



Potter, A. (2010) 'Who needs a Homeric hero when we've got Xena? : The confusion of gendered roles in *Xena Warrior Princess* episodes 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' and 'Ulysses''

Rosetta **8.5**: 96-126.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8supp/potter_xena/

¹Who needs a Homeric hero when we've got Xena? : The confusion of gendered roles in *Xena Warrior Princess* episodes 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' and 'Ulysses'

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Xena Warrior Princess was first broadcast in the US from 1996 to 2001, and the series was shown worldwide, has been continually available on DVD and still has a strong fan base.¹ Although the series was conceived, written and produced primarily by men, the aim was to put a female hero at the heart of the action.² *Xena* was a spin-off from the popular male-centred action series *Hercules the Legendary Journeys*, but with *Xena* executive producer Rob Tapert created a 'darker' show, mixing Hong Kong style action sequences with the story of a previously evil character looking for redemption.³ The character of Xena first appeared in the first season of *Hercules* in 1995 and her three episode story arc took her from being an evil female warlord bent on destroying Hercules, to a woman who saves a baby and thus loses her own troops to her cruel lieutenant Darphus, then teams up with Hercules to stop Darphus from killing innocent people. Xena's character and story arc in *Hercules* is based on *The Bride With White Hair*, a Hong Kong action film admired by Tapert.⁴ *Xena Warrior Princess* began where Xena's story from *Hercules* left off, with a once evil warrior woman looking for redemption for her past crimes, having crossed the boundary between evil and good.

Lead writer R J Stewart states that one of the premises behind the story of Xena is that she was a hero from Ancient Greece who was 'omitted' from history and myth as written down by men, and so the series is restoring her to

¹ *Xena* conventions continue to take place, for example in Los Angeles in February 2010.

² Joss Whedon had a similar aim for the film and series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, contemporary with *Xena*, where the blonde girl from the horror film is able to 'fight back when the monster attacked, and kick his ass'; see Havens 2003: 21.

³ Weisbrot 1998: 5 and 30.

⁴ Weisbrot 1998: 6.

her true place, by including her in the events of the Trojan War and the adventures of Odysseus.⁵ *Xena* writer Steven Sears states:

Here's the way we rationalize it. First, Xena was a dark character, and few people want to write about a dark character, so her participation in certain events would have been omitted. Second the authorities on mythology disagree among themselves. Ovid disagrees with Plato, who disagrees with Robert Graves and Edith Hamilton. Also Xena was a woman. Most of the histories were written by men.⁶

In the 'Xenaverse', Xena's adventures are written down by Gabrielle, Xena's friend, sidekick and soulmate/lover. This premise can be seen as a kind of pseudo-reclamation of the work of forgotten women in the way that Virginia Woolf discussed the fictional female writer Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own* and feminist writers from the seventies onwards, such as Gilbert and Gubar and Elaine Showalter, have attempted to reclaim the work of women writers of the nineteenth century.⁷ In the world of classics, fictional reclamations have occurred in Christa Wolf's novels *Cassandra* and *Medea*, and more recently Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, where familiar Greek myths are retold from the female point of view.⁸ In *Xena Warrior Princess* both Xena, the female warrior, and Gabrielle, the bard who writes down her adventures, are taking on roles traditionally assigned to men.

Myths in *Xena* are used, according to R J Stewart, 'as a foundation, a stepping-off point for telling our stories', as 'in the history of Western culture and civilization the Greek myths have been a taking-off place to tell stories'.⁹ Steven Sears states that the writing team on *Xena* asked the question:

What if we now threw this woman who nobody seems to want to write about into the situation and still try to preserve the myth but give it now another aspect, so that the person who is watching it

⁵ Weisbrot 1998: 8.

⁶ Weisbrot 1998: 38.

⁷ See Woolf 1990: 77-82; Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Showalter 1978.

⁸ Wolf 1984, 1998; Atwood 2005.

⁹ Weisbrot 1998: 39-40.

will now have a different and fresh perspective of what an old myth was?¹⁰

By bringing Xena into the world of the Homeric heroes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* gender roles are destabilised, and new stories are created.

In order to understand how viewers with different experiences engaged with the episodes I organised three group viewing sessions in 2007. My first viewing group was for *Xena* fans, recruited from an online fan forum and via an advert in a fan magazine, and I held the group viewing session at the Open University Camden centre. I also organised a group viewing for postgraduate students of classics, at the Annual Meeting of Postgraduate Students of Ancient Literature held at Nottingham University, where any interested conference attendees could choose to come along. These postgraduate students had a range of interests, including ancient history, literature, and classical reception studies. My final viewing group was for general viewers, who were neither fans nor classicists. I recruited this group from the Northampton based company where I work, and the group viewing took place on a team weekend away at Bridlington. This group cannot be called 'casual viewers' as none of them would have chosen to watch the episodes had they not been taking part in the research, but this group of non expert viewers is the closest I could achieve to people without any specialist knowledge who might just happen to watch an episode of a television series incorporating Greek myth.

Viewers were first asked to complete a pre-viewing questionnaire to help me to gauge their familiarity with the myth. They were then asked to watch the episodes, or excerpts from the episodes, and complete a post-viewing questionnaire. Viewers were asked to complete the written questionnaires prior to any discussion about the episodes, in order to obtain their personal opinions, however the viewers did make a number of short verbal comments whilst watching the episodes. I obtained data from seven general viewers,

¹⁰ From interview with Stephen Sears at the Hilton Metropole, Edgware Road, London, 4 May 2008.

Brooke, Diane, Carol, Emma, Sally, Nosheen and Sue; four fans, Patrick, Michaela, Debbie and a fourth fan who did not give her name; and twelve classicists, Justine, Irene, Cressida, Lizzie, Nikki, Sarah, Rosie, Pauline, Lyndsay, Eva, Hannah and a classicist who did not give her name. I supplemented the group data with questionnaires completed by Nadia, a classicist, and her partner Peter, a non-classicist. All viewers except for one of the fans and the partner of the classicist were female, and ages ranged from early twenties to mid fifties. It was not surprising that the majority of volunteers were female, as a strong female bias exists in my three chosen groups. Female viewers tend to be more active in fandom,¹¹ from my experience the majority of students of classics and particularly ancient literature are female, and the team from which I recruited my general viewers has a high proportion of female staff. Also I would expect that female viewers are more likely than male viewers to volunteer to take part in research into television episodes featuring a strong female hero.

