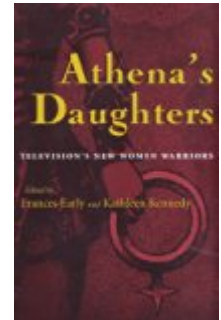




Frances Early, Kathleen Kennedy, eds.. *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003. 175 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8156-2968-9.



Reviewed by Robin Riley

Published on H-Peace (May, 2004)

It is a strange experience to be reading and writing about "television's new women warriors" when television and the nation have actual women warriors with whom we have recently obsessed. Could it be that the presence of fictitious women warriors helped to conceptually prepare us for Jessica Lynch?

Fans of *Xena, Warrior Princess* (as the authors say, hereafter *XWP*) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*not similarly acronymed*) will enjoy this collection. *Athena's Daughters* is filled with plot references to episodes from the *Xena* and *Buffy* "verses," as well as two essays from authors focusing on the *La Femme Nikita* and *Star Trek Voyager* series.

Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy ask, in their introduction, if *Xena*, *Buffy*, *Nikita* and *Seven of Nine* represent female versions of the traditional male "just warrior" and speculate what such representations might mean for our understandings of both gender and war. The editors and some contributors assert that if *Xena*, *Buffy*, and the others are not in fact female just warriors (that is, same old warrior, different body), they

each represent, at least, "a girl-power hero—a young, hip, and alluring portrayal of female autonomy that offers an implicit contrast to and critique of the second-wave feminist generation that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s" (p. 3). The question of whether or not these characters or series represent a move towards female just warriors, contain critiques of war, or are attempting to subvert traditional ways of thinking about gender and war, appears and disappears across the collection's essays.

Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy are dismayed at this turn toward "girl power heroes" with its accompanying de-politicization of gender roles and the turn away from feminism. They do believe, however, that attention must be paid to the new women warrior because "if the stories she tells enable fans to re-imagine and reclaim the heroic narrative for young women, then the new women warrior is a potential ally to the feminist project of reinventing the world" (p. 10). And, as Frances Early argues, "Programs such as *Buffy* portend a shift in gender representation in popular culture that invites critical study" (p. 55).

Well, I am not so sure about that. Those of us who are interested in peace might critique popular culture's fascination with violence and argue that it contributes to the militarization of our culture. Consequently, we would like to believe that a female usurpation of the just warrior persona, or a series that utilizes violence to urge pacifism would work against war. Series creators and writers' intentions, however, do not guarantee audience reception. As two of the essays in the collection attest, *Xena* and *Buffy* creators may intend feminist and pacifist subtexts, but that particular message is often obscured by the viewer's interest in sexy women's bodies, fighting techniques, historical accuracy, or lesbian sub-texts.

Alison Futrell's carefully researched essay, "The Baby, the Mother, and the Empire: Xena as Ancient Hero," argues that Xena and Buffy, if not Seven of Nine and Nikita, are kinder gentler warriors. Yeah sure, Helen Caudill argues in her essay, "Xena has her 'dark side,'" when Xena drags Gabrielle (her lover in queer and not-so-queer readings of the series) behind her horse, in the episode "The Bitter Suite," because Gabrielle's daughter has killed Xena's son (pp. 28-29). But except when Xena is taken over by the "dark side," her concerns are quite different from those of the historical male just warrior. For Xena's concerns, as articulated by Alison Futrell are: "a true 'warrior princess,' an authentic hero, finds fulfillment in the service of home, family, and love not in domination and conquest" (p. 25).

Indeed it is only through pregnancy and giving birth that Xena is able to begin to come out of her dark period (p. 16). So, these authors seem to suggest, this is real womanhood with a twist. Sometimes these female warriors behave badly, but for the most part they are running around the world fighting for good, for family, and for love.

The specific targets of Xena's justice, and the social and historical impact of her actions, however, separate her from the ancient hero norm. Xena's mission tends towards the defense of the

domestic, female-centered institutions and norms, the home and community-spheres where women traditionally played a prominent role. By representing the family and home as essential to the series's concept of "good," and as jeopardized by androcentric ancient social, political and ethical structures, *XWP* celebrates the traditional feminine sphere, giving voice to those conspicuously silenced in the ancient texts (p. 14).

