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'It's all my interpretation'

Reading Spike through the subcultural celebrity of James Marsters

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ABSTRACT This article considers how fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* interpret the character of Spike through meanings attached to actor James Marsters as a 'subcultural celebrity'. Work on TV's celebrity actors has stressed how character and actor can become semiotically blurred. Rather than approaching this blurring of textual and extra-textual connotations as an essential property of television celebrity, we analyse how Marsters displays situated agency by discursively constructing 'himself' in publicity materials as 'like Spike'. We then consider Marsters as a reader of *Buffy*. As a subcultural celebrity, we argue that Marsters is positioned between media producers and media fans, and therefore is able to offer up privileged interpretations of 'his' character, Spike, while simultaneously observing the symbolic power of producers' preferred readings. Marsters supports certain fan readings of Spike, acting as a textual poacher who nevertheless is 'inside' the texts of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*.

KEYWORDS *agency, Buffy, celebrity, fandom, subculture, television actors, textual poachers*

Introduction

The character of Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) and *Angel* has perhaps proved to be the most controversial figure of these shows, a highly polysemic character interpreted in many ways. Academics have considered Spike variously to be 'a comic hero' (Boyette, 2001), an archetype of 'courtly love' (Spah, 2002), a representation of 'hybridized gender' identity (Spicer, 2002), and a shadow for Buffy herself (Wilcox, 2002). Similarly, Spike fans have wrestled with interpretations of the character's actions, even reading and enjoying the texts of *BtVS* and *Angel* through a 'Spike filter' (Symonds, 2003). Websites such as *Bloody Awful Poets' Society*[1] and *Tabula Rasa*[2] have been set up to champion the character and argue for his 'redemption'. However, alongside these character-based web

pages, many Spike fans also declare themselves to be fans of the actor who plays him, James Marsters. A slew of sites praising Marsters have been created, from the *Official James Marsters Website* (www.james-marsters.com/home.html) to the *More Than Spike* site (www.morethanspike.com) which encourages recognition of Marsters' acting in other roles and his skills as a musician. One of the most conspicuous indications of fan adoration for Marsters was the placing of a full-page advert in the 24 March 2003 issue of *Variety* magazine, thanking the actor for his work on *BtVS* and his 'unflagging generosity to his fans'.

In this article, it is not our intention to explore the textual representation of the character of Spike, nor to simply examine the ways in which some Spike fans interpret the text of *BtVS* purely through their love of the character (see Symonds, 2003). Rather, we wish to consider the relationship between the character of Spike and the actor James Marsters, and the ways in which many Spike fans read the character as a result of 'secondary texts' (publicity, promotional interviews, etc.; Fiske, 1991) and extra-textual associations with the actor.

In a discussion of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Sara Gwenllian-Jones has argued that 'it is Xena, not [actress Lucy] Lawless, who is the focus of fans' engagement with the series and who is the main object of their fascinations and fantasies' (2000: 12). However, this is not clearly the case for Spike/Marsters. Fan engagement with the cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* may be via Spike – for at least one fan interpretive community – but both the character and the actor are subjects of fan adoration, fantasy and interest, as evidenced by the creation of slash fan fiction which focuses upon James Marsters the person, rather than upon the character of Spike (http://www.ficbitch.com/glitter/fic.html #JM). Also seeking to neatly and semiotically disentangle actors from 'their' characters, S. Elizabeth Bird (2003) appears to suggest that fans can be divided into two distinct groups – those who are interested in and discuss only on-screen characters, and those who are more interested in actors themselves. As she notes:

> [S]ome [fans] are deeply interested in the actors and spend most of their time discussing and speculating about their lives. These kinds of fans work hard to get close to the actors, sometimes using fan activities as a way to do that. (2003: 77)

It is our contention that Spike fans cannot be categorized readily in this 'either/or' way, and that many fans of Spike would also declare themselves to be fans of James Marsters. Appreciating the actor as well as the character tends to define their fandom. Given this, we will argue that it is James Marsters' status as a 'subcultural celebrity' which influences some fans' interpretations of the texts of *BtVS* and *Angel* and, more specifically, their readings of Spike. Crucial to this thinking about celebrity is how

'celebrities articulate agency and activity . . . [I]n their often "unique" . . . personalities and in their attempts to achieve autonomous status, one can see the work of active human agency' (Marshall, 1997: 242). However, we will argue that cult TV celebrities such as Marsters do not merely display the 'work of active . . . agency'. Rather, they indicate how celebrity agency needs to be viewed as *situated*: that is, Marsters' performances of 'active agency' constantly reflect upon his role within hierarchies of production and reflect his imagined and embodied relationships with fandom. Marsters' self-representations in publicity materials – and his readings of 'his' character, Spike – therefore need to be viewed as evidence of the 'TV text as . . .[a] site of contestation and struggle *within and between* professional practices' (Tulloch, 1990: 181). These differential practices themselves reflect the different 'cultural experience' and 'accumulated knowledge . . . of the show and . . . of their craft' brought to the table by TV's writers and actors (Tulloch and Moran, 1986: 10; see also Tulloch, 1999). Marsters never has a free hand, as it were, to perform his agency as a 'star' of *Buffy*. Although his performance of Spike may oppose readings made by executive producers Joss Whedon or Marti Noxon – given that 'writers and actors are audience[s] for each other' (Tulloch and Moran, 1986: 10), and given that each approaches 'the text' (of *BtVS*) differently by reading it through different forms of expertise – Marsters is required to negotiate constantly with other fan and production readings of Spike.