'Greeks Bearing Gifts', re-writing the story of the Trojan War as Helen's Story

The *Xena* episode 'Greeks Bearing Gifts' was first broadcast in the United States in January 1996, and was the twelfth episode from season one. The action takes place at the end of the ten year Trojan War. Helen, married to Paris and living in the besieged city of Troy, is having bad dreams about the war. She sends a messenger to her old friend Xena, asking her to come to Troy. In order to gain access to the city Xena pretends that she has come to fight on the side of the Trojans, and goes to Helen, who blames herself for the deaths of the soldiers fighting in the war:

Helen: I see terrible things in my dreams, Xena. I want you to take me to Menelaus.

Xena: Why would you want to go back to the man you were forced to marry?

¹¹ See for example Jenkins 1992: 1.

Helen: It's the only way the Greeks will withdraw and the fighting will stop.

Xena: You're wrong. Paris and his army will carve a bloody path to the sea chasing after you. You're better off staying in Troy. At least Paris loves you.

Helen: After ten years of war Troy has become a city of misery and death. Paris may have loved me once but now he is consumed with victory. We're barely more than strangers. I just want the war to end.

Xena refuses to take Helen to Menelaus as she does not believe this will end the war. As Helen attempts to go to Menelaus without Xena's help, Xena discovers her, and offers an alternative solution:

Helen: Every day another soldier dies for my happiness. I can't live with it any more.

Xena: Then don't. The war stopped being about your happiness a long time ago. We both know Paris doesn't love you. And Menelaus barely knows you. The war will go on without you, Helen. Let it.

Helen: But where would I go? What would I do?

Xena: What do you want to do?

Helen: I don't know. No-one's ever asked me that before.

Meanwhile, Xena discovers that Paris' brother, the Trojan commander Deiphobus, has been plotting with Menelaus. He has Xena locked up in the dungeons and advises the Trojans that the Greeks have retreated and have left the horse as a 'gift of peace', fully aware of what it contains. When the Greeks attack, Xena tries to save Helen and Paris, and Helen has decided to take Xena's advice:

Paris: I don't know how all this happened. I just wanted to love you.

Helen: No, you wanted to own me. If we survive I'm not going to stay with you. I want my own life.

Deiphobus kills his brother and captures Helen. He never intended to give her to Menelaus, but wanted her for himself, telling Helen

With you at my side we'll build a new city; give birth to a new race of Trojans. With my strength and your beauty our children will rule the world.

However, Xena hides in the Trojan Horse, then defeats Deiphobus, rescuing Helen and leaving Deiphobus for Menelaus and the Greeks to find.

With Troy burning in the distance, friends Xena and Helen say their goodbyes:

Helen: Thank you for everything. I just wish we could have saved Troy.

Xena: When two kings are bent on destruction, there's nothing much anyone can do.

Helen: You've done a lot for me, Xena. You showed me the only person that can make me happy is me. I appreciate that.

Xena: What's next for you?

Helen: I don't know, but for the first time it's my decision.

Xena: I know you'll make the right one.

Helen walks off into her future, ready to find herself and build her own life away from the protection/domination of men, like Nora from Ibsen's *A Dolls House*.¹² This modern, feminist happy ending for Helen has little in common with the ancient story, which has Helen return with Menelaus to Sparta, where she is found by Telemachus in Book Four of the *Odyssey*.

Although the story of the end of the Trojan War as told in *Xena* is quite different from the traditional story, there are a number of parallels with the ancient myth in Homer and elsewhere that make the episode particularly interesting to classicists, and indicate that the writers had done some research into ancient sources.¹³ In terms of storyline, Xena's presence at Troy as a

¹² Ibsen (online, accessed 14 February 2010).

¹³ The episode had a complicated writing history compared with most episodes of *Xena*, with the story credited to Roy Thomas and Janis Hendler, and the Teleplay to Adam Armus and Nora Kay Foster. Armus and Foster were regular writers for *Xena* and *Hercules* and are always collaborators on scripts for these and other series, but this was the only episode from *Xena* and *Hercules* credited to Thomas and Hendler, who separately have written a number

female warrior arriving late into the war to fight on the side of the Trojans could lead us to see Xena as a re-imagining of Penthesilea. According to the *Aethiopsis* Penthesilea dominated the battlefield when fighting for Priam.¹⁴ Also in the episode, Deiphobus brother of Paris has designs on Helen, and according to the *Little Iliad* and later ancient sources it is Deiphobus who marries Helen after Paris is killed.¹⁵ In Euripides' *Trojan Women* Helen tells Menelaus that she was forced to marry Deiphobus, and that she had tried to go back to Menelaus and the Greek ships many times, but was prevented from doing this (945-960). In the *Trojan Women* we may believe that Helen is only saying this to prevent Menelaus from killing her, and Hecuba puts forward this argument skilfully (969-1032). However, in 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' Helen is sincere in wishing to return to Menelaus in order to end the war.

The portrayal of the character of Helen the *Xena* episode is extremely close to Homer's Helen from the *Iliad*. In Book Three, when the disguised Aphrodite appears before her, Helen is troubled and distressed, and initially refuses to go to Paris' bed until she is frightened into this by the goddess (3.399 – 420). Again, in Book Six when speaking with Hektor, Helen wishes that she had died at birth to stop the war from happening, and although she blames the gods she also blames herself. She has no good words for Paris, rather wishing she had been the wife of a better man, for Paris is not steadfast, and does not notice when other men censure him (6.343 – 353). The Helen of the *Iliad* is no longer in love with Paris, like the Helen in 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts'. And the Paris in both texts is shown to be weak. In the *Xena* episode he trusts his evil brother and ends up being betrayed and killed, and in the *Iliad* in Book Three he is beaten in single combat by Menelaus, and is only saved through the intervention of Aphrodite (355-382), and in Book Six he has

of episodes for fantasy and action genre television shows, such as *Knight Rider* (Hendler) and *Thundarr the Barbarian* and *The Fantastic Four* (Thomas). The number of people involved indicates that additional research may have been done for this episode, in a series where most episodes are written by a single writer.

