

All Too Human: Xander Harris and the Embodiment of the Fully Human

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Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Haven't we heard enough about this show? After all, it was cancelled over 10 years ago. Plus, it is the most studied series in the history of television. There are academic books, articles, and of course, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*. Scholars examined power, law and ethics, familial relations, organizational types, aesthetics, feminisms, genders, and the love and the lore. Scholars analyzed Buffy – the character – to death (Buttsworth; Early; Karras). Same with Spike (Abbott, "From"; Herrmann; Wilcox). Willow receives kudos (Battis; McAvan; Pateman), as does Angel (Abbott, "Reading"; Riley, 2009). And yet here we are writing another piece on *BtVS*. As our heroine might say, "*Hmm, new?!*"

To this we have a one-word answer: Xander. Underappreciated. Overlooked. Understudied. This general neglect – if one were to really contemplate it – is astounding, considering Alexander LaVelle Harris (portrayed by Nicholas Brendon) goes unseen only in the episode "Conversations with Dead People" during the seven-year run of *BtVS*. Only Buffy and Willow appeared in every episode. Xander's importance is also made credible when one considers the words of *BtVS* producer Fran Kuzui: "You can educate your daughters to be Slayers, but you also have to educate your sons to be Xanders" (quoted in Jowett, para. 1). So yes, another piece on *BtVS*, concentrating on Xander, who "happens to have a lot to offer" ("The Zeppo").

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Why this neglect of such an important character? We'll suggest a few reasons. First, the idea of *BtVS* began with Whedon's decision to challenge the stereotypical horror genre.

I'd seen a lot of horror movies which I'd loved very much, with blonde girls getting themselves killed in dark alleys and I just germinated this idea about how much I'd like to see a blonde girl go into a dark alley, get attacked by a big monster and then kill it!" (Whedon, "Becoming")

This basis for the show did two things. In *Buffy*, Whedon created a positive feminist vision, a woman empowered, a woman who – despite the internal doubts and the external threats – achieved and triumphed in what is typically the heroic male role (Craig-Snell). Fans and academics took to *Buffy* as a positive female role model. From the beginning, Whedon wrote strong female characters (*Buffy*, Willow, Darla, Faith, et al) in a positively pro-feminist show where men like Xander are forced to step out of the spotlight and fight side-by-side with their female counterparts. The second thing Whedon did with *BtVS* was conflate our conceptions of good and evil. Not all seemingly "good guys" were good; and not all seemingly "bad guys" were bad. The Watcher's Council and Angel are examples of each, respectively (Braun). Again, this genre-bending would be taken up by fans and academics, but this can often overshadow characters like Xander whose journey does not take dramatic shifts between good and evil.

Another reason Xander is overlooked is because he, out of all the major characters, is the one who is, to use Nietzsche's title, "All Too Human." He has none of the preternatural skill that the slayers – *Buffy* or Faith or Kendra – have in their positions of The Chosen One(s). He doesn't have the wisdom, knowledge, or experience that Giles has as Watcher. Unlike early Willow, he is not a computer guru. Unlike later Willow or Tara, he doesn't develop skills in the magicks. He's not a super

being like Angel or Spike. He's not a thousand year old former demon, like Anya. Nor does he, despite becoming a soldier in "Halloween," have intensive military training a la Riley.

Finally, the other reason for the exclusion of Xander in most *BtVS* scholarship is that unlike many of the other characters on the show, Xander doesn't appear to go on a major quest. Buffy, for example, finally realizes that life is worth living, and importantly, that her power can be shared. Buffy learns the power of community (Rambo). Willow learns magic, goes dark, and comes back. Hers is a story of redemption (Pateman). Angel's "helping the helpless" is also a story of redemption, as he attempts to make up for the evil he did as Angelus (Wilson). Spike goes from bloody awful poet, to "Big Bad," to trickster, to champion (Herrmann). Faith changes dramatically, falling from grace, choosing evil, and being restored (Foster). Even Giles rediscovers his place and sense of worth, after being fired from his position as Buffy's Watcher by the Council (Rambo). In each of these characters the changes are dramatic. Comparatively, Xander appears to remain the same.

