

## Vicious Bitches?: Joss Whedon, “Billy,” and the Cultural Retext

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“I have never hurt a woman in my life! ...I just like to watch.”  
(Billy Blim, “Billy” *Angel* 3.6, 12:19-22, Minear & Bell)

### Introduction

As part of the ongoing #MeToo/Time’s Up movement that has roiled Hollywood, in February 2021, after nearly two decades of rumor and speculation, actress Charisma Carpenter used the social media platform Twitter<sup>1</sup> to recount ongoing abuse suffered at the hands of executive producer Joss Whedon while working on the television series *Angel*. Her posts recounted abuse ranging from threats of firing to criticism of her weight and denigration of her faith, culminating in being written out of the show due to real-life pregnancy. Carpenter, who played main cast character Cordelia Chase in the first three seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the first four seasons of its spin-off series *Angel* (1999-2004), received immediate support and affirmation from several other actors and series personnel who had worked with Whedon and herself

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on these shows.<sup>2</sup> Her revelations form the latest in a series of such claims that question Whedon's long-held status as a male feminist television series creator. Even more so, these claims inevitably lead to a reconsideration of the series he created, casting them in a more complicated light.

When Carpenter took to social media to describe the toxic work environment she experienced on the series, her complaints—including her character's creative direction, her employment on the show, and instances of interpersonal cruelty—singled out Whedon. To date, she has had nothing negative to say about Greenwalt or the showrunners who followed him in the series' final seasons. In her telling, it is Whedon, rather than the ostensible showrunner, whom Carpenter must inform about her real-life pregnancy in an uncomfortable meeting where he cannot contain his displeasure at her announcement because it will interfere with his creative ideas for the upcoming season. Whedon receives her ire for what she describes as persistent traumatic after-effects due to her mistreatment on the series during her pregnancy, which she claims led to false labor caused by the stress of late work nights and middle of the night call times. According to Carpenter, Whedon deserves blame for the abrupt tonal shift of her character and her unsatisfying arc over the fourth season: her final season as a regular cast member, and one where her character was impregnated and gave birth to a demonic female force that served as the season's primary antagonist. Whedon is likewise taken to task for creating and fostering production environments where people he likes receive preferential treatment, while those he does not are shunned and verbally abused. This evidence suggests that, regardless of his official title on the series, Joss Whedon is every bit the center of *Angel* that he was of *Buffy*. It argues that

Whedon, more than anyone else, is responsible for the tone of both the series and its production work environment. Combined with the way discourse around shows with which he is involved is commonly framed, connection and attribution of auteur status to Whedon are virtually inevitable, regardless of the complicated realities of production.<sup>3</sup>

Using television scholar Taylor Cole Miller's concept of the retext (2021), which argues that more than merely a change of context, changed viewing circumstances produce a new televisual text, this paper examines a single episode from season three of *Angel* that ostensibly critiques misogyny. Examined in 2021 through these theoretical lenses and armed with this new knowledge concerning the series' working conditions, the episode "Billy" (3.6) and by extension, the series is retextualized, encouraging a less singular, female-empowered reading. In its place, a darker, more complex, and ambivalent text is revealed in how Carpenter describes her years of labor in the "Whedonverse." A rich, rhizomatic web of paratextual information interweaves the audience's perceived relationship to Whedon as an auteur, episodes of *Angel*, Whedon's other series, interviews, public statements, widely circulated rumors, and criticism to form the broader Whedonverse intertext through which "Billy" is retextualized in 2021.

The present idea is that a single episode of *Angel* might serve as a model for a retextual look at *Angel* and the broader Whedonverse. What follows is a look at the episode demonstrating the application of Miller's ideas concerning the cultural retext, one that reveals a "Billy" that is a fundamentally more complicated text. Considered in light of Carpenter's statement in 2021, the epigram at the beginning of this essay, "I have never hurt a woman in my life! ...I just like to watch," ("Billy" 3.6 12:19-22) ascribes chilling connotations to "Billy," the

series from which it originates, and, by extension, Joss Whedon. By reexamining this episode, the present purpose is to both reveal the episode and suggest the series from which it originates as a more complex, ambivalent text as prone to reading as misogynistic reaction formation as to feminist empowerment, and to encourage contemporary viewers of the episode (and series) to situate themselves, their viewership, and the text itself within their specific cultural and historical moment and knowledge.

