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## CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | CRITICAL ESSAY

# A Bard's eye view: Narrative mediation in *Xena: Warrior Princess*

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**Abstract:** This article aims to present an analytical survey of various aspects of narrative mediation in the action-fantasy TV-series *Xena: Warrior Princess*, by discussing a number of structural, verbal as well as visual devices that justify the qualification of *Xena* as “art television”. What is particularly unique to this series is the manner in which *Xena*'s heroic exploits have reached the modern viewer, namely by means of the “scrolls” produced by *Xena*'s sidekick and bardic companion Gabrielle. Consecutive sections discuss and illustrate the role of Gabrielle as storyteller and narrative mediator, the function and presentation of her “scrolls”, the use of inter-textual or remediating as well as regendering narration of familiar narratives from myth and history, and some of the narrative problems Gabrielle is made to encounter, such as writer's block, writerly self-doubt and the power of the word taking over from “reality”.

**Subjects:** Arts; Humanities; Language & Literature

**Keywords:** action-fantasy; Bard; mediation; narration; sidekick; television; *Xena: Warrior Princess*

He who is wise to the beauty of the stars experiences no joy if there is no one to whom he can tell it.

—Archyta of Tarentum (fl. 400 BC)

“You're a Warrior Princess, and I'm an Amazon Princess. That's gonna make *such* a great story!”

—Gabrielle to *Xena* in “Hooves and Harlots” (*Xena: Warrior Princess*, episode 1.10)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wim Tigges is a retired assistant professor and current guest lecturer and research fellow in English-language literature and cultural studies at the Faculty of Humanities of Leiden University. He has published both in English and Dutch on a variety of literary subjects. The focus of his current research is on aspects of popular culture, both literary and visual. He is the author of *Her Courage Will Change the World: An Appraisal of Xena: Warrior Princess* (2007), and has recently published three articles on this TV action-fantasy series.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The action-fantasy TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) is bound to become a classic in its genre. This paper is part of the author's current research project into different aspects of its artistic ingenuity. “A Bard's Eye View” is intended as a detailed investigation of one of the subtleties of this series, namely the various ways in which the individual adventures of *Xena* and her companion and sidekick Gabrielle are transferred from script to screen. It should be of particular interest to students of media studies (in particular television), and/or popular culture. It is also specifically aimed at viewers, fans and slash-fiction writers.

“What if none of this really is happening—and, like, we’re all in somebody else’s head, and they’re making us up?”

—Joxer in “Been There Done That” (*Xena: Warrior Princess*, episode 3.48)

## 1. Introduction

“Where would the Lone Ranger be without Tonto? Or, for that matter, Holmes without Watson, ... Xena without Gabrielle, ...?” (Buchanan, 2003, p. 15). The action-fantasy *Xena: Warrior Princess* (henceforth *Xena*), produced by Renaissance Pictures in association with Universal Television Enterprises is the spin-off of a simultaneously run series on the adventures of legendary hero Hercules. It was broadcast by syndicated television in six consecutive seasons between 1995 and 2001. Running to a total of 134 episodes, the series narrates the adventures of Xena (played by Lucy Lawless), a female superhero with a dark past, but who is now exerting herself for good causes and in order to redeem herself. In her exploits she is accompanied by Gabrielle (Renée O’Connor), who primarily fulfils the role of “side-kick”, but who soon develops into Xena’s more pacific alter ego, best friend and even “soul-mate”. Gabrielle is also the “Bard” who composes the “scrolls” that narrate their joint adventures, so that she is presented as their narrative mediator.<sup>1</sup>

As Buchanan points out, in the course of time “the literary sidekick assumes additional duties” to those of stock companion of the hero(ine), “most notably as biographer (...) and newer media—comic strips, films, radio, television, computer animation—continue the sidekick’s development as a character element integral to the plot” (Buchanan, 2003, p. 16). However, that “the sidekick is frequently reporter/historian/biographer” (p. 24, my emphasis) is not really substantiated, and as far as I am aware in action films or TV series the “biographer role” of the hero’s sidekick is not at all a common one. In this respect, *Xena* is fairly unique. Of particular interest is the sophisticated manner in which the role of Gabrielle as narrative mediator is manifested throughout the series. She is far more than just Xena’s biographer—her scrolls increasingly also emphasize her own emotional development in the course of the series, although I consider Buchanan’s statement that at an advanced stage “the emotionally sensitive Gabrielle and the contentious Zena [sic] have virtually exchanged roles”, and that “the two have melded into almost identical characters in which the role reversals symbolize the dual sides of their natures” (pp. 22–23) too categorical.