This, of course, is a major error. By comparing Xander to the more obviously evolving characters, scholars have often neglected to examine Xander in his own right. As such he is often rendered as static and never-changing. He's considered "the not-too-bright but loyal boy next door" (Weldes & Rowley 4), "bumbling" (Buttsworth 187), "clumsy" (Sheffield 3), "underachieving" (Schlozman 51), and "physically uncoordinated" (Greene & Yuen 10). "Xander is useless both as combatant and researcher" (Schlozman 2000), with "no remarkable personal skills" (Greene & Yuen 10), reduced to "a diversionary punch-bag" (Simkin 17), who often needs rescuing (Allesio). Xander is "the only character with no true power" (Camron 5). And then there is this backhanded compliment: "That is not to say Xander is completely useless" (Eggertsson 10).

When scholars do examine Xander, they generally concentrate on a few relatively inane throw-away items. The first is his "sardonic wit," and

his sarcasm to hide his feelings of inferiority (Schlozman 51). Scholars mention his unusual use of language, for example, when he uses “crayon-break-y” during his attempt to reconnect the grieving world-destroy-y Willow with her humanity in the Season 6 climax (Adams; Mandala). Likewise Xander’s dating choices – from his love-disdain relationship with Cordelia, to the Incan Mummy, to the praying-mantis teacher – are examined and held up as examples of his geek-nerd ineptitude (Jowett). Xander constantly gets put upon. He acquires the multiple diseases, including syphilis (“Pangs”). He gets split into two Xanders: one competent, one not (“The Replacement”). He gets into a ridiculous slap fight with Harmony (“The Initiative”). His two attempts to use magic go horribly and hilariously wrong (“Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered”; “Once More With Feeling”). Given this, it is easy to dismiss Xander as a useless dateless nerd (“Beneath You”; “The Zeppo”).

When examined from a gendered perspective Xander is often portrayed and coded as feminine. As Karras noted, “Xander [is] the feminized product of feminism” (20). He’s described as “Buffy’s handmaiden” (Pender 36) and as her “helpmeet” (Early 19). He is fighting for his “embattled masculinity” (Buttsworth 187) and viewed as “an archetype of a new 1990s embattled masculinity” shadow boxing with “machismo stereotypes” (Pender 39). He’s an example of the anxiety-laden, disrupted, and dislocated “new man” (Simkin). Through such analysis, Xander is set up as a straw man and a foible for feminist scholarship, supposedly weak and inept compared to the powerful female characters, all of whom have their own faults, failures, and blind spots. In effect, these types of feminist analysis do *exactly* what feminist scholarship is working against: the essentialization of gender.

“Not completely useless” is an incongruous way to talk about such an essential character. Let’s look at the *facts*. Much is made about Xander’s saying, “We saved the world” to which Willow retorts, “We changed the world” in the series finale (Brannon). Yes, they changed the world.

However, Xander *did* in fact save the world multiple times. In “Grave” his love saved the world from Dark Willow. In “The Zeppo” he saved the world by saving his friends who were oblivious to the real danger. Xander came up with the idea to use the rocket launcher in “Innocence.” He pushed Buffy out of the way and got himself “Toth’d”: split into two in “The Replacement.” He staked his best friend Jesse when he realized he could not save him (“The Harvest”). In “Prophecy Girl,” it was Xander – not the supposed hero and love of her life Angel – who saved Buffy after The Master left her dead in a puddle. And without Buffy, we’d *all* surely be dead via some apocalypse or another. Xander was consistently willing to sacrifice himself for his friends – and us – throughout the series.