¹⁴ *Aethiopsis* argument 1. The story is also related in Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, Epitome 5.1.

¹⁵ *Little Iliad*, argument 5, and Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, Epitome 5.9.

to be persuaded by Hektor to leave his chamber and come out to fight (325-341).

Although Paris is not the most heroic of the heroes of the *Iliad*, when compared with Achilles and Hektor, in the *Xena* episode none of the male characters taken from the *Iliad* - Paris, Deiphobus and Menelaus - are at all heroic. The focus of the episode on Helen gives little room for these characters to be much more than one dimensional, and they are portrayed more as villains than heroes, for example in Deiphobus' betrayal of the Trojans. It is the men who are engaged in the futile war, and do not feel guilt or responsibility as Helen does. Also Xena is the principal hero of the series, and beside her the male heroes are pale in comparison.¹⁶

In 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' the writers have taken some elements from the ancient sources, but use these to create a new story, one in which Helen and Xena are the central characters, rather than the male heroes. This 43 minute television episode made on a limited budget may lose some of the subtleties of the ancient sources, but the episode does work as a story. The episode has enough links back to the ancient sources to keep the interest of viewers who are familiar with Homer and other versions of the myth, whilst being accessible to viewers who perhaps have heard of the Trojan Horse and not very much more.

Before watching the episode all seven of my general viewers, who were neither fans nor classicists, stated that they had heard of Helen of Troy. Five of the general viewers mentioned the Trojan Horse in relation to Helen, and Diane and Carol stated that she was very beautiful, and a city was besieged for her. Carol also quoted the saying 'Never trust Greeks bearing gifts', and Sue the 'face that launched a thousand ships'. None of the general viewers mentioned Paris or Menelaus, and Carol, who gave the longest description of

¹⁶ Only the male character not taken from Homer, Perdicas, Gabrielle's ex-fiance, is portrayed as a hero in the episode, although Xena surpasses him in terms of fighting skills and perception.

what she knew about Helen of Troy, actually quoted the story of the wooden horse, rather than anything about Helen herself.

None of the general viewers particularly enjoyed the episode. Carol stated 'it was pants! A decent Greek myth hijacked by American ideals!', and Nosheen was found the episode 'disappointing', stating that she remembered the story 'from school and they could have made it a lot better, plus the Trojan Horse was terrible – made of bamboo!!!' When asked to comment on the portrayal of Helen some of the general viewers focussed on her appearance rather than her character, particularly focussing on whether the actress playing Helen conformed to their concept of beauty. For example, Emma stated that she 'expected her to be a "blonde goddess"', Diane that she 'isn't very beautiful' and Brooke that she was 'not as beautiful as I'd thought she'd be'. Nosheen stated that she was 'pretty but not stunning as I thought'. Some of the viewers commented on the ethnicity of Helen in the *Xena* episode, as rather than casting a white, blonde actress, Helen is played by American mixed heritage actress Galyn Gorg. This is contrary to other filmic and televisual representations of a blonde Helen, with Diane Kruger from Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*, Rosanna Podesta from *Helen of Troy* from 1956 and Sienna Guillory from the made for Television *Helen of Troy* from 2003. General viewer Diane stated that 'she is darker then the Greeks or Trojans, don't know where she is supposed to be from', Nosheen stated that 'Helen looked mixed race in the episode, which I didn't expect' and Sally that 'she was mixed race and should have been Mediterranean appearance'. Only Diane and Carol commented on Helen's character. Diane stated that in the *Xena* episode Helen 'has strong opinions and acts on them'. Diane is the only general viewer who had seen Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*, and so was perhaps comparing the stronger portrayal of Helen in *Xena* with the more insipid Helen in *Troy*. Carol commented on what she saw as the differences in the character of Helen from myth, and in the episode:

Helen in the myth was a very scheming woman who manipulated both Menelaus and Paris. Helen in the episode was portrayed as a victim who only became self aware when prompted by Xena.

The Helen from myth that Carol is referring to is not the Helen from the *Iliad*, who is sympathetically portrayed, but a more negative view of Helen as manipulator, for example as described by Hecuba in Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Although Carol cannot remember the specific source of her knowledge on Helen of Troy and the Trojan War, she believes that her knowledge of other Greek myths comes from a book that had belonged to her mother, which she read as a child. It is likely that her knowledge of the wooden horse stems from here, and the negative view of Helen links with other readings of myths that Carol is familiar with where women are portrayed negatively, such as the story of Pandora.

When asked about the male heroes in the episode, none of the general viewers found them to be convincing. They were described as 'bronzed', 'good looking', 'poncey', 'poofy', 'corny', 'girlie men' and 'complete wusses', rather than the 'worn', 'rustic men' or 'brute[s]' that were expected.

The fans that took part in the group viewing had all also heard of Helen before. Three of them mentioned that Helen was beautiful, two quoting 'the face that launched a thousand ships', although Patrick added that this was from *Doctor Faustus* rather than from an ancient source. Three of the fans stated that Helen's elopement to Troy caused the Trojan War, two remembering that Helen eloped with Paris, the other that this was 'Hector's brother'. Only one fan, Michaela, mentioned the Trojan Horse, and also that Menelaus was Helen's husband. Interestingly, Michaela stated that once the Greeks win the war thanks to the trick of the horse 'Helen was nowhere to be found', which is not the most well known story, as told by Homer, where Helen returns home with Menelaus. Of course the alternative ancient version of the story where Helen does disappear is the story of Helen the phantom, dramatised by Euripides in his *Helen*, although it is unlikely that Michaela knows of this version. Modern versions of the story where Helen escapes during the siege of Troy include the story as told in *Xena*, and the story as told

in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*, stated as a source of Michaela's knowledge. She described it as '*Troy* the feature film, not great but it looks good'.

Commenting on the use of myth in the episode 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts', Patrick stated that the episode was 'largely a feminist slant [to the myth] showing the futility of the conflict'. This anti war stance is a recurrent theme in *Xena*; for example, in the later Roman episodes the Romans are portrayed for the most part as power hungry villains when compared with the Amazons and the Greek villagers, who simply wish to maintain their peaceful way of life.¹⁷ Patrick also stated that there was 'no Cassandra which surprised me as I thought she'd have been good'. In addition to *Xena*, Gabrielle and Helen, however, there was perhaps little room for another important female character, and at the beginning of the episode Helen herself is having prophetic dreams about the Trojan War, so that Brooke stated 'her dreams gave me the impression that she could predict the future'. Helen herself has become a Cassandra-like prophetic character in the episode.

