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“You Hold Your Gun Like A Sissy Girl”: Firearms And Anxious Masculinity In *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*



Overview—“Do We Really Need Weapons For This?”

[1] Buffy’s regular use of mediaeval weaponry in nod-and-wink fashion to hint at female subversion of the male is familiar; indeed, the phallic/penetrative “dusting” of vampires is so commonplace in the series that it requires little commentary. There are, however, some more varied and playful instances where the phallic significance of such objects is highlighted. The creative team of *Mutant Enemy*, responsible for both *Buffy* and its spin-off *Angel*, are clearly aware of this subtext; perhaps the most obvious instance of self-referentiality comes in the *Angel* episode “Billy” (3006) when Cordelia squares up to the eponymous demon with a crossbow and remarks, “the irony of using a phallic-shaped weapon? Not lost on me.” When Principal Snyder expels Buffy from Sunnydale High, she draws a sword from a bag, holds it out, erect and threatening, and metaphorically emasculates him: “You never got a single date in high school, did you?” (“Becoming,” Part 1, 2021). Spike’s reply to Buffy when she asks, “Do we really need weapons for this?”—“I just like them. They make me feel all manly” (“School Hard,” 2003)—is another representative exchange.

[2] In a TV programme that relies heavily on action as part of its genre mix, it is intriguing that, the Initiative-dominated Season 4 aside (which Doug Petrie refers to as their James Bond season), handguns such as pistols, rifles, etc., appear only rarely. There are many reasons why modern weaponry may appear relatively infrequently in *Buffy*; the audience demographic is probably a significant factor.^[1] It is also the case, as several commentators have remarked, that technology tends to be gendered male in *Buffy*, while Buffy and the Scooby Gang routinely rely either on non-violent strategies, or on arcane weaponry and magic (Early 18; Buttsworth 187). This essay will look in depth at a number of instances where modern weapons *do* appear. My contention is that, when modern firearms are featured, it is almost always in situations where the assertion, performance, or destabilising of masculine identity is key. The use of firearms—and especially pistols—can be seen as an important signifier of the wider issue of anxious masculinity. The examples I will look at all revolve around the use of modern firearms and feature a number of different configurations of gender conflict. Note that I do not intend to look at these moments in strictly chronological order: I will begin with a familiar male vs. male conflict from Season 4, return to Season 2 for a more complex male/female interplay, before concluding with a close look at the climax of Season 6.

[3] If the use of handguns almost always comes loaded with subtext about gender and power, it most frequently involves Buffy subverting the standard “male is strong, female is weak” paradigm, and brief examples will serve to illustrate the point: in “Band Candy” [3006], Giles’s *alter ego* Ripper—an overtly, aggressively more masculinized figure than the Giles the audience is used to—takes a cop’s pistol, only to have it confiscated by Buffy, his macho posturing for Joyce’s benefit cut off in its prime.^[2] In “Phases” (2015), the werewolf hunter Cain has the barrel of his rifle bent out of shape by Buffy in a fairly obvious castration gesture. “A big, strong man versus a girl like me?” she mocks, “Wouldn’t be a fair fight.” There are scattered references to guns elsewhere, with Buffy almost always dismissive: twice in Season 6, she uses the same phrase “these things—never useful”—once to a security guard in a battle with a demon at the bank in “Flooded,” [6004], and again in “As You Were” (6015) after she is given an automatic rifle to destroy the Suvolte Demon eggs, spectacularly failing to hit a single one. Considering the tragedy at the heart of Season 6, and the writers’ tendency to set up

long-range story arcs, it is not unreasonable to assume that these lines were planted in earlier episodes with the climactic death of Tara and wounding of Buffy in mind (discussed in greater depth towards the end of this essay).

[4] Other, Buffy-less examples work in a similar fashion, underlining the anxious masculinity that the series explores so frequently: when Spike trains a pistol on Xander in "The Yoko Factor" (4020), setting off the chip, Anya taunts him: "Wow. That chip in your head means you can't even point a gun. How humiliating." Spike's humiliation is doubled when we find out that the gun is a fake: "Can't even point a decorative gun?" remarks Anya. "Give it up for American chipmanship," smirks Xander. The chipping of Spike has, of course, been established early on as a kind of castration. Immediately after he has been fixed by The Initiative, we see him attempt an attack on Willow ("The Initiative," 4007). Prevented from doing her any harm, what follows is a dialogue parodically patterned on male impotence: Spike, embarrassed and apologetic, puzzles, "I don't understand. This sort of thing's never happened to me before"; Willow replies reassuringly, "Maybe you were nervous," and so the conversation continues.³ Incidentally, the "Yoko Factor" episode also explores further Xander's own anxieties, as he is led to question his role in the Scooby front line on the one hand, while being reassured by Anya on the other ("he's a viking in the sack," she tells Spike).