In the next section we will define more closely what is meant by the term 'subcultural celebrity', considering the ways in which James Marsters is constructed, through interviews and personal appearances, as both close to and distant from Spike/Marsters fans. Marsters positions himself as both ordinary (like the fans) and as extraordinary (but, crucially, resembling the character of Spike). Although these processes appear to replay general mechanisms of celebrity–fan identification and desire (Stacey, 1994), we will argue that Marsters' interventions in relation to fan interpretations of *BtVS* and *Angel* specifically mark him out as a subcultural celebrity, engaging with subcultural audience readings as well as with generalized industry practices of publicity and promotion.

Reading Marsters as 'himself' and as Spike

Typically, studies of stardom and celebrity have stipulated that celebrities are those people who are known almost universally within a given culture (Dyer, 1979) and that, by definition, they must have 'a high recognition index' (Bonner, 2003: 83). Therefore, stars/celebrities are said 'to constitute a mass-mediated and shared currency within contemporary consumer cultures' (Hills, 2003: 59). In contrast, the concept of 'subcultural celebrity' refers to 'mediated figures who are treated as famous only by and for their fan audiences' (Hills, 2003: 61). That is, actors who are only recognized and renowned within a small section of society,

providing 'restricted celebrity status . . . created by audience subcultures' (Hills, 2003: 61). James Marsters certainly qualifies as a 'subcultural celebrity' on these terms, as he is recognized and revered by many *BtVS* and *Angel* fans, but has little cultural currency as a celebrity outside those fandoms. Thus Marsters is someone whose celebrity status is recognized distinctively or solely by the 'relevant beholders' of specific fan cultures (Thornton, 1995: 11).

Generalized or ubiquitous celebrity has also been treated academically as a matter of constructed intimacy, whereby fans supposedly believe that they are familiar with media celebrities and are able to discern their 'authentic' qualities (Dyer, 1991). A repeated assumption marking such scholarly work has been that ubiquitous celebrity concerns the construction of closeness through distance (i.e. fans' perceptions of 'intimacy' are false or constructed; they are actually entirely separate from the celebrity's world and have no meaningful interaction with said celebrity). This idea has been expressed via terms such as 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance' (Thompson, 1995: 219) or 'parasocial interaction' (see Giles, 2000). 'Parasocial' interaction fails to be real or actual social interaction (see also Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004), while 'non-reciprocal intimacy' lacks the reciprocation of genuinely intimate relationships. Set against such pejorative notions, David Giles has pointed out that:

> When we form a parasocial relationship with a celebrity . . . we are, effectively, entering into a relationship with a living being with whom a bilateral relationship is a possibility . . . As opportunities increase for the public to become famous, so do opportunities for other points of contact between celebrities and the public . . . [W]hat happens when . . . interaction with celebrities goes beyond the parasocial – when the famous are forced to take notice of us[?] (2000: 129)

Subcultural celebrity is one such type of fan–celebrity interaction 'beyond [the] parasocial' (Giles, 2000: 128), as fans can (and very often do) encounter favoured celebrities at conventions, personal appearances and signings, etc. Rather than closeness being constructed through distance, then, such fan–celebrity encounters require a rather different management of the celebrity persona which we are terming 'distance through closeness'. Given that cult TV fans can be physically co-present with TV celebrities at conventions, perhaps even drinking with them in the hotel bar, or dancing with them at an organized 'disco', celebrity is not simply rendered 'authentic' through secondary texts in such circumstances. Instead, embodied celebrities are called upon to withhold aspects of their personal identities and lives, recuperating and sustaining codes of 'the private'. Thus, although fans can experience a closeness to such celebrities which is not often assumed or analysed in work on generalized media celebrity, they are required to respect the privacy of subcultural celebrities.

Hence such embodied fan–celebrity encounters carry pronounced ethical weight, with both parties being called upon to minutely and self-reflexively monitor their behaviour.

How do these issues play out in James Marsters/Spike fandom? For a long time details about Marsters' personal life were suppressed on fan message boards, keen to portray themselves as reverent and respectful of the actor's privacy. This lack of detail works to construct Marsters as an elusive figure, both charismatic and distant. For example, the *James Marsters Official Website* features the following disclaimer regarding Marsters' marital and family status:

> I'm neither willing to speculate about it nor discuss it with anyone. James' private life and family matters are nobody's business but his own. If there's certain aspects of it that he doesn't want to discuss in public, then we as fans should respect that.