When Xander is spoken of in positive terms, he’s called a “charming and loyal fellow” (Early 14), “witty” (Buttworth 187), Buffy’s “right-hand man” (Burr & Jarvis, 277), “sharp” (Schlozman 51), sensitive (Sherman, 2004), socially intelligent and compassionate, “able to observe others and to demonstrate his understanding of, and concern for, how they feel” (Stuart 4). Many of these positive terms foreground Xander as the heart of The Scoobies (Bradney; Sherman; Weldes & Rowley). Much of this is based upon the gang’s synergistic final confrontation with Adam in Season 4, where each member plays a specific role. Buffy (the hand), Giles (the head), Xander (the heart), and Willow (the spirit), merge to become überBuffy, who defeats the postmodern Prometheus (“Primeval”). However, this extrapolation leaves us wanting. Surely there’s more to Xander than this relatively simplistic analysis.

We examine the evolution of Xander over the duration of *BtVS*, and how his character’s depiction of masculinity itself is an interrogation of the rhetorics and discourses of masculinity. According to Stabile, since the September 11, 2001 attacks characterizations of masculine heroes have seen a resurgence. The return of superhero tales of comic book characters like Superman, Spiderman, or the aptly named television series *Heroes* is a reflection of a trend toward the stories of men that “represent a desire for

secular saviors, for men whose powers do not come from god, but are nonetheless sufficient to the task of saving the world from some kind of apocalypse” (87). Stabile argues that the gendered desire for masculine heroes is a response to the perception that feelings of insecurity and fear are “feminine.” In a time where fear is used as a common political tactic (Altheide; Robin; Stabile), one of the results of that strategy is a reinvigoration of rhetorics that characterize safety and security as an outgrowth of a masculine approach to the world. How Whedon’s depiction of Buffy has undermined the connection between being male and saving the world has been widely recognized, but *BtVS* does more than just replace a masculine male hero with a masculine female one (Buttsworth). Instead, we get to see Buffy as a leader of a gang of “Scoobies,” each of whom is equally dedicated to saving the world from successive apocalypses.

As one of the “Scoobies,” Xander is a male character who struggles with being a man in a world where being “the man” is not an option. Xander Harris presents us with a depiction of masculinity that must manage how cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity are linked to discourses of power and individuality. Gender scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to the differences between the discursive use of masculinity and the many different ways of being a man. Much like the powers possessed by superheroes, Connell argued that masculinity “is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same” (76). The more preferable term, “masculinities,” evolved to account for the ways in which what it means to be a man have shifted over time and to allow for space for different ways of being a man. Over time characterizations of what masculinity means have been adapted to social and cultural circumstances. However, those changes have also allowed it to maintain its privileged place in what Connell describes as “a massive structure of social relations” (65).

Connell and Bourdieu have similar perspectives on the interconnection between gender and social values, examining the ways in which the rhetorics of masculinity are conflated with a natural world order. Bourdieu claims,

The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it. The social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded. (9)

Bourdieu's observations about the connection between masculine ideologies and patriarchy are echoed in Connell's observations about masculinity as social phenomenon. Connell believes that the male body itself acts as a justification for masculine ideologies. According to Connell, "gender politics is an embodied-social politics" and perspectives on the body treat masculinity as the natural outgrowth of the existence of males in relation to females (66). Similarly, Bourdieu asserts the rhetoric of modern masculinity is based on the perception of "the active male and the passive female" in sexual relations, which has influenced social practice (21).

Similarly, in her work on the intersection of masculinity and war, Cohn discusses a distinction between "gendered individuals" and "gendered discourses" (228–229). She argues that gender refers to "a symbolic system, a central organizing discourse of culture, one that not only shapes how we experience and understand ourselves as men and women, but that also interweaves with other discourses and shapes *them*" (229, emphasis in original). According to Cohn, gendered discourses employ a series of binaries that are largely based on perceptions of value. Cohn claims that gendered discourses structure talk about events or actions using masculine terms to denote positive or active characteristics

and feminine terms for characteristics discussed as negative or passive. Cohn is careful to point out that her observations are not a reflection of a biological phenomenon, but a discursive phenomenon that couches discussions of power and influence in gendered terminology. Gendered discourse is a way of discussing issues such as war, which is the focus of Cohn's work, using terminology that perpetuates what she calls a "constellation of meanings that a given culture assigns to biological sex differences" (228).