Riley vs. Angel—"The Yoko Factor"

[5] In an overview of anxious masculinity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, if we leave aside for now the members of the "Trio" (Jonathan, Warren and Andrew), Riley stands out as perhaps the most anxious male of them all, and this is often displayed by his interaction with his stridently masculine comrades. The commandos of The Initiative are to a large extent defined by their aggressive masculinist image, stubbornly retro in their sexual politics. In his commentary for the episode "Hush" (4010), Joss Whedon notes the Initiative's reaction to the latest Sunnydale crisis—"Here we have the classic male response 'guns, guns, guns'"—thereby making a particular kind of association between firearms and masculinity. Doug Petrie, meanwhile, makes similar remarks on the soldiers in his commentary for "The Initiative," drawing attention to their, quote, "big machine guns," adding "it's all wonderfully phallic."⁴ As Sarah Buttsworth notes, "Soldier identities are 'embodied' by, and embody, *heterosexual* masculinity" (186). It is clear, moreover, that Riley has a huge psychological investment in his military identity. As he remarks (rhetorically) in the episode "This Year's Girl" (4015): "I'm a soldier. Take that away, what's left?"

[6] The conversation between Forrest and Riley in the refectory in the opening scene of 'The Initiative' clearly positions Forrest as a male sexual predator, objectifying the female students—and then specifically Buffy—as sex items—

Forrest: Women. Young, nubile, exciting. Each one a mystery, waiting to be unlocked.

The sequence alternates shots of Forrest talking with Riley with shots of his point of view as he watches Buffy. One particular Forrest PoV shot zooms in on the breasts of another female student as she walks towards him carrying her tray. This scene is undoubtedly problematic in terms of racial politics—the image of the African American Forrest as sexual predator panders, no doubt unintentionally but nevertheless unhappily, to familiar myths about black sexuality. However, the intended meaning in terms of sexual politics is well taken. Riley, significantly, is clearly uncomfortable with Forrest's discourse, and this is soon reinforced when Parker, the student who has slept with Buffy, egged on by Forrest and Graham, cracks a joke about the difference between freshmen girls and toilet seats ("a toilet seat doesn't follow you around after you've used it"). Riley, in Jimmy Stewart mode, promptly knocks him down

[7] Nevertheless, Riley shows himself to be distinctly old-fashioned in his sexual politics. Petrie describes him bluntly, as "a sexist doof" in his commentary on the scene in this same episode, when Riley attempts to chaperone Buffy to safety (behaviour which prompts Buffy's neat line "Who died and made you John Wayne?").⁵ Lorna Jowett accurately describes him as 'macho, violent, and strong, but . . . also romantic, heroic and human' (65). There are other complicating factors, too, including a traceable subtext of homoeroticism between Riley and Forrest, and the provocative figure of Maggie Walsh: Walsh is herself both mother and stern patriarch, and has a particularly close bond with Riley and, of course, Adam. The commandos also contrast nicely with the more feminized male figure Xander,

who continues to occupy (willingly or not) that borderland between the aggressively masculinist on the one side and the less gender-defined new man on the other.⁶ Xander's battles with vampires are exemplified by his tussle with Harmony: Petrie notes that, with its "tough guy dialogue" and slow motion effects, the scene plays "as if it's going to be the fight of the century," but quickly descends into a comic, slapping, hair-pulling fight. Harmony reminds Xander of the fight when trading insults with him in "The Real Me" (5002): "You're the hair-puller, you big girl."⁷ Xander's generally inept attempts at combat contrast markedly with Riley, who, though lacking the slayer's superhuman strength, nevertheless fights side by side with Buffy.

[8] Riley's relationship to modern, technological weaponry is an integral part of his role as soldier.⁸ The credit sequence, which always uses carefully selected clips to introduce each actor/character, includes two images of him with a taser gun (once shouldered, once firing). By the time we get into Season 5's credit sequence, one taser shot has been replaced by an intriguing clip of him from the dream episode "Restless" (4022): filmed from a low angle, Riley is seen suited and seated at a table, whilst a pistol perches on a glass tabletop in front of him, foregrounded and in focus. Throughout Season 4, Riley most often uses the science fiction toned taser gun. However, there are two key sequences in which Riley uses a pistol, and these are both particularly useful in an exploration of Riley's anxious masculinity.