Despite this attempted suppression of the actor's personal details, the sport of 'trying to ascertain his actual age, reputed to be around 40, is a perennial pastime on various *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* web sites' (Udovitch, 2002). Unusually, one older article names Marsters' former wife (Rowland, 1999), a rarity in more contemporary promotional material which circulates around the star. However, at a convention in Florida in 2003, James 'outed himself about his family situation at [the] Q&A . . . James came right out and said he had a seven-year-old son' (Chase820, 2003). Despite this, many fans insisted that Marsters' personal life should continue to be kept private and not discussed, regardless of his own disclosures. This was articulated as concern for the actor and his young child, while it was also argued that 'true fans' wouldn't care about the actor's marital status or age:

> [F]ans that come and go quickly might be turned off by the fact that he was married at one time and has a child, but his true fans aren't. I see it as a positive thing. He's just like the rest of us. (Lilaina, 2003)

This fan reluctance for knowledge concerning the actor's private life may occur also because fans are uneasy about accruing too much personal information regarding the actor, in case this threatens their readings of Marsters and Spike as inextricably linked. As John Ellis has noted:

> [T]he television performer appears in subsidiary forms of circulation (newspapers, magazines) mostly during the time that the series of performances is being broadcast. The result is a drastic reduction in the distance between the circulated image and the performance. The two become very much entangled, so that the performer's image is equated with that of the fictional role. (1982: 106)

This entwining of Marsters and Spike is developed in a plethora of secondary texts which circulate around *Buffy*. Marsters constructs himself as a hopeless romantic (much like Spike, the perpetual 'fool for love') and in response to the question 'Do you agree with your "Love's a bitch" speech?' in an online chat, he responds 'Yeah, totally! To be in love is to be vulnerable in that way, and people who try to protect themselves short-change their experience' (Wanda, 1999). In another interview, Marsters again blurs the boundary between himself and the character, acknowledging that 'The more Joss Whedon . . . finds out about my past, the closer the writing gets to me' (George, 2001). Statements such as this work to make Spike and James Marsters seem inextricable; indeed as John Fiske (1991: 150) has noted, 'television personalities merge into their characters or are submerged by them'.

Marsters also habitually reiterates his status as a 'freak' and frequently self-identifies as an 'outcast' in secondary texts, commenting that '*very much like Spike*, I was not comfortable with myself in my younger years . . . I was very much on the outside. I was the freak' (Ferrante, 2002; emphasis added). Similarly, in an interview about the *BtVS* episode 'Fool for Love' (5:7), which revealed the human Spike to have been the 'nerdish' William, Marsters declares 'He's one of us!' (*SFX #77*, 2001). As well as blurring Spike/Marsters, this also has the effect of making Marsters seem ordinary, even partly fan-like. The cultural trend for stereotyping cult TV fans as needing to 'get a life' (Jenkins, 1992: 9) has stigmatized such fans, and Marsters has commented on this in extra-textual material, arguing that he relates to his fans in a sense because 'They're freaks and I'm a freak' (Topping, 2003: 45).

These iterated discursive bids to be seen as 'like Spike' (and 'like the fans') can be viewed as instances of Marsters' situated agency. That is, he himself participates in industry processes that appear to blur character and actor, while also seeking to partly position himself as 'ordinary' and thus as a potential figure for (fan) audience identification. Such semiotic interplay does not occur behind Marsters' back, as it were, but is instead seemingly embraced and appropriated by the actor. *Contra* the theoretical positions of Ellis (1982) and Fiske (1991), where TV character/actor blurrings appear to be the near-magical outcome of powerful institutional forces (or the result of some 'essential' quality of TV seriality), Marsters' case indicates the need to consider more closely how TV actors can participate in, and discursively appropriate, industry forms of promotion within their function as subcultural celebrities. Thus elements of character and actor 'identity' can be activated extra-textually in order to position the celebrity as semiotically 'close' to a fan subculture.

A number of classic studies have indicated that fan audiences tend to read characters 'as if' they are real (Amesley, 1989; Ang, 1985), but such studies have marginalized the complex interplay between actor and character identity in which fans engage (see Gwenllian-Jones, 2000).

Although Marsters' discursively constructed similarities with Spike affect fan interpretation of the character, fan readings are influenced also by significant differences between Marsters and Spike. One of the most frequently expressed publicity statements about Marsters is that he is a 'nice bloke' (O'Brien, 2002: 64), and this aspect of his celebrity personality is endorsed by official *BtVS* merchandise such as *The Watcher's Guide*:

> James is about as unlike Spike as you could imagine. He's a genuinely nice enthusiastic man with undying affection for the theatre, his craft and *Star Trek*. [He chuckles] at the very fact that he's being interviewed. (Golden and Holder, 1998: 226)

While Marsters' efforts to conflate himself with Spike engender fan support for the character, his mediated 'niceness' when appearing as himself also appears to feed into the ways in which fans interpret the character of Spike positively (as a redeemable/heroic figure), against the expectations of Joss Whedon and Marti Noxon.