Additionally, in an historical perspective on the evolution of masculinity in the U.S., Rotundo connected that belief to both masculinity and the development of the nation as a whole:

The communal form of manhood lingered on through the first decades of the nineteenth century, but it was eclipsed by a *self-made manhood* which had begun to grow in the late eighteenth century. The new manhood emerged as part of a broader series of changes: the birth of republican government, the spread of a market economy, the concomitant growth of the middle class itself. At the root of these changes was an economic and a political life based on the free play of individual interests. (3, emphasis in original)

Rotundo depicts this type of individualism as an outgrowth of a new manhood, but what must also be acknowledged is how that masculinized structure has evolved beyond just a standard for manhood. Similarly to Rotundo, Thio observed that "the American ideology of success consists of two related social functions. It encourages the populace (1) to raise their level of aspirations and (2) to believe in the established society as one with abundant opportunities for all citizens" (381).

While often discussed as hegemonic masculinity, the truly hegemonic feature of masculine ideologies is their ability to masquerade as natural or generalizable other ideologies. For example, depictions of those who have

lived “the American Dream” often incorporate stereotypically masculine characteristics such as distinction from others and public success as core components of their narratives. These stories interweave traditionally masculine characteristics with social aspirations that require us to view the dream as a masculine ideology that masquerades as social philosophy. Tales of heroes who succeed by single handedly overcoming obstacles and realizing individualized dreams have become *the* standard for recounting the successes of Americans both male and female, but those tales reflect *a* standard for success that is largely based in masculinity.

One of the specific arenas where gendered discourses and rhetoric impact daily existence is the construed difference between the public and private spheres of life (Ashcraft & Flores). The public realm is viewed as the site of work, politics and economics, and is reified as masculine. The private sphere is linked to intimacy, emotion, and personal interests and reified as feminine. The self-made man and the lone hero are rhetorically and discursively gendered not only as masculine, but simultaneously situated within the public sphere. Cold War hero Rambo and post 9-11 Jack Bauer serve as exemplars of this rhetorical and discursive stylization of character. With few exceptions, neither have particularly interesting private (re: gendered feminine) moments.

Xander Harris, however, troubles the stereotypical public-private dichotomy. During the early seasons of the show his public persona is one of ineptitude, verbal dexterity, and geekdom. He’s picked on by Sunnydale High’s more publicly “masculine” athletes and abused by Cordelia and her merry band of überfeminine snobs. While in public, Xander is “The Zeppo,” where he excels is within the private and supposedly feminine sphere of the Scoobies. How? Stuart correctly noted Xander possesses emotional intelligence, but this attribute goes relatively unexamined. Emotional intelligence is the “ability to perceive emotion, integrate emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions to promote personal growth” (Salovey & Mayer 185).

The emotionally intelligent person is communicatively competent, able to appraise the verbal and nonverbal signifiers of their conversational partners, and interpret their emotional state (Eisenberg, Goodall & Trethewey). The emotionally intelligent individual uses their emotions to aid their problem-solving abilities, to temper others' emotions, as well as their own.

While obviously not perfect – none of our heroes are – Xander's communicatively-based emotional intelligence is often on full display in the show. He seems to consistently recall what Giles told him about Jessie: "Now you listen to me. Jesse is dead. You have to remember that when you see him you're not looking at your friend. You're looking at the thing that killed him" ("The Harvest"). It is Xander who reminds the Scoobies – who have developed emotional attachments to several preternatural beings – that these beings are, in fact, inherently evil ("Becoming, Pt. 1"). He consoles the inconsolable Willow when Oz leaves ("Something Blue"). He's the first to recognize Tara and Willow are "swinging with the Wiccan lifestyle" ("Family"). An exemplar of his emotional intelligence is in his confrontation with Buffy where he's seen the depth of Riley's love for her, and the mistake Buffy is about to make.

