

## **Evan Hayles Gledhill: An Unsuitable Job for a Woman: Emotional Labour and Heroism in the Work of Joss Whedon**

Heroism is depicted as an emotionally, as well as physically, demanding calling in American media, particularly in fictions about superheroes. The heroes, and their support team or 'sidekicks' if they are blessed with such, must manage the grief of loss, the pain of trauma, even the fear of death - their own, and others'. This process is 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983), expected and yet unremunerated and poorly supported in real workplaces as well as fictional teams. Since Hochschild's naming of the process, there has been much interest in and exploration of gendered expectations around emotional labour, and its feminine associations (Lutz 1996, Brooks and Devasahayam 2010). What is unusual about Joss Whedon's fictional worlds containing superpowered beings, and concomitant depictions of heroism, is the regularity with which it is men who undertake the 'caring' roles, and focus upon communication, team-building, and trauma recovery.

This paper explores the idea that a form of gender inversion is at play in these texts, where male characters are more likely to administrate and nurse than in comparable heroic fictions. This paper explores the 'emotional labour' performed by Xander Harris, Rupert Giles and Spike in Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2004), and Nick Fury, Phil Coulson and Clint Barton in the Avengers films (2012, 2015). Critical voices from within fan communities have accused Whedon of centring a mediocre white man as a 'Mary Sue' amongst more skilled or 'super' characters. In de-centering men's action and re-centering their emotion as a new model of heroic masculinity, is it the case that men have, in fact, retained the central position in the text that Whedon, as a self-proclaimed feminist, had hoped to subvert with his action heroines?

Lorna Jowett has suggested that in *Buffy* representation of masculinity 'struggles with a binary construction [...] old masculinity is macho, violent, strong, and monstrous, while new masculinity is "feminised"' (2005). As response to feminist critique that suggests binarism itself 'is an unhealthy patriarchal worldview', Marc Camron's exploration of gendered identity in *Buffy* suggests that 'removing the binary would place the show so far into the realm of unreality it could no longer be effective' as a critique (2007). This essay works from the queer perspective that binaristic gender construction is an illusion *created by* the 'patriarchal worldview', and that in working within such a constraint Whedon does not make his own fictions more real, but shows us how unhelpful and divisive the fiction of normative gender really is—even if he doesn't always know this himself.