Being Her/She in “Who Are You?”

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This paper analyses “Who Are You?”, episode sixteen of the fourth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), written and directed by Joss Whedon, the creator of the series. The analysis will focus on the way the formal organisation of the episode explores issues of identity. My aim is to contribute to the detailed study of singular episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* while contextualising them within the whole series. Rhonda Wilcox’s recent book, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”*, ¹ is a relevant work within the remit of this study, but the lack of interest in this kind of research is frequent in television studies. We may say that the field is still trying to accept the validity of different approaches and is trying to free itself from the dichotomy of contextual and textual studies — that is, the studies that revolve around institution and audience, and those that concentrate on programmes.

At the end of the previous episode, “This Year’s Girl” (4.15), Faith (Eliza Dushku) and Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) switch bodies, which means that this fact is known from the beginning of “Who Are You?” There is no mystery in this sense and therefore the episode becomes a character study. These two episodes have been mainly interpreted as an important stage in Faith’s moral journey. This moment in Buffy and Faith’s relationship is crucial and its immediate effects are further explored in two subsequent episodes of *Angel* (1999-2004): “Five by Five” (1.18), and especially “Sanctuary” (1.19), in which Buffy goes to L.A. seeking revenge. While this dimension is undeniable, the episode cannot be reduced to this narrative purpose. It also investigates the notion of swap, examines the idea of division, and explores concepts of identification.

**Exchange**

Buffy is in Faith and Faith is in Buffy, but they are not in the same situation. The first has to learn how to imitate: the vessel’s appearance is not enough as a disguise, she

has to learn how to act and talk like Buffy in front of mirrors and for her friends. The second is trapped and does not accept the mask that has been imposed on her. This does not happen by accident. It is part of Faith’s plan. Her desire to disappear can be linked to her wish for self-annihilation that is confirmed in the following episodes of *Angel*.

There are two point-of-view (POV) shots throughout the episode and they are of Buffy in Faith’s body or Faith-as-Buffy (Dushku).² This goes against a conclusion that seems obvious: that because Buffy-as-Faith has more screen time, the episode is more interested in her. This is certainly one of the reasons why “Who Are You?” has been chiefly read within Faith’s narrative arc. The POV shots also coincide with two moments when Faith-as-Buffy’s perception is blurry: first, when the paramedics take her to the ambulance at the beginning and, later, when she is recovering her consciousness in a police car. These images that represent her subjective perspective demonstrate how Faith-as-Buffy is clearly Buffy. Additionally, her body expresses Buffy’s subjectivity as her friends might recognise it. Later in the episode, it is hardly believable that Giles does not want to believe her, since her hand gestures, facial expression, body posture, and way of talking reveal that she is, in fact, Buffy.

On the other hand, Buffy-as-Faith (Gellar) has an opaque presence that masks her true identity even from herself. A representation of her subjectivity, comparable to the POV shots, materialises when she stabs Willow (Alyson Hannigan) with a knife. Willow seems to suspect that something is wrong when she concentrates on Buffy-as-Faith’s eyes — and it is worth remembering that Faith-as-Buffy tells Giles to recognise her by the eyes like she recognised him when he was transformed into a demon in “A New Man” (4.12). In this case, there are no POV shots and the moment expresses an impulsive thought of physical action and violence. Joss Whedon has revealed that the actresses watched videos of each other extensively and tried to ape each other’s move-

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² I use this terminology, “Faith-as-Buffy”, that is, the image we see as the character that it represents, because I am accepting the playing rules of the episode. Eliza Dushku, the actress who usually plays Faith, is credited as Buffy.
ments without falling into parody. At the same time, the fiction demanded something different from a precise imitation. It demanded that they embodied two distinct ways of being: Dushku explores interiority as Buffy whereas Gellar explores exteriority as Faith. We see Faith-as-Buffy’s perception of reality through the POV shots. In contrast, we see the stabbing of Willow through images that are the product of an imagination fuelled by anger, which shows a split between what is gathered by the senses and what is imagined in Buffy-as-Faith’s mind.

**Split**

For all the uneasiness and awkwardness that the characters experience, the question raised by the title does not have a simple or direct answer. Who are they? The initial difference between these two girls gives place to a reflection on being in which the divergence between such terms as freedom/duty, woman slayer, and individual/collaborative becomes indiscernible. We may associate the first terms with Faith and the second with Buffy, but once they fill in the role of each other — voluntary for Faith and forced for Buffy — they are given access not simply to a new life, but indeed to a new outlook.