Xander: See, what I think, you got burned with Angel, then Riley shows up.

Buffy: I know the story, Xander.

Xander: But you missed the point. You shut down, Buffy. And you've been treating Riley like the rebound guy, when he's the one that comes along once in a lifetime. He's never held back with you. He's risked everything. And you're about to let him fly because you don't like ultimatums? If he's not the guy, if what he needs from you just isn't there, let him go. Break his heart, and make it a clean break. But if you really think you can love this guy, I'm

talking scary, messy, no-emotions-barred need, if you're ready for that, then think about what you're about to lose.

Buffy: Xander...

Xander: Run. ("Into the Woods")

Simultaneously, Xander realized the depth of his own love for Anya, as is revealed later in the same episode.

Eventually, Xander realizes his own power. "They'll never know how tough it is, Dawnie, to be the one who isn't chosen. To live so near to the spotlight and never step in it. But I know. I see more than anybody realizes because nobody's watching me" ("Potential"). It is his emotional intelligence – his ability to see and make connections in the private sphere – that discursively and rhetorically frames him as feminine, compared to what we normally perceive as masculine power, with its need to be actively in the spotlight and be seen. In fact, it is Caleb, the misogynist priest and right hand man of The First, who fully recognizes Xander's emotional intelligence – his seeing and knowing – as both his power and as a threat. "So, you're the one who sees everything? Let's see what we can do about that." And with that, Caleb gouges out Xander's left eye in one of the most gruesome scenes in the series ("Dirty Girls").

There is another way the rhetoric and discourse play into perceptions of Xander as unmasculine. As noted above, modern conceptions of masculinity intertwine the ideologies of the American Dream, self-made manhood, and individualism. These intertwined conceptions feed into and bring us face to face with that modern masculine model of "*homo economicus*": economic man. As Nelson noted,

"Economic man," the "agent" of the prototypical economic model, springs up fully formed, with preferences fully developed, and is fully active and self-contained. He has no childhood or old age, no

dependence on anyone, no responsibility for anyone but himself. The environment has no effect on him but rather is merely the passive material, presented as “constraints,” over which his rationality has play. He interacts in society without being influenced by society: his mode of interaction is through an ideal market in which prices form the only, and only necessary, form of communication. He is one pretty tough guy. (289)

The ideological scientism that underpins the conceptions of economic man and related formulations like the American Dream are supposedly gender neutral. However, economic rhetoric structures various conceptions in intriguing masculinist ways. Integral to this is the rhetoric of the professional “and the division of labor in modern society,” which separates and divides different kinds of – and attitudes toward – work (Cheney & Ashcraft 149). Similarly, success is configured with an emphasis on individual economic accumulation, consumption, and prestige. Likewise, it frames career success on a person’s upward trajectory within one organization or occupation, moving forward into positions with progressively more esteem (Bujold). However, these masculinist rhetorical and discursive constructs inform not only how we enact economic activity in our own lives, but how we judge others’ successes.

While his friends begin attending the University of California, Sunnydale, Xander ends his formal educational career once he graduates from Sunnydale High. “Educational career,” for example, is now its own rhetorical device, permitting judgments on those who do not desire or are unable to continue their educations and privileging those who do. An example will suffice as an exemplar of this type of judgment. Willow tells Xander:

You remember, you fail math, you flunk out of school, you end up being the guy at the pizza place that sweeps the floor and says, “Hey, kids, where’s the cool parties this weekend?” We’ve been through this. (“The Pack”)

Until Season 6, he works a number of low-prestige, low-wage jobs: bartender, protein bar salesman, ice cream truck driver. Worse yet, he lives in his parents’ basement, and is afraid he will remain there (“Restless”). Xander starts off and – even after he receives his promotion with the construction company, gets his own apartment, etc. – remains working-class. Through the rhetoric of economics, the American Dream, professionalism, etc., and their “inherent” masculinity, Xander’s own masculinity is challenged. Due to the “strength of the masculine order” (Bourdieu 9) Xander finds himself lost, feels incompetent and tries to find ways to justify his “lack.” Xander, like others in the working-class, is shown through his experience of subordination to larger societal rhetoric that devalues their type of employment (Kuhn).

