

Fooling with Fashion: Costume as Comic Catalyst in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*

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Aggressive invaders threaten the world; the Avengers, the superhero team who offers Earth's best defense, are in disarray; and Avengers team member Bruce Banner/the Hulk finds himself, as a helpful security guard notes, "buck ass nude" (01:31:56) amidst a pile of rubble in a deserted warehouse. While all hope seems lost, the solution to Banner's predicament is simple: a pair of pants from the guard and his pronouncement, "Son, you've got a condition" (01:32:17-18). This comic, very human, moment from Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012) not only demonstrates five essential Whedon signatures highlighted by David Lavery in *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait*—"language," "genre-hybridity," "the naughty," "emotional realism," and "bringing the funny" (183-199)—but also provides a memorable example of how Whedon and his collaborators' strategic use of costume highlights these signatures.

A number of Whedon scholars, including Masani McGee, Sara Hays, Leigh Clemons, and Marcus Recht have examined costume choices in the Whedonverses to illustrate the characters' complex, often ambivalent, natures, given that clothing choices are markers of identity; or to explore the visual richness of Whedon's imagined environments

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and his texts' generic hybridity. My contribution is to consider how Whedon and company use costume comedically as well as dramatically, utilizing precise dress choices and dialogue about this dress as catalysts to transform characters and their arcs, link characters visually or emotionally, and reveal unexplored depths, including traumas, within characters and worlds. Such use also provides tonal variety, adding a witty leavening agent even in texts that are part of serious genres with high stakes.

Whedon's fooling with fashion may seem only a minor aspect of his approach to texts, no more than a temporary tool to release tensions within and between characters and allow them, and viewers, the simple pleasure of a visual or verbal joke; however, this fooling can also function on a deeper level, given the nature of comedy as a form associated with role reversals and transgressions of sociopolitical structures, a form that may encourage characters and viewers to dig into complex emotional and intellectual questions. In sharing the delight of a witticism, for instance, characters and viewers are knitted together emotionally, enhancing the stakes of the situation and the text's emotional depth. At the same time, by highlighting costume's power to reimagine identity, whether that identity be a single character's sense of him or herself or viewers' understanding of the conventions of a genre, Whedon and his costume designers reflect playfully, even critically, on his characters, their narrative arcs, and the genres and traditions to which they belong. This reflexivity may, in turn, encourage viewers to consider these characters and texts more fully and thoughtfully.

While I examine diverse examples of the production of humor through costume in the Whedonverses and select non-Whedon texts, my particular focus is Whedon's *Avengers* due to the unique, high stakes nature of this text as Whedon's first blockbuster and the first Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) team-up. The film also marks an interesting, potentially difficult, tonal and visual balance in its generic hybridity, mixing the superhero film and the war film—two genres often treated with great seriousness—with the voice of screenwriter and director Whedon, a textual creator known, as Lavery notes, for “bringing the funny” (183).¹ I argue that to address these issues Whedon and his collaborators use specific costume designs and dialogue concerning

costume, along with other elements, to insert humor and levity into *Avengers*, thereby humanizing these fantastical characters and their worlds while simultaneously presenting a film that is true to the epic scope and high stakes required of its narrative and mingling of genres.

To explore Whedon and his collaborators' considered use of costume, this essay begins by defining the unruly nature of comedy as a form and its capacity to create change within characters and worlds. It then foregrounds the costume/comedy link in a discussion of select theatre, film, and TV texts, bearing in mind the manner in which theatrical design both sets up and differs from film and TV design, before providing examples from the history of film comedy and from Whedon's pre-*Avengers* work to examine how Whedon and his designers build on these precedents. It concludes with a detailed discussion of specific comedic costume choices within *Avengers*, their immediate effects, and the larger, sometimes more serious, implications of these choices.

Defining the nature of narrative comedy in "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter" in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Kathleen Rowe focuses on two major characteristics of comedy: "antiauthoritarianism" (43) and "an impulse towards renewal and social transformation" (44). Rowe's definition of comedy's nature highlights the form's complexity, particularly its transgressive challenges to social and sexual mores and its regenerative characteristics. An important influence on Rowe's definition of the function of narrative comedy, and in understanding the form as a whole, is the work of the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who, in texts including *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World*, argues that the comic mode is intimately connected to the festive, anarchic time of carnival and to the carnivalesque: a mode of defiance of tradition and authority focused on the carnival's upturning of convention. The resulting carnival laughter is not only joyous, but, as Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais*, a powerful, transformative force: "Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality" (123). Bakhtin also specifies that the transgressive, topsy-turvy capacity of carnival is fundamentally

connected to clothing; for example, in *Rabelais* he notes, “From the wearing of clothes turned inside out and trousers slipped over the head to the election of mock kings and popes the same topographical logic is put to work: shifting from top to bottom, casting the high and the old, the finished and completed into the material bodily lower stratum for death and rebirth” (81-82). Clothing thus becomes not only a vital part of festive rites but also a visible, external reflection of internal transformation and of both individual and large-scale social shifts, even if these changes, like the time of carnival, are transitory.

Theatrical costume design seizes on clothing’s protean power, particularly in comedies—a form whose plots of madcap misunderstandings and shifting identities often turn on a character’s clothing choices. Examining the role of costume design in a discussion of the Elizabethan dramatist William Shakespeare, Bridget Escolme notes, “The most obvious work that costume does on stage is to create a cultural and historical world for the play that makes sense to the audience. But costume can also highlight the socially and theatrically constructed nature of the world, the class, gender and racial relations within it...” (130). Given the dramatist’s influence on the development of theatre and Whedon’s fondness for him, Shakespeare’s plays, particularly his comedies such as *The Taming of the Shrew* (1590/1592) and *Twelfth Night* (1601/1602), both of which include costume as essential parts of their fooling, may prove a fruitful model to study to explore how Whedon uses costume for comedic—as well as serious—effect.

Shakespeare’s comedies are notable for the manner in which the theatrical possibilities of costume choices to conceal or reveal characters’ natures and turn gender and social identities topsy-turvy form essential elements of their character and narrative arcs. Examples of this include the transformation in *Shrew* of the drunken Christopher Sly from tinker to lord through, amongst other changes, a switch in clothing,² and the gender swapping through costume that allows *Twelfth Night*’s heroine Viola to transform into the boy Cesario, assuming the likeness of her seemingly deceased twin brother Sebastian. The ensuing confusion of social and, in *Twelfth Night*, gendered identity in each play is primarily played for laughs, as are many of Whedon’s own verbal and visual games with costume. However, these comedic reversals, particularly those in

Twelfth Night, also foreground a more serious, even ambivalent, consideration of the powerful, long-lasting impact of such identity-shifting that sets up Whedon's complex treatment of costume in texts such as *Avengers*.