In this article, I will concentrate on a number of structural, verbal as well as visual, techniques its creators have used to put across the theme of mediation, which I consider to be one of the major devices that make the series a prime example of what Kristin Thompson refers to as “art TV” (Thompson, 2003, p. 108).<sup>2</sup> In the following sections, I will consecutively discuss and illustrate Gabrielle’s role as a storyteller and narrative mediator, the function and presentation of the scrolls, the use of intertextual or remediating as well as regendering narration, and some of the narrative problems Gabrielle is made to encounter.

## 2. Gabrielle as Bard

Gabrielle may be Xena’s sidekick, “sister”, companion, friend, soulmate, perhaps even lover, and she may be redoubtable with fighting staff or sais—she is also, perhaps first and foremost, the “Bard of Poteidaia”. We are given to understand that the television series called *Xena: Warrior Princess* is not a late twentieth-century invention, but that it is based on the scrolls on which Gabrielle recorded the adventures of Xena and herself. In other words, what the viewer gets to see when watching an episode of *Xena* is not the “reality” as it actually happened, but a reconstruction based on mediation, namely by one of the protagonists, who may be supposed to have had a biased view.

An early element of narrative sophistication is the suggestion that Gabrielle’s narrative skills may be in her genes. Although described as a “farmer”, her father Herodotus shares his name if not his identity with the “Father of History”, who lived from ca. 480 until ca. 425 BCE. This would make him a rough contemporary of the tragedian Euripides (ca. 480–ca. 406 BCE), with whom Gabrielle competes in “Athens City Academy of the Performing Bards” (1.13) and of Sophocles (ca. 496–ca. 406 BC), who is her rival playwright in “The Play’s the Thing” (4.85).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Gabrielle might easily have developed

a career as a dramatist, as she does in the alternative timeline of “When Fates Collide” (6.130). On the other hand, if the historical Herodotus was her father, she may have inherited some of his narrative skills, although the story she tells the orphans in “A Solstice Carol” (2.33) about the wealthy Lydian King Croesus does not tally with the account the ancient historian gives of him in the first Book of his *Histories*.

Gabrielle is indeed a storyteller rather than a historian. In “Prometheus” (1.8) she summarizes Plato’s famous story of the split souls, and in later episodes she tells stories as well. In Act I of “Is There a Doctor in the House?” (1.24), she distracts a ruthless and cynical general whose wounds she is tending by telling him the story of Actaeon and Artemis, but with a twist of her own. As the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–14 CE) tells the story in his *Metamorphoses*, Book III, Actaeon the hunter, who offended the goddess Diana (Artemis) by watching her bathing naked, was changed into a stag and hunted to death by his own hounds. In Gabrielle’s version the hunter is a proud king, Liberus, who offends Artemis by testing his hunting skills against her and is changed into a deer. In that shape he learned to love the deer and their peaceful life, and to understand that “the true secret of life is to find peace in yourself, and to share it with the world”. Artemis then took pity on him and restored him into his human shape, and Liberus became “a better king and a much happier man”. By telling him this story, Gabrielle is teaching the general a lesson—which he picks up in the end, calling off the war when he has recovered. Xena may be the better healer, but Gabrielle has a better bedside manner. The Bard also tells a story or two in “A Solstice Carol”, and “The Execution” (2.41) opens with Xena absent-mindedly listening to Gabrielle relating the earlier story featuring the valiant but alcoholic Meleager, “The Prodigal” (1.18).

Precisely, when Gabrielle hit upon the idea of recording the “Xena scrolls” is not clear. Probably, she did it from the very start, or how else would the earliest episodes have survived? She may have been further inspired in “The Giant Killer” (2.27), when she meets her great fellow-bard David, who writes down his psalms as well as the stories about his friend Jonathan’s exploits. That Gabrielle at any rate memorizes all her adventures with Xena from the very beginning becomes evident in “Athens City Academy ....”. She is understandably offended when Polonius, the father of “Orion”, one of the candidates about to enter a competition for entrance into the Academy of the performing Bards in Athens, calls her stories “cute” (she has just been telling the gripping story of “The Reckoning”, 1.6, visualized by means of clips from that episode), and points out that the bardic profession is not suitable for women. While Xena is busy defeating some Cyclopes, Gabrielle travels to Athens and surreptitiously enters the contest, where she relates at least six more of the previous twelve Xena episodes as well as the *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* episode “The Gauntlet.”

Characteristically, Gabrielle uses her stories to point a moral; thus, in Act II of “Athens City Academy ...”, she recounts the story of “Death in Chains” (1.9) to illustrate that death can be a beginning. When fellow contestant Euripides “quotes” from the *Hercules* episode “The Warrior Princess” (in which Xena was first introduced) to prove the “coldness” of Xena, and Stallonus, another contestant, adduces clips from these “evil Xena” episodes to illustrate her gory pugnacity, which he actually admires, Gabrielle comes up with the core scene from “The Gauntlet” to demonstrate her friend’s stamina and courage. The others are so impressed by her storytelling that when she is removed from the contest because she has entered it under false pretences, they refuse to compete any more unless she is allowed to participate after all. The bard and critic Gastacius, who is to judge the final contestants, allows her to tell the “Cradle of Hope” story (1.4), which so impresses him that he insists to the organizers that she be reinstated for the final contest.