Equally as important as Xander’s struggles with education and employment are his struggles with how he is privately perceived both by others and by himself. According to Gramsci hegemonic power is not simply a form of oppression, it is a form of oppression that derives its power from the consent of the individuals being oppressed. Given that, it stands to reason that hegemonic masculinity can be found in the ways that masculinity is taken for granted. Throughout *BtVS*, we continually see Xander grappling with how his actions will influence how others see him as a “man.” Particularly early on in *BtVS*, Xander’s character is shown struggling with what being a member of the Scoobies says about his “manhood.” In the second episode of *BtVS*, “The Harvest,” Buffy is faced with pursuing the vampire Luke in the graveyard to save Jesse. When Xander offers to “saddle-up” and fight alongside Buffy, he is rebuked by her. His response: “I’m inadequate. That’s fine. I’m less than a man.” The fourth episode, “Teacher’s Pet,” opens with Xander’s daydream about

saving a fawning and helpless Buffy from a dangerous vampire and continues with other guys questioning his sexual prowess at the Bronze. From the very beginning, Xander's insecurities are born out of how he perceives he is being judged by others.

These insecurities plague him throughout the series. In the episode "Grave," we see Xander leading Dawn, Jonathan, and Andrew out of danger from a turned-evil Willow while his other friends are engaged in a superpower fueled epic struggle. During their escape attempt, Dawn challenges Xander pushing him to reenter the fray, "You know if Spike were here, he'd go back and fight." Xander lashes out at Dawn, revealing the secret that Spike attempted to rape Buffy. Out of his own insecurities about his role in battle, Xander betrays Buffy's trust. It is a moment of weakness born out of a perception that he is not valuable. However, his actions *are* a contribution to the team and, as we will see, it is *his* love and concern that saves them all.

As we have noted, love is an all too complicated topic for Xander. Whether he is dealing with his boyish crush on Buffy, cheating on Cordelia with his best friend, or being tormented by one of the many demons who become the focus of his affections, Xander struggles with the role of love in his life. By far, the most complicated of Xander's love stories is his relationship with the former vengeance demon Anya (a.k.a., Aud or Anyanka). In many ways, Xander and Anya's relationship is crafted out of complimentary insecurities. Both characters feel out of place and seem to need to be needed. However, as we learn in "Once More with Feeling," their insecurities and their unwillingness to confront them would begin to undermine their relationship. Eventually, a man seeking revenge on Anyanka – for turning him into a demon – twists Xander's fears about marriage into a "nightmare vision of his future." Up to this point in his relationship with Anya, Xander's followed the path of gendered ideology and American masculinity which states that by marrying Anya, he could be more of a man in a traditional sense: good job, nice place to live, a

wife, and in the visions, a couple of children. However, following this ideological path was not enough to lift the burden of the vision he saw, nor the insecurities he felt, particularly as he watched his parents' unhappy marriage. This experience overwhelmed Xander and – even after the demon's plot was revealed – he walked away from Anya on their wedding day.

As other scholars have noted (Camron, 2007; Kociemba, 2011; Stevenson, 2003), one of the main points where the audience is presented with Xander confronting his insecurities is in the season three episode "The Zeppo." According to Kociemba (2011) in "The Zeppo" Xander "must face his real foes in this episode: his friends and his own low self-esteem" (86). Xander's struggles with his own masculinity, a masculinity that doesn't fit the supposedly natural and taken-for-granted definition of what it means to be a man in the everyday rhetoric and discourses which permeate the foundation of our society. Xander is more than a simple *example* of "embattled masculinity." He is the *embodied* interrogation of society's masculine rhetoric and discourses.