[9] In "Goodbye Iowa" (4014) we find Riley, psychologically coming apart at every nail, confronting Buffy in Willie's Bar. Disoriented, paranoid, and physically shaking, he pulls his gun on a female bystander. The bystander may be a vampire (as the unstable Riley suspects), but, judging by her terrified response to the threat, she is more likely to be an innocent citizen. The camera angle emphasizes both the muzzle of the pistol and Riley's lack of control over his sidearm. After he lets the pistol drop (allowing the woman to run panic-stricken from the building), Riley turns around to the bar and smashes the drink glasses. Immediately afterwards, Buffy is depicted ministering to him in his hideout; the relationship portrayed is something like mother and sick child. The sequence displays the extent to which Riley has lost self-control, and establishes his profound reliance upon Buffy.

[10] The second instance is even more interesting in terms of anxious masculinity. In "The Yoko Factor" (4020), Riley encounters Angel first of all in the alleyway, beating up an Initiative team. Riley suspects Angel and Buffy have recently slept together, since Buffy has just returned from a trip to visit her former lover in L.A., hot on the heels of rogue slayer Faith. Riley is determined to prevent Angel from seeing Buffy again, but is fairly comprehensively taken apart by Angel, his only momentary advantage courtesy of his stun gun. By the time he catches up with his rival, Angel is already in Buffy's dorm room. Riley enters pistol first, and the camera angle exaggerates the muzzle of the gun comic book style (the effect is even more marked than in the barroom scene in "Goodbye Iowa"). The conversation that follows is a macho locking of horns: Angel suggests Riley put down the gun and Riley, revealingly, responds, "It's pretty much all I got left, so I'm thinking not." Buffy insists Angel "won't hurt anybody," but Angel instead raises his metaphorical hackles—"might hurt you," he tells Riley). When Angel mocks his opponent's physical weakness ("Some threat. You can barely stand"), Riley defers to (or, rather, clings to) the potency of the phallic symbol again: "Trigger finger feels okay." Angel continues the challenge along more explicit lines, as the subtext of sexual competitiveness erupts to the surface in his next line, spoken to Buffy—"You actually sleep with this guy?" The direct challenge to Riley as Buffy's sexual partner prompts physical violence, and Buffy has to literally pull them apart, while her one-liner forces both of them to stand down—"I see one more display of testosterone poisoning and I will personally put you both in the hospital." In a neat touch, Angel is reduced to childish protests—"He started it—," swiftly cut short by Buffy's glare. Finally, Riley's last attempt to assert his will ("I'm not leaving this room," crossing his arms, and taking up a defiant position), is quietly defeated by Buffy's tiny gesture to Angel, who accompanies her out into the corridor.

[11] The audience is aware that Angel poses no threat to Riley's relationship with Buffy, but for Riley the threat is very real and profoundly unsettling: he has only just discovered the truth of Buffy and Angel's romantic history (including the consequences of their lovemaking). Angel's fight with the Initiative soldiers has convinced Riley that Angel is "up to his old tricks again." The confrontation, then, is inevitable: Riley, humiliated by Angel in hand to hand combat, also suspects Angel and Buffy have slept together again, and the pistol—all that Riley's "got left"—is a desperate attempt to regain control

and “possession” of Buffy. Incidentally, there is a strikingly similar scene in “The Replacement” (5003). The plot of the episode is constructed around the magical division of Xander into two bodies—a confident *persona* and an anxious *persona*—and the showdown, with pistol, takes place in a similar battle over Anya. The camera angles, dialogue and Buffy’s intervention are all reminiscent of the Riley and Angel showdown in “The Yoko Factor.”

Cock Fighting—“Innocence”

[12] Perhaps the most striking use of a firearm by Buffy herself (striking both literally and figuratively) comes from an earlier season: the acquisition and deployment of the rocket-launcher in “Innocence” (2014).⁹ This episode, together with its predecessor “Surprise” (2013), charts an unusual approach to the power struggle between male and female. The confrontation between Riley and Angel in “The Yoko Factor” is a clear example of struggle between two men for power and sexual dominance—who “owns” Buffy?—and the answer both crushes Riley and, more importantly, shows that neither man can own her and that she is quite capable of asserting her will over both of them. The “Innocence” example plays out a male vs. female conflict, but in a very different way to the more straightforward examples given in the introduction to this essay. The rich complexity of the rocket-launcher incident derives, as we shall see, from its context—in particular, the crucial narrative arc of Buffy’s psychosexual journey.