Traditionally, women as well as men are required to sacrifice in defense of nation, and for women, that has historically included giving their children to serve in militaries. Aside from notable exceptions, women in wartime have kept home fires burning and resorted to violence only in defense of family. According to this account then, Xena differs only slightly from traditional understandings of women's role in war time.

Helen Caudill, in her essay, "Tall, Dark, and Dangerous: Xena, the Quest, and the Wielding of Sexual Violence in Xena On-line Fan Fiction" presents research gathered from Internet sources. Caudill does not tell us, however, how this fan fiction was chosen or reveal any websites. She does reveal, that fans are fascinated with the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle and the potential for "sexual violence" between them (p. 28). In spite of the disturbing specter of Xena as rapist and Gabrielle as victim, and lesbian relationships as sexually violent and coercive, Caudill wants *XWP* to be transformative. She ends her essay by claiming that: "Xena reclaims the quest and presents the reality of women loving women wielding violence and power and loving whom they choose—an image as powerful as those ancient goddesses, an image that is changing forever the way popular culture looks at women" (p. 39).

Popular culture still looks at lesbians as abhorrent or fodder for male fantasy. Contemporary warrior women—U.S. women soldiers—are subject to lesbian baiting and "witch hunts" that can result in dishonorable discharge. Wishing does not make these series transformative.

Frances Early contends, in "The Female Just Warrior Reimagined: From Boudicca to Buffy," that the Buffy series has transformative potential in relation to both its gender representations as well as its pacifist message. Early suggests that Riley's character is a critique of militarism through his repudiation of his male colleagues and leadership in a paramilitary organization. She further asserts that Buffy often defers killing in favor of non-lethal resolutions to wrongdoing. She suggests that Buffy's blonde, slim, middle-class looks subvert gender norms because viewers do not expect to see such a body perform as a warrior. Recently we have seen the military's creation of petite, blonde, Jessica Lynch first as a fierce warrior, then later when this account proved false, represented as a kindergarten teacher in need of "rescue" by male soldiers. Neither fictional nor actual actions by diminutive blonde women are sufficient to expand notions of the proper practice of white femininity, or the belief that war is the purview of men.

Early describes Buffy as a "special kind of just warrior who is honor bound to protect humanity and to sacrifice for the greater cause of fighting evil" (p. 59) and as "a complex individual with a strong moral authority" (p. 64). Both of these expressions fail to persuade the reader that a belief in war erodes as the United States wages war in Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of a "moral authority" who is "fighting evil."

In another essay about fan sites (dedicated to the *Buffy* series) entitled, "If You're Not Enjoying it, You're Doing Something Wrong: Textual and Viewer Constructions of Faith, the Vampire Slayer," Sue Tjardes discounts critiques of the series that suggest that Buffy's whiteness, blondeness and adherence to Western standards of beauty are problematic (p. 66) by pointing to the character of Faith, another white girl who is depicted in the series as sexually active and a "member of an underclass" (p. 69). The essay does not follow through on the issue of class. Buffy's class privi-

lege and the presence of women in the series who are "different," although still white, does not mitigate the problems with race in the series. In fact, presenting a character that is "different" because she is sexually active only reinforces the patriarchal notion that women's desire must be contained.

Still, Vivian Chin and Lee Parpart both report that the show's creator Joss Whedon is interested in promoting feminist ideas covertly. In her essay, however, Lee Parpart ("Action, Chicks, Everything: On-line Interviews with Male Fans of Buffy the Vampire Slayer") raises an important concern missing from other essays, pointing out that while feminists might read these women warriors as transformative, the public might not read *Buffy* as disruptive of patriarchal norms or gender constructions (p. 79). Parpart's study of male fan responses reveals most were not aware of gender norm transgressions. "Numerous male fans went out of their way to read *Buffy* as simple entertainment, and some categorized Buffy as a politically inert figure rather than as a woman warrior whose very existence challenges patriarchal assumptions about female passivity" (p. 90). Finally, Parpart argues: "if Buffy is not a girl but a warrior for all genders and all ages, viewers are under no particular obligation to think about her character's impact on the social construction of femininity or to consider the symbolic or real-world implications of her appropriation of violence. In this respect, Whedon may have succeeded a little too well in making male fans comfortable with the idea of a girl who takes charge: for those who wish to read the series as simple entertainment, the Chosen One's transgressive force can be made to simply disappear" (p. 91).