It is not until Season 7, in the episode "Potential," where we see Xander articulating his own place as a Scoobie that is distinct from his own gendered expectations. While comforting Dawn after she realized she is not a potential slayer, Xander makes an important distinction between special and extraordinary. Special is reserved for slayers, ensouled vampires, witches, and werewolves. It is a power derived from unique abilities and being chosen. Quite simply, to be "chosen" is to be appointed and anointed by something external. To be extraordinary, however, is not a calling: it is an existential choice. It is the choice to do the research and fix the windows while the special do the fighting. It is the choice to run into the fray, with nothing but one's simply human self. It is the choice to commit one's self to the people and ideas one cares about (Frankfurt). It is a distinction Xander is uniquely qualified to assess given his position as the person who watched his friends get "more and more powerful" for

seven years. After hearing Xander's monologue, Dawn turns to Xander and says, "Maybe that's your power. Seeing. Knowing." to which Xander responds, "Maybe it is. Maybe I should get a cape." In this moment, Xander's signature wit has been molded into a person who fits within a group through his own choice. Importantly, Xander shares this moment and this common bond with Dawn, a bond created by their shared humanity regardless of their sex.

Conclusion

In his essay about Xander's character, Camron writes that "attempts to pin a generic gender role on any of these characters does them a disservice, because, as in reality, what lies beneath the surface is more complicated" (15). We agree, but we find it equally as important to point out that this statement is true of any of us "all too humans." The conflation of gender and discourses of power often leaves both men and women grappling with their own personal subjective struggles. For this reason, what we see with the character of Xander Harris is the conflict that arises when a social conception comes into conflict with a personal identity. Xander's struggle in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is about discovering a personal identity not tied to a masculinity that is defined by individual power. It is a quest of self discovery where a person can both stand alone as an individual actor and simultaneously function as a member of a group without those two ideas coming into conflict. By becoming a man who can be both masculine and feminine, he is defined by neither. Thus we can see him, more than any other character, not struggling with a destiny or a past, but instead struggling with what it means to be a person in a culture that conflates gender with power.

The ease with which critics can point to both feminine and masculine traits in Xander's character is what makes him so compelling. Certainly the struggles he is having can be seen in other characters, such as Buffy,

who struggles with a desire to be one of the girls, but Xander's primary journey is grappling with the relationship between social conceptions of manhood and his own place as a person in a community. In Stevenson's important chapter on the role of the quest for self in *BtVS*, he entitles his section about Xander "Xander Harris: Power and Weakness" (96), writing about a character who "wants to belong, wants to contribute to the group in a meaningful way" (97). What stands out is the word "meaningful" and its relationship to gendered preconceptions of what it means to be a man. If the only way to be a man is to fight the "Big Bad" or to kill the demon, then Xander is decidedly not a man. Consequently, Xander most often questions himself and his manhood in those instances where he imposes these "masculine" criteria upon himself. However, while being male is a biological determination, what we learn from Xander is that being *human* in the face of terrible danger and seemingly insurmountable obstacles is his meaningful contribution. It is strength accompanied by the presence of weakness, bravery with the acknowledgement of fear, and individuality with the understanding of how his skills allow him to contribute to the group that make Xander Harris a human hero.

As we find out in the Season 8 and 9 graphic novels that continue *BtVS* beyond the seven seasons on television, there is much more for Xander beyond his time at the Hellmouth. He becomes a leader in his own right. He becomes a watcher, even though he shuns this title, and finds love with none other than Dawn. It is, with a typical Whedon twist, a BIG love. His journey continues on in the pages of the graphic novels and only reinforces the journey he took while still on the small screen. Xander transcends the either-or dichotomy of the masculine and feminine by acting fully within the auspices of both, and by doing so embraces and exemplifies the fully all too human.

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