Witches and vampires, it seems, go hand in hand in popular culture. Yet unlike with vampires, Lisa Vetere argues that most see Whedon as never able to move beyond the stereotypical visions of the good-witch/bad-witch dichotomy that has so troubled modern day practitioners. Instead she claims that, as with so many other stereotypes, Whedon presents a pluralistic panorama of witchcraft identities in Buffy *that perhaps demonstrate the multiplicity of womanhood rather than the over simplified good/bad dichotomy so prevalent in modern television. By exploring the historical demonizing of witchcraft, Vetere demonstrates that Whedon once more offers both an acceptance and a critique of what we have always known to be true, and in this way offers a far more complex vision of those who practice Wicca.*

CHAPTER SIX

THE RAGE OF WILLOW: MALEFIC WITCHCRAFT FANTASY IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*

LISA M. VETERE

> "What's your story, Willow, I mean, witchcraft? Wow, that sounds new-agey" —Kennedy
>
> "No, it's safe to say that what I practice is definitely old-agey" —Willow ("Showtime" 7:11)

Within the magical realms of popular culture, it seems that wherever vampires roam, so too do witches, whether it's in the novels of Anne Rice or in recent television series such as *True Blood* and *Vampire Diaries*. Thus, one of the most arguably important characters in the highly popular and critically-regarded television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), is Willow Rosenberg, a witch. Considering that its creator, Joss Whedon, declared *Buffy*'s mission to be celebrating "the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it" (qtd. in Miller 35), this focus on witchcraft is no surprise. As historian Diane Purkiss claims, the "figure of

the witch ... mirrors – albeit sometimes in distorted form—the many images and self-images of feminism itself" (10). Popular culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s reinforced this connection between witchcraft and independent female power. In fact, it seemed to embark on a mission to redeem the "wicked witch." Rather than "wicked," these works insist, this figure is really just a misunderstood "good witch." Magical but not malevolent, this "bad-witch with a heart of gold" stock character registers a larger cultural imperative to avoid labeling or stereotyping all witches as evil. True, good witches such as Glinda from *The Wizard of Oz* floated through popular culture over fifty years ago, but a slew of her descendants pervaded all genres in the late twentieth century: Gregory Maguire's bestseller, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), and its hugely popular adaptation on Broadway; popular television shows, such as *Sabrina, the Teen Age Witch* (1996-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006); films, such as *Practical Magic* (1998); popular spell books and teen witch novels, like Cate Teirnan's "Sweep" series (2001-03), Isobel Bird's "Circle of Three" series (2001-01), and, of course, the global sensation, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), both the books and the blockbuster films.

Unlike all those other "new agey" teen witches of the era, however, *Buffy*'s Willow Rosenberg explores witchcraft both benign and malevolent, practices both white and black magic, and for purposes both productive and destructive. One of the main characters of the heroic "Scooby Gang," Willow often does real harm with her magic, a representation of witchcraft from which Whedon does not generally shy away. In its very first season, for instance, *Buffy* casts a witch as a villain. Its third episode, "The Witch," features an archetypal wicked witch: a malevolent mother who uses a potent spell to switch bodies with her daughter in order to relive the glory days of her high-school cheerleading successes. As critics of the series such as Winslade and Wilson note, this episode represents witchcraft as dark and malignant, "a particular early modern type of magic" (Winslade 8) with its accompanying cauldron, black cat, voodoo dolls, and vengeful, malevolent witch.

Some claim that such malefic and consequently "negative" images of women, whether of mothers or of witches, conflict with *Buffy*'s general message of female empowerment—or, in other words, that they are at odds with a feminist agenda. P. Williams, for example, writes that "even as it proclaims allegiance to ideals of female power, *Buffy* presents few positive female models for its teenage protagonists" (61). Consequently, Williams finds it "difficult to label *Buffy* a feminist text" (71). Similarly, although Moseley observes that the series "is engaged in renegotiating what 'being

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a girl' means now, carving out a new space" (420), she nonetheless sees *Buffy as* a "post-feminist" text, mainly because of its representation of teen witches as too invested in conventionally feminine attributes such as glamour. Other critics of these "negative" representations of witches include modern "witches" themselves, whether Wiccans or adherents of the closely related goddess/"feminist spirituality" movement. Whedon attests to existence of such objections in his commentary on "The Witch," by acknowledging, "We get a lot of flak from witches and people claiming to be witches." While other critics contend that *Buffy* complicates these "negative" images by juxtaposing them with alternatives, they do so by retaining the good witch/bad witch binary and simply insist that *Buffy* showcases a multiplicity of witches: the Wicca witch, the folkloric/fairytale witch, the New Age witch, the Halloween-costumed witch, and the herbalist-healer witch, Tara.