Interestingly, the news of *Angel*'s cancellation appeared to alter how Spike/Marsters fans approached codes of privacy, challenging the maintenance of Marsters as a semiotic counterpart and foil for Spike. One Marsters fan site updated its FAQ to reveal that 'James was born on 20 August 1962' and that 'James was married and . . . has a son who was born in 1996' (Deni, 2004). As the character of Spike has been laid to rest for now, it is tempting to suppose that there is no longer such a need to keep Marsters' personal life suppressed. Fans are no longer reliant upon the intertwining of Marsters' celebrity personality with the character of Spike, and thus Marsters seemingly no longer needs to serve as a blank slate upon which interpretations of the character can be projected, nor as a semiotic facsimile of the character through which actor/character identities can be playfully blurred.

Thus far we have approached James Marsters partly via relatively traditional semiotic readings of celebrity. However, fan attachment to Marsters/Spike is not encouraged simply via fan readings which rely on secondary texts (magazine interviews, publicity, official programme guides, etc.). Given Marsters' availability to fans as a subcultural celebrity, it is also possible for these fans to develop 'reciprocal intimacy' and 'social interaction' with the actor through his frequent attendance at conventions and via gigs performed with his rock band Ghost of the Robot (see www.ghostoftherobot.com/home.html).[3] Indeed, this apparent accessibility is arguably another factor in the fan (and media) construction of Marsters as 'nice' and 'friendly', working to support key connotations surrounding Marsters which fans can then blur onto the figure of Spike in their textual interpretations.

Throughout June 2003 and May 2004, Marsters toured the UK with Ghost of the Robot, appearing at several low-key gigs across the country. He also appeared at a London *BtVS* convention 'The Harvest' over the

weekend of 20–22 June 2003, and returned to London for a special 'Audience with James Marsters' event on 15 May 2004. Thus Marsters has been one of the 'Buffyverse's most accessible personalities at fan conventions, and his band's tours of UK venues have made him yet more accessible and approachable. As we have already suggested, fan festivals and conventions render professionals unusually available to fans. This fan–celebrity social proximity, however ritualized and reflexively monitored it may be, allows fans to feel close to Marsters, and they are able to develop personal relationships with him through such encounters.

These meetings between fans and Marsters allow the actor's celebrity personality to be experienced phenomenologically in a way that mere reporting of his 'qualities' in secondary texts cannot fully achieve. The fan who meets or sees Marsters in person often seems to be left with a positive impression that they are eager to convey to fellow fans, their experience of having met him also being worthy of sharing in the fan culture as a marker of status or 'fan cultural capital' (see Hills, 2002). After a personal appearance at 'The Harvest' convention, fans posted reports online, enthusing about 'James's' personal qualities, and emphasizing his 'niceness'. Fans posted comments such as: 'James was so sweet. He has a trick of making you feel that his attention is focused on you and you alone . . . neat trick with 1,200 people to relate to' (Deb W, 2003) and also applauded him for his generosity towards fans, stressing a reciprocal relationship between this celebrity and his fandom. Posters reported that 'He told me when a fan says "I'm sure you don't remember me, but I met you last year", nine times out of ten he does remember them. What a guy!' (DeepBlu, 2003).

In terms of realizing distance through closeness, Marsters seems to have perfected the art of appearing at once both accessible and enigmatic, being 'adept at giving his braying audience what they want, but still holding enough back for the mystique to be kept pristinely intact' (O'Brien, 2002: 62). Given this structured absence at the heart of convention encounters, it should be noted that we are not suggesting that fans' face-to-face meetings with subcultural celebrities such as James Marsters can allow them to truly 'know' such celebrities. Indeed, 'managing perceived intimacy requires actors to delicately balance their real persona with that of their character when interacting with the public' (Harrington and Bielby, 1995: 62).The 'persona' that fans encounter at conventions and personal appearances is thus a hybridized actor/character performance of identity, an embodied self-performance that remains related to character/actor blurrings in secondary texts.

We referred earlier to the fact that this affectively-loaded fan–celebrity social interaction engenders very carefully policed forms of behaviour on both sides. Although fans of Marsters are always eager to discuss their sightings or meetings with him, they enforce a strict code of 'appropriate' behaviour and devalue those who do not adhere to codes of fan practice for