The importance of costume and the social and gender shifting it allows, as well as the emotional resonance it can carry even in its comic strain, is foregrounded in the role playing of Viola as Cesario, a performance in which she finds herself, to her surprise and fascination, the center of romantic attention from both male and female characters, as well as the object of martial challenges.³ The confusion caused by Viola's disguise continues until the play's finale and its revelations, which include the discovery of Viola's true gender and her reconciliation with her twin; these revelations prove crucial in fulfilling the characters' and the comedy's narrative arc from tragedy and chaos to joy and the marriage of the primary romantic couples.

Despite the seeming neatness of this ending, formally typical of romantic comedies, Shakespeare does not fully resolve all the play's social and sexual reversals, with the result that this particular comedy has an ambiguous ending that foreshadows the manner in which Whedon's comedic jests with costume in *Avengers* are more complicated than they may seem. For instance, at least one element of Viola's anarchic disguise remains, for while Viola offers to readopt women's dress in the finale, Shakespeare makes the choice to never show her in it; this is a provocative decision, for in choosing not to move Viola towards feminine dress, Shakespeare refuses the characters and audience a visual move to gendered dress norms and, by implication, norms generally. In so doing he extends the sense of social and sexual transgression beyond individual characters such as Viola to the play itself; at the same time he also highlights the performative nature of dress and, in a sense, identity itself. Viola's gendered costume swapping and its unruly results serve as a rich, complex example of the power of costume to work as a catalyst to disrupt mores and overturn conventions: perhaps only doing so within the fantastical mode of a work of fiction, but with potentially long-lasting effects.⁴

If costume design in theatre plays an essential role in illuminating the interior lives of characters while advancing narrative arcs and

engaging critically with genre conventions, theatre's highly visual descendants film and TV potentially demand an even more profound, and both similar and different, use of costume. The dramatic size of film's vast screens, for example, forces viewers to pay great attention to the nuances of costume design, acknowledging its power to provide viewers both immediate and more complex understandings of characters and worlds and its role as a source of visual pleasure. As Drake Stutesman argues in *Fashion Design in Film*, design "plays on our deepest responses to clothes and all their aspects (shape, color, texture), aspects which augment, indeed almost stand in for, our perceptions of sex, authority, comfort/discomfort, and stature... . Power, class, and wealth are recognized by what is worn" (20). Other aspects of the particular formal elements of film and TV provide further challenges to designers; for example, tools such as camera movement and editing provide viewers of these media forms the opportunity to move closer to, then linger in luscious close-up on, each design choice and the bodies that wear these costumes, especially in formats such as 70mm or HD—an impossibility in theatre. Such tools allow an even greater potential for the use of costume to enhance the visual spectacle of texts and to enrich viewers' understanding of the nature of these texts' characters while, at the same time, increasing the dangers of missteps in the design process.

Two important early film figures who quickly grasped the power of film costume generally, particularly its comic potential, were the comedians Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, and a consideration of their film costumes serves as a good primer for film's unique formal demands and possibilities in anticipation of a close reading of *Avengers*. This is particularly so since both performers became famous during the silent era, when their costumes had to do even greater work to convey not only the nature of their characters but also each film's narrative arc and tone. The array of specific details each performer employs—from Chaplin's mismatched ensemble of too-tight jacket, baggy pants, and eloquently bendy cane to Lloyd's round horn-rimmed glasses and jaunty straw hat—work to clearly communicate through the vast scale of the cinema screen the distinct nature and worldviews of their particular characters; these details also create an intimate sense of each performer's particular comedic spirit and unique presence.

Chaplin's iconic Tramp costume, for example, powerfully conveys the sense of a scrappy trickster and Everyman figure navigating a difficult, often hostile, world, and the argument made by Chaplin and others that the Tramp character was largely created through costume highlights the importance of this and other costumes to comic characters and performances. As David Madden discusses in "Harlequin's Stick, Charlie's Cane," when Chaplin was instructed by director and producer Mack Sennett to "Put on a comedy make-up. Anything will do," Chaplin reputedly initially had no sense of the character (14). However, he noted to Sennett that "the moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up made me feel the person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked onto the stage he was fully born" (14). Chaplin's experience in forming the Tramp points to the power of costume to facilitate characterization for the performer and to enhance the diegesis as a whole.⁵

Such precise creation of character through costume is also a function of Whedon's collaborations with his costume designers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the first work over which he exercised full creative control. *Buffy* designers Susanna Puisto (Season One), Cynthia Bergstrom (Seasons Two to Six), and Terry Dresbueh and Matthew Van Dyne (Season Seven) produce costumes that must not only efficiently sketch the nature of individual characters and their relationships but also play with the series' genre hybridity and tonal mixing. This challenge may have been particularly acute for Puisto, who, with Whedon, had to establish in *Buffy* a unique TV series that mixed genres and cultural references in often unexpected ways. Puisto also had to do so, especially in those early episodes, in a manner that was both overt, to catch viewers who were channel surfing, and nuanced, to appeal to those viewers who chose to continue watching as each episode, and the season itself, developed.

The degree of care exhibited by Whedon and Puisto in conceiving the costumes for *Buffy* is visible from the opening moments of the pilot episode "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1), in which the costume choices for the vampire Darla visually establish, then play with, the series' generic mix of horror, comedy, and teen romance/drama and its frequent tonal shifting, including finding ways to mine flashes of humor

from dread. The decision to dress Darla in a Catholic schoolgirl outfit serves to visually proclaim her apparent nature as the epitome of youthful girlish purity, a reading that quickly proves darkly ironic when her true nature as a violent, ancient vampire is revealed. Darla's schoolgirl costume does double-duty here, setting up her seeming innocence and potential victimhood at the hands of her leather-jacketed male companion and then turning this on its head as she transforms and attacks him, showing that this costume and persona are deceptive. Such complicated use of costume is essential because it both informs viewers that Darla is a multi-layered, ever-shifting character and gestures to the argument that there is much more to the world of *Buffy*, including its title character and its approach to genre, than first greets the eye, as is the case with *Avengers*.

While Whedon and Puisto use costume here to set up a moment that is more shocking than comic, their careful choice of dress is important because it alerts viewers to the series' self-knowing quality, a reflexivity not only regarding its generic nature but apropos of its teenage characters and their world, a world in which fashion, and fashion's link to power and privilege, is incredibly important. As Leigh Clemons argues in "Real Vampires Don't Wear Shorts: The Aesthetics of Fashion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," questions of what is and is not fashionable, and, with that, who has, or lacks, social status and power, are essential aspects of the characters' development and of the show's overall aesthetic (pars. 1 and 2). For instance, the plain, almost childish-looking, ensemble of a white Oxford shirt, shapeless plaid dress, and white tights that designer Puisto and Whedon choose for the introduction of Willow, the shy computer whiz who becomes Buffy's best friend, reveals Willow's limited fashion sense and modest economic resources and, with these, her social vulnerability, especially in contrast with Cordelia, the school's resident fashion expert and ruler of its social set. Unlike Willow, Cordelia embodies the power of clothing in her polished outfits and clever, cutting statements regarding who is, and is not, fashionable: a combination of visual and verbal fashion skill that anticipates the character of Tony Stark/Iron Man in *Avengers*.