### *Angel* and “Billy”

Co-created by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Whedon and producer David Greenwalt, *Angel* is a spin-off of the earlier series. Set in Los Angeles, it follows the titular vampire with a soul as he forms a supernatural detective agency, Angel Investigations, which he uses to “help the helpless” (“Rm w/a Vu” 1.5 00:42-44). Described at the time of its initial airing as a darker, more adult counterpart to *Buffy*’s teen angst,<sup>4</sup> both series have at least one foot firmly planted in horror as a genre. While it eventually settled into a format described by writer-producer Tim Minear as a near-operatic structure that developed over its span (Gross, 2009), *Angel*’s more episodic design is framed in a stylized version of a primarily nocturnal LA that owes as much of its mood and structure to a neo-noir take on that city’s urban spaces as its predecessor series owes to the complexity of comic book serialized narrative generally. Virtually from *Angel*’s outset, the vampire is joined in his investigations by Cordelia Chase. Introduced on *Buffy* as a thorn in the side of its title character, throughout that series’ early seasons, Cordelia transforms from high school antagonist to reluctant member of the crew that helps vampire slayer Buffy

Summers defend fictional Sunnydale and the world from the forces of darkness.

Reintroduced in *Angel's* pilot episode, she is now a young woman struggling to get an acting career off the ground in the City of Angels. After her fortuitous reunion with Angel and in need of steady work, Cordelia joins what becomes the nascent detective agency, even naming it. Intended to act as a foil to Angel's brooding, skulking darkness, her character and role deepen during the series. Without entirely sacrificing her lightness and humor, she serves as a grounding force for Angel, both his most stalwart aide and the one most likely to remind him of his appointed task as a champion of the forces of good protecting people from evil. Gifted early in the first season with the power of supernatural sight, Cordelia is revealed to be every bit the brave champion as her vampire employer and friend by the time of the episode "Billy."

That episode is the sixth episode of *Angel's* third season. Written by Tim Minear and Jeffrey Bell and directed by David Grossman, it takes its title from the recently introduced Billy Blim. In this episode, Angel investigates an unexplained wave of violence against women plaguing LA quickly linking it to Blim. Freed by Angel from a demonic prison cell in an alternate dimension in an earlier episode of the series ("That Vision Thing" 3.2), Billy, the scion of a well-connected, wealthy political family, is shown to be a half-demon possessed with the power of activating escalating violent misogyny in men through his touch. Throughout the episode, Blim uses this power so he can voyeuristically experience the resulting violence and mayhem. Framed by scenes of Angel teaching Cordelia martial arts techniques, "Billy" sees other female characters placed in harm's way by Blim's power. Fellow Angel Investigations team member Winifred "Fred" Burkle must use her wits and

resources to defend herself from two of her male colleagues after they are exposed to a sample of Blim's blood. In contrast, Lilah Morgan, a series antagonist and employee of demonic law firm Wolfram & Hart, is severely beaten by a colleague Billy has infected. Although Cordelia confronts Billy, Angel interrupts their exchange, interposing himself as the hero in an encounter in which Billy unsuccessfully attempts to infect the vampire with misogynistic rage. However, Lilah ultimately shoots and kills Blim, undoing the misogynistic spell affecting the other male members of Angel Investigations.

While often acknowledging that its presentation is overdetermined, conventional readings of the episode unfailingly observe its negative critique of the problems of misogyny (Murray, 2010; Oshiro, 2012; Shangel, 2015). Naming it to their list of the best television episodes of 2001, website *The Futon Critic's* Brian Ford Sullivan states that "no show pushes as many buttons at the same time as this one" (2002). Along similar lines, writing for *DVD Verdict*, Brett Cullum characterizes the episode as an unsubtle homage to Stanley Kubrick's film version of Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980) complete with a scene of a character taking a fire ax to a door with the overarching message that "misogyny is BAD" (2004). In addition to its critique of male misogyny, the active roles played by Cordelia, Fred, and Lilah make this episode something of a spotlight for the series' female characters as capable and heroic. This is particularly true of Lilah, whose role is typically antagonistic to Angel and company. In describing the episode as one of her favorites, the actor who plays the character, Stephanie Romanov, has said, "It was the only time Lilah was a hero" (Stafford, 2004, p. 208).

Rather than treating that text as a fixed object from the past, one that is untouched by or somehow distinct from the

knowledge gained in intervening years concerning the circumstances of its production, viewers are urged to observe that the present knowledge and circumstances produce a new text related to but distinct from “Billy” as it appeared when it aired initially. Whatever else it might represent in 2021 and beyond, the experience of watching *Angel* is undoubtedly complicated, retextualized by the knowledge of the suffering inflicted on members of cast and crew by series creator Joss Whedon claimed by Carpenter and others.

### **Move the Line: Retextuality**

Viewed in 2021 and with knowledge of the series’ working conditions, the episode and series are darker, their relationship to misogyny revealed as much more ambivalent than merely critical. Taylor Cole Miller (2021) coined “retextualization” to describe an instrumental concept for how viewing contexts frame the televisual experience that offers insight into what happens to a text such as “Billy” in light of Carpenter’s revelations. While more directly concerned with how syndication and reruns are intentionally reframed in different programming contexts and how these produce different texts that deserve to be treated on those terms,<sup>5</sup> the framework Miller offers is crucial in making sense of the changed viewing experience of “Billy” in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his look at retextualized reruns, Miller (2021) even broaches a particular form of retextuality, the “cultural/organic” (p. 11), that is directly applicable to the experience of viewing “Billy” and *Angel* in 2021.