I would instead suggest that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s representation of malefic witchcraft does much more than merely add to its pluralistic panorama of witchcraft identities. Not only do the different images of witches interrelate and interrogate each other, but the presence of "negative" images of women as malefic witches in *Buffy* is quite the opposite of "post-feminist." In fact, it is precisely through what second-wave feminists might view as "negative representations" of witches that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fearlessly confronts the uglier side and complicated consequences of the emergence of female power. While such an engagement with the time-honored genre conventions of witchcraft narratives and fantasies may be critiqued as promoting misogynist "stereotypes" and are therefore "post-feminist," I will nonetheless argue quite the contrary: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* deploys malefic witchcraft fantasies throughout its seven seasons as discursive articulations of women's emotions and therefore aligns itself with feminist art and politics. Furthermore, through the character arc centered on Willow Rosenberg, the series demonstrates the pernicious and ultimately oppressive silencing effect of the attempt to censor such malefic narratives and to police the boundaries of gender and genre.

Recent feminist scholars of the witchcraft trials, such as Lyndal Roper, Diane Purkiss, and Deborah Willis, have begun to recognize such a silencing effect. Their work on witchcraft appeared in the late 1990s and was the first to take seriously—and find historical value in—the malefic witchcraft "fantasies" of early modern women. Enlightenment historians scorned such talk as idle gossip and superstitious nonsense. Later in the twentieth century, even feminist historians of the witch trials dismissed these women as tools of the patriarchy, mouthpieces for misogynist institutions and leaders. While these women's stories did become fodder

for the state and church authorities' persecuting witches in witch trials of the early modern era, scholars like Roper analyze how they nonetheless also often registered the desires, fears, and anxieties of those early modern women who provided the testimony. According to Roper, German women's witchcraft confessions reveal much about *women's* concerns about childbirth, sexuality, and motherhood. Such witchcraft stories consisted precisely of accounts of a witch's maleficium: her destruction and interruption on domestic affairs, whether bewitching a cow, spoiling the milk, hurling the pots and pans, and making other women's children sick. Because such witchcraft stories revolved around domestic matters (though pre-modern conceptions of the public and private may be considered as much more fluid than they later became), village women were in fact quite often the ones voicing these complaints.

To insist upon "positive images" of witches is to forbid and therefore erase the history of the expression of such emotion and to force women once again into the "good girl" role that ultimately limits their real power and wholeness—and erases them from the history books. Unfortunately, as Purkiss notes, when contemporary discourses of radical feminism, Wiccan mythologies, and the feminist spirituality movement protest such images of the witch figure, they perpetuate the silencing. Constructing the figure of the malefic as a "secular martyr" (Purkiss 22), a benign victim of the patriarchy, the prolific and well-published contemporary witch Starhawk reinforces the notion that women must sacrifice themselves for others. The roles of the herbalist-midwife-witch are traditional feminine roles: nursing, healing, caring for women and children" (Purkiss 22). While this central figure of the "myth of the burning times" is "in all essentials … not true, or only partly true, as a history of what happened to the women called witches in the early modern period" (Purkiss 7), the myth also has served, Purkiss admits, as "a key part of many feminists' identities" (26).