One of the near-constants of *Buffy*'s early seasons is the manner in which Cordelia wields the visual power of her designer label form-fitting

dresses, tops, and trousers, along with witty, often caustic, discussion of fashion, to control Sunnydale High's social hierarchy. This control places her in contrast to Buffy, whose responsibilities as the Slayer gradually pull her away from her initial devotion to fashion as a form of social entree, even as she remains highly fashion savvy. Whedon's "Hellmouth" script memorably introduces Cordelia's combination of wit and snobbishness, in concert with Willow's defenselessness, in an early scene in which Cordelia details the school's social cliques to Buffy, pausing to survey Willow and note, "Willow, nice dress. It's good to know you've seen the softer side of Sears" (00:11:07-11). Given the power such fashion knowledge accords, Cordelia's loss of this control on various occasions unsettles the character and her circle in both comic and poignant ways, forming a central element of the character's transformation from one-note narcissist to a complex, empathetic member of the Scooby Gang, a transformation continued in the Buffy spin-off *Angel* (1999-2004).⁶ Cordelia's fashion sense along with the power it grants her is also one of the many threads that knit together the seemingly dissimilar Cordelia and Buffy, and one of the early hints that they will increasingly collaborate over the length of *Buffy* and into *Angel* (1999-2004).

Like Cordelia, Buffy is a master in using fashion, her own and others, as a source of visual and verbal power, from the short, on-trend dresses and skirts, paired with stylish tops and boots, that she wears in the early episodes to blend in with Sunnydale High's fashionistas to the trousers, jackets, and boots she dons to patrol in her role as the Slayer. Discussing Buffy, Clemons notes the manner in which her fashion sense is an essential aspect of her characterization and something that sets her apart from many of the other characters, especially Sunnydale's vampires (par. 10). The scene from "Hellmouth" Clemons uses to illustrate this point, a scene in which Giles encourages Buffy to hone her senses to scan for vampires at the Bronze, is also important because of the manner in which it foregrounds how the series will use costume for comedy.

The scene wittily puts costume at its center to provide vital clues to the individual characterization of Giles and Buffy and their interplay as mentor and mentee, as well as to Buffy's unique powers. As Buffy complies with Giles's request to locate a vampire, she identifies one

through his unstylish clothing, which she describes as “carbon dated” (00:32:42-43): singling him out not through her Slayer abilities but by, as Clemons notes, her fashion sense (par. 10).⁷ The manner in which Giles’s excitement at Buffy’s success mingles with his indignation at her unconventional choice to eschew her Slayer abilities for her fashion sense creates a comedy that balances the episode’s rising tension while highlighting this particular aspect of Buffy’s skillset. Focusing on this skillset, Clemons quotes Matthew Pateman, who in his similar focus on this moment in *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* argues, “The humor here and its specific object of vampire fashion connects to other episodes where the undead’s dress sense is the motor for the comedy” (142). The scene is also important because it reveals, as did the opening reversal of Darla in her schoolgirl costume, the unusual, sometimes disruptive, choices Whedon and his collaborators make regarding genre conventions and storytelling structures here and throughout the series. While a run-of-the-mill fantasy/horror series might seize on a scene of this kind to showcase its protagonist’s supernatural powers, Whedon instead uses it to emphasize that Buffy’s fashion sense and tart wit are as much a part of her powers as her conventional Slayer abilities: a differentiation of both character and series that may surprise, then delight, viewers encountering *Buffy* for the first time.

If “Hellmouth” alerts viewers to the careful visual design of *Buffy*, the costumes of “Prophecy Girl” (1.12), the Season One finale, both sum up the season and set forth further seasons’ complex, often comic, treatment of costume and other formal elements. This is particularly the case for the costume Buffy wears—a flowing white and cream-colored dress intended for the Spring Fling dance combined with a black leather jacket—in her final fight with the Master, an ancient vampire who is Season One’s Big Bad (primary villain). With its contrasting shapes, colors, and diverse symbolism—a disparate, yet somehow blended, union of elements—the costume visually represents the series’ own tonal and genre mixing and links Buffy with notable female literary and cultural antecedents. For instance, the white and cream dress could be read to betoken Buffy’s potential victimhood: her role as a sacrifice. Clemons argues that she appears “like a lamb to the slaughter” (para. 14)

as she enters the Master's dark realm of the sewers for a final confrontation with him. At the same time, the dress's pale hue, providing a literal and figurative light in the darkness, speaks of youth, rejuvenation, and hope even as Buffy's jacket indicates her modernity and toughness, as well as a touch of irreverence due to this unusual combination. Buffy's jacket also provides a visual connection between Buffy and the Master, as he too wears dark leather: a link that complicates their seeming dichotomy of mortal woman and ancient vampire, hero and villain, and arguably foreshadows the manner in which Buffy herself will increasingly struggle with her own darkness and sense of monstrosity as the series progresses.

The nature of Buffy's costume also foregrounds a multifaceted relationship to gendered dress conventions, recalling, in a sense, the complexity of Viola's dress and arc in *Twelfth Night*, with the dress's soft flowing material representing conventional representations of femininity while the hard, shining surface of the jacket's animal skin is associated with masculinity: a diverse mix that betokens the complex nature of the Slayer and the series as a whole. (On this particular costume and gender, see also Halfyard 42-43.) The ensemble also evokes Buffy's cultural antecedents in powerful female leaders and warriors in both fiction and real life. For example, Buffy's dress is reminiscent of an actual leader who, like Buffy, balanced multiple identities and responsibilities at a young age and did so, in part, through the power of both costume and wit: England's Queen Elizabeth I.⁸ Buffy's "Prophecy" outfit recalls Elizabeth's famous ensemble of a long white dress and metal breastplate (cuirass) worn as the monarch appeared before her army at Tilbury during the 1588 Spanish invasion.⁹ Just as Elizabeth's Tilbury dress mingled references to peace, warfare, femininity, and masculinity, so Buffy's ensemble provokes multiple meanings and emotions, from a sense of tragedy in her likely fate to admiration for her gritty heroism and her sense of humor which, despite the desperate nature of her situation, remains.

As both a visual symbol and a cue for witty comments, Buffy's Spring Fling dress brings the episode full circle, as it is this same costume that the Master compliments as he kills Buffy and that a resurrected Buffy wittily references as she defeats the Master in the episode's closing

minutes. When the Master removes Buffy's jacket, drains her, and drops her limp body into a pool of water, noting, as he does, "By the way, I like your dress" (00:32:09-10), he seems, initially, to have got the last word and the once-joyous dress becomes a shroud. Yet when Buffy is revived by Xander's breath and returns to life, reinvigorated and ready to once again confront the Master, her dress, now wet and tattered, is likewise resurrected—an essential part of her more confident, still quipping, self as she meets his amazed exclamation "You're dead" (00:40:24) with an assertion of her powers of both wit and fashion, noting, "I may be dead, but I'm still pretty. Which is more than I can say for you" (00:40:26-31). The dress then serves again as a festive sign, a fist shake to fear, in the season's final moments as the Scoobies gather in the library and Xander invites the group to celebrate their victory. The nature of Buffy's wry response as she contemplates her dress—no longer pristine but speaking overtly of her trials and ultimate triumph—reveals the resurgence, even augmentation, of her power, including her fashion sense, as she replies, "Sure. We saved the world. I say we party. I mean, I got all pretty..." (00:43:27-37).