Offering a framework building on the ideas of televisual intertext and paratext, retextuality presents specific language to frame the present experience. John Fiske (1987) describes the

televisual intertextual relationship as not established in “specific allusions from one text to another” (108). Instead, not unlike Raymond Williams’ (1997) ideas describing the televisual experience in terms of the medium’s “flow,” for Fiske (1987), intertextuality exists “in the space between texts,” in the cultural “memory bank” a viewer employs to link texts to help to make meaning of them (p. 108). Fiske goes on to delineate types of intertextuality. One such form, the vertical, which typically involves secondary and tertiary texts that exist in criticism or response to the original text, turns out to be critical in retextualizing the *Angel* episode and series, albeit taking an unexpected paratextual form. Relatedly, Jonathan Gray (2010) adopted the word “paratext” to describe the media objects surrounding a text trailers, promotional materials, bonus materials, reviews, and the like and the way that those objects surrounding the text become sites of meaning-making relative to the text itself. As elucidated by Gray, the paratext further suggests that meanings of media texts are both made and remade due to this paratextual relationship. Included among these paratexts are social media posts such as Carpenter’s concerning her experiences in creating this series.

In introducing the concept of the cultural/organic retext in passing, Miller asserts that, even when the text itself has not been deliberately reformatted or modified, retextualization can occur. Retextuality expands the understanding of the televisual intertext and paratext and their shaping effects on the textual experience, offering a more specific way to approach a text like “Billy.” The social media posts and news reports cataloging and describing Whedon’s behavior and the actors’ experiences of it over the years form paratextual materials to *Angel*, which are woven into the intertext of the series and the broader experience of the “Whedonverse.”



Without using the term itself, in writing about re-viewing *The Cosby Show* in light of the revelations concerning its star Bill Cosby, blogger Zeba Blay (2017) describes the impossibility of separating the character and the series from what is known about Cosby's contemporaneous predation. The specific example episode Blay offers ("The Last Barbecue" *The Cosby Show* 7.3) is one in which the character played by Cosby spikes a barbecue sauce with an unidentified chemical substance that, as he describes it, makes those who consume it "huggy buggy" (23:07-23:47). Initially played for laughs, when viewed with the information concerning Cosby's real-life modus operandi drugging women to render them unconscious so he could sexually violate them, both that episode and *The Cosby Show* take on a distinct, sinister character unavailable upon its initial broadcast but subsequently inescapable for those armed with the knowledge of the star's criminality. As Miller (2021) describes it, "Our understanding of *Cosby* as the moral family sitcom it had always been suddenly inverts, opening possibilities for a host of different readings and new, distinct analyses apart from still valuable historical ones" (10). Retextualization names this layer of intertextual significance, one that accounts for the production of a fundamentally different text due to circumstances that have "effectively [reauthored] its meaning" (Miller, 2021, p. 10). Not intended to strip individual viewers of agency in interpreting a text, the retext instead elucidates a more general understanding of textual meaning (Miller, 2021, p. 31).

Accordingly, "Retextuality illustrates the key importance of understanding texts as phenomena both greater and more specific than shows, episodes, or reruns. These objects of study might seem alike but magically appear very differently [...]" (Miller, 2021, p. 30). That is, rather than writing over or

replacing the pre-revelation version of the text, in its way, this pre-revelation viewing of “Billy” becomes a paratext to it, something related to but distinct from contemporary viewing that cannot help but be shaped by revelations such as Carpenter’s. The episode and series are retextualized by their own historical/cultural/viewership context. Instead of merely offering a changed viewer context, these revelations produce a new “Billy.” In place of reframing, episode and series are created anew as distinct objects when viewed under the current circumstances.

### **Vicious Bitches? Retextualizing “Billy”**

As the episode begins, in the Hyperion Hotel’s basement that serves as the headquarters of Angel Investigations, Angel and Cordelia are involved in self-defense training, with Angel demonstrating moves using swords to the receptive woman. Previously, she had expressed a desire to learn self-defense tactics so that she would no longer fall prey to being the damsel in distress in need of saving, so the vampire instructs her. Angel encourages Cordelia to continue to move the line, which, in turn, keeps a would-be assailant off balance, as they must continually readjust. When she presses him about the goal of continuously shifting this line, it is revealed that Angel is thinking in terms of her holding off an attacker until he can arrive to save her. Cordelia reminds him that she already knows how to stave someone off and instead needs the instruction to take them down. As she puts it, not only are men not always around to save women, but — given the precarity of the spell that causes his ensoulment — it might be Angel that Cordelia must put down in the future. Angel acquiesces, showing her a series of swiftly executed moves using the sword, then suggests he

repeat them at half speed until she gets them. Informing Angel that she is a quick study of physicality as evidenced by her years as a varsity cheerleader, Cordelia flawlessly and immediately repeats what he demonstrated, pinning him to the wall with her sword at his throat. A classic Whedonverse trope, this culminating exchange reminds the viewer that Angel underestimates Cordelia's strength and resourcefulness.