The fans disagreed on the characterisation of Helen. Whilst Michaela found her 'fairly weak' and 'quite whiney', and Debbie found that 'this version was uninspirational – bad casting', Patrick thought she was 'fleshed out' and 'given more to do' than she was by Homer, and the fourth fan who did not provide her name stated that 'I'm guessing she was stronger in *Xena* than Homer – stronger in an anachronistic way' and that 'her disenchantment after 10 years was well portrayed'. Only Patrick found that the male heroes were 'pretty much in line with the original script', presumably referring to Homer. Patrick states that 'Homer concentrated largely on the heroic combat aspects' of the story of the Trojan War, and so he is perhaps comparing the desire for war of the male heroes in 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' with the victory ethos of the heroes in Homer. The other fans tended to agree with the general viewers with regards to the male heroes in 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts'; Michaela described them as 'tossers – each one out for themself', Debbie found them

¹⁷ See particularly 'A Good Day' and 'Endgame' from Season Four.

‘uninteresting’ and the fourth fan found that ‘none of the men were heroic – very twentieth century’.

As would be expected, the postgraduate students of Classics had a superior knowledge of the myth of the Trojan War when compared with the general viewers and fans. Most of the classicists specifically quote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as sources of knowledge, and other ancient sources quoted included Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and *Helen*, Georgias’ *Enconium*, together with a number of additional Greek and Roman writers. Unlike the fans and general viewers the classicists did not respond to the question ‘please summarise what you know about Helen of Troy’ with a summary of what they knew about the Trojan War, but concentrated on Helen as per the question. Responses did differ, for example Justine, whose research is into postcolonial responses to the *Odyssey*, commented on ‘contrasting depictions of Helen in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*’. Most classicists mentioned that she was the cause of the Trojan War, and that she was wife of Menelaus and was ‘abducted by’, ‘kidnapped by’ or ‘ran off with’ Paris to Troy. Two classicists stated that she was the daughter of Leda, two that she was the daughter of Zeus, two that she was the daughter or stepdaughter of Tyndareus and one that she was the sister of Clytemnestra and the Dioskouri. Both Lyndsay and Eva provided more detail, including different variants of the myth. Lyndsay stated that she was abducted by Theseus as well as Paris, that the ‘tendency to blame her [was] partly repudiated by the “phantom story” and that ‘in some versions after death [she] lives with Achilles on [the] White Island’. Eva stated that she was ‘born from an egg’, that Aphrodite ‘persuaded’ her to go with Paris, and that in Euripides’ *Helen* she ‘remained safe in Egypt while her *Eidôlon* was taken to Troy’. The classicists tended to focus on Helen’s relationships and function as the cause of the Trojan War rather than her appearance. Only three of the classicists mentioned that she was beautiful, and a further two mentioned that she was the ‘face that launched 1000 ships’, out of a total of thirteen classicists who completed the questionnaire.

When commenting on the portrayal of Helen in *Xena*, only five of the classicists commented on the appearance of the actress playing Helen. Nadia, a classicist who has watched and enjoyed *Xena* episodes before, commented that 'Helen was beautiful in the episode, as per tradition, but looked more Trojan than Greek in terms of ethnicity', when 'beautiful women are described as "white armed" in Homer'. She went on, however, to state that '*Xena* episodes ignore ethnicity in casting generally'. Three classicists commented that she was 'not beautiful enough', although one of these stated that the 'ethnicity [was] possibly correct' and another that she was 'possibly sufficiently "mystic"'. The final classicist who commented on the appearance of Helen in *Xena* stated that she was a

very beautiful, modern 90's TV woman, which is supposed to be less patronising than early 20th century attitudes towards women but still is. Homer is less sexist. Helen isn't patronised in Homer, she is practically a deity.

Some of the classicists commented on Helen's revealing costume in *Xena* and some stated that although inauthentic the costume seemed appropriate. Eva, for example, stated that 'she looks like a Mediterranean woman, dressed in kind of Ancient Eastern traditional clothes' and Nadia that 'Helen's costume had an air of Greekness to it in that it was drapey, but she wore less clothing than expected'. In the episode Galyn Gorg, playing Helen, wears a white sleeveless dress, which is less revealing than *Xena*'s own costume, but we also see Helen naked in the bath early in the episode.¹⁸

With regards to Helen's character in 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts', the classicists were split between a few who commented on the consistency with Homer, and the majority who found this Helen to be a version of Helen consistent with modern attitudes, whether they found this 'sexist' or 'feminist'. Of those who commented on the consistency with the Helen from the *Iliad*, one of the viewers stated that Helen was 'consistent with [the] character' of

¹⁸ A Helen in revealing attire or naked is not uncommon, for example in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* of 2004 one of Diane Kruger's costumes, a white dress, is similar to that worn by Galyn Gorg in 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' and in Ian Judge's 1996 production of *Troilus and Cressida* for the Royal Shakespeare Company Katia Caballero as Helen rose naked from below the stage.

Helen from myth because of her 'self loathing' and as she 'dislikes Paris'. Also, Nadia stated that 'the *Iliad* does portray Helen as full of guilt about the war, as here', and Eva commented that 'Helen was seen as a problematic character even in ancient times' and 'this characteristic is kept'.

Some of the classicists find the Helen of 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' more sympathetic or less passive than in ancient sources. For example Sarah found Helen in *Xena* to be 'a victim' as opposed to the 'terrible woman' from myth, and Nikki stated that she was 'independent' in the episode, when in myth 'her beauty defines her character and there's not much else to her'.