This complex playing with, and subverting, character expectations, narrative arcs, and genre through costume while simultaneously digging into gender roles is carried over to *Angel*, as in the show's representation of its vampire protagonist Angel, whose persona as a mysterious hero who is the epitome of hard-boiled masculinity is frequently deflated through comic visual and narrative elements. These humorous disruptions of Angel's image and of masculinity generally also serve as a crucial counterbalance to the literal gloom of the show's noir aesthetic and its sometimes melancholy narrative arcs. Discussing this treatment of Angel in the series, Pateman cites the first season episode "In the Dark" (1.3) in which the visiting vampire Spike, Angel's descendant and frequent rival, voices an irreverent take-down of both Angel's clothes and his heroism in saving a young woman. Describing Spike's parody of Angel and of heroism generally, Pateman notes, "Providing his own voice-over for the action unfolding below, he impersonates the woman's thanks by saying, 'How can I thank you, you mysterious, black-clad hunk of a night thing' and then voices Angel's response to her seeming advance" (143). Spike's verbal undercutting of Angel here fulfills

multiple purposes: it provides a moment of comedy in an episode that is both literally and figuratively dark, the latter given Angel's emotional and physical suffering in the episode, while serving as a reminder of Angel's bravery and his dreamboat status even as Spike dismisses both.

Providing much-needed wit within this episode and *Angel's* first season, Spike's comedic take on Angel is also important because it serves as a reminder of the complex nature of Spike himself, a character whose power lies as much in his wit and visual flair as his strength and cunning: a combination that connects him to his antagonist Buffy and anticipates, in various ways, Whedon's treatment of Stark in *Avengers*. Such close observation of clothing and its meaning is particularly apropos from Spike, a fashion code switcher with a particularly marked sartorial history given his own move from the soft, muted clothing and spectacles of his human Victorian past to the splashes of crimson and black of his later vampire clothing, including his signature black leather duster: once Slayer Nikki Wood's coat. Yet while Spike uses the latter clothing to assert a hard-edged masculinity and overt violence, the striking contrasts provided by his clothing changes highlight the performative nature of his vampire persona, thus destabilizing that persona even as he seeks to maintain it.¹⁰ By extension, it also highlights the performative nature of the clothing and behavior of all of the other vampires in the series. The vulnerability of Spike to potentially losing that persona is highlighted in the moments in the series when he is forced to leave behind this clothing, exposing him as vulnerable in a manner not unlike Cordelia's own crises during her various losses of fashion power and status. For instance, Pateman cites the episode "Doomed" (4.11) in which a bechipped and literally and figuratively exposed Spike is forced to temporarily adopt Xander's clothing and appear in a colorful, baggy Hawaiian shirt and too-long khaki shorts combined with black shoes. Pateman notes of the ensemble, "The punk sociopath is now a parody of hopeless white trash: what on Xander was endearingly goofy is for Spike a humiliation" (99). The comedy lies not simply in the visual joke of Spike's appearance but, as Pateman notes, the tangible sense of Spike's reversal of fortune and his powerlessness, embodied in his adoption of Xander's clothing and in the other characters' amused reaction to this.

Whedon's TV series *Firefly* (2002-2003), with costumes by Shawna Trpcic, extends the nuanced, playful presentation of costume Whedon and his collaborators developed in *Buffy* and *Angel* to new genres and worlds. Notable comedic costume choices from the science-fiction/western series include the delightful incongruity of the hard-edged, often violent, gun-toting character Jayne sporting his mother's soft knitted hat, a costume choice that adds a touch of whimsy and familial affection to a figure who might otherwise seem unsympathetic, and captain Mal's floral bonnet, worn as part of his disguise as a pioneer woman traveling on a wagon-like boat in the opening of "Our Mrs. Reynolds" (1.6). Mal's clothing in this scene is a particularly rich example of the manifold possibilities available through clever costuming. On the one hand, the dress and bonnet he wears appear simply to be an example of costume used for a quick visual reversal, as the seemingly vulnerable lady beset by outlaws—fodder of so many settler-in-distress scenes in conventional westerns—is revealed to be the heavily armed Mal. That Mal swears by this same bonnet as he threatens the outlaws further amplifies the joke's visual and generic tweak, adding a linguistic flourish. However, the costume's potential meaning and its roots are much deeper and more far-reaching than a passing joke, reflecting the long history of cross-dressing in comedy and the play with gender and genre found in texts such as *Twelfth Night*. Whedon, the episode's screenwriter, directly evokes this play with identity in his choice to dress Mal as the putative damsel in distress who is accompanying her "husband" (Jayne in the costume of a male settler) rather than place one of *Serenity*'s female crewmembers, such as the similarly weapons-savvy Zoe, in this clothing. Instead, Zoe is concealed in the back of the boat, emerging at a crucial moment to drop several thieves in a spectacular fashion while clad in her usual clothing of a leather vest, shirt, and trousers—clothing that is similar to Mal's usual dress though, at this moment, diametrically opposed to his dress and bonnet.¹¹

The decision to costume Mal in this manner works on multiple levels. For one, it makes viewers confront their own assumptions regarding the "lady" in the floral bonnet, foregrounding gender conventions within the western genre and in mainstream media as a whole. In addition, the scene conveys a number of crucial pieces of

information regarding Mal's character, from his acceptance of cross-dressing and performances of identity generally to his facility in playing the part of the "lady" and his lack of concern about asserting his masculinity. This ease in reshaping his identity through clothing gestures to Mal's comfort in his own skin, a comfort viewers see literally displayed in the episode "Trash" (1.12), in which Mal appears nude. As I will discuss in my work on Banner in *Avengers*, this lack of costume and the exposing, literally and figuratively, of the protagonist's body and psyche can be treated in a humorous manner, revealing a character who feels both confident and unencumbered, as in the case of Mal, or in a much more complex manner, indicating the struggles of a character to overcome the trauma of a divided, uncertain identity, as in the case of Banner.

Together, *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* establish the strategic and nuanced ways Whedon and his collaborators employ costume, along with other mise-en-scène elements, to indicate characters' natures, engage viewers critically, and balance emotionally heavy moments and high stakes with flashes of humor.¹² As Whedon moves to the vast screens of the film medium, beginning with *Serenity* (2005), costumed by Ruth Carter, and then with *Avengers*, costumed by Alexandra Byrne, who previously worked on *Thor* (Branagh, 2011), the costume design choices in his texts become even more important, given the high visual impact of cinema and the massive economic and cultural stakes of feature films. This was particularly so in the case of *Avengers*, whose budget David Lavery puts at \$220 million in contrast to *Serenity*'s \$38 million in his discussion of the films in *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait* (169). In addition to these stakes, Whedon and Byrne faced a variety of challenges; these included the already-established nature of many of the characters' costumes and an attendant lack of flexibility to significantly alter them. At the same time, working with established characters and worlds created an advantage in that Whedon and Byrne had a template within which they could work as they sought to bring these disparate characters together.