In "Love is the Battlefield: The Making and Unmaking of the Just Warrior in *Xena, Warrior Princess*," Kathleen Kennedy returns to the theme of Xena as a more compassionate and sexy warrior. "In Xena's world, love is rooted in concrete relationships among women and in devotion to

family and friends" (p. 47). Male warriors too would argue that their work is to protect family and country. Here lies the danger in this kind of analysis. As Parpart points out, watching women "kick ass" does not necessarily transform our collective consciousness. As we are enjoying it, we must ask ourselves what old messages are re-inscribed by this particular representation. If the "new women warriors" are presented as more loving and virtuous than male warriors, we risk not only a kind of re-glorification of war but also an opening up of the warrior status to women and a reversion to 1960s and 1970s feminist thinking.

Kathleen Kennedy is careful to point out, "as *XWP* faces west, it offers a sustained critique of the male warrior story--in particular its embedded misogyny and its emphasis on the violent conquest of others. But when *XWP* faces east, its legacy is more ambivalent as it carries the burdens of Western imperialism" (p. 41). She critiques *XWP* for its Orientalist gender constructions and portrayal of the East as mysterious and dangerous (pp. 47-48). This piece along with Vivian Chin's "Buffy? She's Like Me, She's Not like Me--She's Rad" are the strength of this collection. As Vivian Chin points out: "Race is there and yet not there in Buffy" (p. 94). These two authors' exploration of race(ism) in the Xena and Buffy "verses" might actually move towards a "new feminist project," as feminism in 2003 cannot consist of a bunch of white girls cheering each other on without awareness of the racial and imperialist dynamics that operate simultaneously. Chin goes on to say, "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can reveal attitudes and beliefs about gender and about race, not just as presented in the series, but as enacted in the everyday world" (p. 93). Chin argues that Buffy's blondeness places her on the side of good as does Gabrielle's in *XWP*. Xena's, dark hair signals us that she has a "dark side" but her white skin means that she is also capable of doing good.

I wish there had been more to support the last two chapters as they are both quite interesting, thoughtful essays. Laura Ng in "The Most Powerful Weapon You Have: Warriors and Gender in *La Femme Nikita*," does a good job in addressing issues of gender and the just warrior question. She contends that the series makes visible, in its use of settings and in the character of Nikita, how persons outside the corridors of power are often sacrificed for "the greater good" and how the imposition of morality so often obscures the horrors of war (p. 107). She carefully analyzes the potential of the character Nikita for subversion of contemporary understandings of femininity. Edie Sobstyl's "We Who Are Borg, Are We Borg?" is a really thoughtful exploration of the character Seven of Nine and a feminist analysis of popular culture generally, and ends with this caution: "reading Seven as a just warrior woman lets us see that her transgressive power was taken from her in exchange for the false lure of freedom. It also enables us to identify the capitalist, patriarchal and military hierarchies that reinforce the lure of freedom and to see those forces at work in our own lives. Making the *cyborg* a female demonstrates that the problem for feminism is not lack of freedom, individuality, and agency; nor is it fear of permanently partial identity. It is that we are women, and there is no cure for that" (p. 132).

Well actually, the cure for being a woman in this culture is a feminist movement. And yet, if the *Buffy* and *Xena* series are guilty of racism, can the characters also be feminist role models? Race may be the thing that stops these women from being third wave feminist icons just as race and the glorification of violence prevent these series from changing our views about war. I am left wondering if it is accidental that we have been exposed to these new women warriors in preparation for an imperialist war against an Orientalized enemy where women have a much more vital and enlarged military role than ever before. Does *XWP*

encourage women to serve as the new WMD?
Nah, its just TV.

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Citation: Robin Riley. Review of Early, Frances; Kennedy, Kathleen, eds. *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors*. H-Peace, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

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