. Both are also beautiful young women, sixteen and fifteen years-old respectively, when they are “Chosen” or “Called” for their sacred mission.¹⁵ While Margaret is called by God, Buffy’s being Chosen appears arbitrary—it is the status of her blood which mystically contains the essence of the Slayer and places her in a lineage of chosen warrior women extending back to prehistory.¹⁶ Either way, these appointed young women’s physical beauty and desirability—qualities that often code young attractive women as powerless, meek, or feminine—masks their extraordinary strength, establishing that not only masculine force can overcome demonic foes. Thus, as these seemingly meek feminine figures undergo excruciating trials in their journey towards sanctity, both physically and emotionally, the assumed fragility projected by their appearance invokes sympathy and admiration from the witnessing audience. Their kinship is only furthered by the fact that Buffy and Margaret’s trials overlap with one another in numerous ways: they both drown, suffer physical beatings, spill blood, experience demon conflicts, and defy patriarchal control. The intertextual motifs of torture, brutality, and suffering establish the saints’ fortitude and moral standing, while the hagiographic narrative itself—Latin *vita* or television series—frames or positions the *passio* within a greater context.¹⁷

I choose “Storyteller” because, as the title itself alludes, “Storyteller” is concerned with the act and role of storytelling the life of a mythic figure or superhero. Furthermore, the broadness of the term “storyteller” allows for a connection between numerous types of social and cultural activities regarding the sharing of stories for the purposes of entertainment, education, cultural preservation, and/or fostering moral virtues.

Hagiography

Like Buffy Summers, saints were the superheroes and celebrities of medieval European culture: they were ordinary humans who had become extraordinary, using their special powers to help their supporters and to protect the vulnerable.¹⁸ Hagiography, as the media genre concerned with the writing of saints’ lives—known as *vitae*—is a rich and complex field of literary, theological, and cultural history. Many of these legends about individuals full of exemplary love and devotion to God began to appear in the early Roman Imperial period, although their production exploded in Late Antiquity and the early Middle

¹⁵ “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” *Buffy*, DVD.

¹⁶ “Get It Done,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 7 Episode 15, directed by Douglas Petrie, aired December 3, 2003 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

¹⁷ Larissa Tracy, “Introduction,” in *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature: Negotiations of National Identity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 1-30, 25-6.

¹⁸ Sarah Salih, “Introduction: Saints, Cults, and Lives in Late Medieval England,” in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 1-23, 1.

Ages and continued long afterwards.¹⁹ The increase in hagiographical output can be understood as the work of a growing Catholic Church's establishment of a powerful, yet attractive, religious identity by generating compelling, accessible, and fantastic stories exemplary of God's Grace, Love and Majesty.

Hagiographic texts were compiled in numerous volumes and collections, most famously the *Legenda Aurea* (c. 1259-1266) by Dominican Italian chronicler Jacobus de Voragine (1228-1298). Audiences of hagiography spanned the social spectrum, from the literate clergy to the illiterate poor who heard *vitae* read in church on holy days, during festivals, on feast days, performed in plays, and/or during weekly sermons.²⁰ Saints' stories were also depicted in multiple media like ornately illuminated manuscripts, illustrations on church walls, or depictions in stained glass. Hagiography thus allows us to catch a glimpse into a genre of medieval "popular culture," especially that of the lay audiences, because of its widespread popularity and multitude of mediums.²¹ As such, hagiography, especially vernacular hagiography, is important for understanding the innate relationship between literary forms and social institutions, practices, and culture.