Costume plays a crucial role in the MCU films leading up to *Avengers*, with each individual superhero's Avengers costume a visual sign of his or her character arc, as well as a source of visual spectacle. For

instance, Stark's flashy, high-tech red and gold armor, created by Stark in 2008's *Iron Man* (Favreau), the first MCU film, both protects and makes extraordinary his vulnerable body, which was severely wounded by shrapnel in a terrorist attack. Stark's choice to continue to wear this armor in successive films, including *Avengers*, along with his sometimes-cutting dialogue and unruly behavior, reveals, despite his attempts to cover it, the emotional and physical vulnerability he conceals within this armored carapace. In contrast to Stark's attempts to camouflage his body and emotional state, the stars and stripes of Steve Rogers's/Captain America's bright red, white, and blue superhero costume overtly proclaim that character's nature, particularly his patriotism and call to duty as a soldier during World War II, while visibly proclaiming a nostalgic sense of an idealized American past. A further costume difference to the dramatic costumes of both Stark and Rogers, as well as to the visually spectacular Asgardian Thor, resplendent in a long red cape and metal breastplate, is provided by the black, relatively plain superhero costumes worn by Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow and Clint Barton/Hawkeye, whose costumes' utilitarian design and dark shades speak to the characters' covert activities with S.H.I.E.L.D. and their shadowy, violent pasts. The relatively unobtrusive and understated appearance of these costumes and of Romanoff and Barton themselves not only make the characters seem less visibly spectacular but remind viewers of their power difference from their fellow superpowered Avengers and thus their greater vulnerability. At the same time, this visual difference serves to make the characters stand out, especially when one adds to this the issue of gender difference in the case of Romanoff, as I will address later in the essay.

As Stark, Rogers, and the film's other superheroes are introduced in short vignettes in the opening scenes of *The Avengers*, their superhero costumes remain a sign of their distinct individuality, a visual and cultural difference that gestures to the difficulty of uniting them as a team. When they are all, with the exception of the brainwashed Barton, eventually gathered in a single location—S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Helicarrier—Whedon and Byrne use these visual differences to highlight this individuality and build the tensions underneath their interactions as they struggle with their cultural/character differences. At the same time, their superhero

costumes gesture to a visual cohesion, the various shared excesses of the costumes knitting the characters together onscreen and foreshadowing their move towards unity in the film's finale. This move is crucially navigated, in part, through humor, with the jokes that each superhero, with the exception of Romanoff, make about his own flamboyant appearance and nature, as well as that of his fellow Avengers, central to that union. This joking is both similar to and significantly different from the ways in which the Avengers take jabs, literally and figuratively, at their opponents, particularly the deliberately theatrical, appearance-centered Loki, the excesses of whose ornate green and gold costume with its vast metallic antlers demand a comedic response.

And the superhero who most fully answers that call to comedy is the Avenger who, fittingly, also wears a highly theatrical, psychologically revealing superhero costume and favors a witty turn of phrase: Stark. While Stark's irreverence in word and deed is a feature of previous MCU films, Whedon dials up this element of the character and actor Robert Downey Jr.'s portrayal of him, creating a Stark who is both traditional hero and wise fool, self-reflexive in his mockery and deeply aware of everything around him, including the nature of other characters' clothing. Like Cordelia, who wields her power through, in part, her fashion sense and quick, often cutting, tongue, Stark deftly highlights the comic possibilities of most of the other characters' costumes and the deeper meanings behind them, in the process revealing important character and plot points and providing necessary moments of humor to lighten the film's tone. At the same time, Stark's irreverent, unfiltered approach to other characters' costumes also serves as a source of dramatic tension, highlighting the flaws and insecurities of the people who wear these costumes while simultaneously revealing Stark's own (armored) Achilles heel: his fears about his own vulnerability and his potential inability to rise to the challenges posed by Loki and the invading Chitauri and to equal the talents and bravery of his fellow Avengers.

For instance, in Stark's first encounter with Loki, who has transformed into his full Asgardian costume and vast horned headdress in a deliberately theatrical choice meant to instill fear and amazement in Earth's citizens, the Avenger attacks the Asgardian using both his

repulsor rays and his wit. His reference to Loki as “Reindeer Games” (00:42:35) mocks Loki’s elaborate get-up and operatic language as cartoonish and childish and enacts a momentary reversal of fortune: Loki’s threats and violence previously carried the day, but he is now the one on the defensive. In his containment of Loki through word and deed, Stark echoes the defeat of fear that Bakhtin notes was an essential aspect of medieval carnival: “The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a ‘comic monster’” (91). And in disrupting Loki’s intimidation, the disruptive, witty Stark allows at least a temporary alleviation of tension for the characters onscreen and for viewers.

While Stark reserves his most cutting wit, including his jokes about costume, for the film’s antagonists, he does not spare his fellow male Avengers, particularly Rogers and Thor—a behavior that initially frays their tentative efforts at team-building but eventually strengthens them. The similar and yet distinct nature of Stark’s jabs at the other male Avengers and the diverse effects of these jabs are instructive, revealing as much (or more) about Stark’s own insecurities and aesthetic judgements as that of his targets. Notably, Stark’s teasing of Rogers regarding the latter’s appearance and history, while often comic, shades more fully towards the serious, revealing the generational tension and contested ground regarding style versus substance that becomes a through line in their character interrelations. In contrast, Stark’s pokes at Thor are usually used for more overtly comic purposes, highlighting the theatrical nature of Thor’s costume, of Thor himself, and of the superhero costume and genre generally.

The dichotomous nature of Stark’s and Rogers’s characters is highlighted in their increasingly tense conversations in the Helicarrier lab as they discuss Nick Fury’s motives in bringing them together and their respective powers and identities, a discussion facilitated largely through the contrasts Whedon builds into each man’s reactions to his own and his opposite’s costume. The interchange begins with Stark wearing his civilian clothes, here a Black Sabbath t-shirt and dark jeans, and verbally jabbing at Rogers, who is already suited up in his superhero costume. Stark dismisses Rogers’s input regarding their situation, noting, “Of the people in this room which one is A. wearing a spangly outfit and B. not of use” (00:58:39-42). Rogers’s response is telling, for while he too

focuses on an issue of costume as the measure of the man, so to speak, he does so in a way that addresses the vulnerability of Stark's own body and psyche in contrast to his seemingly impenetrable metal suit, retorting, "Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?" (01:10:11-14). While Stark has a quick reply that not only reminds the viewer of the speed of his wit but of the many sources of his economic and social power beyond his fantastic armor—"Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist" (01:10;15-17)—the reply's glibness reveals to both Rogers and viewers the brittleness of Stark's façade, his fear that he is simply a void encased in flashy, high-tech armor: all style and no substance. At the same time, Rogers demonstrates here, and elsewhere, his own vulnerability: his fear that he is indeed, as Stark argues, "not of use," as in his earlier question to Agent Coulson when the former discusses some adjustments to Rogers's Captain America suit, "The uniform? Aren't the stars and stripes a little...old fashioned?" (00:28:56-00:29:00). Rogers's anxiety regarding his costume reveals a larger concern that he might be a relic of the past: out of touch with, and unneeded in, this new world.