Orion, whose father’s perpetual bullying has made him leave the contest in disgust, but who returns when Gabrielle follows him and begs him not to give up, qualifies for entrance into the Academy by telling the story of Spartacus as famously filmed by Stanley Kubrick in 1960. Gabrielle actually wins the competition by relating a compilation of “Sins of the Past”, “Chariots of War” and “Dreamworker” (1.1–3), so as to illustrate how Xena and she became “a great team”. This is probably what triggers her decision to rejoin Xena rather than remain in bardic training for another five or six

years. She does not seem to need it anyway, being in fact able to render useful advice on the subject of storytelling to all and sundry. Asking Orion what his true name is (“in case you become famous”), the answer she receives is: “Homer”.

It will have become clear that *Xena* makes considerable use of flashback scenes, both in the shape of “clips” that memorize earlier events in the series’ narrative, and of previously unrecorded events, for instance those referring to Xena’s evil past. Such clips are not just inserted as strategies of “redundancy” or “dispersed exposition” (Thompson, 2003, p. 63ff.). Thompson rather overemphasizes the commercial aspect of TV series, including aspects such as the way commercial breaks tend to format the structure of episodes (pp. 40–55), and the structuring of story arcs with respect to the concerns of advertising agencies and broadcasting corporations (pp. 58–63). It is true that in *Xena* seasons and episodes are also subject to such considerations as regards the “mediation” of the show itself, but this does not as such affect the theme of the fictional mediation of the adventures by Gabrielle as Xena’s (and her own) “biographer”. Of course they are also made use of for economy’s sake, as well as to inform irregular or new viewers about earlier events. In “A Day in the Life” (2.39), for instance, Minya, who is presented as Xena’s earliest fan but does not at first recognize the authoress of her adventures, is shown to read some of Gabrielle’s scrolls. This enables her to summarize Xena’s earlier encounter with a giant. Clips are also made to enable viewers to “relive” emotional and suspenseful scenes, and to confirm character types. Another “economical” device, the repeated use of identical, brief, purely “descriptive” shots in different episodes (such as corpses swaying on torturing wheels or hanging on crosses, flocks of disturbed birds, starry skies, and full moons) is remarkably close to the use of formulaic phrases in classical epic (see e.g. Lord, 1965, pp. 30–67).

I would prefer to “read” the complete series of *Xena* rather in the way readers of Charles Dickens’s novels read them in (usually no more than marginally adapted) full-length novel format, rather than in that of the original monthly or weekly instalments. Modern critical discussions of these novels do not generally take much account of their original “seriality” and its structural restrictions and conventions. Gabrielle is, at least to some extent, the author as “a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the [series] for our comprehension” (cf. Thompson, 2003, p.112; quoting Bordwell, 1979, p. 59 on art cinema). As “Bard” she creates a fiction of single authorship of the whole series, which in actual fact was created by scores of writers, both male and female, professionals as well as fans.<sup>4</sup> In the following section, I will discuss in some detail the nature of her scrolls, and how they are presented in the series, both verbally and visually.

### 3. Scrolls and scripts

As to the written versions of Xena’s exploits, “historically” Gabrielle’s scrolls are first mentioned in “A Day in the Life”, in which Xena, as yet fully unaware of the significance of these papyrus, uses a scrap from one of them, admittedly with little writing on it, to, *horribile dictu*, wipe her bottom with—because “there were no good leaves in the bush”! In Act III of that episode, Gabrielle also has Xena’s admirer Minya read one of the stories about her hero. This episode, which has the format of a sitcom, is different from any other episode in that it has headings between scenes in both Greek and English, the Greek looking pretty authentic, except that, as sometimes happens in printed books as well, the symbols for *nu* (ν) and *upsilon* (υ) are reversed. These headings, of which there are ten altogether, are of the nature of κλησις ἐκ της φύσεως (literally: “a call from nature”—this is the one that introduces the bottom-wiping scene). Unfortunately, what Gabrielle herself writes in that scroll, as far as can be ascertained, looks more like a series of random ligatures, and looks different again from her signpost lettering to confuse the giant Gareth. Her worried “I hope I spelled Laurel right” is parried by Xena’s exasperated “Giants don’t spell”, but the actual lettering looks nothing like Greek, or like anything in fact except possibly something out of the linguistic and orthographic imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien. We get a clearer view of Gabrielle’s writing in Act II when Gabrielle has Minya read one of her scrolls, but this looks definitely unlike any version of ancient Greek.