The threat posed by the newly released Billy Blim is introduced in the next scene, which takes place at Wolfram and Hart's law offices. After his family retrieves Billy from her office, Lilah is left there with another firm lawyer, Gavin, with whom she has a contentious professional relationship. She tells him to get out and, when her back is turned momentarily, he throws Lilah into a glass-shelved bookcase, stunning her. Now that she is on the ground, Gavin begins violently choking her. There is a cut to a shot of Billy walking away in the hallway, an enigmatic smile creeping across his face. It is not unusual for episodes of the series to include short scenes absent Angel and his fellow investigators. Often, such scenes offer a glimpse into the threat posed by the latest supernatural foe—commonly highlighting a victim of some sort. However, it is rare (and noteworthy) for that victim to be someone typically presented as an antagonist to Angel, such as Lilah.

Angel Investigations is brought onto the case by Cordelia's psychic vision, which shows an older man beating his wife to death. Unlike in her more standard visions, this crime occurred in the recent past, so there is no opportunity to save the woman. Still, since the visions are invariably a call for intervention, the group springs into action to investigate the crime, accessing all the information they can. While they are looking over the crime scene photos, Wesley, a male associate, removes the grisly photos from Cordelia's hand, suggesting she

ought not to look at them. She must remind him that she has already experienced all the violence in her vision – in moving, living color. This exchange overdetermines Angel’s earlier underestimation of Cordelia and, as the episode shows, a more comprehensive underestimation of the resourcefulness of its female characters. Although the team is initially unclear why Cordelia received a vision of a crime where the murderer has already confessed in custody, Angel notices Billy Blim on an image from a surveillance tape in the convenience store where the attack took place. Angel recognizes Blim as the young man he had earlier freed from imprisonment in a hell dimension in an exchange with Wolfram & Hart undertaken to save Cordelia. This leads Cordelia and Angel each to feel responsible for the woman’s death.

When Angel next sees Lilah, she is drinking in her darkened apartment. The signs of her beating at Gavin’s hands are visible as she steps into the light. By this point, Angel has determined that Billy has some supernatural power that triggers men to harm women. In an exchange where the visibly shaken Lilah tells Angel to stay away from Blim, her politically connected client, she emphasizes how difficult it is to take seriously chivalric claims from Angel, the only man she knows who wants to kill her. An intriguing moment of line-blurring, this exchange complicates the episode’s themes, reframing notions of heroism as less about who someone is than what they do.

From there, to locate Blim, the male members of Angel Investigations break into the estate of the wealthy family to which the half-demon is related. Angel spies Blim through a window and busts a glass door before walking in. This is significant because, as a vampire, Angel must be invited into homes occupied by living humans. At this moment, beyond the

generally supernatural, Angel realizes he is dealing with the demonic in Blim. They have a brief conversation that includes the epigram at this essay's outset. It is essential to consider the episode's antagonist and his demonic power: a touch that causes escalating misogynistic rage in men that culminates in violence towards whatever woman is nearby so that he can enjoy the resulting suffering voyeuristically. Voyeurism occupies a prominent position in the Whedonverse. Even Angel, when he is introduced on *Buffy*, is presented as someone stalking Buffy, lurking in the shadows, watching her, only surfacing briefly at specific moments.<sup>6</sup> It is not for a few episodes that the viewer is comfortable that he does not have ill intent towards the series protagonist. However, even then, there is the troubling realization that Angel stalked Buffy from the time she was a high school freshman until they began a romantically charged relationship a couple of years later, somehow converting the objectionable stalking behavior into something more protective or even romantic. When Blim replies to Angel's charge that he inflicts violence on women asserting that he has never hurt a woman, he just likes to watch , there is a narrative suggestion of disingenuousness. After all, Billy knows the effects of his touch on men will produce a violent response. However, the idea of a villain who sets in motion aggression, violence, and mistreatment of women so that he can vicariously enjoy the results voyeuristically takes on particularly disturbing connotations considering the revelations concerning Whedon's mistreatment of Carpenter. On one level, as a retext, Blim can be seen to stand in as an attenuated, metaphorical expression of Whedon's real-life actions towards Carpenter, captured in the epigram quoted at this essay's outset. On another, even more problematically, viewed in 2021 with the knowledge of

Whedon's behavior, it is difficult for the attentive viewer not to consider how much that statement, placed in the mouth of Blim, captures some of the pleasure experienced by the viewer in a series that so frequently places women in peril and subjects its female characters to violence.