In 1998 (*Buffy*'s second season), historian Katherine Hodgkin agreed that it was precisely witchcraft's "central place in a larger feminist mythology" (274) that discouraged even scholars of "women's history" from interrogating the role of gender in the witch trials. She writes, "The debates over gender and feminist history raging across the profession steered well clear of witchcraft, while gender remained a no-go area for witchcraft researchers," despite "popular perceptions of witchcraft in history" having "'feminist' interpretations at their core" (273). Hodgkin adds that historians of women's history felt "embarrassed" by these popular accounts, and thus they "lost any position from which to explore gender (274). Purkiss adds that

> the historical narrative of modern witchcraft is not problematical because it is a fantasy; it is problematical as a fantasy. The meanings it produces about past golden ages are a refusal of modernity which owes more to Romanticism than feminism. The myth of a lost matriarchy is disabling rather than enabling for women. To relegate female power in politics or religion to a lost past, to associate it with the absences of civilisation, technology, and modernity, is to write women out of the picture. To confine female power to the marginal space of a reinvented religion which rejects any vestige of mainstream power is to reify women's exclusion from the public sphere. (42)

"Gingerbread," an episode from the third season of *Buffy*, parallels women's historical use of malefic witchcraft fantasies as articulations of domestic dissatisfactions. It begins with a mother-daughter conflict between Buffy and her mother, who has just found out about Buffy's secret identity as the Slayer. Seeking to bond with her daughter, Joyce Summers accompanies Buffy on a vampire-hunting expedition. She insists that slaying is "such a big part of your life, and I'd like to understand it. It's, um, you know, something we could share." Once the mother-daughter pair stumble upon two slaughtered children, however, it becomes glaringly apparent that Buffy's role as slayer is threatening to Joyce's maternal identity. Buffy's strength and experience in such dark matters force a reversal of roles between mother and daughter, as Buffy must be the one to hold and comfort Joyce in her despair and to assuage her fears. Continuing with the reversal, Joyce sobs in Buffy's arms, as Buffy promises that she'll make everything all right and "take care of everything." In fact, she directly articulates her own sense of powerlessness, exclaiming, "I have to help." But Joyce does not have the special powers of her Slayer daughter; therefore, all that she can do is mount a campaign against those "witches" whom she believes perpetrated the horrendous crime. MOO, "mothers opposed to the occult," thus springs up in Sunnydale. Joyce, in fact, openly and publicly points to her horror of Sunnydale's upside down power relations between adults and children by declaring, "I say it's time for the grownups to take Sunnydale back. I say we start by finding the people who did this and making them pay." The fact that she includes the Slayer in her list of dangerous forces in town reveals that it's her own daughter, not just witches, whom Joyce finds threatening. In establishing this organization, MOO, Joyce seems to be engaging in a rivalry with her daughter, attempting to restore what she perceives as the proper hierarchy in Sunnydale between mothers and daughters.

In "Gingerbread," Willow is only just learning her magical skills. As most critics of the series contend, her mastery of magic and witchcraft

becomes one of the main ways in which Willow develops self-confidence, pleasure in her intellect, and a sense that she meaningfully contributes to the efforts of the Scooby gang. Yet her mother, Sheila Rosenberg, explicitly marked as an academic feminist in this episode, denies the reality of Willow's skills and the potency of her magic, rationalizing that such "identification with mythical icons [is] perfectly typical of your age group. It's a classic adolescent response to the pressures of incipient adulthood." Her mother's denial of Willow's real malefic witchcraft clearly gets coded in this scene of conflict between mother and daughter as maternal neglect and dismissal. In response to her mother's refusal to take her seriously, therefore, Willow increasingly asserts the maleficia of her witchcraft: she starts by claiming that "I can do stuff. Nothing bad or dangerous, but I can do spells," but in the face of her mother's continual denial of her daughter's agency, Willow appeals more and more to the malevolence of her magic: First, "Mom, I'm not acting out. I'm a witch! I-I can make pencils float. And I can summon the four elements," and then, "I worship Beelzebub. I do his biddings. Do you see any goats around? No, because I sacrificed them." Finally, as her mother leaves her room, "All bow before Satan!" and "Prince of Night, I summon you. Come fill me with your black, naughty evil." In other words, Willow strategically employs the discourse of malefic witchcraft to manage her own sense of helplessness against her mother's power and to assert those sides of herself to which her mother might be oblivious.