Throughout the series, the scrolls and the writing on them are often shown in close-up, thus visually emphasizing their importance. The same technique, incidentally, is used to bring out the facial

expressions of tellers and listeners to stories, or to hide physically impossible human actions, such as Gabrielle hitting five barbarians in the face with her boots while performing a Russian dance on top of a stick which simultaneously bores itself deeper into the soil (“The Quill is Mightier”, 3.56).

As to the *modern* discovery of Gabrielle’s records, that is the topic of an episode set in Macedonia during Second World War, “The Xena Scrolls” (2.34). In this episode, which is visually reminiscent of Steven Spielberg’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Dr Janice Covington, an intrepid archeologist, played by O’Connor, gets a visit from the dainty southern belle and daughter of the scholar Mel Pappas, Melinda (Lawless). The latter can read ancient scripts, as well as briefly realizing in a crucial scene towards the end of the episode that she is not only the linear descendant but also a full reincarnation of Xena, Warrior Princess. Bumblingly assisted by a pretended officer in the Free French Army, Jacques S’er (Ted Raimi), whose name should have rung a bell, and under threat by the villainous fortune hunter John Smythe, who intends to sell to the highest bidders, which might well be the Nazis, Janice and Melinda recover the scrolls that record the exploits of Xena. As Janice phrases it in the teaser, these scrolls have “the power to turn history into myth, myth into history”.

As such, the Nazi theme does not play a major narrative role in this episode, as it does for instance in the two-part story arc in *Star Trek: Enterprise* (“Storm Front,” episodes 1–2 of season 4, 2004), or in the new BBC version of *Dr. Who* (“Let’s Kill Hitler,” Season 6, episode 8, 2011). In *Xena*, intertextuality of this kind is generally subservient to the theme of mediation, as stories from the distant or more recent past are retold from a feminist or at least feminized point of view. I will revert to this aspect of the series in the next section.

To return to “The Xena Scrolls”: apparently some “historical” written accounts of Xena’s doings have survived to set Covington digging, but they have not been properly interpreted, as Mel(inda) demonstrates when decoding the story of “Callisto” (1.22) in what will become another clip show. Mel can also decipher the code on a tablet just unearthed. The sherds of this tablet are already conveniently if somewhat improbably glued together as it is pulled out of the sand. Small, almost unnoticeable visual tricks of this nature are a recurrent feature of the series. Another instance of such a visual joke is a man swallowing an anachronistic banana in the corner of a very brief shot of Xena and Gabrielle walking past an entertainer swallowing a sword in “Many Happy Returns” (6.131).

The unearthed tablet leads the two parties to a nearby hidden temple (or tomb) of Ares. Bullied around by Janice, Mel discovers the scrolls stuck in a rock in the wall, and she is greatly moved by the “romantic” love story of Xena and Marcus, as we watch clips from “Mortal Beloved” (1.16). Mel also finds the half of a broken chakram (Xena’s circular throwing weapon), John Smythe having discovered the other half. In Act III, the two halves are as if magnetically attracted to one another and join up in Melinda’s hand. This first awakens Ares from his tomb, and subsequently revives Xena in Melinda. Jacques S’er, meanwhile unmasked as “a brush salesman from New Jersey”, learns he is descended from the clownish recurrent would-be warrior character Joxer (Raimi), and Janice, to her dismay, finds that her ancestry lies in the “irritating blonde” Gabrielle. The latter phrase comes from war-god Ares, who tells Melinda/Xena that only a descendant of Xena can release him into the world. Fortunately, in this year of 1940, Xena can prevent him from joining forces with one Adolf Hitler, whom Ares approves of as a “new leader, with a lot of vision, a lot of potential” and in whose company he intends to make “a lot of potential changes”. His plea to Xena that he is “in [her] blood” falls on a deaf ear, and she fights him after he has conveniently eliminated Smythe. She then liberates her friends, and closes the door before Ares is able to escape, thereby breaking the chakram once more and reverting to her identity as Melinda Pappas, but with a wish to join Janice Covington in stepping out of their fathers’ shadows.

We are led to assume that by 1940 Ares is no longer able to “pop” himself to any place, and also that he is somehow liberated again around the year 2000, as is evidenced in “Soul Possession” (6.132). Another mystery that will probably never be resolved is who found and rejoined the chakram (it is the old one, of Darkness, which is irreparably broken in “The Ides of March”, 4.89), rejoined it

with that of Light and then sold it to Alexis/Alti in “Send in the Clones” (6.128). Such narrative loose ends, occurring in individual episodes as well as in the over-all narration, may well offend some finicky viewers, but they are allowed for by the often dream-like quality of the series’ mythopoeia and its narration. They also exemplify the first of five major traits of postmodern art cinema Thompson (2003, p. 110) refers to as briefly discussed by Bordwell (1979), and suggests we might apply to “art TV” as well, namely the loosening of causality.