The collation of *Buffy* with hagiography provides a compelling point of contact for contemplating the modern alongside the medieval because both *Buffy* and hagiography are concerned with narrating the fantastic life (or lives) of an inspirational figure who conquers their adversaries while displaying moral exemplarity. As discursive phenomena, they pull their material from diverse pools of differing levels of discourse: in the case of hagiography, from high theological theory to lay culture, and, in the case of *Buffy*, from third wave feminism to popular culture. It must also be acknowledged that, as alleged documentations of fact, both hagiographic materials and Andrew's documentary in "Storyteller" are susceptible of falling into storytelling rather than reporting due to the fantastic nature of their subject.²² For his *Legenda Aurea*, for instance, Jacobus de Voragine took his legends from a variety of sources, sometimes using the works of Church Fathers such as Saint Ambrose and Saint Jerome, other times constructing his narratives from fragmentary pieces in martyrologies and existing calendars of saints. Yet Jacobus also admits that he adds materials of his own, asserting his own personal role in shaping

¹⁹ James Corke-Webster and Christa Gray, "Introduction," in *The Hagiographical Experiment: Developing Discourses in Sainthood*, ed. Christa Gray and James Corke-Webster (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 126, 1.

²⁰ Katherine J. Lewis, "History, Historiography and Rewriting the Past," in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. Sarah Salih, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 122-40.

²¹ Buffy Studies scholar Rhonda Wilcox remarks, "*Buffy* can be seen as mythic not just because it embodies the hero monomyth, but also because it has framed a truth for its own time." Rhonda Wilcox, "In the 'Demon Section of the Card Catalogue': Buffy Studies and Television Studies," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 1, no.1 (2006): 37-48, 44.

²² Salih, "Introduction," 2-3.

the legends and their material for his own purposes.²³ Historian Pierre Delooz, in his influential analysis on hagiography, writes:

All saints are more or less *constructed* in that, being necessarily saints *for other people*, they are remodelled in the collective representation which is made of them. It often happens, even, that they are so remodelled that nothing of the real original is left, and, ultimately, some saints are solely *constructed* saints simply because nothing is known about them historically: everything, including their existence, is a product of collective representation.²⁴

In other words, saints are what we make of them, religiously inflected, or secularly bound.

Part of what made and makes a saint's celebrity so appealing is their charisma. Much like how Alicia Spencer-Hall uses celebrity studies to inform hagiology, Byzantinist and medievalist Gary Vikan borrows from sociologist Max Weber to formulate the "secular charismatic martyr/saint" to avoid the "stickiness of the word 'saint'" in his analysis of Elvis Presley.²⁵ By adopting Max Weber's non-religious, value-neutral terminology that centers instead on the word charisma rather than "hallowedness" or "purity," the word "charisma" can be successfully used in religious and secular contexts. Indeed, charisma comes from the Greek word *charisma*, "favour, divine gift," and is therefore not limited exclusively to a particular theological context.²⁶ I mention Vikan's formulation because it assists in capturing the aura or allure that emanates from both *Buffy* and hagiographic media. The use of charisma also contributes to interpreting Buffy Summers as a contemporary secular saint by allowing the continuation of the centuries long practice of popular saint-making. Buffy Summers the character is a magnetic figure and leader, while *Buffy* the series becomes a text that "people quote lines from the way they quote Shakespeare, making the text a part of the way to see life."²⁷

²³ Tracy, "Introduction," 37 n24.

²⁴ Salih, "Introduction," 3. Emphasis original. Pierre Delooz, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church," trans. Jane Hodgkin, in *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 189-216, 195.

²⁵ Gary Vikan, *From the Holy Land to Graceland: Sacred People, Places and Things in Our Lives*, (Washington D.C.: American Alliance of Museums Press, 2012), 20. Alicia Spencer-Hall, "Hagiography, Media, and the Politics of Visibility," http://www.medievalshewrote.com/blog/gms2018-fulltext/#_ftn1, accessed June 16, 2023.

²⁶ Vikan, *From the Holy Land to Graceland*, 20. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, "Charisma N.," accessed June 16, 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30721?redirectedFrom=charisma#eid>.

²⁷ Wilcox, "In the 'Demon Section of the Card Catalogue,'" 44.

