

This critique of *Friend in Need*, the final episode of *Xena Warrior Princess*, was written in July, 2001, well before the tragedy of September 11th. In retrospect, the events of that dreadful day seem somehow presaged by the dismal failure of the Xena finale to bring to a meaningful and satisfying conclusion the story of a great epic hero. The finale's message affirming the necessity of vengeance, which the series itself had challenged time after time, came to stunning fruition in the events of 9/11 and its aftermath.

This essay was originally published in *Whoosh* in August of 2001, and has been anthologized in the book *How Xena Changed Our Lives*, edited by Nikki Stafford. For some strange and mysterious reason, I was moved to post it here.

Catherine M. Wilson, March 1, 2006

## Good-Bye To My Hero

by [Catherine M. Wilson and Donna E. Trifilo](#)

Of all the endings I could have imagined for the series *Xena Warrior Princess*, I would never have guessed that Rob Tapert would go for the cliché. In fact, he went for two clichés.

The first is the tired, old, misogynistic cliché that the uppity woman must get her comeuppance. Women have been allowed few heroes, and those we have almost always meet a tragic end. Countless stories tell of strong, independent women who are taught a lesson, put in their place, brought down, made powerless. The movie *Thelma and Louise* is just one example of a long tradition, as is the constantly retold, historically true tale of Joan of Arc.

For many, these stories of strong women are fantasy fodder, titillating as a dominatrix is titillating, but also reassuring, because the woman's demise makes her ultimately non-threatening.

For women these stories are cautionary tales, warning us not to dare too much. No strong woman is allowed to win, and that's what made Xena the hero of so many women, because she did win, time after time.

The second cliché is expressed in early twentieth-century novels like *The Well of Loneliness* (1926), countless pulp novels of the 1950s, as well as in movies like *The Fox* (1968) and *The Children's Hour* (1961). In those bad old days, if one dared to tell stories about lesbians, they must always have a "moral" ending, meaning that one or both of the women had to end up with a man, in prison, insane, or dead. Most often it was the more powerful, the more "unwomanly" woman, who came to a bad end. All too often she died, and her death was usually a violent and gruesome one.

Although Xena and Gabrielle have never been definitively outed by the show, it is well known that *Xena Warrior Princess* has a large following of lesbian fans, who view the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle as a love story. The death of Xena triggered a reaction in many lesbians who saw yet again the tired, old cliché. As one woman said, "Nothing like keeping up the cinematic history of dead lesbians."

I doubt that Mr. Tapert intended to send either of these messages. I don't believe he recognized that his "bold choice" ending was a cliché, just as I don't believe he ever made the connection between the mushroom cloud over Japa and the atomic bombs the United States dropped on Japan. I certainly don't expect that he has had any exposure to feminist theory, and I doubt he has ever seen the film, *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), which documents Hollywood's unfortunate depictions of lesbians.

Mr. Tapert must be aware, however, that his show has empowered women. The hero he created has changed forever the way women see themselves and the way women are portrayed on screen. The woman-as-victim scenario, once so common in popular culture, has lost its credibility, and female helplessness is no longer an acceptable counterpoint to male heroism. Post-Xena, women recognize the warrior in themselves.

While no television producer has an obligation to try to change the world, Mr. Tapert has helped to do just that, which makes his final betrayal of his audience that much more painful.

I have heard many women express their grief over the demise of their hero, and I think many of them wonder why they feel as they do. Perhaps on some deep level they understand that Xena's ultimate defeat is their own defeat as well.

I have heard many lesbians express their anger at the separation of Xena and Gabrielle, and most of them do understand why they are angry. While the series itself has constantly hedged over the exact nature of the relationship, many fans, and not only lesbians, saw it as a romance. Lesbians have largely accepted the half a loaf they've been given by the show, but the separation of the two "friends" feels like the final insult.

Mr. Tapert has not only betrayed a large number of his fans; he has also betrayed his own vision. Throughout the series, the tragic cycle of violence and revenge has been a constant theme, but in the end, violence and revenge won the day. Throughout the series, the power of love to heal and forgive has been repeatedly invoked, yet in the end, love was powerless.

What can account for this sudden reversal of everything the show has stood for?