In the epilogue of “The Xena Scrolls”, set “fifty years later”, Ted Raimi, grandson of “Jacques S’er” and understandably an admirer of the personality of “the lead guy, Joxer”, offers the scrolls to the series’ producer Rob Tapert (played by himself), who is more interested in the character of the Warrior Princess (“Tell me more about this Xena”). The episode exceptionally ends with 10 seconds from the well-known title sequence which normally comes between the teaser and the first act.

As is further confirmed in late episodes like “You Are There” (6.125), “Send in the Clones” and “Soul Possession”, the television series is indeed a representation of Xena’s adventures as “originally” recorded in Gabrielle’s scrolls. What happens in *Xena* is a clear case of what Marie-Laure Ryan, in her introduction to *Narrative Across Media*, calls “remediation” (2004, p. 32), notably “[t]he representation of a medium within another medium by either mechanical or descriptive means”, which is presented as “transposition from a medium into another” (p. 33). In “You Are There”, the series turns utterly metafictional when it has characters from the story, humans and gods alike, pursued by a talk show host and interviewed, sometimes on the spot (“Hello. I’m here—in Hell. And I’m about to do what no other reporter has ever done before: I’m going to interview—Lucifer”), and sometimes in a modern studio (“Xena, welcome. And also with us this evening: Gabrielle, the Battling Bard of Poteidaia, Xena’s constant travelling companion, and the chronicler of her deeds”). Gabrielle may be looking rather pleased at this appellation, but we need not wonder that her “clone”, in “Send in the Clones”, indignantly notes: “They’ve taken liberties with my scrolls”. Remarks such as these are evidence of another of Bordwell’s traits of art cinema: explicit authorial comment.

If the liberties taken with Gabrielle’s scrolls by the makers of the TV-show include adapting the accounts of events, they certainly include the actual wording of the texts. There is “evidence” to demonstrate that Gabrielle generally if not always composed in the “epic style”. Gabrielle’s voice-over relating the circumstances of “Lifeblood” (5.106), an epic on the origin and traditions of the Amazon nation, does not necessarily report the Bard’s own voice. Even so, phrases like “And so the Amazon legacy, to temper might with mercy, was restored—thanks to the innocence of a child—and the wisdom of Xena” are more elevated than her ordinary speeches as recorded in the serial scripts. In the episode that immediately follows it, “Kindred Spirits” (5.107), Xena actually rediscovers the scrolls, as they have been unpacked by young Amazon Eris, who has the ambition of becoming her new sidekick. Xena reads to her own little daughter Eve from “Return of Callisto” (2.29), beginning: “I sing of the wrath of Callisto, the pain of Gabrielle, and the courage of Xena, and the ineffable mysteries of their friendship as immortal as the gods ...”. Rather than in the demotic colloquial style of the series’ episode of that name, this is worded in the convention of the epic exordium and somewhat reminiscent of the opening lines of Homer’s *Iliad*.

It is her reading to Eve in “Kindred Spirits” that makes Xena realize to what extent Gabrielle really admires her by making her the hero of her stories. Somewhat later in the final act Gabrielle, who had toyed with the idea of staying with the Amazons as their queen, soliloquizes: “What made me think I could be a good queen?” Xena, entering just at that moment, answers “Your heart”, and tells Gabrielle that she read her scrolls, adding: “... anyone who writes like you can, who can find grace and meaning in everything that happens, she’s sure to make a wonderful queen”. By then Xena has come a long way from using a piece of scroll for hygienic purposes, and even from the fourth act of “The Ides of March”, where, about to die on the cross together with her friend, she sighs: “I wish I’d read your scrolls just once”.

In the final seasons of the series, we begin to learn how impressed friend and foe have become with the stories about Xena as recorded by Gabrielle. That the aged Joxer offers a bagful of dinars for “the last known scroll transcribed by the Bard of Poteidaia herself” in the teaser of “Looking Death in the Eye” (5.109) comes as no surprise, nor need it do so when we learn, in “Legacy” (6.117), that Kahina and her Northern African nomad tribe were “brought up” listening to the stories inscribed on Gabrielle’s scrolls. When told of this, Gabrielle reacts with modest surprise: “I had no idea they’d come this far. I’m pleased”. In fact, already before the 25-year stasis of Xena and Gabrielle between episodes 5.109 and 110, the scrolls had acquired some fame. Mavican, challenging the temporarily combined personalities of Xena and Gabrielle in “Succession” (5.93), and having the latter caged towards the end of Act I, has a brief exchange with her:

Mavican: ... So what’s it like? I mean—being with Xena? It’s like a brush with eternity, isn’t it?