the 'celebrity meeting'. Fans tend to devalue as 'inauthentic' those who wish to discuss the more scurrilous gossip circulating around a subcultural celebrity (see Crawford, 2004), as such discussion or speculation fails to respect the celebrity's privacy. Similarly, fans who meet Marsters are frequently critical of those who appear too hysterical or 'immature' and are often keen to disassociate themselves from these labels. Particularly frowned upon are Marsters/Spike fans who attend Ghost of the Robot gigs but profess to have no interest in the band's music. 'Authentic' fans thus try to avoid being associated with fan stereotypes such as the adoring female fan who lacks subcultural capital, not showing 'proper appreciation of the music and the band' while only being interested in the male celebrity's physical appearance. Reacting to a derogatory review of a Ghost of the Robot gig (Brown, 2003) which suggested that the majority of the fans were 'exactly what you'd expect: hysteric teen girls swooning against the front of the stage', fans defensively posted: 'I can't believe she was implying that we are all teen girls with bubble gum for brains' (SpikeForever, 2003). These fans also sarcastically dismissed the article's comment that 'James is actually not Spike', posting in response: 'Really? He wasn't wearing a black coat and eyeliner? Gosh, could that be because he's an *actor* and this is *real life*?' (ToriaR, 2003). Thus fans who are perceived as being unable to distinguish between the character of Spike and the actor playing him are heavily critiqued as an imagined Other; enacting 'authentic' fandom means being dismissive of those who unacceptably blur the boundary between Marsters and Spike.

This is especially striking when we consider that it is arguably the interlinking of Spike and Marsters which has consistently influenced fan readings of Spike, and supported fans' favourable interpretations of the character. However, we can make sense of this if we consider that where fans ridicule an 'excessive' or unacceptable blurring of Spike and Marsters they are directly dealing with discourses of 'the real' versus 'the fictional', whereas through their interpretations of Spike as redeemable and heroic – which, as we have argued, draw on Marsters' positive image as a subcultural celebrity recognized by his fans – the semiotic interplay between character and actor is always implied rather than being directly spelled out. Thus fans seem to produce what Theodor Adorno (1991: 152) in 'How to Look at Television' calls a 'psychological carry-over' – here, from their reactions to Marsters to their reactions to Spike. Yet since this 'psychological carry-over' is not framed explicitly as a blurring of fantasy/reality, it can remain implicit and undefended or unrationalized.[4] But where the question of Marsters' personal identity versus Spike's character identity is *directly* raised, then fans immediately mobilize a defensive discourse of 'the "real life" Marsters' to protect their aesthetic pleasures from critique, and to render transparent or explicable the 'double process of emotional engagement with . . . and acute awareness of the devices of . . . narrative' (Geraghty, 1991: 21).

Having considered how James Marsters displays situated agency via his discursive blurrings of character/actor identities, and how Marsters' subcultural celebrity (his availability, privacy, 'niceness') can feed into fans' positive interpretations of Spike, we will now move on to address a further intersection between celebrity and subcultural practices. In the following section we will explore how Marsters reads 'his' character, and how such part-'official', part-'textual poaching' interpretations of Spike relate to those offered by fan and producer interpretive communities.

Reading Marsters reading Spike

Fan-critic Barb Cummings (2001) argues that it is Marsters' interpretation and performance of the role which has engendered a favourable impression of Spike among many fans, as 'differences between the shooting scripts and the aired episodes make it obvious that the director and the actors are putting the best possible light on words and actions which might otherwise be creepy'. In a later piece Cummings (2002) argues that Marsters' performance is,

> if anything, too sympathetic; the writers' attempts to show Spike as still fundamentally evil were constantly undercut by Marsters' performance, which has scads of otherwise upright and moral people rooting for a near-rapist serial killer over the supposed heroes of the piece.

Such fan commentary implies a clear disjunction between the situated agencies of production staff (writers) and performers (actors), with actors' decisions sometimes working against the written text of a TV screenplay. However, rather than these creative tensions being textually self-evident, we want to suggest that secondary texts also play a vital role in mediating different production/actor interpretations to fans. Thus, James Marsters can use interviews to put forward 'his' take on Spike, and 'his' interpretations of *BtVS*.

One of the most prominent examples of Marsters discursively claiming agency for himself as an actor is his oft-repeated claim that 'I right away played a [sexual] attraction to Buffy' (2002). In Spike's first episode 'School Hard' (2:3), Marsters (2002) suggests that:

> I'm walking through the crowd watching her dance and there was something both very much of a hunter – I'm going to kill you – but also a heavy sexual undercurrent and that just came off the day . . . there was that attraction immediately.

Although with knowledge of future events one can rewatch the corresponding scenes in 'School Hard' and interpret Spike's/Marsters' actions as being sexually attracted to Buffy, Marsters' statement functions

as a legitimation of fan readings that stress the Spike–Buffy ('Spuffy') relationship, as well as potentially implying that Marsters' creative decisions prefigured Whedon's and others' storylining. Marsters is certainly not alone in claiming specific intentions that appear to predate related outcomes, thereby discursively positioning himself as creatively powerful and agentive. Another infamous example of this is Joss Whedon's widely circulated claim that he 'designed *Buffy* to be an icon, to be an emotional experience, to be loved in a way that other shows can't be loved' (Robinson, 2001). Whether or not Whedon really did 'intend' this, and whether or not James Marsters 'always intended' for Spike to be attracted to Buffy, are both moot points. For these extra-textual claims, circulated through the 'secondary texts' of official publicity, attempt to legitimate Whedon's role as powerful auteur – having an 'intended' impact on the show's audiences – or, in Marsters' case, his statements work to legitimate the Spike–Buffy relationship. Hence Marsters claims a discursive space for his own 'power to gloss' (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 147) narrative events, putting forward specific readings of his character while at the same time endorsing related fan readings.