A step or two behind Billy, Angel follows his tracks to the apartment of a fully human male cousin of the half-demon. Angel is invited in when he asserts that he intends to kill Blim. That exchange suggests quite a bit about Billy's relationship with his cousin. Although Blim is gone, Angel learns in this scene that his cousin and family are aware of Billy's effect on men and the threat it poses to women, so they have instituted a strict no-touching rule with him—which extends in the case of this cousin to his friends. This kind of containment strategy is darkly resonant with the production system that enabled Whedon's behavior—arguably culminating in actor Michelle Trachtenberg's assertion that after some unspecified inappropriate private exchange between Whedon and the then-underage performer—there was a strict rule that Whedon was no longer allowed to be alone with her on *Buffy* (Carras, 2021).

Cordelia undertakes a parallel search for Billy, arming herself before heading to Lilah's apartment for answers so she can track down the evil scion of the Blim family. Cordelia intends to enlist Lilah's help in stopping Billy. The conversation between these characters inspired the present essay's title, as Cordelia uses the phrase "vicious bitch" as an attribute ostensibly shared by the two women, one that they can use in reclaiming the historically negative associations of the word "bitch" as an assertion of female strength. Cordelia claims to understand Lilah because she has likewise been a "vicious bitch." They have a sparring exchange concerning shoes designed to underscore Cordelia's equality to and

understanding of Lilah. Throughout their conversation, Cordelia emphasizes two things. One of these is the complex of responsibility shared by herself, Angel, and Lilah. Cordelia feels responsible because Blim was released to save her, Angel because he did the physical labor of freeing him, and Lilah because it was her scheming that put Cordelia in mortal harm to coax Angel into freeing the half-demon at the behest of a Wolfram & Hart client. The other thing Cordelia lays out is the threat to women posed by the combination of menace and vulnerability they face at the hands of Billy's supernatural misogyny. As she puts it, "No woman should ever have to go through that. And no woman strong enough to wear the mantle of 'vicious bitch' would ever put up with it" ("Billy" 3.6 19:58-20:06).

Retextualized, this phrase becomes particularly charged. There is a question of whether Cordelia or Lilah's behavior in the episode merits the term. Even Lilah's eventual killing of Blim is framed by the actress who plays her as her only moment of heroic action on the series, and unlike Blim, she exhibits no willful cruelty in carrying it out. Equally, taken seriously, there is something troubling about equivocating Cordelia and Lilah's behavior more generally. Although Cordelia was often mean to Buffy and her friends on the earlier series—particularly in its early going—, throughout *Buffy* and her time on *Angel*, a more complex Cordelia is revealed that hardly seems vicious. In contrast, although the series reveals both characters to be complex, Lilah is a generally self-interested schemer working for an evil, demonic law firm. Viewed in 2021, it feels like the series cannot tell the difference between the two women and their motivations.

Throughout, the episode's plot reveals that Cordelia is a step ahead of Angel in this investigation. Although it is initially

Angel who tracks Billy, Cordelia locates and confronts him on the tarmac of a private airport, where he is waiting for a chartered jet to spirit him away from LA and the control of his family. During that climactic confrontation, after Cordelia neutralizes Blim with a taser before holding him at bay with a crossbow, she introduces herself. Their exchange further highlights a level of awareness regarding misogyny as Billy expresses his base antipathy towards women, while Cordelia's retorts reframe things. When he refers to "what is under [her] skirt" ("Billy" 3.6 32:05-06) she replies she is wearing pants. After he questions whether her wearing pants, which he characterizes in terms of dressing and acting like a man, makes her feel superior, her response is worth reproducing in full: "Actually, I'm feeling superior because I have an arrow pointed at your jugular. And the irony of using a phallic-shaped weapon... not lost on me" ("Billy" 3.6 32:14-32:24).

Angel interrupts their conversation, veritably swooping in to "save the day," which offers a callback to the episode's beginning in the basement. Even though she has the situation well in hand and there is no indication she intends to kill Blim, Angel knocks the crossbow out of Cordelia's hand, emphasizing that he will not let her kill Billy. At this moment, Billy touches Angel, anticipating that his viral misogyny will infect the vampire resulting in even more pleasurable carnage. However, it turns out that Angel is immune to the spell. Angel does not kill humans, but since Blim is part-demon, he has no qualms about harming him; still, rather than kill him, like Cordelia, Angel intends to return Billy to the demon dimension prison from which he had earlier liberated him. By inserting himself here in the role of would-be champion, Angel fails to consider that his is not the only conscience that desires assuagement by neutralizing the threat. As the beneficiary of



the deal that included Billy's release, Cordelia likewise feels responsible for the carnage Blim has unleashed. Angel's intrusion robs her of the chance to be the hero.

After a brief fight, Angel is denied the opportunity to capture Blim, as Lilah arrives and shoots and kills Billy exacting a bit of retribution of her own for the violent abuse she has suffered. While this efficiently dispatches Billy, given both *Buffy's* and *Angel's* pervasive negative critique of the use of firearms (Pasley, 2003), it is difficult to see that resolution as positive. While it does "deal" with Blim as a threat, in effect neutralizing him, that the termination of the character is at the hands of one of the series' antagonists makes his comeuppance feel too easy. Cordelia is spared from deciding whether to kill him. Angel does not need to confront that he butted in when unneeded and, in so doing, very nearly made things worse. Lilah is left in the position she typically occupies: a self-focused adversary with blood on her hands.