While the language (both visual and textual) used to articulate *Buffy's* influence or meaning borrows from a medieval religious vocabulary, Buffy's "sainthood" is simultaneously strikingly different than that of a conventional medieval Christian saint. *Buffy's* context may be richly flavored with Christian and religious imagery and symbolism—including pain, purity, and sacrifice—making her immediately familiar to medieval hagiographic media and scholarship, but it must also be acknowledged that her centrality is not as intercessor to God or Jesus. Instead, it is her status as an "icon" for a particular movement and sense of purpose, her meaning-making and moral exemplarity as a strong woman in a patriarchal world that makes her sacred. This is best articulated in the Season 7 episode "Storyteller."

Storyteller

By the time "Storyteller" occurs, Buffy has died and come back-to-life twice, been ripped out of Heaven, lost a mother, met Dracula, fought countless demons, and averted at least seven apocalypses. "Storyteller" takes place during the climactic build-up of the series' final season against the ultimate Big Bad, The First Evil, an entity "beyond sin, beyond death" that is the "thing darkness fears."²⁸ As if that were not enough, The First is assisted by the Turok-Han (aka ubervamp), an ancient demon species preceding vampires that is immensely powerful and incredibly difficult to defeat, and a defrocked Southern priest and sexist serial killer, Caleb.²⁹

Andrew Wells, a one-time member of Season 6 Big Bad "The Trio" who has "now crossed over to the side of good," is obsessed with stories of the fantastic and extraordinary, and he spots the unique opportunity of recording the life of a "real" wonder woman up against all odds. Therefore, he takes on the task as Buffy's documenter, her modern-day hagiographer. Although Andrew's tactics may be evocative of poor found footage documentaries and Masterpiece Theatre, his project of recording Buffy's numerous roles as The Slayer assuredly aligns itself with hagiography. Andrew is the narrator, the hagiographer equivalent who witnesses the heroine in action and deems it worthy of documentation. His desire to document his heroine reaffirms a statement made by Xander in the Season 4 episode "The Freshman," "[W]hen it's dark and I'm all alone and I'm scared or freaked out or whatever, I always think, 'What would Buffy do?' You're my hero."³⁰ However, unlike Xander, who speaks his words to Buffy in private, Andrew sees and understands the value of recording and sharing Buffy's heroism.

²⁸ "Amends," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 3 Episode 10, directed by Joss Whedon, aired December 15, 1998 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

²⁹ "Bring on the Night," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 7 Episode 10, directed by David Grossman, aired December 17, 2002 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

³⁰ "The Freshman," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 4 Episode 1, directed by Joss Whedon, aired October 5, 1999 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

This is established early in the episode, where a camcorder-holding Andrew enthusiastically videos the Slayer in action. Buffy is not enthused by his new project, seeing it as a distraction rather than what Andrew argues is “a valuable record, an important document for the ages. A Slayer in action . . . But the story needs to be told! . . . The world’s going to want to know about Buffy. It’s a story of ultimate triumph tinged with the bitterness for what’s been lost in the struggle. It’s a legacy for future generations!”³¹ Andrew is not only giving voice to the plight and responsibility of the Slayer for his documentary audience, but he is also re-articulating this often taken-for-granted fact for the television series’ audience. He is informing the audience of his documentary, as well as the audience of individuals *within* the world of *Buffy*. For the first time, Buffy’s narrative is not documented by the external frame of the series itself, nor by the unseen Watcher journals kept by Giles, but instead by an in-series witness and participant. Andrew’s emphatic statements and documentation of fact establishes and confirms a reality previously known by only a select few. Buffy always wins—it is why she is the hero of the series and the core of the Scoobies—yet she has done so literally in the dark of night for years. It appears, then, that Andrew, the pop culture nerd, is initially the only one who sees the value and necessity of documenting and sharing Buffy’s plight.