Despite the protestations of the production staff in secondary texts circulating around *BtVS* and *Angel*, Spike/Marsters fans have continued to read the character in a way that is strongly opposed to interpretations supposedly shored up by producers' interview comments. For example, as Noxon has commented:

> We've made our case. Certain people get it and understand it, and other people are going to be Spike-shippers . . . no matter what . . . but . . . I feel like we've made a pretty good case for the fact that they [Spike and Buffy] probably shouldn't ride off into the sunset together. (O'Hare, 2002)

Despite such remarks, many Spike fans continue to champion the character as both a potentially redeemable, heroic figure and as a suitable romantic partner for Buffy, supporting the Buffy–Spike 'ship' or romantic pairing even after Spike's transferral onto *Angel*.

Marsters himself thereby influences (and interacts with) the reading formation that Spike/Buffy 'shipper' fans use to negotiate meanings from *BtVS* and Spike. As the actor playing the character of Spike, typically Marsters' readings are privileged by these fans and – along with his accessibility as a subcultural celebrity, discussed above – his exegetical glosses encourage or license an oppositional reading of Spike running counter to the stated intentions of *Buffy*'s writers and creator.

As well as offering oppositional diegetic or textual readings of Spike, Marsters has also offered up readings of extra-textual, industry–fan relationships which are opposed to those put forward by Joss Whedon. One example of this relates to Spike's enduring role on *BtVS*. It has been asserted repeatedly in official promotional materials for *BtVS* that Spike

was initially a 'disposable villain' (Spelling , 2001) due to be killed off after only a few episodes. However, we are told:

> Audiences fell for the handsome, sly and witty character, who quite often rattled off the best one-liners, and they also came to appreciate Marsters' sublime performances as the character. Spike emerged as the character everyone loved to hate. (Spelling, 2001)

Marsters himself has suggested that 'because of fan reaction they decided to keep him around. So as you can imagine I'm very thankful for the fan reaction' (Walsh, 1998). But whether Spike's stay of execution was a result of audience adoration or a production decision has been heavily debated, with both fans and producers keen to assert their control over textual developments. The audience/producer boundary has grown increasingly blurred with the advent of the internet, and the increased ability to communicate with those in charge of shows has led to suggestions that this relationship has become more reciprocal (Jenkins, 1998; Nussbaum, 2002). As such, it is probably impossible to ascertain the 'true' reasons for Spike's survival on the show. What we are left with are discursive bids for authority in secondary texts, and various constructions of producer/actor agency.

One such construction of authorial agency is Joss Whedon's declaration that fans have no real influence over storyline developments: 'I definitely gauge [fan] reactions to things . . . [but] if you do things by consensus, it's not art' (Whedon, 2002). Discursively constructing his own position as that of a romantic, visionary 'artist' rather than as a (fan) market-serving commercial producer, thus Whedon distances himself from any notion that he may write to order.

By marked contrast, Marsters has done little to contradict Spike fans' assertions that their fan campaigning and pressure affected the *BtVS* narrative, commenting to fans from the *Bloody Awful Poets' Society* website that they potentially influenced the storyline of Spike regaining his soul at the end of Season 6:

> I thank you for being on line calling for that [Redemption], by the way. Joss *does* go on line and he *did* hear you. And there is no way you're going to give Joss Whedon an idea for his show, but if you plant seeds, *maybe* he'll get his own. And something tells me you guys had a hand in that. In the soul. (Marsters, 2003)

Unlike Whedon, Marsters appears to have a lesser investment in discursively defending the writerly 'art' of the show, although he remains careful not to contradict directly Whedon's professional authority as *Buffy*'s hyphenate, to whit: 'you're [not] going to give Joss Whedon an idea for his show'. However, unlike Whedon's more univocal assertion of

artistic independence, Marsters' statement carries a pronounced semiotic tension. He both subordinates himself to Whedon-as-auteur (a mark of deference or respect which reflects professional necessity and Marsters' place within the production hierarchy) while also according limited agency to Spike/Marsters fans. These fans are supposedly able to 'sow a seed' that may subsequently germinate as an official narrative development in the TV series. In a complicated balancing act between different aspects of his professional identity, Marsters hence discursively construes an indebtedness to both producers and fans.