[13] The two-parter “Surprise” and “Innocence” is pivotal in the sexual maturation of a number of characters—Willow and Oz, Xander and Cordelia, Giles and Jenny. Whedon remarks how the conversation between Willow and Oz as they wait in the truck, and Oz refuses to kiss Willow, marks the moment when Willow falls in love with him.¹⁰ There is development of a kind, too, between Xander and Cordelia (their kiss is witnessed by a horrified Willow), while the Jenny/Giles relationship is abruptly derailed by the discovery of Jenny’s knowledge of and involvement in Angel’s reversion to his evil former self. However, all this pales beside the crucial development in the Buffy/Angel romance—what Whedon describes as “a horror movie version of the idea of ‘I sleep with my boyfriend and now he doesn’t call me and also he’s killing hookers in alleys.’”¹¹

[14] As is often the case in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Surprise” and “Innocence” play out a surface narrative of rampaging demons and the threat of Armageddon while proceeding with major developments in the characters’ story arc. When Keith Topping writes, “what holds the episode down is the unnecessary plot about the rocket-launcher that pushes the viewer away from the important relationship stuff,” he is missing the point (Topping 2002: 112). The Judge is the key antagonist in the “Buffy saves the world” narrative, but he also fits into the psychosexual story arc, and in this context can be understood to represent a kind of phallic totem for Angelus, Spike and Drusilla. Over the course of the two episodes, the boxes containing the parts of The Judge are collected and the surprises contained within the various boxes all have readily detectable phallic significance. In “Innocence,” Dru opens one box and is turned on by what she sees, her view of the box’s contents spliced with an erotically charged interaction with Spike, kneeling in front of him and sighing suggestively. There is also a classic Freudianism when Dru almost kills Dalton for losing the box containing the Judge’s arm. Stopping short of gouging out his eyes, she instead removes his glasses and stomps them into the concrete before putting them back on his nose—the Freudian idea of blinding as a substitute for castration fits the phallic subtext very neatly. When the re-assembled Judge burns and annihilates Dalton, Dru is clearly turned on—“Do it again, do it again,” she coos.

[15] When Buffy opens the box confiscated from Dalton, however, the result is very different: she is promptly attacked and nearly throttled by the Judge’s arm that has been shut inside. It is easy to interpret this as a sign of anxiety over her burgeoning sexuality, with the arm as a phallic symbol threatening to suffocate her—the Buffy/Angel consummation is close, and has been hinted at already by the Buffy dream sequence that opens the episode, and which climaxes with her marrying Angel. The song played by the band during the dream is suggestive—it includes such lines as “*Take me over, I’m lying down / I’m giving in to you*”¹²—as are Joyce’s words in the dream (“Do you really think you’re ready, Buffy?”—a line she speaks later in the episode when Buffy talks about learning to drive). The subsequent shattering of the saucer in the dream (again prefiguring reality, *déjà vu* style) is a clear signifier of loss of virginity. It is often noted that the encounter with the re-assembled Judge in the episode “Surprise,” when Buffy and Angel narrowly escape with their lives, is the catalyst for their first sexual encounter.

[16] For Spike, the Judge is "Big Blue" (a variation on his familiar, macho catchphrase "The Big Bad," most often applied to himself); conversely, Buffy refers to him, belittlingly, as "the smurf." Buffy chooses to combat the Judge in a particular way—a way that will, tellingly, deeply impress Faith, who is less ambivalent about her violent vocation than Buffy (see "Faith, Hope and Trick," 3003). Her choice of weapon is a technologized phallic symbol, which Joss Whedon himself acknowledges in the same terms during his commentary for the episode. After describing how original plans to use a tank proved impractical, Whedon talks at some length about the rocket-launcher, referring to it as "my man-toy"—going on to clarify, in endearingly Xander-like fashion, that he's talking about "the rocket-launcher, not my other man toy."¹³ The acquisition of the rocket-launcher in the first place occurs under cover of a particularly macho game, reinforcing the sexual/phallic subtext. I have already noted how the Scoobies more often use quick wits, research, and magic in their battles with demonic forces. Here, it is Xander's ability to draw on the soldier in him (as Whedon refers to it)¹⁴ that germinates the counter-attack. It is important that Xander chooses Cordelia (for him, the sexualized female), and not Willow to accompany him on this mission. And although Xander's proficiency with weaponry seems to come and go—he can't figure out how to fix the taser gun, for example, in "This Year's Girl" (4015)—in "Innocence" his confidence is strong and well founded. As he tells Cordelia, "I am pretty sure I can put together an M-16 in 57 seconds," and his military skills are put to simple, effective use.