In some respects, the experience of Fred, the other woman who works with Angel, is the most intriguing take on the episode's viral, supernatural misogyny. Unlike Cordelia and Lilah, who are each presented with the opportunity to confront the malevolent source of this threat to women and, directly in the case of Lilah, exact some form of retribution in eliminating Billy, Fred spends much of the episode in the role of what Carol Clover (1992) termed horror's "Final Girl," having to defend herself from two men who are otherwise both in love with her, but who are corrupted by exposure to a sample of Blim's blood. As is generally true of the "final girl" trope, if there is pleasure in experiencing her ingenuity and survival, there is the equal possibility of pleasure in seeing her suffer on the way.<sup>7</sup>

Lilah earlier describes to Cordelia that Blim's "touch" affects different men in distinct patterns, sometimes working

almost instantly and other times over hours, and it is with these two men that we witness the range of response. Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, a genteel English man of letters, is exposed first and exhibits a slow burn, seething at Fred and making sarcastic and passive-aggressive comments before he finally erupts into violence, chasing her around the hotel threatening to kill her. The escalation of his antipathy initially takes the form of ostensible suggestions involving Fred, what she wears, and its effect on the “grown men” around her (“Billy” 3.6 24:17-24:42). Wesley emphasizes that what he describes as her provocative dress challenges these men to take her by force. The scene in which Wesley subsequently chases Fred around the hotel with an axe, exclaiming “I’m a man” (“Billy” 3.6 28:18) while bursting a door open clearly evokes Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* and its similarly misogynistic terror. According to Wesley, in a psychotic monologue, women are deceptive, weak, and dirty. Viewed in 2021, that Wesley’s love and desire for Fred are unrequited renders his transformation even more discomfiting, as its expression comes across like the perception of the contemporary incel movement<sup>8</sup>: Here, somehow, it is Fred’s failure to accede to his sexual longings that renders her deserving of violence and murder.

In contrast, Charles Gunn, the only central Black character in the series, reacts more quickly to his later exposure to the blood sample. Arriving initially as a potential savior for Fred, after she tells him what has happened to Wesley due to exposure to Billy’s bodily fluids, Gunn realizes that he poses a threat to her because he likewise came into inadvertent contact with the blood sample Wesley was analyzing. That a Black male character would succumb to the viral rage so quickly cannot help but invoke the racist idea of the angry Black man as one who always has anger just below the surface, ready to burst out,

which is underscored in contrast to the comparatively slow build-up experienced by his white colleague. Still, Gunn's recognition of what is happening to him complicates this deeply problematic trope. Unlike Wesley, aware of what is occurring, Gunn implores Fred to knock him unconscious before he can pose a physical threat to her. While initially reluctant, as Gunn's anger grows, she realizes she must knock him out and does so.

Particularly with Wesley, Fred demonstrates ingenuity throughout her ordeal, ultimately fashioning a makeshift contraption that incapacitates him without killing him. Though she is a comparative waif, to that point presented as an innocent and ingenue, this episode represents an early example of how smart, resourceful, and brave Fred will prove to be over her tenure on the series. In a sense, unlike Cordelia, she *is* allowed to save herself, incapacitating and restraining two physically stronger men until the spell can be undone. Still, as much as the episode offers all that, retextualization reveals it equally as an opportunity for the viewer to watch the terrorized woman, something Blim likewise would have vicariously enjoyed.

Cordelia and Angel are back in the hotel basement at the episode's denouement, training with swords. On one level, this sequence serves as something of a visual *inclusio*, designed as it is to echo the episode's opening. However, as this scene begins, the two are close to one another, executing moves in tandem with no instruction—underscoring some level of recognition on Angel's part of Cordelia's improved facility for self-defense. Moving in sync, even turning and ultimately exiting together, the two appear more like partners in a choreographed performance than teacher and student. Equally, this scene offers an opportunity to explain why Angel alone among the men shown in the episode was immune to the effects of Billy's

touch. As he explains it, as a long-lived vampire, he has transcended the primal hatred and anger that Billy brought out in others. Even vampirically, he never killed because of those emotions; instead, the kill was always about pleasure and pain. Ironically, it is as if, as Cordelia describes it, Angel's demonic nature renders him less prone to the pettiness and jealousy she sees at the root of the primal misogyny Billy activated in these other men. On a series centered on the supernatural, that Blim's demonic power does not affect a vampire is plausible. However, particularly for the faithful viewer of *Angel* and *Buffy*, Angel's explanation may seem unconvincing. Anyone familiar with the cruelty inflicted on Buffy and Drusilla by the soulless Angelus is unlikely to be convinced that there is a meaningful distinction to draw between what Angelus did to these women and what Blim enjoyed activating in other men. The irony of Cordelia and Angel's conversation is further intensified with the revelations of Carpenter, as pettiness seems to reside at the root of the cruelty inflicted on her by Whedon.