Unlike her feminist mother, Willow is free to explore her malefic art in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Further, the series dramatizes how the social insistence to be a "good witch" reinscribes conventional gender boundaries, forcing the women to perform role of "good girl." From its first season, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* clearly positions the witch Willow as the good girl of the series. This high standard actually forces her to perform a very traditional role within her "Scooby" surrogate family—the reliable, nurturing, and supportive "sidekick" to the more active and dominant Buffy. One might almost say that Willow performs as the mother figure of the Scooby gang. As Faith Mendlesohn observes: "Because it is apparently unsexual, Willow's support is often presented as unconditional, an appearance enhanced by Willow's little-girl presentation until midway through the fourth season" (48). Before Buffy arrives in Sunnydale, Willow had been playing this non-sexual, almost maternal, support role for her best friend, Xander. Willow and Xander often speak of their long-standing love and care for each other: spending time in each other's bedrooms in their pajamas, visiting each other for holidays, supporting each other as the outcasts of Sunnydale High. As the conscientious

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academically-superior partner, Willow assists Xander in his schoolwork, while Xander, as the warm, witty nitwit, provides Willow with affection and amusement. While Willow's feelings are clearly more romantically inclined towards Xander, she nonetheless has obviously found a great deal of solace and comfort in their relationship. As they both have neglectful parents, the two function as surrogate family members for each other, although neither perhaps imagine that familial relationship in precisely the same way: brother/sister; husband/wife; mother/son even. However, the cozy dyadic nature of this relationship gets radically interrupted when the sensational Buffy arrives in town. Beautiful, strong, assertive, intelligent, funny, and sassy, Buffy embodies the "girl power" movement of the late 90s, a manifestation of third-wave feminism that sought to reclaim the agency in femininity. Resentful at Buffy's intrusion and jealous at the sexual attention that Xander explicitly lavishes on Buffy, Willow cannot express such feelings: first, because she loves Buffy herself; and, second, because she is so constrained by her position as the Scooby family's "good girl," or perhaps "supportive mom."

Willow mildly articulates this frustration in an early episode of the series, "I Robot, You Jane" (1.8), an episode driven by Willow's envy of Buffy's sexual appeal, especially for Xander. It begins with Willow's seeking Xander's company and with Xander's literally running after Buffy. Left alone in the library, Willow becomes vulnerable to a demon, Moloch, "a very deadly and seductive demon," who "draws people to him with promises of love, power, knowledge." Thus Moloch, who disguises himself to Willow as an on-line crush named Malcolm, offers Willow the very thing that she lost when Buffy arrived in Sunnydale: the exclusive attention of a love object. Willow thus becomes especially sensitive when Buffy warns her about "Malcolm," evincing a jealousy towards Buffy that she can barely acknowledge. The whole episode, in fact, explores such tensions between Buffy and Willow. In each conversation with Buffy, Willow reveals some level of hostility and resentment: "Oh, see, I knew you'd react like this," she complains to Buffy, and "I don't understand why you don't want me to have this. I mean, boys don't chase me around all the time. I thought you'd be happy for me." Such comments reveal Willow's having had prior notions of Buffy as an obstacle to Willow's romantic success; she imagines Buffy as the jealous one, an obvious projection of a not entirely disguised hostility. When Buffy declares to Willow, "This just isn't like you," Willow, for instance, responds, "Not like me to have a boyfriend?" "I Robot," therefore, depicts Willow's conjuring of the demon Moloch first as a compensation for her loneliness, and then as a discursive opening for a passive aggressive retaliation against her Scooby family—a

foreshadowing of the sort of black magic Willow practices later in the series. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that "I Robot" is the first episode in which viewers are introduced to the "techno pagan," Jenny Calendar, a very important character for Willow, as she is her mentor in magical spells and the woman who introduces Willow to witchcraft, which becomes the key way in which Willow achieves some parity, if not superiority, to Buffy.