Given this semiotic/discursive tension between differently situated production staff, with writers and creators wanting to support a 'preferred reading' that may clash with actors' readings of 'their' characters, and with writer/creator hyphenates promoting TV industry meanings that stress their autonomy – versus actors oppositionally referring to fans' empowerment – it is unsurprising that much official publicity may actually seek to close down differential bids for 'creative' agency by stressing consensus among production staff. This demonstrates that where media texts can be thought of as multiply-authored, extra-textual work has to be done to secure a clear 'preferred reading': 'Marsters is probably Whedon's best public mouthpiece for *Buffy*. He understands why it works, understands its metaphorical underpinnings and he's insanely proud of the show' (O'Brien, 2002: 62). Marsters has also been described, again in rather fan-like terms, as

> filled with an almost evangelical worship for both his character and the world Spike inhabits . . . [H]e sees . . . [Buffy] as something special – a cut above the rest, hidden within a package that only the canniest of audiences can penetrate. (*SFX* #77, 2001)

Through Marsters' assertion that *BtVS* is 'special', that you have to be smart to 'get it', and his discussion of 'highbrow' issues, he privileges those fans who employ discourses of 'quality' in their discussions of *BtVS* and Spike, thereby reproducing a 'preferred reading' of *Buffy* that is shared with other production staff, one that promotes the show as unique, and as 'quality TV'.

When directly questioned on the Spike character, generally Marsters is careful to tread a line between saying what certain fan factions and interpretive communities may want to hear and toeing what might be termed the 'official party line' of the *BtVS* and *Angel* production company Mutant Enemy. It is thus the case that his readings of Spike do not always or consistently clash with official textual developments. One need only witness the change from Marsters' early proclamation that 'Inside my own mind, Spike is . . . not good. He's just hot for Buffy' (Spelling, 2001) to his comments circa Seasons 5 and 6 of *BtVS* to the effect that 'I think he's deeply in love with Buffy' (Ferrante, 2002) to consider that, here anyway,

actorly interpretations have been marshalled and brought into line with official narrative developments and preferred readings. At certain moments, then, Marsters appears to act as a fan-like 'textual poacher' (Jenkins, 1992) – making selective meanings from the show and in relation to Spike – who is 'within' the text's production in a sense, while at other moments reinforcing 'producer-led' meanings. Notions of production intentionality and agency are extremely blurred here; rather than secondary texts clearly promoting singular readings of *BtVS* or *Angel*, instead they appear to become a type of semiotic field in and through which discursive bids for agency take place, and where actors, producers and writers can clash as much as reinforce one another's readings of 'their' TV shows (Tulloch, 1990: 181). This scenario provides further evidence of Marsters' status as a subcultural celebrity, liminally positioned between the fans and producers of *Buffy*, and enacting situated agency rather than the stronger agency which Marshall (1997) argues is linked to generalized celebrity. Alan McKee has problematized 'authorial' approaches to cult TV, noting, like Tulloch (1990), that 'two creators of a text [may] contradict each other' (McKee, 2003: 69). However, both contradictory and consensual readings exist across potential 'author' figures (the producer-writer and the actor) in the case of Spike/Marsters and *BtVS*, indicating that collective or multiple authorship can give rise processually to very different levels of tension within and between more-or-less 'official' (writer/actor) interpretations.

As well as inconsistently supporting producer-led or otherwise 'official' readings of *BtVS*, Marsters has also been inconsistent in his support for fan-based readings of Spike. Following the *BtVS* series finale 'Chosen' (7:22), he began distancing himself from the Spuffy relationship at conventions and in interviews:

> I thought that what the final episode did very well was admit that Buffy really is in love with Angel. That the sexual relationship she had with Spike was unhealthy. That it was unwise. Spike was evil . . . I started to get uncomfortable because people still wanted Buffy and Spike to be together. (Butler, 2003)

Fans took umbrage with these comments and voiced their dissent about Marsters' apparent betrayal of their fan belief that the Buffy–Spike relationship was valid. On one Spike site fans posted that they were 'completely frozen and terrorised' (PassionTaint, 2003) by Marsters seemingly anti-Buffy–Spike comments. Their violent reactions ('ok, that is the only time JM has EVER made me feel ill!' – Diane311, 2003) to the suggestion that their fan interpretations were somehow incorrect, seem to corroborate the suggestion that much fan adoration for Marsters is linked to his endorsement of their way of 'reading' the show, and the Spike character. Fans took these comments personally, commenting, for example:

> I respect JM as an actor and as a human being. He has a right to his opinions but I can't help but feel hurt by his recent comments (and a bit confused). But I believe in Spuffy and no matter what any of the *BtVS* or *AtS* cast or crew say. (KindredSpirits, 2003)

The perceived closeness between the fans and Marsters, as demonstrated by his frequent convention and gig appearances, means that fans feel betrayed on a personal level when his interpretation of Spike does not support their own. Fans vented anger toward the actor, posting messages such as 'This statement just seems so unlike the usual JM offerings (which are normally intelligent and logical), that I can't help but wonder where it comes from' (Josephine, 2003).