Gabrielle: What are you talking about?

Mavican: Oh Gabrielle, please—you’re a part of making the legend true. Those scrolls you write. Yeah, I got ahold of one a while back. You know? You really should write more. I’m gonna need someone to write me into history after I kill her.

The irony is that Mavican, losing the challenge, is destined to be forgotten.

Another person who is understandably impressed with Gabrielle’s scrolls is Xena’s daughter Eve. Having been read to from them as a baby, as noted above, she finds herself reading the scrolls about her mother’s exploits as an adult in “Motherhood” (5.112), telling Gabrielle in Act II: “You preserved Xena for all ages in these scrolls, Gabrielle. Thank you!” Ironically, her intense reading of the scrolls nearly causes her death by their author’s hand, as Gabrielle, temporarily obfuscated by the Furies and intent on avenging the death of Joxer by the hand of Eve’s evil *alter ego* Livia, stabs her in the back. Actually, it is a miracle that the scrolls survived at all considering the damage done to the location in which Xena fights off some of the fireball-throwing Olympians in that episode.

If the scrolls did ultimately survive, even in the teeth of Alti’s failed attempt of hiding them after Xena’s death, so that her “reputation as a do-gooder was lost for eternity” (“Send In the Clones”), one wonders who, apart perhaps from Melinda Pappas, could have made any sense of them so as to enable what Alti calls “this hideous TV-show” to start “celebrating her as a defender of righteousness”. The “Clones” episode is indeed *the* show about the remediation of the series on television, referring to its protagonists as “television characters”, whom the fans as a matter of fact ultimately find more exciting personages than the “real” thing. Mostly, of course, “quotations” from the scrolls are given in the form of clips, as we have already seen in our discussion of “Athens City Academy of the Performing Bards” and “The Xena Scrolls”. If I have counted them correctly, in “Send In the Clones” there are no fewer than a record 75 clips, although most of these are very brief shots that may be consecutive in the original but are here separated by comment from the present.

#### 4. Remediation and regendering

The over-all narration of *Xena* involves a number of interesting and original traits. Not only is there an overarching storyline,<sup>5</sup> but many individual episodes retell familiar narratives from myth and history. Although supposedly set in ancient Greece, both the setting and location of individual episodes gradually expand to comprise an area ranging from Britain and Gaul to India, China and Japan, and from Northern Africa to Scandinavia. The events described may have occurred as early as around 1,250 BCE or as late as the Middle Ages. This generally testifies to a third trait Bordwell ascribes to art cinema, the violation of classical clarity of space and time. A trait of art cinema that might well be added to Bordwell’s list is that of intertextuality or what in this case may be called remediation, as it is the assumed recorder of the individual episodes who also rewrites these stories. Specifically, individual episodes deconstruct and reframe plot elements from stories such as those of the sacrifice of Isaac, the fall of Troy, the return of Ulysses, and the murder of Julius Caesar, and they include many other Biblical, mythical and historical themes, as well as taking off literary motifs from such stories as those of Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra as narrated by Shakespeare, from

*Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied* and Richard Wagner's *Ring-cycle*, and from Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, to mention just a few.

*Xena* is not of course unique in making use of earlier verbal or visual artefacts. Shakespeare's "adaptations" in particular are multitudinous. The shipwrecked cast landed on Gilligan's Island devote an episode of the eponymous 1960s sitcom, itself in a certain sense a comic spin-off of *The Tempest* (Garber, 2008, p. 10), to a parodistic musical performance of *Hamlet* ("The Producer," season 3, episode 4, 1966), and an episode of *Moonlighting*, a comedy-drama that ran in the mid-80s, is devoted to the *Taming of the Shrew* ("Atomic Shakespeare," season 3, episode 7, 1986). Many other examples could be added. What is of particular interest in *Xena* is that its adaptations of "classical" stories are often transformed into a "feminized" variant: not only the protagonists, but also secondary characters and opponents from the sources used may be given a gender change, or the borrowed stories or plots as such are regendered and given a feminized twist. In other words, one of the narrative devices applied in this series is the creative use of well-known myths and legends of the past. This has even inspired fans to extend what has come to be called the "Xenaverse" by producing further series-based story material in the form of "slash-fiction". As Jones (2000) formulates it:

The production of mythic narratives is one means by which oppressed or marginalized groups are able to appropriate some aspects of history's regulatory function for their own purposes .... In the Xenaverse, this kind of narrative intervention is not understood by fans as a means of grasping and harnessing any singular "reality" of the past but instead becomes a means of constituting multiple possibilities. (p. 415)