In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon most explicitly shows viewers the pernicious effects of the repression of the "bad witch" in Willow through the emergence of her doppelganger, "Dark Willow," a figure, the series repeatedly emphasizes, that endows Willow with the power to express the very feelings that ordinary Willow cannot: resentment of Buffy's power at the Scooby's denial of her power in the form of efficacy of her spells, and their insistence that she curb her dangerous black magic. Episodes, such as "Halloween" (2.6), "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" (2.16), "The Wish" (3.9), and "Doppelgangland" (3.16), demonstrate that Willow achieves undeniably positive effects—strength and confidence, honesty with her friends—when she is "bad." Yet her best friends and comrades repeatedly insist that Willow curb her dark magic; they often inaccurately deny its efficacy and demand its repression. In Season Four's "Fear Itself" (4.4), for example, both Buffy and Oz warn Willow against her experimentation in magic, her levitation, charms, "glamours," and try to curb what she states as her ambitions to go further into "transmutation, conjuring, bringing forth something from nothing," her desire to get "pretty close to the primal forces." Later in that same episode, Buffy scornfully derides Willow's magical abilities, claiming that her "basic spells are usually only fifty-fifty." Unlike in earlier seasons, however, this more confident Willow shoots back at Buffy that "I'm not your sidekick!" and later observes to Oz that Buffy "thinks I'm not ready to be a full blown witch! I can handle the dark forces as good as anyone else." The show parallels this insistence on Willow's suppression of malefic witchcraft with contemporary notions of Wicca by having Willow reject Wicca precisely for the same reason that she resists her friends' admonitions: she has found malefic witchcraft empowering, able to make her Buffy's equal rather than her sidekick.

While these earlier seasons show Willow responding rather mildly to her "family's" playful and sometimes even loving refusal of her dark side, by Season Six, Willow has had enough. A savage "Dark Willow" emerges in Season Six who is, one might argue, a response to this foreclosure of negativity, of the "bad girl" in good Willow. For the Willow Rosenberg of this season is no longer the passive good girl; she has become a most formidable active magical force. With the death of Buffy at the hands of

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Glory at the end of Season Five, Willow has become the leader of the Scoobies, supervising their slaying and literally standing over all of them on top of one of the cemetery's mausoleums. Her power here has reached extraordinary levels as she is able to insert her thoughts and orders into the very minds of her friends. Perhaps the assumption of new leadership is on the mind of *Buffy*'s creators, as Marti Noxon has taken over Joss Whedon's responsibilities as executive producer in Season Six. As with the series as a whole, Season Six explicitly showcases and explores the dark powers of a young woman. Willow's witchcraft has strengthened to the extent that she has power over life and death, as she is the one who casts the spell that brings Buffy back from the dead. It is significant that a key part of that spell is the sacrifice of a sweet, gentle fawn. Willow cuts its throat, a violent part of the ritual that Willow hides from her friends, as black magic is incongruous with her good girl image.

The Scoobies find it difficult to accept the dark and powerful side of Willow. Their intolerance of Willow's malefic witchcraft and their insistence on its repression consequently fuels the plot of Season Six. Once Giles returns to Sunnydale after Buffy's resurrection, for example, one of his first acts is to scold Willow for magical overachieving. Although Willow was successful, Giles is angry at Willow because he didn't expect such power from her: "Willow," he laments, "you were the one I trusted most to respect the forces of nature." Once again, the Scooby gang holds higher standards for Willow than for the others, leading her loved ones to respond all the more intensely when this good girl defies her role and performs something that might be considered "bad." In Season Six, however, viewers see Willow responding more aggressively to her friends' judgment of her badness. In response to Giles' scolding, for example, Willow—perhaps for the first time ever—expresses anger: "Giles," Willow insists, "I did what I had to do. I did what nobody else could do. . . I wasn't lucky. I was amazing. And how would you know? You weren't even there." After he calls her a "rank amateur," she responds, "The magicks I used are very powerful. I'm very powerful. And maybe it's not such a good idea for you to piss me off." In this episode featuring Giles' coming to Buffy's rescue, returning to watch over and guide the Scoobies, resuming his fatherly role by lending Buffy the money to make repairs to the house, Willow is chastised for assuming power.