[17] Xander and Cordelia approach the armoury, and Xander attempts to gain entry by pretending to be an off duty soldier who wants to give his girl, quote, "The Tour." The dialogue that follows plays out the familiar connections between guns, phallic symbols, sexual arousal and virility—"Well, you know the ladies. They like to see the big guns. Gets 'em all hot and bothered," Xander says when challenged by the guard. He asks the soldier to cut him some slack, and when the soldier asks why he should, Xander takes him apart:

Xander: Well, if you do, I won't tell Colonel Newsome that your boots ain't regulation, your post wasn't covered, [*grabs his M-16 and gives it back to him properly*] and you hold your gun like a sissy girl.

Soldier: You got 20 minutes, nimrod.

Xander: [*smiles*] I just need 5. [*heads for the door, stops and looks back*] Uh, forget I said that last part.

Xander's scornful mocking of the soldier ("you hold your gun like a sissy girl") takes on a particular resonance within the scenario that has been set up, where display of weaponry—the "big guns"—has already been established as a phallic signifier.¹⁵ The exchange ends with a typical instance of Xander inadvertently cutting himself down to size—the reference to "20 minutes" and "I just need five" is, of course, another index of virility, or lack of it.

[18] Now the Scoobies have their own phallic box to play with. Just as Spike has presented his boxes to Drusilla as gifts, so Xander presents the boxed rocket-launcher to Buffy with a "happy birthday" greeting, underlining the parallel between the two. But here the talk is straight-faced and business-like, with none of the fawning, self-consciously erotic overtones that characterize the conversations between the vampires. The exchange between Buffy and Xander ("Do you want me to show you how to use it?"—"Yes I do") is terse and business-like, refusing any suggestion of *double entendre*, and the same goes for their brief exchange after the rocket has blasted the Judge into tiny pieces—"Thanks"—"Knew you'd like it."¹⁶ In the confrontation with the Judge, "Big Blue's aggressive over-confidence—"You are a fool; no weapon forged can stop me"—is countered by Buffy's smooth riposte, "That was then—this is now," and the Judge responds with a flummoxed "What does *that* do?" before the rocket blows him into tiny pieces. This sequence is beautifully put together—the emphasis is on smooth, fast cutting, and Gellar's portrayal of cool, unflustered determination as she raises the rocket-launcher, arms, and fires it adds to the impact of this climactic scene.¹⁷ It is telling that Buffy looks far more confident and at ease with the rocket-launcher than she does with taser guns on the rare occasions she uses them in Season 4: her interaction with firearms in that season is more consistent, and more in keeping with her identity as the Slayer, and in retrospect serves to emphasize her proficiency on this particular occasion.

[19] In the showdown with the Judge, Buffy is dealing on one level with the threat of Armageddon—nothing new for the slayer. However, on a psychosexual level, Buffy is dealing with her humiliation at the hands of Angelus. In this context, the showdown between the totemic Big Blue and Buffy and her “man toy” takes on a particular resonance. Buffy defeats the phallic enemy by unsheathing the emphatically male, technological, overpowering weapon.¹⁸ The thread follows through directly to Buffy’s fight with Angelus. Although she is unable to stake him, she does deliver a well-aimed kick to his groin that leaves him thoroughly incapacitated. Buffy exchanges the “mine’s bigger than yours” tactic for a more familiar, and equally powerful method of castration. Moreover, this moment is likely to get an even more enthusiastic response from the audience than the destruction of the Judge does—another indication of the primacy of the sexual story arc. Indeed, the significance of the moment is underlined by Whedon’s commentary. He evidently saw it as providing a kind of closure for the narrative of Buffy’s sexual initiation and humiliation: the defeat of Angel in this fight, and the way in which Buffy does it, is a reminder that *Buffy* was designed to be, as Whedon says, “a feminist show—not a polemic, but a very straight on feminist show.” The kick to the groin, he says, is “very primal, it’s very important, it’s kinda empowering and I kinda love it.”¹⁹

Bite the Bullet—“Seeing Red” and “Villains”

[20] Undoubtedly the most devastating use of a handgun comes at the climax of Season 6, when Warren shoots and critically wounds Buffy, and inadvertently kills Tara. This moment, the events leading up to it, and the aftermath—specifically, Willow’s torture and killing of Warren—can all be interpreted from a similar perspective, tracing gender conflict, anxious masculinity, and Freudian subtext. Note also that the build-up to this shooting incident is protracted, but that the phallic subtext remains intact—indeed, as we shall see, it becomes so blatant at times that it is hard not to feel that it is very knowingly playing Whedon’s “bring your own subtext” game.