Lizzie stated that in *Xena* Helen is 'a little more outspoken and there was the forced marriage element, but still annoying – ten years to realise it was silly to get people to fight and die for you?! Please!' In one of the most detailed and interesting analyses offered by the classicists, Rosie grappled with the feminist and non feminist aspects of the episode:

Hardly wearing anything, was very beautiful; these are clearly not feminist aspects. I liked the emphasis on her lack of choice - her trafficking by men. This removes the aspect of ambiguity about the motivation of Helen from Homer but emphasizes a more feminist slant. Rather than a misogynist blaming of her there is understanding of how she has been exploited by male power. Also the ending, emphasizing that she decides to leave alone, makes the story somehow about her - whereas in Homer Helen is not of so much interest. However, I cannot really see this series as feminist despite the emphasis of *Xena* as a powerful woman. She is almost naked and very beautiful. I do not accept the idea of the display of the female body as an assertive 'reclaiming' of beauty by women. It is meant to appeal to male viewers and is voyeuristic.

Of all the viewers Rosie gave the most thought to her answers, and was the only classicist who felt that watching the episode had increased her knowledge, as she stated:

It has made me think of the misogyny of the traditional story. It is about the trafficking of women. The question of whether Helen was raped/abducted or wanted to run away (which is excluded from the episode) is part of a misogynist discourse which does not take

seriously the exploitation/ domination of women, but rather assigns blame to women for their own ill treatment.

The point that Helen had been forced to marry Menelaus, implicit in the *Iliad* but explicit in the episode, has taken Rosie back to the ancient source with a different perspective. Lorna Hardwick states that one of the key objectives of classical reception studies is to 'focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions', and this is what has happened for Rosie.¹⁹ In the *Iliad* the trafficking of women is depicted through the shadowy characters of Briseis and Chryseis, but in the *Xena* episode we see that this applies as much to Helen the Queen as to other girls who become captives and slaves.

The centrality of Helen to the episode was commented on by Justine, who stated 'it's all about Helen', and by having Helen at the centre 'they make it a new story rather than adding to Homer's version, therefore more contemporary', with the 'very twentieth/twenty first century' plot focussing on Helen 'finding her own path'. Nadia felt that:

The role of Helen was handled fairly well in that *Xena* pointed out that the war wasn't really about her anymore and the slant was that it was the war through Helen's eyes.

As Nadia stated, the plot was not focussed on 'battle and heroics' but on 'a woman's choice to lead the life she wants'. Some of the classicists commented on the modernity of the ending, such as Irene, who stated 'women's lib [was] to the fore here', and Lizzie, who found the episode to be an 'interesting take on the story drawing on the well known bits but adding a different twist', making it more 'modern' with 'more of Helen's point of view', and adding the idea of 'forced marriage'.

As I have stated above, the focus on Helen means that the male heroes are less important to the episode, and the classicists, like the fans and general viewers, found the male heroes to be 'not very heroic', 'weak' and 'a little one

¹⁹ Hardwick 2003: 4.

dimensional'. Nikki stated that 'they were always subordinate to the female characters – always evil'. Cressida commented on the portrayal of a 'peculiarly unheroic Menelaus' and a 'very strange evil Deiphobus', but goes on to state 'I think it worked'. Rosie found it 'interesting' that in *Xena* 'they said the men didn't love [Helen]' thus 'de-romanticising the story', and goes on to state that in the episode:

All the men were rather pathetic and uninteresting. Helen was much more interesting – we were invited to care about her feelings/motivations. In Homer the story is really a story of men.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the makers of *Xena*, focussed as they are on a female hero, take a story about men and make it into a story about a woman.

Some of the classicists compared the character of Paris in the episode with the Paris of the *Iliad*; Lizzie commented that 'Paris was similar – weak, led by others', although Sarah thought that 'Paris is more wimpy in Homer', and Nadia that in the episode 'Paris was portrayed too kingly'. Some classicists commented on the lack of Priam, Hektor and Achilles, as Sarah calls them the 'real heroes of the Trojan War'. Only Lyndsay commented that 'Deiphobus' desire for Helen' was consistent with the ancient sources. One of the classicists who particularly disliked the episode stated that none of the male heroes were 'familiar from Homer, only from American sitcoms'.

Most of the classicists did, however, enjoy the episode and found it 'fun', 'amusing' and 'entertaining', particularly because they knew the story as told in ancient sources. For example Rosie stated 'it was quite funny how the episode makers tried to incorporate *Xena* and her own elements of the story into the myth'. She found that 'the contrast between my expectation of how the story would work out and how they actually did it was fun'.

As classicist viewers found, there was even more benefit to be gained from prior knowledge to fully benefit from the re-telling of the story of Odysseus in 'Ulysses'.

The story of Uselesses: Odysseus/Ulysses is no hero compared with Xena

'Ulysses' was first broadcast in the United States in April 1997, towards the end of the second season of *Xena*. This episode is not a particular favourite among fans generally; Lucy Lawless herself states that 'the actor who played Ulysses was somewhat miscast',²⁰ and a love story between Xena and a man was not popular when many fans were looking for the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle to be taken further.

The episode begins with Ulysses fighting the pirates sent after him by Poseidon to stop him from getting home after he has blinded Polyphemus the Cyclops. Xena and Gabrielle help Ulysses to fight off the pirates, and although Poseidon tries to warn Xena off, she agrees to help Ulysses get back to Ithaca. From the beginning they have much in common, as Xena states 'you've blinded a Cyclops? I've done the same myself'. It is probably because Xena fights a Cyclops she has previously blinded in the first episode of *Xena* that R J Stewart, who wrote 'Ulysses', chose not to include the Cyclops episode from the *Odyssey* in this episode. As in the *Odyssey*, however, the story of the blinding of the Cyclops is re-told by Odysseus, but to Xena and Gabrielle rather than to the Phaeacians:

- Xena: How did you come to blind Polyphemus?
- Ulysses: On the way back from Troy, we stopped at Polyphemus' island.
- Xena: That doesn't sound wise.
- Ulysses: We needed food. We were hungry. Unfortunately, so was that one-eyed monster.
- Gabrielle: He tried to bite off more than he could chew, I take it.
- Ulysses: Yes. I definitely wasn't on his diet.

²⁰ Quoted in Weisbrot 1998: 218.

As well as being equally matched in blinding Cyclopes, Xena and Ulysses find that they also each have a special weapon. Ulysses asks Xena about her chakram, a circular throwing weapon, and tells her about his bow:

Ulysses: I'd like to see that chakram in action. I've never seen one before.

Xena: Yes, I guess it's unique to me.

Ulysses: I have something like that back home in Ithaca, a weapon only I can use.