Yet Willow's dark witchcraft does not really seem any more malevolent than the powers embodied in many of *Buffy*'s other characters. Willow's magic, on the contrary, has done much good over the years. She has, for instance, used her magic to reverse the invitation for Angel to come into Buffy's house ("Passions," 2:17); to cast a binding spell to

exorcise the ghost of a murdered teacher from Sunnydale HS ("I Only Have Eyes For You," 2:19); to restore Angel's soul ("Becoming, Part 1 and 2," 21 and 22); to help Anya conjure the alternative "Doppelgangland"; to slay a vampire in the Mayor's office with pencil and discover the Books of Ascendance ("Choices," 3.19); to successfully cast a spell to have her will be done ("Something Blue, 4:9); to play a key role in the group spell that defeated Adam ("Primeval," 4.21); to magically enter into Buffy's catatonic mind ("The Weight of the World," 5.21); and finally, to resurrect Buffy from the dead ("Bargaining, Part One," 6.1). With only this incomplete list of the power and efficacy of Willow's spells, both malevolent and benign, her friends' fear and prohibitions seem unreasonable, if not irrational.

This prohibition against black magic reaches its peak when Willow's girlfriend, Tara, demands that Willow go "cold turkey" on black magic. Tara, not coincidentally just the sort of gentle Wiccan figure whom historian Diane Purkiss warns has literally shut down the historical and scholarly study of witchcraft narratives, disciplines Willow excessively—forcing Willow to choose between the most powerful love of her life and the most empowering force of her life: Willow cannot, that is, have both power and love, the Wiccan witch insists. One can argue that the emergence of a more dangerous and reckless Willow results from her having to make this choice, a choice enforced almost cruelly by all of her friends and family. As loyal viewers of *Buffy* know, Willow consequently spirals into an addiction and pain that culminates in Tara's accidental murder at the hands of Warren in "Seeing Red" (6.19). What makes this loss especially painful for Willow is that Tara had just forgiven Willow for her darkness, for not having been a "good witch." Avenging the loss of Tara, Willow brutally murders Warren, speaks all sorts of painful truths to her friends, and even physically fights Buffy for the first time—a scene upon which the episode lingers. Ultimately, Willow the Dark Witch threatens to destroy the world and is only prevented from doing so by Xander's intervention: a recovery of the original loss that Willow experienced upon Buffy's arrival in Sunnydale. Xander offers Willow unconditional love and acceptance; he is able to convince her that she can be whole—both a good and a bad witch. She is no longer forced to choose between wholeness and acceptance.

Without her descent into malefic witchcraft, Willow would never have felt the power and sense of security provided by Xander's confession of unconditional love. As Battis explains, "All of her rage, grief, and desire for vengeance cannot withstand his [Xander's] brilliant, calm declaration of unconditional love" (34). According to both Klein and psychoanalyst

D.W. Winnicott, the kind of destructive fantasy enacted in this sixth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be extremely important in psychological development, especially for the kind of psychic challenges that critics such as Battis and Ruddell see in the split and disembodied character of Willow. Children need to feel license enough to imagine such destruction of loved ones. Winnicott writes that

> "It is destruction … that enables the subject to go beyond relating to the object through identification, projection, and other intrapsychic processes pertaining to the subjectively conceived object. Destruction makes possible the transition from relating (intrapsychic) to using the object, to carrying on a relationship with another who is objectively perceived as existing outside the self, an entity in her own right. That is, in the mental act of negating or obliterating the object, which may be expressed in the real effort to attack the other, we find out whether the real other survives. If she survives without retaliating or withdrawing under the attack, then we know her to exist outside ourselves, not just as our mental product." (qtd. in Jessica Benjamin 39)

To crush the "good object" in fantasy, to have violent and retaliatory fantasies of murdering their loved ones, results in a more integrated and secure subject. Bruno Bettelheim makes a similar point in *The Uses of Enchantment*, specifically about children's need for fairy tales as malevolent fantasies—focusing in particular on the figure of the wicked witch in such narratives. To prohibit the representation of malefic witchcraft is to prohibit emotional development, say these psychoanalysts. Fantasies of violence against a loved object can foster a deep sense of object permanence; the child can comprehend and believe in the power of love to survive wrath. This allows her ultimately to feel gratitude and safety in her environment and life, a comfort in community and self. For Willow at her darkest, Xander's confession of unconditional love for both "yellow chalky Willow" and dark Willow finally allows her to work through her the resentment, envy, and rage that she had repressed for so long, and which almost forced her to act out in the most destructive and malevolent of acts. Because Joss Whedon refuses to succumb to cultural imperatives to redeem the wicked witch, viewers feel the pleasure of watching this happen.

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