The footage Andrew captures of Buffy reveals not just the immense capability of the Slayer, but also the lethal potential of a hunter on the prowl: Buffy has demons to slay. As Andrew narrates at the end of the episode, as an outnumbered Buffy fights possessed students who have become villainous “Bringers,”

She is like a woman fighting for more than life. She fights like fighting IS her life. It is the air she breathes, and she knows she will win because there is no alternative.³²

Andrew’s prose for his “Buffy, Slayer of the Vampyres” may lean toward the idealistic, but it is nonetheless an eloquent, and profound insight into the duties of The Slayer. Buffy’s moral center combined with her militaristic and martial arts ability make her an incredibly capable warrior, protector, and hero; someone dangerous and powerful. It is these qualities that align Buffy not only with Saint Margaret but also with another medieval figure, Saint Joan of Arc (c. 1412–1431), who likewise responded to a calling with bravery, responsibility, and ethical virtue. Peggy Maddox, in her book *Portrayals of Joan of Arc in Film: From Historical Joan to Her Mythological Daughters*, considers *Buffy* a fit successor to Saint Joan, while Susan Butvin Sainato argues *Buffy* echoes Joan in her role as

³¹ “Storyteller,” *Buffy*, DVD.

³² “Storyteller,” *Buffy*, DVD.

modern-day knight.³³ Saint Joan is worthy of brief mention here because of her status as a recognizable medieval female figure and saint in modern times for many of the same reasons and qualities that establish saintly sisterhood between Buffy and Saint Margaret.

As a keen observer, Andrew not only witnesses Buffy's skill as a warrior, but he also acknowledges the inherent risk and danger that Buffy herself is placed in every day and the physical as well as emotional pain she experiences. This is an imperative element in the path to sanctity; to be canonized or recognized as a saint, the figure must not only display moral exemplarity, but also often experience some form of pain and its emotional companion suffering, expressed in forms like spiritual asceticism, stigmata, paramystical experiences, fighting demons or devils, and/or physical torture. This is one of the most substantial connecting threads between Buffy and Margaret: physical torment—its presence and its purpose. While Margaret, in her trials, is drowned, burned, and scourged to such an extent that her bones are literally visible, her body covered in her own blood and her abdomen ripped open so completely that “the guts were visible” before finally being beheaded, Buffy daily experiences severe bruises, cuts and sprains, while in her major trials she is drowned, stabbed, severely beaten, and even experiences death (twice!).³⁴ In both instances, pain allows the female figures' exceptionality to be made visible.

The role or function of pain is radically different in both narratives. Margaret, who dies for Christ, does not ask her followers to themselves become martyrs, but instead to live virtuous lives and suffer for God.³⁵ Buffy, on the other hand, illuminates that pain and sacrifice are inescapable aspects of living a meaningful life. Although the historic contexts and worldviews of each narrative differ greatly—one is from a medieval and social period where religion was a core aspect of daily life whereas the other was “created” in a secular American Capitalist, third-wave feminist era—pain is a prominent part of these moral exemplars' stories. The wounds on the heroines' bodies signify the manifestation of the

³³ Throughout the series there are also small references to Buffy as a modern-day Saint Joan, most notably in Season 6 episode “Tabula Rasa” (S6.E8) where all the Scoobies' memories, including their names, are wiped due to a memory spell backfire. As the episode progresses Buffy adopts the name “Joan” for herself and intuitively becomes the leader for the confused group. In a parallel association between Buffy and Joan, Saint Margaret is one of the three divine voices that speak to Saint Joan. For more on this refer to Susan Butvin Sainato's chapter “Not Your Typical Knight: The Emerging On-Screen Defender,” in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. by Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2004), 133–146; and Peggy Maddox, *Portrayals of Joan of Arc in Film: From Historical Joan to Her Mythological Daughters* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

³⁴ Larson, “Three Thirteenth-Century Lives,” 686.

³⁵ Sherry L. Reames, “Margaret of Antioch, Introduction,” in *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, ed. Sherry L. Reames (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003)

<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/reames-middle-english-legends-of-women-saints-margaret-of-antioch-introduction>.

invisible-to-visible, the inherent *power* of the heroine—either that of God’s divine grace in the virgin martyr legend and the supernatural prowess of The Slayer in *Buffy*—by not only pain and suffering, but also the *contra naturam* rapid healing powers.³⁶ And just because one heals rapidly does not negate the presence of pain, nor the desire to experience pain; Buffy and Margaret ultimately call upon pain *willingly*.³⁷ While Buffy challenges her position as savior, abandoning her post as Slayer more than once she always returns because it is the right thing to do, underlining that courage and heroism is not the absence of fear or doubt but rather the assessment and acceptance that something else is more important. Regardless the amount of torment, both Buffy and Margaret put themselves in the line of fire, their pain experienced of their own free will even despite any misgivings or trepidations. The withstanding of pain and suffering, however gracefully, in both narratives is one of the main aspects of these figures’ heroism.