Xena: What is it?

Ulysses: A bow.

Xena: A bow? What's so special about it?

Ulysses: It's made of the hardest ironwood. It's so powerful, it can send an arrow through three warriors.

Xena: Mmm. I sure hope that doesn't get into the wrong hands.

Ulysses: I wouldn't worry about that. I'm the only one who can string it.

This exchange indicates to the viewer that the bow will be important later in the episode.

The only adventure from the *Odyssey* prior to Odysseus landing on Ithaca to actually take place in the episode is the encounter with the Sirens. In the episode from Book Twelve of the *Odyssey*, on the instructions of Circe, Odysseus stops the ears of his men with wax and has them tie him to the mast, so that only he can hear the Sirens. Although on hearing their song he begs his men to be set free to go to them, he remains tied to the mast until out of range of their song. In *Xena* Ulysses is tied up by Xena so that he does not try to go to the Sirens. He manages to escape his bonds, but Xena saves him by singing to mask the song of the Sirens, until they are out of reach. Ulysses says to Xena 'you saved us all'. Here elements of the story from the *Odyssey*

remain; the singing of the Sirens, and Ulysses tied up so that he cannot go to them, but in the *Xena* episode it is Xena and not Odysseus that ensures that the ship passes by the Sirens unscathed.

On the way to Ithaca Ulysses and Xena fall in love, and Ulysses had been led to believe that his wife Penelope was dead; but when they reach Ithaca they learn that she is still alive. Ulysses' friend Metacles tells Ulysses that his home is 'swarming with pirates' who 'call themselves suitors to Penelope' as 'everyone here believes you're dead, just as you believed Penelope was dead'. Ulysses and Xena plan to get into the castle via the old moat. On their way to the castle Ulysses tells Xena that he no longer loves Penelope, and wants to travel the world with Xena and Gabrielle, but Xena tells him that she does not love him, as she does not want to take him away from Penelope. Meanwhile, inside the castle Penelope holds up her husband's bow and tells the suitors that 'the first man who can string this bow will be king'. Ulysses, in a beggar's cloak, steps forward to string the bow. He struggles to do this, and so Xena helps him from under the table. As in the episode with the Sirens, Odysseus' heroic deed from the *Odyssey* is only achieved here through the help of Xena.

The pirates are defeated, and Xena and Gabrielle leave Ithaca on board the ship. Ulysses realises that Xena does love him, but she tells him 'your kingdom needs you, your wife needs you. You're home at last. Whatever you feel toward me will pass'. As they leave, Xena and Gabrielle discuss what has happened:

- Gabrielle: How are you feeling?
- Xena: Oh, splendid. Well, maybe not splendid, but I'll live. He'll learn to love her again. She's quite a woman, standing up to those pirates all those years.
- Gabrielle: Yes she is. Do you think that he knows that you helped him with the bow?
- Xena: No, I don't think anyone knows, and I want it to stay that way. This is Ulysses' story. And for years the people of

Ithaca will talk about how he bent that bow. It's the way it should be.

And so the happy ending for would-be lovers is that Ulysses gets back his kingdom and wife, and Xena continues on her adventures with friend/lover/sidekick Gabrielle – her real soulmate. Xena is happy that it is the story of Odysseus/Ulysses that is remembered, and if we subscribe to the view that Xena is a warrior written out of the history books, then it is maybe unreliable narrator Odysseus that embellishes his own heroism by removing Xena's role from the story, or perhaps assigning it to Athena.²¹

'Ulysses' works with Homeric myth in a different way to 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts'. In 'Greeks Bearing Gifts' the writers create a new version of the story of the end of the Trojan war with Helen at the centre, whilst in 'Ulysses' the writers deliberately take episodes from the *Odyssey*, the story of the Sirens and the story of Odysseus stringing his bow and defeating the suitors, and make Xena into the hero of these episodes. Although the writers have created an entertaining episode for those who have no prior knowledge of the myth, viewers who are familiar with the story of Odysseus will have their expectations overturned. 'Ulysses' is a good example of an episode where we as viewers are let into the secret that the *real* story from the *Odyssey* involves the female hero Xena, who is instrumental in helping Odysseus to string his bow, but she allows this fact to be omitted from the story as it is re-told as history/myth.

As before, viewers were asked to state what they knew about Odysseus/Ulysses prior to watching the episode. Prior knowledge among the general viewers and fans varied, from those who had no knowledge or extremely limited knowledge to those who could list some of his adventures. Only five classicists took part in the 'Ulysses' viewing compared with the thirteen classicists who viewed 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts', due to the lack of time available at the conference where I showed the episodes. As time was

²¹ This is not the only episode in which Xena takes on the role of Athena. In 'the Furies' Xena presides over her own trial, rather than Athena presiding as in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus.

limited I chose to show only the last section of 'Ulysses', focussing on the return to Ithaca, the stringing of the bow and Ulysses' relationship with Xena, although Nadia watched the full episode. Unsurprisingly all the classicists were familiar with the story of Odysseus from the *Odyssey* and other texts.

All the general viewers preferred 'Ulysses' to 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts', preferring the love story type episode rather than an episode focussing on war. For Peter, the partner of classicist Nadia, the converse was true, as he found 'Ulysses' dull as he is 'not really into love stories', and for him 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' was 'okay' as 'it at least had some action and intrigue in it'. General viewer Sally found that 'Ulysses' 'hung together better as a story', Brooke found the story 'more believable' and Diane thought 'the scenery was really nice and the story was a bit more interesting'. Emma enjoyed the episode as:

I knew a lot about the Ulysses story and it was interesting to see what was done to fit Xena in - liked the love story bit - very funny!

Emma, Carol and Nosheen all commented that the Sirens were maintained from the original story. Carol stated that 'I think the Sirens were maintained as they are probably the most generally recognisable by the audience'. Nosheen, who had remembered the connection with 'the god of the sea' from school, commented on the elements of the story that were retained, including:

His falling out with Poseidon, and his journey back to his homeland, Ithaca. Plus the Sirens. The love interest with Xena was a bit of a surprise! Also did two women really help get him back to Ithaca? Thought Poseidon would have made it more difficult to get back home.