Yet while Rogers's treatment of Stark and issues of costume here is serious, Rogers's growing comfort throughout the film in returning to the world and becoming a member of a team is revealed through the witticisms about costume he increasingly voices, showing that he and Stark can indeed function as teammates, albeit bickering ones. For instance, when Thor first appears, Stark immediately makes fun of his costume; he then flies off after Thor when the demigod snatches the captive Loki. Preparing to follow them, Rogers is cautioned by Romanoff that the Asgardians' power is beyond him. He replies as he prepares to jump, "There's only one God, ma'am, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that" (00:44:33-35). By allowing the often-serious Rogers to get in on the act of mocking Thor's costume, Whedon's script accomplishes multiple aims: it serves as a reminder of both Rogers's faith and his capacity for dry wit and it ties him to Stark and the other Avengers. Additionally, in taking Thor down a peg or two through a critique of his costume, Rogers humanizes this near-perfect alien figure.

If moments of such costume critique allow Whedon to more fully develop the do-gooder Rogers while bringing Thor figuratively down to

earth, Stark's pokes at Thor provide an even more profound sense of comedic reversal that acknowledges the improbable nature of Thor's clothing, Thor, and the world of *Avengers* and the superhero genre itself. Confronting Thor after he takes Loki from the Avengers, Stark leads with his wit, responding to Thor's indication that he should not meddle by saying, "Uh, Shakespeare in the Park? Doth mother know you weareth her drapes? (00:47:00-04). Stark's clothing critique ably highlights the dramatic, excessive nature of Thor's appearance, from the shining, intricately etched armor that highlights his muscles and makes him appear even more spectacular to the flourish of his long red cape. In associating Thor's apparel, particularly his cape, with the feminine, his "mother," and with the domestic space, "her drapes," Stark casts Thor as a juvenile, a child playing dress-up in his mother's home furnishing, and feminizes the demigod despite his hypermasculine appearance.

Such exchanges are not only entertaining, alleviating moments of tension and violence, but essential to the film's balance of tone and genre. For just as the spectacular nature of the heroes' clothing might seem over-the-top without self-reflexive wit and fooling, so the film might veer into the ridiculous or, given its apocalyptic narrative, the horrific, without Whedon's use of comedy's disruptive, topsy-turvy force to leaven these elements. Discussing this force, Rowe notes, "Like carnival, comedy levels the lofty and erases distinctions, replacing the exalted hero of tragedy with one reduced to the level of Everyman, or lower" (44). Rowe's point seems particularly pertinent in considering the Avengers themselves: heroic, superhuman figures who are also flawed and vulnerable, the comedy supplying the emotional component that humanizes the characters and grounds the fantasy of their world in its own kind of reality. In gesturing to their costumes through visual jokes and dialogue, Whedon both acknowledges the strangeness of the enterprise of these characters, films, and genres and celebrates them.

Yet while costume is largely a source of levity within the film, there are two notable characters that complicate this argument—Romanoff and Banner—who must be considered. The costumes of these two characters are addressed in very different ways than those of Stark, Rogers, and Thor. In the case of Romanoff, her costumes, from her superhero costume of a relatively unadorned black bodysuit to her

usual civilian clothing of leather jackets, t-shirts, and trousers, are not addressed: with one notable exception.¹³ In the case of Banner, who lacks a superhero costume save his own ordinary/extraordinary body as both Banner and the Hulk, issues of trauma complicate comedic representations of his (dual) identity. I will take these characters and their costumes in turn to consider how issues surrounding Romanoff's and Banner's costumes speak to the complexity of issues of representation and tonal balance within *Avengers*.

The lack of discussion of Romanoff's costume is a mystery, the key to which might be Romanoff's gender and the perceived difficulty of addressing the female superhero costume and her body. There seems to be a reluctance on the part of Whedon as the screenwriter and director of *Avengers* to address the cultural freight of representations of women's bodies in media, specifically the tendency to make their bodies erotic objects through, amongst other means, the use of body-revealing costumes.¹⁴ By choosing not, in the main, to address Romanoff's costume in jest or any other manner, Whedon may wish to avoid this issue, even as the choice to not address her costume serves, to some degree, to highlight Romanoff's costume and body even more fully, particularly as the costume, despite any potential wish to avoid the treatment mentioned above, hugs Romanoff's curves in a manner that elicits the gaze.

The arguable exception to the manner in which Romanoff's costumes are not remarked upon and remain outside the realm of costume and comedy occurs in the character's introduction, which shows her undercover in her S.H.I.E.L.D. field work. Unlike the majority of the film's length, here Romanoff wears an outfit that is traditionally feminine—a sleeveless black dress with stockings but no shoes—and her bare skin is displayed in a manner that makes her the source of attention for the Russian thugs, all male, who are interrogating her and for viewers. Tied to a chair, she seems vulnerable and scared: the very image of the damsel in distress, just like Mal in his flowered bonnet. Here again, however, costume is used for a reversal, the overt femininity and elegance of the dress contrasted with the aggressive, acrobatic moves that Romanoff uses to free herself and to subdue the Russians. Her defeat of the men ends as she scoops up her nearby heels and walks

away, the delicacy of her shoes a sharp contrast with Romanoff herself, who, as the scene establishes, is certainly no delicate flower.

The final example of the possibilities and complications surrounding the use of comedy and costume I will discuss is Banner's costume, or lack thereof. Unlike the other characters, whose superhero personas are conveyed, to an extent, through their superhero costumes, Banner has no such shell; instead, it is his body, or rather the body of his other identity the Hulk, that is, in a sense, his costume. This is one of the crucial reasons that while clothing becomes a source of comedy for many of the other Avengers, for Banner it is, in part, a source of trauma, as his Hulk persona announces his emergence by ripping through Banner's clothes as his body transforms into the giant green frame of the Hulk. Despite this dissolution of most of his clothing, Banner's trousers usually remain on the body of his Hulk persona, providing a visual reminder of that other self. That these trousers disappear entirely in Hulk's transformation back to Banner as he crashes to earth following his aerial combat with a fighter jet near the Helicarrier is significant, potentially removing the last vestiges of Banner's self in the loss of both his psychic and physical coverings; the result is that when Banner wakes up in the warehouse, as discussed in the essay's opening, he is completed naked.