[21] In “Seeing Red” (2019), the Trio (Warren, Jonathan and Andrew) acquire the Orbs of Nezzla’khan, which Warren quickly appropriates for himself (having used Jonathan to retrieve them). The orbs give him superhuman strength and apparent invulnerability. It is difficult not to interpret the orbs as phallic—or, more precisely, testicular: Warren even has a pouch, slung on his belt, designed to hold them. As he absorbs their power, Warren’s expression is orgasmic (“Oh, they work,” he gasps). Jonathan pokes him curiously immediately afterwards, remarking that “I thought they were supposed to make us all huge and veiny” (the phallic subtext once again unmistakable). Warren settles any doubts by promptly trouncing a Nezzla demon. When Jonathan and Andrew attempt to reach the orbs, desperate to try them out for themselves, they are rebuffed by the onanistic Warren—“You’ll each get a whirl . . . as soon as I’m done playing with ‘em.” Here and elsewhere, the homoerotic subtext is also in play: “Man, I can’t wait to get my hands on his orbs,” Andrew remarks as he watches Warren turn over the security van later in the same episode. Later, abandoned by Warren and, with Jonathan, under arrest, Andrew’s despair has an overt romantic theme: “How could he do that to me? He promised we’d be together. He was just using me. He never really loved—(*catching himself*)—hanging out with us.”²⁰

[22] It is not entirely surprising, given his history, that Warren’s first port of call when he has acquired his new powers is a bar, where he deliberately provokes a fight over a woman. Although there is not space here to explore in detail Warren’s particular brand of anxious masculinity, it is enough to recall his lack of success in romantic relationships leading him to create a robot designed to be the perfect, submissive, sex slave girlfriend (“I Was Made to Love You,” 5015). In Season 6, he hypnotises his former girlfriend Katrina and turns her, too, into a sex slave (“Dead Things,” 6013). Katrina is dressed in a French maid’s outfit and is clearly about to perform oral sex on Warren when she recovers from the spell. When she tries to escape, Warren accidentally kills her. Here in “Seeing Red,” armed with the orbs, he confronts Frank, a bully who victimized him at high school, and beats and humiliates him in a confrontation over Frank’s girlfriend. Xander is in the bar, too; while Warren’s attempt to chat up a woman is aggressive and clichéd, Xander, by contrast, has just politely declined the advance of a woman at the bar. When Xander faces off against Warren, Warren taunts him sexually: “You think maybe you could put a word in for me with that Anya chick?” he mocks. “Cause if she’s taking it from a vamp, I think I might have a chance.”

[23] The episode builds towards a showdown between Buffy and Warren. Willow will later accuse Warren of killing Katrina because he “got off on it”—it was his way of asserting his power over her.

Willow sees his desire to kill Buffy as similarly motivated by a desire to establish his superiority over a woman—"That's why you had such a mad-on for the slayer. She was the big O—wasn't she, Warren?" (note the toning down of the more overtly sexual "hard-on" to "mad-on"). Warren revels in his supposed superiority, his language shot through with gendered discourse: "you hit like a girl," he tells Xander in their fight in the bar. In his fight with Buffy, he calls her "Superbitch" and "kitten," and tells her (prematurely) he will be remembered as the guy who beat her. "You really got a problem with strong women," retorts Buffy. Warren, unharmed by her blows, continues the overt references to gender conflict: "What's the matter baby? Never fight a real man before?" He is defeated only when Jonathan tells Buffy to, quote, "smash his orbs." In the shooting script, the phallic/testicular subtext is given another twist: Buffy misinterprets Jonathan's message, and kicks Warren in the groin, to no effect, and Jonathan comments, to himself, "Not those orbs . . ." ²¹ When Buffy sees the pouch, snatches it and destroys the real orbs of power, Warren is left helpless. The term "bitch" has many meanings in Buffyspeak: Spike admits that "I may be love's bitch, but at least I am man enough to admit it" ("Lover's Walk" 3008), but it can also be used as a way of admitting the strength of a woman (usually in a pejorative way, as in Warren's use of "Superbitch," noted above), as well as in the more familiar, purely belittling fashion. Here, Warren's "Say good night, bitch" is reclaimed by Buffy and turned back on him: "Good night, bitch, " she quips, sending him crashing down with one powerful kick. Stripped of his orbs, Warren is nothing but a "sad little boy." ²²

[24] In "Innocence," Buffy faced down the Judge with her own massive, technologized phallic weapon—the rocket-launcher. In "Seeing Red," Buffy is first defeated by what we might call a phallically enhanced Warren, before a close-to-literal act of castration allows her to turn the tables. At the end of that episode, Warren critically wounds Buffy and inadvertently kills Tara with a handgun. "You think you can just do that to me? That I'd let you get away with it?" he rants. His desperate and cowardly act recalls not only Riley's desperate "it's pretty much all I got left" in "The Yoko Factor," but also Spike's reversion to the desperate measure of a rifle after being humiliated by Buffy in "Fool for Love" (5007). ²³ Time and again, men use firearms, often as a last resort, and almost always in attempts to reassert their masculinity.