This fan hostility directed at Marsters echoes what Sara Gwenllian-Jones (2000) found in relation to fans' expectations of *Xena: Warrior Princess* star Lucy Lawless, and the role that she was expected to play. Gwenllian-Jones argues that:

> An important aspect of Lawless' off-screen role in relation to fans is that she can seem to provide some measure of authenticity to fans' interpretations of Xena by sanctioning them either directly, or by explicitly endorsing certain readings of the character, or indirectly, by refraining from contradicting such readings. (2000: 15)

Similarly, S. Elizabeth Bird (2003) has discussed the way in which online fans of *Doctor Quinn: Medicine Woman* reacted angrily when the lead actress Jane Seymour seemed to criticize internet fans. Bird (2003: 78) suggests that 'fans are also very conscious of the implied relationship between fan and performer that suggests an obligation owed to fans'. Accordingly, the fact that Marsters not only devalued and dismissed the Buffy–Spike relationship but seemed to covertly critique fan faith and loyalty to Spike was discordant with the beliefs of many Spike fans. Fans posited theories as to why Marsters had changed his stance on the Buffy–Spike relationship and on Spike's nature, concluding that as Spike was moving to *Angel*, the emphasis would be shifted away from the Buffy–Spike relationship and onto a new direction for the character:

> I can't help wondering if this pronouncement has something to do with JM joining *Angel* next year . . . JM must be worried that Spike's character is going to be altered and minimised to allow [David Boreanaz] some chance to remain a significant part of the show that takes its name from his character. Maybe he thinks that by trivialising S/B, he stands a better chance of getting good character development. (Josephine, 2003)

Just as Marsters recognizes Whedon's authority, even when attempting to posit that fans have affected official narrative developments, he also recognizes fan interpretations at the same time as challenging them,

marking out the doubled, contradictory nature of his discursive position in relation to producer and fan constituencies. Marsters attempts to ward off and forestall fan outrage when there is a pronounced disparity between actor and fan interpretations. Here, the actor constructs his own readings of Spike as merely subjective, thereby seeking to deprivilege his interpretative position. Of course, where actor and fan readings coincide, then no such discursive tactic is undertaken; in this alternative scenario, Marsters' readings of Spike are constructed (and embraced by fans) as privileged. In the case of actor/fan disagreement, Marsters has cautioned that 'this is his interpretation of what's happening with the characters and not anything creator Whedon or executive producer Marti Noxon has explained to him . . . "It's all my interpretation"' (Ferrante, 2002). Thus, while Joss Whedon's readings of *Buffy* remain unassailably 'official' and auteurist, Marsters' readings as an actor – rather than as the industrially much more powerful creator-executive producer-director-writer hyphenate – can be selectively deprivileged by factions of fans, then subjectivized as 'individual' by the subcultural celebrity in response to these fans' decanonizing of material which clashes with their interpretive communities. Sara Gwenllian-Jones has suggested that:

> Like the worlds they inhabit, cult television characters are incomplete and incompletable. Lacking referents, they exist as liminal entities poised between tele-presence and absence. Every diegetic elaboration adds intricacy and uncertainty to their hauntological shadow-selves beyond the screen; the more we learn about them, the more latent they become . . . Creative and interpretive fan practices are all concerned with this latency. (2002: 86)

In this article we have argued that it is not only cult TV characters who may be liminal. So too is the subcultural celebrity, caught between producer and fan constituencies, and hence attempting to carve out a discursive space for their situated agency by simultaneously negotiating with fan and producer readings of character. Also, since the subcultural celebrity is predominantly recognized by their fans (or by fans of the relevant TV show), and may be more available to those fans than generalized, ubiquitous celebrities – either via an official website or through regular convention appearances – such celebrities are called upon also to display discursively forms of deference to their fans. And in co-present fan–celebrity situations such as conventions, signings or gigs, subcultural celebrities such as James Marsters must also self-reflexively manage the borders and boundaries of privacy. What Marsters' case further highlights is that scholars of popular, cult TV should not only pay attention to supposedly institutional realizations of character/actor hybridity (Ellis, 1982: Fiske, 1991), and that they should not assume that 'official' (production) readings of *Buffy* can be readily or clearly opposed to fan 'poachings' of meaning (Jenkins, 1992). By contrast, we have argued

that studying character/actor blurring requires a focus on how the situated agency of the subcultural celebrity is enacted, thus also exploring how producers' interpretations may be complicated, or even opposed, by readings put forward by cult TV's performers. Here, the so-called 'textual poacher' is actually 'in' the cult TV text of *Buffy*, with James Marsters performing his situated agency via liminal readings of Spike that both reinforce and oppose elements of producers' and fans' interpretations, rendering the character of Spike (in Jones's terms) ever more 'incomplete and incompletable'.

Notes

1. The *Bloody Awful Poets' Society* website (www.bloodyawfulpoet.com) is named after the human Spike's hobby of writing bad poetry, revealed in the episode 'Fool for Love' (5:7), and is dedicated to championing Spike's on-screen redemption for his past evil deeds.
2. The *Tabula Rasa* website (www.btvs-tabularasa.net) was established to support Spike's quest for redemption and is named after the *BtVS* episode 'Tabula Rasa' (6:8).
3. Editor's note: Marsters left Ghost of the Robot in May 2004, allegedly to concentrate on his acting career in the wake of the cancellation of *Angel*, but has embarked subsequently on a solo musical career.
4. See Harrington and Bielby (1995) on soap fans' pleasurable and playful blurrings of reality and fiction.

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