Discussing the nature of nudity and its effects in "The Dressed Body," Joanne Entwistle notes the importance for human beings of clothing, arguing that "When we dress we do so to make our bodies acceptable to a social situation" (35). As he awakens in the warehouse, Banner finds himself exposed, and thus socially unacceptable both physically and psychologically. Kate Soper maintains in "Dress Needs: Reflections on the Clothed Body, Selfhood and Consumption" that "clothes have been very extensively used to assert the cultural status of human beings, to police the border between humans and animals, to deny or cover over our animality and thereby preserve a seemingly distance from the beast" (17). In finding himself naked, Banner is close to the beast, both in this sense of clothing being the distinguishing mark between human and non-human animals and in the sense that it places him closer to the Hulk, who is usually partially nude and associated with a sense of a loss of human boundaries and social barriers. While nudity is

used in other Whedon texts as a source of comedy—as in Mal’s nudity in “Trash”—in this scene it is also associated with a strong sense of trauma that makes the already-complex figure of Banner/the Hulk even more profound.¹⁵ As Yann Roblou argues in “The Superhero in Modern American Movies,” the superhero can seem a decidedly ambivalent, even threatening, figure given his/her physical and emotional difference from regular humans. Roblou notes that this is especially so in the case of the Hulk: “The Hulk is probably the most appropriate illustration of this ambivalent experience of the sublime: the character’s spectacularly amplified rage turns him into a monster (an heir to Frankenstein’s creation), whose existential fear and hatred of the whole world takes on a fantasied capability of destruction and yet lends him the dimension of an object of pity in the eyes of the spectator” (81). In fully stripping away the Hulk persona in transforming him back into the vulnerable Banner while further removing Banner’s last security in taking away the character’s clothing entirely, Whedon both acknowledges this sense of pity and chides Banner and, in a sense, viewers for it—for, as the guard reminds Banner, some things can indeed be solved with just a pair of pants. The sense of Banner’s trauma in this scene and in all those leading up to it is increased by this nudity, and yet it is also the thing that allows the audience—and Banner—to move past it.

In his essay “Monster Culture” (Seven Theses)” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, “The co-option of the monster into a symbol of the desirable is often accomplished through the neutralization of potentially threatening aspects with a liberal dose of comedy: the thundering giant becomes the bumbling giant” (18). Cohen’s description of the transformation of the monster seems very much like the arc of the Hulk’s representation within the film as a whole, particularly in this scene, as the character is moved from a representation as a vast, threatening, and powerful being to a diminutive and vulnerable figure who can have a very human connection through his dialogue with the security guard, perfectly performed by character actor Harry Dean Stanton, and through the gift of the pants. Given new clothing, Banner seems to discover fresh purpose, setting out to find the rest of the Avengers and join the Battle of New York to successfully defeat Loki and the Chitauri.

As Rowe notes, one of the essential aspects of comedy is “an impulse towards renewal and social transformation” (44), and through laughing together about costumes while suiting up in them, the Avengers learn to bond and trust each other. Similarly, viewers are reminded of Buffy’s resilience when, despite being killed by the Master in her shimmering Spring Fling Dress, she returns in that same dress to kill him, noting before she does that she may be dead, but she’s still “pretty.” As these examples illustrate, Whedon’s characters use their costumes and their quipping about them to demonstrate their humanity, the ways in which, despite their traumas and troubles, they carry on, fooling with fashion.

Notes

¹ In “Joss Whedon Throws His Mighty Shield: *The Avengers* as War Movie” from *Reading Joss Whedon*, Ensley F. Guffey argues, “Whedon gathered all the disparate elements of *The Avengers* within the generic form of the classic combat film as defined by his former film studies professor at Wesleyan University, Jeanine Basinger” (281). Guffey then reads the film through Basinger’s description of the genre’s requirements, detailed in *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*.

² Encountering the unconscious Sly in *Shrew*’s frame play, a Lord muses to his huntsmen about playing a game of role reversal with Sly, noting, “What think you, if he were convey’d to bed, / Wrapp’d in sweet clothes, rings put upon his fingers, / A most delicious banquet by his bed, / And brave attendants near him when he wakes, / Would not the beggar then forget himself?” (1.1.38-42). The Lord then has his men dress, bathe, and treat Sly in just such a manner. The Lord’s game includes requesting that some visiting players go along with the joke and stage a play for Sly, a play that amplifies the frame play’s focus on the performance of identity in scenes such as the dispute over dress in Act 4, scene 3, that forms part of the marital power play between the rebellious “shrew” Katherina and her husband Petruchio.

³ Viola’s choice of identity for her disguise reveals a good deal about her character, not only demonstrating her practical nature in solving the problem of being a young woman stranded in a foreign land in need of an employer/protector through this dress and her employment with the Duke Orsino but gesturing to the trauma of her bereavement, a loss she addresses in assuming Sebastian’s dress and mannerisms to, in a sense, bring him back to life even as she absorbs his passing. She soon regrets the disguise, noting when the Countess Viola expresses interest in “Cesario,” “Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much” (2.2.27-28).

⁴ Notably, the dress disruptions Elizabethan theatre-goers encountered were not contained

to the plays themselves. Elizabethan actors frequently wore lush and lavish costumes in violation of the period's sumptuary laws, a display that may have thrilled, and disturbed, audience members. Discussing such dress transgression in his essay "Festivity, dressing up and misrule in *Twelfth Night*" for the British Library's webpages on Shakespeare and the Renaissance, scholar Michael Dobson notes, "This was one reason some anti-theatrical writers gave for wanting to close down the playhouses: not only did they provide an arena in which spectators could show off their own inappropriately dressy outfits, but when not watching each other they could enjoy the spectacle of mere common players dressed up as lords and kings" (par. 2). Thus, the costume shifts by Viola and other characters within *Twelfth Night* may not only serve as diegetic vehicles for gender swapping and social play, prompting the playwright, characters, and viewers to delve into thought-provoking questions about identity formation and convention, but they may also have moved audience members to question their own dress and the social conventions that formed and regulated that dress.

⁵ The selection of the Tramp costume forms a memorable set-piece in the film *Chaplin* (Attenborough, 1992). As the older Chaplin discusses the character's formation in voiceover with his editor as he prepares to write his autobiography, the youthful Chaplin is pictured onscreen entering the studio's wardrobe shed. The words and image initially present the costume selection as a sort of magical possession, with Chaplin's voiceover noting that the figure seemed to call out to him, as crucial elements of the Tramp costume are highlighted—from the bowler hat that glows, then magically moves up Chaplin's arm and onto his head, to a cane that rattles in its stand to gain Chaplin's attention before flying towards his waiting hand. This fantasy is interrupted by the voice of George, Chaplin's editor, who uses a short, curt profanity to voice his disbelief at this story. Chaplin acquiesces to George's skepticism even as he argues for the need to embroider the truth. The sequence continues without a voiceover, showing Chaplin hurrying around the wardrobe area in speeded up motion to quickly assemble the rest of the Tramp outfit. It then presents him moving towards the filming area, discovering his famous duck-footed walk, thanks to his too-large shoes, as he does so.