Of the three fans who expressed a preference, Patrick preferred 'Ulysses' as it is 'less grim', when 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' 'largely contained [the] sack of Troy', but both Debbie and Michaela preferred 'Greeks Bearing Gifts'. Michaela found that 'the storyline was stronger and the casting of lead characters [was] slightly better', whilst Debbie's preference was based on the development of the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle, and so 'Beware

Greeks Bearing Gifts' was preferred as the episode 'is more intense as it drags up past feelings for Gabrielle plus it stretches the "friendship" between the two'. As fans, Patrick and Debbie have different attitudes to the series, so that Patrick stated that it was 'great to see [these episodes] again', whilst for Debbie 'these are among my least watched episodes'. Patrick, who has a broad interest in myth, appears to particularly enjoy episodes with content based on myth, whilst Debbie has little prior knowledge of myth and is primarily interested in the Xena/Gabrielle relationship.

Of the classicists, only Nadia watched both episodes in their entirety, and so could comment on her preferred episode, stating that although both episodes were 'fun but very lightweight' she preferred 'Ulysses' as 'it featured Poseidon' and she prefers 'the episodes where gods and mortals are trying to outwit one another'. This is perhaps a particularly interesting aspect for classicists, although a modern concept, as in both *Xena* and *Hercules* the heroes are continually able to outwit and outmanoeuvre the gods in ways that they are unable to in classical sources, where the gods ultimately always have the upper hand.

The classicists were, however, all able to respond to the portrayal of Ulysses, and any changes made from the *Odyssey*, from the excerpt of the episode that I played them. Hannah and Nadia found some similarities, as Hannah stated that in *Xena* Ulysses was 'smart' as in Homer, and Nadia that he is 'strong and witty' in the episode, as in the *Odyssey*, and in the episode, as in Homer, he has the 'desire to reach Ithaca'. Nadia also found a less obvious similarity:

He does seem rather love-struck with Xena, diverting his attention from his duties. In Homer, however, he spends sensuous years (albeit imprisoned) with Calypso before abandoning her to go back to Penelope. This is similar in that he finds some comfort in another woman, but dissimilar in that he leaves Calypso.

I read the potential Xena/Ulysses relationship in a similar but slightly different way, as a companion piece to another modern American use of the *Odyssey*,

Jonathan Shay's *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, which uses the *Odyssey* to explain the behavior of soldiers returning from Vietnam.²² Shay discusses the exciting dangerous sex on offer while on tour, compared with the return to wives at home.²³ In this context Xena, like Circe and Calypso, offers exciting dangerous sex when compared to Penelope, and also the comradeship of a friend who understands combat. Xena is therefore the perfect potential partner for Ulysses.

Nadia found that the main changes to Homer in the *Xena* episode are that Ulysses is 'tricked to believe that Penelope is dead' and that 'Telemachus was missing'. Nadia found that:

This made it about grief and romantic love rather than duty to family. I thought that was too simplified and the idea of him falling out of love with Penelope was certainly a modern idea.

Rosie also commented on this major change to the motivations of the hero:

The focus on love is a big change - it is not really important in the *Odyssey* whether Odysseus feels romantic attachment to Penelope, or exactly how his feelings are affected by his adventures (beyond for example weeping in Phaeacia). Here we are told that after the years of separation he no longer feels close to her - perfectly plausible in an age of psychoanalysis, where we have a concern with feelings as a suitable subject for narrative, but not a concern of the ancient text. The change seems to be rationalising (making more like everyday life - as we perceive it today) what is ultimately part of a fantastical and unrationalisable story.

This rationalisation appears to work for some viewers, with the context of the love story narrative, familiar to modern audiences, helping the general viewers to relate to the episode and in the case of Brooke to find it 'more believable'.

With regards the portrayal of the character of Ulysses, both Rosie and Pauline focused on the differences from Homer, caused specifically by inserting Xena into the story as hero. Pauline found that 'Ulysses seemed weak and

²² Shay 2002.

²³ Shay 2002: 65-75.

indecisive in the light of Xena' and 'Xena helped Ulysses to string the bow and kill the suitors'. Rosie commented on this aspect of the story in more detail:

He seemed to be easily influenced - he was convinced by Xena to go back home again, although he claimed to want to leave with her. Also, of course, he couldn't do the bow on his own. In the *Odyssey* he always knows what he wants, or rather a concern with confusion/nuances regarding what he wants is not at issue. Here he is no longer the main character in his story - but a side character in Xena's story. In being the person who is helped, and the person who has decisions made for them, he takes over a normative female role, whereas Xena takes on the normative male role.

Ulysses is not exactly feminised by the introduction of Xena into the story, but gender roles are subverted.

The non classicist viewers also picked up on some of these points. Nadia's partner Peter was less than satisfied with the changes made to the story:

The changes portray Ulysses as a lesser man, unable to accomplish his journey home or win back his throne without Xena's help. [The] changes weren't for the best. They took a fairly heroic journey of a man's struggle to overcome the gods and to get home to his wife and kingdom and they turned it into a ten minute montage of Xena singing on a boat.

General viewer Sally found that Ulysses was 'easily led by his heart' thus taking the role traditionally assigned to the female, and that he was 'not as strong as Xena'. Diane found him 'a bit less all-powerful than I had expected - he was quite dependent on Xena'. Carol goes slightly further to state that 'he was too wet in the episode. Also he should have been able to string his own bow'. When commenting on changes made to the story, Carol stated that:

They cut out a lot of his travels and obviously made Xena the reason he succeeded, plus putting her in as a bit of love interest. Cutting the journey would be necessary for the length of the episode but the love stuff was unnecessary.

Emma, however, found that the changes were necessary in the context of the episode:

Xena helped Ulysses pass the Sirens rather than him remaining tied to the mast. They were good in order to bring Xena into the story as the programme needed to be focused about her.

Emma also found that Odyssees/Ulysses was portrayed as a 'handsome hero', which is what she would have expected.

Fans Patrick and Michaela both comment on the casting of the actor playing Ulysses affecting their belief in the character. Although Patrick found that the character of Ulysses in *Xena* is 'pretty consistent' with Homer he also stated that 'the actor was poorly cast' and 'didn't convince as king or soldier'. Michaela gives 'casting' as part of the reason why she 'was never a fan of this interpretation of the character' but also 'the "love story" between him and Xena' as 'in stories he is devoted to his wife and driven by this to get back to Ithaca'. Patrick also comments on the main changes to the myth:

No axes, Sirens much prettier and changed, Ulysses doesn't have a crew, no Telemachus and doesn't hang the maids as this was misogynistic.