[25] A vengeful Willow proceeds to redress the power imbalance in the following episode, tracking down, torturing, flaying and burning the misogynist woman-killer Warren ("Villains," 6020). The bullet she took from Buffy's body in the operating theatre is a key element in the process: if Buffy's defeat of Warren in "Seeing Red" recalls her kick to Angelus's groin at the end of "Innocence," Willow's attack on Warren is modelled on the rocket-launcher paradigm: "It's so small," Willow marvels, as the bullet withdraws from Buffy's chest and hovers in the air. The extent of her mastery over the bullet—both in saving her female friend and destroying her male enemy—is crucial; it also acts as a poignant comment on her failure to save her lover, Tara. The audience has watched Warren put his faith explicitly in brute technology. When he believes he has killed Buffy, he swaggers into Willy's bar, Western style, and boasts of his supposed victory: "Don't underestimate science," he says to the vampire he is regaling with his braggart story of slaying the Slayer; "good old-fashioned metal meets propulsion." Willow, by contrast, traps him using magic and nature. However, having brought the vines and branches of the trees to life to catch and bind his arms and legs, she proceeds to torture him with the phallic bullet, stripping away his shirt and allowing the bullet to hover just in front of his chest. ²⁴

[26] The extent to which Willow transgresses the strict slayer code that Buffy follows ignites a familiar controversy over women wresting power by appropriating male behaviour patterns (particularly violent ones). In part, her acts are mitigated by Warren's impenitence: he continues to spew his aggressive misogyny, even in defeat. "You're really asking for it," he spits at Willow, and when the ghost of Katrina is raised, he tells her he killed her "because you deserved it, bitch" (that word again). Willow's punishment recycles male violence and is deliberately phallic and penetrative, with disturbing overtones of rape: "Want to know what a bullet feels like? . . . I think you need to feel it . . . Can you feel it now?" ²⁵ In this respect, the dynamic is very different from Buffy's confrontations with Warren (where reasonable, non-lethal force is used), with Angelus in "Innocence" (the justifiable and empowering kick to the groin), or the Judge (averting apocalypse). Buffy, Anya, and Xander are all visibly appalled by Warren's execution, and shortly after this act, Willow, clearly out of control, faces off against Buffy, Anya and Giles as she hunts down the implicated (though comparatively blameless) Andrew and Jonathan.

[27] However, it is the way in which Willow is prevented from unleashing Armageddon that brings us full circle in terms of gender and violence. The climax of Season 6 is notable for its sidelining of the series' eponymous heroine. Although, as we would expect, Buffy has been the chief protagonist in each season's climactic battle (against the Master in Season 1, Angelus in Season 2, the Mayor in Season 3, Adam in Season 4 and Glory in Season 5), in 6022 she is left in a holding pattern, trapped underground, fighting for her life and her sister's. It is left up to the two males we have already noted as both more feminized and, to differing degrees, less anxious about their masculinity, to save the world from destruction. Both Giles and Xander use methods which are strongly coded as feminine: Willow is first weakened by Giles (who is drawing on the magic of a presumably female coven) but finally defeated only by the Watcher's near fatal act of self-sacrifice and the intervention of the feminized male Xander. Xander's words "I love you" (compare this with Warren's vitriol), repeated over and over again as Willow blasts and wounds him with her magic, gradually deplete her all-consuming destructive energy, until she finally gives in and breaks down in his arms.²⁶ If the male is usually subverted by the female in the Buffyverse, and if one of the standard issue symbols of aggressive masculinity (the gun) is often used to symbolise anxious or destabilized masculine identity, it is also worth remembering that the Mutant Enemy creative team is seldom predictable. The complexities of gender and power that are mapped out in individual episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as the longer and broader story arcs, pay eloquent tribute to the creator's (and the writers') serious intent.

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[1] In this respect, it is worth noting the WB network's decision to delay the broadcast of the third season's final episode, "Graduation Day, Part 2", in the wake of the Columbine high school massacre. Sarah Michelle Gellar's statement, presumably voicing the opinions of the Mutant Enemy creative team, makes it clear that they are acutely aware of such sensitivities: "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has always been extremely responsible in its depiction of action sequences, fantasy and mythological situations. . . . There is probably no greater societal question we face than how to stop violence among our youth. By canceling intelligent programming like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, corporate entertainment is not addressing the problem." (Quoted in Topping 2002: 229). Joss Whedon also notes that Warren's use of a gun at the end of Season 6 was in part "mak[ing] a statement about guns" ('Buffy Past, Present and Future' 2002: 13).