⁶ An example of the manner in which Whedon and company mine comedy from the disruption of Cordelia's polished appearance can be found in "Homecoming" (3.5), in which the prom-attired Buffy and Cordelia are hunted by Mr. Trick and his fellow villains and end up bloodied and disheveled by the time they arrive at prom. Despite their scrapes, both Cordelia and Buffy retain their physical and linguistic skills, ultimately triumphing over the villains even as they lose the title of prom queen. One of the best encapsulations of the nature of Cordelia's character arc occurs in "The Prom" (3.20), in which financial problems in Cordelia's home mean that she cannot afford a dress for prom and must work to earn one, a position she finds humiliating when Xander discovers it. He later finishes the remaining payments on the dress she desires, an act that reveals not only Xander's generosity and his desire to make amends for their breakup earlier in the season, but also Cordelia's newfound grace when she thanks him for the gift.

⁷ When Buffy notes the vampire, Giles protests, "But you don't know," to which Buffy replies, "Oh, please. Look at his jacket. He's got the sleeves rolled up. And the shirt... Deal with that outfit for a moment." To Giles's question, "It's dated?" Buffy emphasizes, "It's carbon dated!" (00:32:34-43).

⁸ Discussing the Queen's attributes in *The Life of Elizabeth*, Alison Weir notes Elizabeth's fondness for the comic, arguing, "Like her mother, the Queen reveled in jests, practical jokes and 'outwitting the wittiest'. She would laugh uproariously at the antics of the comic actor Richard Tarleton, and her female dwarf" (229). Weir notes that the Queen was herself witty, and she relates the following incident as evidence of her linguistic skills: "When a French ambassador complained about her having kept him waiting six days for an audience, she sweetly retorted, 'It is true that the world was made in six days, but it was by God, to whose power the infirmity of man is not to be compared'" (229).

⁹ As Weir notes in *Elizabeth*, one of the most prominent examples of Elizabeth using dress as a form of visual rhetoric occurred on the occasion of the Spanish Armada and her trip to Tilbury to address the troops. Weir describes her appearance on her arrival on August 8th thus, using quotes drawn from contemporary accounts: "Escorted by Leicester, who walked bare-headed holding her bridle, and riding a large white gelding 'attired like an angel bright', the Queen appeared before her troops in the guise of 'some Amazonian empress' in a white velvet dress with a shining silver cuirass, and preceded by a page carrying her silver helmet on a white cushion and the Earl of Ormonde bearing the sword of state" (392). Weir describes the applause that met her appearance amidst the troops on August 9th, the day she delivered the famous Tilbury speech, and the manner in which her appearance was once again keyed to the moment: "When the clamour had died down, the soldiers acted out a mock engagement, after which they paraded before her. Then, 'most bravely mounted on a most stately steed', and dressed as 'an armed Pallas' with her silver breastplate and a small silver and gold leader's truncheon in her hand, the Queen again touched their hearts by delivering the most rousing and famous speech of her reign" (393). In that speech, which Weir then quotes, the Queen famously describes herself as a monarch who combines elements of the female and the male, strength and vulnerability, noting, "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too..." (393).

¹⁰ This performativity is further highlighted by the manner in which Spike's clothing is linked to pop culture performers and their own performances of masculinity and sexuality; perhaps the most prominent example of this is the character's similarity to the English punk rocker Billy Idol, whose black leather clothing and spiked platinum hair are, according to Buffy's discussion of this dress in the *Buffy* episode "Sleeper" (7.8), reputedly modelled on Spike's dress.

¹¹ To heighten the gender play of the scene, Whedon's dialogue for the next scene includes an interchange between Mal, now dressed in his regular clothing of a shirt, trousers, and long jacket, and Inara. The latter asks why Zoe did not wear the dress and Mal's reply stresses his practical nature and confidence in Zoe's marksmanship while foregrounding his playfulness, especially with Inara: "Tactics, woman. I needed her covering the back. Besides, those soft cotton dresses feel kind of nice. There's a whole airflow" (00:02:16-26). To Inara's question, "And you would know that because..." (00:02:27-29) he simply replies, "You can't open the book of my life and jump in the middle. Like woman, I am a mystery" (00:02:30-35). Whedon here lets Mal tease Inara's and viewers' expectations regarding the behavior of the sometimes ruthless captain by showing his teasing as well as his tactical side while, through dialogue, aligning him with women as "a mystery," a gesture to his largely unexplored past

and a further underlining of his cross-dressing.

¹² Whedon's TV series *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) also contains, at times, a satiric take on costume that works to balance its often-dark tone, courtesy of its generic heritage as a conspiracy thriller. Examples of this include "Echoes" (1.7), in which a virus that lowers inhibitions causes characters such as the controlled Adelle DeWitt, director of the Los Angeles Dollhouse, to become disheveled as she plays like a child while programmer Topher Brink wanders around without trousers, and "Belle Chose" (2.3), in which the serial killer A plot is interwoven with a B plot in which the Doll Echo is shown delighting in a make-over administered by Franklin, the Dollhouse's resident style advisor and (apparently) wit, who, when questioned about the length of the process by Paul Ballard, Echo's impatient handler, replies, "Changing their insides is nothing—zip, zip. The outsides, that's art. Art takes time. Magazine?" (00:09:50-00:10:00).

¹³ The only notable objects of adornment that Romanoff wears are two belts, one with a red and black hourglass symbol reminiscent of the design on the black widow spider and a second belt, used to attach her weapons holsters. She also wears bracelets around each wrist, the so-called Widow's Bite, which can be used to carry tech.

¹⁴ Such objectification of the female body is a long-standing source of criticism by cinema theorists, one of the most notable being Laura Mulvey, who in her essay "Narrative Cinema and Visual Pleasure" notes, "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (719). Thus Romanoff's representation in her black bodysuit is potentially more vexed than that of Barton, even though his costume of black pants and a black top reads as somewhat similar to her costume, albeit it is much less form-fitting.

¹⁵ *Buffy* contains several notable examples of nudity used to convey, to various degrees, elements of humor or trauma. For instance, a largely comedic representation of nudity occurs in "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" (2.16), in which Buffy is transformed into a rat by Amy Madison, a witch. Buffy returns to her human form when Amy and Giles find a way to break the spell, and Oz, who has been searching for her, discovers her naked, much to their mutual consternation. That Oz is the one to discover Buffy naked is interesting, given that in "Phases" (2.15) he learns that he is now a werewolf when he wakes up nude in the forest, having transformed from his werewolf form back into his human form. While the moment is played with a touch of humor given Oz's bemused reaction to this discovery, this nudity is primarily a source of trauma for Oz, associated as it is with his lack of control of such shifts and the danger he poses in his werewolf form—a situation similar to Banner's shifting into Hulk and, with this, his "beast" form.

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