What justifies the qualification of regendering as well as remediation is the suggestion that in adapting the stories we are familiar with from myth or history in such way that male protagonists are replaced by female counterparts, the viewer is as it were "put right" concerning what "really" happened. Not only does *Xena* itself feature female protagonists of heroic stature, like its scarce generic predecessors such as *Sheena* (1955) and *Wonder Woman* (1976–78), we now learn that the major participants in classic narratives were "in fact" women rather than men, and also that *Xena* and Gabrielle played significant roles. In "Is There a Doctor in the House", a season finale clearly inspired by *M\*A\*S\*H* (Hayes, 2003, p. 63), it is *Xena* who teaches both Galen and Hippocrates (anachronistically swept up into a single story!) a lesson in medical science, inventing both blood transfusion and heart massage, Gabrielle, meanwhile, improving the medics' bedside manners. To heighten the emotional effect, the camera zooms in alternately on their faces when *Xena* is reanimating Gabrielle, just as earlier in the episode it had switched to and fro from the latter's face as excited storyteller to that of the wounded general as concerned listener.<sup>6</sup>

The use of familiar devices in the series' narratives is not only combined with the relevant intertextual material (visual as well as verbal), but also with suitable generic conventions. Thus, *Xena* includes narrative patterns from comedy as well as tragedy, quest and romance, fairy tale and musical, detective and western, to mention just a few instances. As to the special effects used in *Xena*, rather than being smoothly digitalized they mostly resemble Ray Harryhausen's famous stop-motion techniques in remediated if not regendered classic action-fantasy films like *The Seventh Voyage of Sindbad* (Juran, 1958), *Mysterious Island* (Endfield, 1961) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (Chaffey, 1963).

## 5. Narrative problems

Mediation sometimes proves to be far from a routine business for Gabrielle—and *Xena* is also a comic show. Being in one sense a light-hearted expression of Gabrielle's discontent with *Xena*'s dominant and dismissive bearing during the third-season "Rift", and featuring what looks like the lengthiest scroll of the series, the episode "The Quill is Mightier" testifies to some of the Bard's problems in setting quill to papyrus. The episode opens with a shot of a couple of youngsters running away from a temple of Aphrodite, the walls of which they have defiled with that age-old testimony of youthful vandalism or artistry (depending on one's view), graffiti. Crudely cruciform symbols are

subtitled as representing phrases like “ELECT XENA GOD”, “XENA RULES” and “Xena’s da BOMB” [sic]. Needless to say, the Goddess of Love is not pleased with this type of desecration of her temple by some of the earliest Xena fans in ancient history. Instigated by her brother Ares, who points out that the problem is not so much “[his] little Xena” (her appellation), but that irritating blonde Gabrielle “and her busy quill”, adding “I only made the warrior—she made the legend”, Aphrodite puts a spell on Gabrielle’s writing: from now on everything she writes down will become literally true. Essentially, this is exactly what happens when the scriptwriter of an action-fantasy puts pen to paper, and the director and film crew then as it were cause life to imitate art.

Still in the teaser, without being noticed by the two friends, Aphrodite listens in on a soliloquy by Gabrielle, while Xena is performing some needlework (!) on her breastplate:

Gabrielle: I love the smell of a new scroll—the feel of it in my hands, the look. It’s so clean. It’s perfectly empty. Listen—the way it crinkles— the first time you open it. That smell! It’s just a—special, untouched scent.

...

Xena: Don’t you ever get tired of writing down what I do? Why don’t you create new characters—new images?

Gabrielle: You mean fiction?

When Gabrielle takes up Xena’s suggestion that she have a “shot” at fiction this time, the first name she wants to write down is “Xena”, but Xena impatiently begs her to “[m]ake some one else the hero for a change”. Gabrielle proceeds to “punish” her dismissive companion, who has already gone to sleep, by writing her out of her new story. In this “fiction” Xena goes fishing, and Gabrielle wakes up as a Xena-like hero, single-handedly or rather single-leggedly, defeating five “barbarians”, while Joxer, whom she has accidentally introduced as the “jerk” with which she awoke, excels his usual self in jerky behaviour.

Even though Joxer does not get this unintentional joke against him until much later, it is the first illustration of Aphrodite’s spell causing figurative expressions and metaphorical phrases to come literally to life. When Gabrielle writes herself and Joxer a free meal at a tavern, adding that “the drinks were on the house”, alcoholic beverages begin to pour down through the roof. More seriously, when the pacifist Bard writes that “War lost all his power”, Ares comes toppling down from the sky, bereft of his immortality, and something similar happens to Aphrodite when Gabrielle tries to undo the powers of the originator of the spell. As the episode proceeds, things get worse and worse. Fortunately, Xena does turn up in the end, pulling a cartload of fish, with which she proceeds to defeat the army of one Thelonus (whose second-in-command is named Monk!), whom Ares had hoped to give a fighting chance of local conquest in Xena’s absence. Since Aphrodite’s charm had run: “Lies will make the world go round, till truer words are written down”, all Gabrielle has to do to lift the spell is to render a truthful description of what happens from now on. Objecting at first that she is “not really good at writing action” because she loves using metaphors, she agrees to write according to careful and truthful dictation from the others, the irony being of course that the fish-throwing Xena is too good to be true. But all ends well, as befits a comedy.