In the last analysis, Mr. Tapert failed to grasp the nature of his own vision. He has an uncanny knack for pulling great themes out of his head, but he seems to lack an understanding of their meaning. *Destiny*, *The Debt*, and *The Ides of March* are works of genius. So much of Mr. Tapert's creative vision has been so good that most fans have been willing to forgive his gaffes. Some of his gaffes, however, have been horrendous, and the finale is the worst of all, because it appears to undo all the good that he has done.

What if the series had ended with *The Ides of March*? That episode was a brilliant conclusion to the arc that had been developed throughout Season Four. Xena had a vision of her death and Gabrielle's. She spent much of Season Four trying to avoid the fate her vision had foretold. Her fear of it haunted almost every episode and created in us a feeling of dread. And yet, when it came true, the very thing that we had dreaded was the perfect ending. Xena and Gabrielle were released into another world. The

fears, the struggles, the sorrows of this world were left behind. They were together. They were happy. Nothing could hurt them again. They were free.

*The Ides of March* was brilliant because it contained a profound message. Perhaps what we most fear is the best thing that could happen. Perhaps we don't see things as clearly as we think we do. Perhaps we don't understand what the important things really are.

*The Ides of March* was brilliant, not only in meaning, but in execution. All year I dreaded seeing Xena's vision come true, and when it did, I felt the rightness of it. It is no mean feat to take the viewer on a journey like that, to make us feel Xena's dread, her desperation, to take us with her on every step of an inevitable journey, and then to turn the whole story on its head, to reveal that the worst thing that could happen was in truth the best.

*The Ides of March* achieved the impossible. It was both tragic and triumphant, and our grief was tempered with the joy of seeing two liberated souls leave this world together.

But *A Friend In Need* was a disaster. The plot was full of holes. Xena was to blame for the deaths of 40,000 people because she inadvertently started a fire while trying to defend herself. Wasn't Akemi more to blame? If she hadn't killed her father, none of it would have happened. Then Xena had to die to help the Ghost Killer kill Yodoshi, the demon who had devoured the 40,000 souls. But Akemi was already dead. Couldn't she have done it?

Xena's explanation of why she had to stay dead was the worst of all. The 40,000 souls had to be avenged before they could enter into a state of grace, whatever that means, and only her death could avenge them.

The producers of *Xena Warrior Princess* have always operated from a potpourri of rulebooks, making up their cosmology as they go along, and the rules are often arbitrary and capricious. But making up an arbitrary rule is not a credible way to motivate important events, and no event could be more important than the death of the hero.

There are worse things in *A Friend In Need* than the rickety plot. The amount of misogyny in the episode is appalling. Never before in the series have I heard anyone make Xena's womanhood an issue, yet in Japan she was told that the katana is for men only. The display of her naked, headless body, strung up for all to see, was an expression of contempt, intended to humiliate. Worst of all was her treatment by Yodoshi, who stripped her, called her a whore, and referred to her "servicing" his need for souls. That whole scene, played out in explicitly sexual terms, felt darkly pornographic.

The saddest thing about *A Friend In Need* is its nihilism. The message of *A Friend In Need* is that vengeance works. The 40,000 souls entered a state of grace because they got their revenge. That is a chilling message to send out into a world where the lust for vengeance kills thousands every day.

In the finale, all the values extolled throughout the series are proved empty and meaningless. Love and forgiveness cannot end the cycle of violence, and Xena's journey of redemption has been for nothing.

She cannot be redeemed, not by her sincere repentance for the hurt she's caused, nor by all the good she's done, nor by Gabrielle's love for her, nor by her love for Gabrielle.

The emptiness and grief felt by so many fans are not what we should feel at the close of a heroic epic. A hero's life should inspire us, and a hero's death should feel like the fulfillment of that life. Instead, Xena's death is simply tragic. There is no triumph in it.

Some will say, "It's just a TV show. Why are people taking it so seriously?" I take it seriously because the stories we tell each other are important. They tell us who we are and what is possible. They teach, encourage, and inspire. Lives have been changed by this TV show, and that's what gives me hope. Already fans are rewriting the ending, and parodies of the finale are allowing us to heal our hearts with laughter.

In the final analysis, not even her creator, Rob Tapert himself, can destroy Xena. She is much too strong for him, because she lives in all of us.

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