The hanging of the maids in the *Odyssey* is a difficult concept for modern audiences and it is not surprising that this is omitted from the *Xena* episode. However in her feminist modern re-telling of the *Odyssey*, the *Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood chooses to focus to the hanging of the maids, and the lack of choice available to them. This echoes the lack of choice available to Helen in 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts', although for the maids there is no possible happy ending.

Attitudes to use of myth in the episodes

Finally, viewers were asked questions about how much the series' creators expected their viewers to know about the myth, and whether they thought that prior knowledge would increase enjoyment of the episodes. The general viewers, who had the least prior knowledge, had managed to follow the episodes, and so did not believe much prior knowledge was expected. For example Brooke stated 'I don't think it matters how much you know about the

myths, they still make good episodes' and Nosheen stated that 'It's possible to watch the episodes without knowing much about the myths. Both were easy to watch'. In fact, some of the viewers believed that if you knew the myths well you might not enjoy the episodes. Diane stated that if you knew the myths 'it would probably make the episodes more annoying as you would see where the changes were', and Carol, who did not particularly enjoy the episodes, but does have an interest in myth, stated 'the more I know about the myths the more irritating I find the episodes'. Sue had a similar view, stating she 'probably [would] have enjoyed [them] less if I had known the stories better. Just saw them for what they are'. Peter, the partner of a classicist, also stated that if you knew the myths well 'it would decrease the enjoyment, particularly if you enjoyed the original'.

The fans did not necessarily think that the writers expected viewers to know the myths in detail prior to watching, but Patrick stated that viewers would need to know 'a fair amount to recognize the phrase [Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts] etc, but not necessarily be familiar with the narrative'. Debbie was very close to the words of lead writer Steven Sears when she stated:

I believe that the writer worked on two levels - on a basic level the story is set out in such a way that anyone can enjoy it as there is enough basic information, however for people with a better understanding of the myths they will be able to compare and evaluate, giving another dimension to the story.

Like the general viewers, though, Debbie believed that too much prior knowledge would lead to lack of enjoyment:

As someone with no prior knowledge I think the episodes worked well, I believe people with a general knowledge would still get enjoyment out of it, however people with a great understanding would criticise it too much.

The classicists did read the episodes on a different level, and did evaluate the episodes against original sources. In some cases the classicists reacted to the episodes in a negative way, as some of the non-classicists had expected, but in other cases prior knowledge actually enhanced enjoyment, and classicists

were taken back to the original source texts. Justine stated 'there are many conflicting elements though this makes you think of Homer again and compare'. Although Cressida thought that 'it feels more like dictionary of myth dipping rather than a systematic treatment of the "real" story', she felt that having knowledge of the myth 'increases humour and irony'. Lyndsay also thought that having prior knowledge added to enjoyment in order to 'see how they've adapted the myths', and Lizzie also thought it was 'interesting to see how "others" (not classicists) interpret the myths'. Rosie also thought that prior knowledge had been important for her own enjoyment:

I personally feel that knowing the story beforehand is crucial to enjoyment, as the whole fun is noticing the changes and thinking why they have done them. If I didn't know about it I'd have had an enjoyable experience too but I would have understood it more just as a fun story.

Classicists who had the opposite view included Sarah, who thought that the episodes were 'more about entertainment with a few winks to the classics', so prior knowledge would 'decrease' enjoyment, and Nikki, who thought enjoyment would be decreased with prior knowledge as the episodes are 'quite silly and not very accurate'. Nikki stated that 'I view this as COMPLETELY SEPARATE to studying the actual myth - it is only entertainment in a particular setting, nothing to do with the real thing'. This is an interesting standpoint, as for most people today all myths are introduced through modern re-tellings, whether this is children's storybook versions or through film or television, and so for me the myth cannot be entirely separated from the more recent versions.

Nadia analysed what writers have done with the episodes separately, and concluded that prior knowledge can help, but is not essential:

I think a viewer gets more out of the Helen episode by knowing who Helen was and therefore understanding that this is the story through her eyes but giving her more power than in the myth by having her commission Xena's help. If you didn't know the Iliad then too many names would have been confusing, which is probably why few characters were named. [In 'Ulysses'] you need

to know that Penelope is still alive to really sympathise with Xena. I understand that there was no room for most of Ulysses' homeward exploits so I doubt purists would really complain about omissions in the story, so the brevity of the journey suits those with and without knowledge of Homer.

Rosie came to a similar conclusion:

I think [the creators of the episodes] probably know quite a lot but decide to treat it in their own way. Some things, e.g. The Trojan Horse, were clearly there to invite recognition of viewers. The programme makers are quite sly, i.e. the pivotal moment of the bow is subverted - which seems to be a deliberate and knowing wink at the viewer, like an in-joke between those in the know. Similarly the fact that after finally managing to get home Odysseus should suddenly change his mind is hilarious, but only if you know the text. It probably functions at two levels, so that those who know and those who don't will each get something out of it, but I would have thought that knowing the story would give you a much more challenging experience (i.e. you are confronted with changes and have to face up to what the reasons might be - what sort of comment on the story the programme is making).

By reading the episodes as new texts with their own aims, we do not need to see them as inferior to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but rather as simply different, although comparing the similarities and differences can be rewarding, as some of the comments from viewers illustrate. Ultimately the story that makers of *Xena* are telling is one where women are at the heart of the action; not only the protagonists Xena and Gabrielle, but also the female characters from myth. Helen is made stronger as the story of the Trojan War is focused on her, and even Penelope is made stronger, as Xena comments on how she is 'quite a woman' who has protected Ithaca from the pirates while Ulysses has been away. But as the women are made stronger by the presence of Xena, the male characters are weakened. In 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts' the heroes of the Trojan War are hardly heroes at all, and Ulysses, although portrayed as a hero, is still subordinate to Xena. These changes may for some viewers like Rosie highlight the misogyny inherent in the original myths, or may simply be seen as entertaining, as expectations are subverted.

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