The concept of switching bodies points towards a dualist conception of life, a split between body and soul, given that the latter as a non-physical entity can migrate from one container to another. In this sense, the body as an image of being seems to be discarded. Yet this not exactly true. As mentioned before, it is easy to identify Buffy by observing Faith’s body with attention. At the same time, Faith demonstrates how important it is for her that the body expresses her dark and troubled soul — and so she makes Buffy’s body her own. Faith knows that her body is not the one that she sees in the mirror. She made a conscious choice, even if she was not fully aware of its consequences: she adjusts to it and tries to transform it, as the sequence with Willow shows. This transformation is not presented as contrived. Buffy’s body appears dif-
ferent, but not so different that her friends and boyfriend find it odd. In Faith-as-Buffy’s case, it is more about acceptance. She considers this condition as transitory and makes no effort to change her appearance to match who she really is.

By the end of the episode, the split (made clear by the imaginary stabbing of Willow) has turned Faith into someone who cannot deal with her own image. In the final confrontation with Buffy-as-Faith, she hits her as a form of self-punishment. Her identity is literally out of herself, she sees herself in the other body, she sees herself as *an other*. The image of her body is a reflected image that she wants to destroy — a *specular image*, even though there is no real mirror in the scene.

**Mirror**

Throughout seven seasons, the figure of the slayer is a warrior burdened by her uniqueness as well as a broad image of femininity, leading to a constant negotiation of morality and to a permanent discussion of identity *as connected matters*. Never was this connection as expressive as in this episode. Consider the scene when Buffy-as-Faith argues with herself in front of a bathroom mirror. There is a moment when the laughter is not synchronised with the image, once again evoking the dissociative nature of Buffy-as-Faith’s psyche. In contrast, Faith-as-Buffy is a very physical being repeatedly forced into a state of unconsciousness, in which she is not in control. The scene in front of the mirror may be considered an homage to a similar scene in *Taxi Driver* (1976), directed by Martin Scorsese. This episode has no audio commentary by Joss Whedon, but he would probably confirm this idea. However, it is too hasty to think that this inspiration gives any insight into the specifics of the scene. In the film, Travis (Robert De Niro) addresses an imaginary interlocutor, but he recognises the image in the mirror as his own and as he wants it to be. It is true that in both cases we see a character who is trying to adopt a new personality, but in “Who Are You?” the other person
exists and it becomes clear that Faith sees Buffy as a kind of repressive moral agent when she says: “You can’t do that, it’s wrong. You can’t do that, because it’s naughty. Because it’s wrong.”

A major difference between the two scenes is that in the series we never see the actor and his reflection sharing the same shot. Buffy-as-Faith is filmed saying these words, touching her skin, making a face to the camera, and the frontal view of the camera is maintained in spite of the fact that there are numerous cuts. We may construe this as a way of showing her from behind the mirror or of showing her reflection on the mirror surface. Perhaps this ambiguity is intentional. Since we do not see the reflection and the body as separate, but as either one or the other, she is not presented as performing to herself like Travis, but to us — which calls attention to the centrality of performance not as something opposed to authenticity, but as a transformative and learning process that always has an audience. Is not Buffy the Vampire Slayer the story of a girl who learns how to fulfil a role, the role of the slayer? Of course she interprets and changes the characteristics of this role in the last season, but that is exactly what an actor does. What is relevant is how what seems like an imposition at first — under the solemn rationale that it is her destiny — becomes a component of who she is. The same may be said about Faith, another slayer. In the end of the episode, in the church where she is facing vampires, Buffy-as-Faith repeats the same sentence that she said unconvincingly in front of the mirror: “Because it’s wrong.” Only this time she means what she says.

Conclusion: Being

My analysis has demonstrated that “Who Are You?” cannot be simply read as a decisive chapter in Faith’s moral journey with little interest in Buffy. In a way, this is an episode where each of them experience the emotions of being. Faith faces the enjoy-
ment and the dread of finding her place. Buffy deals with the discomfort and the novelty of being a victim — which is why Buffy tells Faith later in “Sanctuary”: “I’ve lost battles before, but nobody else has ever made me a victim.”

The act of performing is at the centre of this episode. In fact, the series displays a recurrent interest in this topic, from “Once More, with Feeling” to “Tabula Rasa” (6.08). In this episode, this theme is linked with an inquiry on identity that is developed throughout season four. A scene that seems so narratively functional as the one where Adam (George Hertzberg) convinces the vampires to attack the church ends up emphasising the character’s troubled identity as a composite creature. The relation between performance and identity in “Who Are You?” defines identity as a construct, something that is not stable, not a given, and that is constantly negotiated with others and ourselves — like it is between Buffy and Faith, and Faith and Buffy.