The argument for an uncomplicated reading of the episode where misogyny is presented as bad is straightforward. An infectious form of murderous misogyny is introduced as the embodiment of its demonic antagonist in a context where the series' most prominent women do battle with this force and overcome and neutralize it through their ingenuity and bravery. The editing strategy at the episode's climax, which crosscuts the showdown between Cordelia, Angel, Blim, and Lilah with the final confrontation between Fred and Wesley, underlines its presentation's overdetermination. So, what does it mean to suggest that these recent revelations concerning Whedon's treatment of one of the principal actors in that episode lead to its retextualization? What form does this retext take? That is,

how is the 2021 version of “Billy” distinct from its prior iteration?

In Shakespearean terms, when it comes to misogyny, “Billy” and by extension, *Angel* “doth protest too much.” This explanation reveals multiple layers of misogyny presented in the episode. In addition to the more overt expressions revealed through the violence, threat, and anger that permeate it what might be termed the “misogyny bad” layer of its thematic discourse there is another, less apparent but equally pernicious misogynistic expression demonstrated by *Angel*’s patronizing behavior towards Cordelia. His patronization is introduced at the episode’s beginning. It carries over to his pursuit of Blim where he initially enlists the two men who work with him but neither of the women.

Moreover, it resurfaces again at its climax, where he cannot seem to apprehend that Cordelia and women more generally might less require a man to save them, that it might well be men who place them in jeopardy, and that what they most desire is for men to respect their ability to take care of and look out for themselves. Notice that the ending reverts to the kind of training shown at the episode’s beginning, without acknowledgment that in this instance Cordelia did not need *Angel*’s intervention. That, if anything, his attempt to save her was ill-conceived and made the situation more dangerous.

As much as the episode offers a display of female ability, it does so ambivalently. None of the male characters acknowledge what each of the three substantial women has accomplished over the episode’s course. The most any can manage is the shame and embarrassment Wesley feels for the ordeal he caused Fred, which is about his feelings rather than hers. This core of ambivalence underscores a retextualized “Billy”: It is an episode neurotically addressing its core

misogyny, as opposed to one merely criticizing the concept; it is an episode that wants to believe in female empowerment, more than one that accepts it.

Put succinctly, rather than merely demonstrating a feminist critique of misogyny, these recent revelations invite a symptomatic approach to the episode and its broader production environment that is retextualized as a form of reaction formation. This concept describes a neurotic psychological defense mechanism wherein impulses and emotions perceived as unwelcome, unacceptable, and anxiety-producing are mastered by exaggeratedly expressing their opposite tendencies. As Calvin S. Hall (1954) describes the mechanism in *A Primer of Freudian Psychology*:

[t]he instincts and their derivatives may be arranged as pairs of opposites: life versus death, construction versus destruction, action versus passivity, dominance versus submission, and so forth. When one of the instincts produces anxiety by exerting pressure on the ego either directly or by way of the superego, the ego may try to sidetrack the offending impulse by concentrating upon its opposite. For example, if feelings of hate towards another person make one anxious, the ego can facilitate the flow of love to conceal the hostility. (pp. 92-93)

This does not mean that the disfavored impulse or emotion is replaced. Instead, reaction formation is expressed in ambivalence, with the opposing tendency seeking to shout down the emotion or impulse deemed unacceptable, which is still expressed, albeit unconsciously. In the case of “Billy,” this comprehensive and full-throated critique of misogyny can be retextualized through the revelations concerning auteur Whedon and his treatment of Carpenter as equally an attempt

to conceal the misogynistic system in which it originates as it is to address misogyny as a societal concern.

### Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, “Billy” is not unique among *Angel* episodes ripe for retextualized readings. Just in terms of elements that resonate with the specific complaints leveled by Carpenter, there is an episode from the second season of *Angel* (“Belonging” 2.19) that includes a segment devoted to her character’s acting career. Cordelia is subjected to abusive behavior at the hands of a director on the set of a commercial that effectively foreshadows the real-life actor’s allegations against Whedon with the benefit of hindsight. Likewise, the series reveals a problematic relationship to the idea of pregnancy. In three distinct instances where pregnancy is central to a storyline,<sup>9</sup> two involving Cordelia herself, pregnancy is shown as demonic, abject, and monstrous. It is shown as something that should not be, a mystic problem to be solved. Considering so much of Carpenter’s subsequent complaints center on her mistreatment during her actual pregnancy, these storylines take on an even more disturbing, possibly passive-aggressive, arguably even pathological character. Similarly, after years of complaints, criticism, and head-scratching concerning the unexpected, out-of-character behavior and ultimate sidelining of Cordelia Chase during the fourth season of the series, Carpenter’s statement offers a plausible explanation: her real-life pregnancy angered Whedon, who took out that anger on her and her character.