[2] Lorna Jowett argues that, in the series as a whole, Giles is desexualized by his age and his nurturing/fatherly role – see Jowett 2002: 61-3. Anne Millard Daugherty describes Giles as 'ambiguously gendered', and also notes he is 'resistant to most late-twentieth-century technology' (Daugherty 2002: 151).

[3] The demon in "Villains" (6020) makes the metaphor quite explicit: "You were a legendary dark warrior and you let yourself be castrated," he tells Spike.

[4] Petrie backs it up with references to the films *The Spy Who Loved Me* (*Loves Me* [sic] in Petrie's words) and *The Spy Who Shagged Me* (commentary on Region 2 Season 4 DVD set, disc 2).

[5] Doug Petrie, commentary on Region 2 Season 4 DVD set, disc 2.

[6] Xander's monologue in "The Initiative" ("Every man faces this moment," etc.) is taken from that macho masterpiece *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and is quite clearly used in a parodic way.

[7] For a more detailed study of Xander's masculinity, see Jowett 2002, Simkin 2004.

[8] When Buffy is stabbed by vampires in "Fool for Love" (5007), Riley's response is to throw a grenade into the crypt as a form of retaliation. (Thanks to Renee Dechert for this point).

[9] The Season 7 episode "Him" (7006) features a humorous reprise of the use of a rocket-launcher when Buffy, magically infatuated with a Sunnydale High quarterback, and competing with Willow and Anya to prove her love for him, attempts to assassinate Principal Wood with a similar weapon.

[10] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[11] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[12] "Anything", by Shawn Clement and Sean Murray.

[13] The fact that, as Whedon indicates in his commentary, they initially intended to use a tank brings to mind a moment in the movie *Tank Girl* when Rebecca straddles a cannon and challenges the men, "Hello, now don't you feel inadequate?" The image of Buffy with the rocket-launcher may also recall the figure of Vasques, the butch female marine in *Aliens*. In all these cases, the iconic images that are set up act as direct challenges to male phallic power.

[14] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[15] The soldier's use of "nimrod" may be significant, since although its surface meaning is "fool", the word also implies virility in its etymological roots (Nimrod the biblical hunter).

[16] The two showdowns, Buffy vs. The Judge and Buffy vs. Angel (as well as another earlier showdown, set in the school corridor, between Jenny, Xander, Willow and Angel, interrupted by Buffy), are seen in terms of the Western movie by Whedon—perhaps the most macho-oriented of all genres of US cinema.

[17] Again, Whedon's particular emotional investment in the episode is revealed by his remark in the commentary at this precise moment: "When she picks up that rocket-launcher, I have never loved her more".

[18] The significance of technology is underlined by the fact that the apparently invulnerable Judge, it would seem, is defeated by a weapon that is manufactured rather than "forged", which implies hand-tooling.

[19] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[20] Meanwhile, Jonathan is more unnerved by his stereotype of prison life: sitting in their cell, he eyes a neighbouring inmate and remarks: "That guy's been looking at me. I think he wants to make me his butt monkey."

[21] The kick to the groin is missing from the finished programme, which cuts straight to Warren revealing the pouch as he draws his fist back to strike the killing blow. Buffy snatches the pouch from his belt and smashes the orbs.

[22] The term "bitch" is also crucial in the episode "I Only Have Eyes for You" (2019), when Buffy, possessed by the spirit of a male student from the 1950s, re-enacts the original tragedy and shoots Angel, who has been possessed by the female teacher's spirit. For a detailed discussion of the episode, see Stevie Simkin, "Who died and made you John Wayne?".

[23] Spike's determination that he will shoot Buffy is shattered when he finds her outside her house, devastated by the news of her mother's illness, and the episode ends with his moving, faltering attempt to offer her comfort.

[24] The use of the trees in this way may recall the infamous rape of a woman by a tree in Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* (1983).

[25] In this respect, there is another possible parallel between Willow's attack on Warren and Spike's attempted rape of Buffy earlier in the same episode.

[26] Note that Willow's rehabilitation at the beginning of Season 7 is seen in terms of reforging connections with magic through nature ("energy and Gaia and root systems", as Willow herself says). The coven where she is being looked after is clearly gendered female: Willow refers to her teacher Miss Hartness and "the coven" and its members ("they're the most amazing women I've ever met") ("Lessons," 7001).