The comparison of two key scenes from *Buffy* articulate this—one from the Season 1 Finale “Prophecy Girl” after Buffy learns about the prophecy of her death within the Pergamum Codex; and the second from the tenth episode of Season 7, “Bring on the Night,” that occurs after Buffy faces her first Turak-Han vampire and is nearly killed:

BUFFY. They say how [The Master] is going to kill me? Do you think it’ll hurt? . . . I’ve got a way around it. I quit . . . I’m making it that simple. I quit. I resign. I’m fired! You can find someone else to stop the Master from taking over . . . I don’t care! . . . I don’t care . . . Giles, I’m sixteen years-old . . . I don’t want to die.³⁸

BUFFY. I’m beyond tired. I’m beyond scared. I’m standing on the mouth of Hell, and it is going to swallow me whole. And it’ll choke on me . . . I’m done waiting.³⁹

³⁶ The Slayer’s power, it is revealed, derives from a prehistoric ritual wherein an innocent young woman was filled with the “essence of the demon.” This then makes Buffy’s power, in source, demonic, but it is her actions that make her sacred. Interestingly, the truth behind Buffy’s Slayer essence is revealed in the episode directly before “Storyteller,” “Get It Done.”

³⁷ The most undeniable proof that Margaret experiences pain throughout her suffering comes from the early thirteenth-century Katherine Group Seinte Margarete: “Lord, protect me and have mercy on me; lighten my suffering and heal my wounds so it *may not appear, or show on my face, that I feel any pain*.” This desire not to express discomfort denies the concept of “holy anesthesia” and delightful endurance, instead underscoring Margaret’s willing submission of her body to every kind of suffering. See Bella Millet and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “Saint Margaret,” *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Bella Millet and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 44-85, 53. Emphasis mine.

³⁸ “Prophecy Girl,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 1 Episode 12, directed by Joss Whedon, aired June 2, 1997 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

³⁹ “Bring on the Night,” *Buffy*, DVD.

The character development is profound. Buffy not only grows into her role as protector and Slayer, but as a leader. And not just any leader, a leader of young girls who will encounter battle at the Mouth of Hell, to near certain death—willingly. If Margaret is seen as a model of chastity, virtue, and proper way of living, then Buffy is a modern example of a courageous moral exemplar, a secular saint. She willingly suffers for others, making the difficult, often painful, and sometimes fatal decisions. Buffy recalls Andrew's commentary at the end of "Storyteller": she fights like a woman who "fights like fighting IS her life. It is the air she breathes, and she knows she will win because there is no alternative."⁴⁰ The battle, no matter how painful, is worth fighting.

In conclusion, by turning to hagiography to read *Buffy*, the overlaps between two seemingly disparate topics demonstrates how they can mutually inform one another by exploring the perpetuation of themes such as pain, sacrifice, and sanctity. In fact, the reading of popular medieval "superheroes" alongside modern media, and vice-versa, highlights surprising continuities between these two periods in terms of perception, selfhood, and purpose. Despite hagiography's religious roots, it is an amazingly versatile genre which served the purpose of both edification and entertainment, the exact same words Andrew uses to describe the purpose of his documentary project.⁴¹ The storytelling approach may be pulpy, but that does not mean it is not a valuable record, an important document for the ages.

⁴⁰ "Storyteller," *Buffy*, DVD.

⁴¹ Juliana Dresvina, "How to Train Your Dragon (and Become a Saint)—the Medieval Way," The British Academy (Blog), published June 20, 2016, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/how-to-train-your-dragon/>.