As it turns out, the retext serves up novel concerns. Even, maybe particularly *for* the more dedicated fanbase of this series and Whedon’s work in general, these troubling revelations

present an ethical dilemma. Armed with this knowledge, is it possible or responsible to separate these revelations from the viewer's series experience? Is the text enjoyable still? Does watching the show now implicate the viewer in the decades-old suffering, in a sense, retraumatizing the victims with each stream or viewing? That is, is both the series creativity and the pleasure of its viewing bound inextricably to voyeurism predicated on suffering inflicted on women, rendering the viewer a passive version of Billy Blim?

Conversely, would withdrawing the series present a new form of victimization, both in suppressing the evidence of the quality of the work produced regardless of its production circumstances and by removing an ongoing residual income stream for victimized performers themselves? Texts are complicated, multivalent objects. Even as "Billy" forms a new text in light of this recently disclosed information, as is the case with the work of other exposed victimizers in this current social media environment of reckoning with past abuse, what to do with the knowledge gained by these revelations is not immediately apparent.

**Declaration of Interest Statement:** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://twitter.com/AllCharisma/status/1359537746843365381?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoolg%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet](https://twitter.com/AllCharisma/status/1359537746843365381?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoolg%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet)

<sup>2</sup> To date, fellow *Buffy* and *Angel* actors Amber Benson, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Michelle Trachtenberg, Emma Caulfield, Anthony Stewart Head, James



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Marsters, J. August Richards, Clare Kramer, Eliza Dushku, and David Boreanaz, as well as *Buffy* and *Angel* writer and executive producer Marti Noxon, have used social media to echo and support Carpenter's posts.

<sup>3</sup> A discussion of televisual authorship is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the reader is encouraged to consider <http://patemanponders.blogspot.com/2017/09/celebrity-culture-brand-whedon-and-post.html>; Jason Mittell. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York: NYU Press, 2015; Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine. *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*. New York: Routledge, 2011; Roberta Pearson. "Hyphenate: The Writer/Producer in American Television," in *The Contemporary Television Series*, Edited by Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 11-26; David Lavery. "Afterword: The Genius of Joss Whedon." *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002, 251-256; and Alan Sepinwall. *The Revolution Was Televised: How The Sopranos, Mad Men, Breaking Bad, Lost, and Other Groundbreaking Dramas Changed TV Forever*. New York: Gallery Books, 2013 as indicative of how the discourse around creators of so-called "prestige television" and Whedon in particular are framed in terms of the televisual auteur. See also, Abbott, Stacey. *Angel*. Detroit: Wayne State Press, 2009. Abbott goes to great lengths to describe the highly collaborative nature of the series.

<sup>4</sup> Even the series creators saw it in those terms. See, for example, Michael Ausiello, "Angel EP Reveals Season 1 Crisis that Triggered a Shutdown: 'The WB Completely Freaked Out.'" *TVLine*. June 20, 2019. As series co-creator Greenwalt described *Angel* as part of a twentieth anniversary show reunion organized and filmed by *Entertainment Weekly*, "We thought, 'Let's do a noir thing that's about addiction and redemption, and we'll put them in LA.' The stories will be darker and, more important, [*Angel*] will be darker."

<https://tvline.com/2019/06/20/angel-reunion-controversy-season-1-david-boreanaz/>

<sup>5</sup> For example, under Miller's formulation, the syndicated rebroadcast of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on denotatively LGBTQ+-themed Logo TV creates a new text that both situates the series within its historically significant role in queer representation on American network television while also expressing a broader, connotatively queer text than the one that was initially broadcast on the WB and the UPN or the initial syndicated reruns on the action-oriented FX network.

<sup>6</sup> On *Angel* as stalker, see Rhonda V. Wilcox, "The Darkness of 'Passion': Visuals and Voiceovers, Sound and Shadow." *Joss Whedon: The Complete Companion*. Edited by Mary Alice Money. London: Titan Books, 2012, 101-112.

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<sup>7</sup> In terms of questions of audience complicity in the broader Whedonverse, see Rhonda V. Wilcox, “Echoes of Complicity: Reflexivity and Identity in Joss Whedon’s *Dollhouse*.” *Slayage* 8.2-3, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the relationship between incel culture and the Whedonverse, see the Wardell and Overstreet-edited special issue of *Watcher Junior* that is dedicated to the topic: 12.1 [17] Fall 2021.

<sup>9</sup> These include *Angel*, season 1, episode 12, “Expecting,” the storyline in season three concerning the pregnancy of the vampire Darla, and the supernatural pregnancy of Cordelia throughout much of season four. For an extended consideration of pregnancy in the series, see Jacqueline Potvin, “Pernicious Pregnancy and Redemptive Motherhood: Narratives of Reproductive Choice in Joss Whedon’s *Angel*,” *Slayage* 14.1, 2016.

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