The implicit suggestion is that Xena’s adventures are to be considered “really” historical. If this particular episode is mainly fictional and hence untrue, it also turns out to be a Xena episode after all. This makes it almost paradoxically *metafictional*, since all of the Xena stories are of course nothing but fictional, including the scrolls mentioned in them as their source. When she first discovers that everything that is happening happens because she wrote it, Gabrielle exclaims triumphantly: “I can write anything, and—and it comes true!” However, as Aphrodite’s spell (itself a fiction) suggests, fiction is *not* true. But then we never get to “see” the “truth” of Gabrielle’s scrolls anyway, in view of the “liberties” the creators of the television series have taken with them. It does not really matter

whether the stories we view are “true” or not, since we have no way of checking them. What counts, however, is that *Xena*-the-series, which is based on stories made by twentieth-century scriptwriters, is at least “true” in some sense: not literally or historically, but symbolically, the way there is “truth” in myths or fairy tales.

There are a few more occasions when Gabrielle has a problem with the correct and truthful mediation of her stories. In “Punch Lines”, another zany comedy, Gabrielle is helped by Aphrodite to overcome her “writers’ block”. Showing the goddess her scrolls, she says: “These are my scrolls. I wrote them—I wrote all of them. It’s like a—it’s like a diary of my travels with Xena. When I wrote them I just—I felt so complete”. It turns out that Aphrodite has intuitively pushed the right button by putting on a psychiatrist’s attitude, having Gabrielle lie on a couch and retell the story of the past day. By offending Lachrymose, “God of Despair”, Gabrielle has caused the shrinking of Xena’s horse, Argo and at some stage even that of her own body. In a light-hearted manner, this episode deals with the possible effects of guilty suppression of an unpleasant truth, the truth in question entailing both Gabrielle’s offence against Xena (not taking proper care of her beloved Argo, as promised) and her own resulting feeling of inferiority, symbolized by her temporary diminution in size. Comic relief of the most basic slapstick kind (pie-throwing, always a visual success if well done) resolves Gabrielle’s embarrassment, to the extent that even Xena gets “pied”—and is able to laugh at herself. In this episode, mediation of the *Xena* stories plays another role as well: in her attempt to make Lachrymose laugh (the condition under which he will undo the metamorphosis of Argo), Gabrielle tells him comic scenes from various earlier episodes, visualized in the usual manner by means of clips.

Of a different nature once again is the occasion when Gabrielle makes an effort to promulgate her message of peace by dramatizing her adventures with Xena. In “The Play’s the Thing” she has to travel back to Piraeus, apparently the Hollywood to Athens’s L.A., to recover a lost scroll entitled “Charting our history through the prism of time: with a more intricate examination of our relationship”, and turns it into a script for a play. Her sponsors, “Queen of Cons” Zehra and her fawning associate Milo, encourage her to present the play as a “Message of Peace”. They sell its expected proceeds several times over to various warlords who are hoping to see and cash in on a bit of action but are likely to lose their money, Zehra and Milo intending to scamp with the investments. During the rehearsals, led by Gabrielle as her own director, Joxer, who is appointed as producer and stage assistant, insists on a more realistic version of the *Xena* stories, and so does Minya, who had hoped to be cast in the role of Xena (the real Xena is absent until the final act of this episode).

The question of what the audience will most want to see has to compete with that of what the author most wishes to convey, an issue that is of course also of great importance to the creators of *Xena* as a commercial enterprise. When Gabrielle obtains a peek of the show of bloody fighting and barelegged chorus girls that her rival playwright Sophocles is setting up in another theatre, she allows herself to be convinced that she must serve her audience’s preferences if she wants to have an audience at all. But for this insight, modern viewers might have had to suffer a very milk-and-watery version of the Xenaverse. Instead, she is now willing to introduce even more “blood” and “sex”, and when Joxer objects: “What about the critics?”, she yells: “It’ll kill ‘em all!” (Act II).

While the sponsors are getting worried, the play is beginning to look more and more like a self-reflexive parody of a certain TV-show called *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Such is the case in a scene where Gabrielle, played by herself, and Paulina as “Xena” are bathing together—a recurrent motif in the series from “Altared States” (1.19) onwards. “Xena” introduces some subtext innuendo by yelling: “Wow! I’m really wet!”, and Gabrielle giggles: “Oh! Oh! Me too!” Their main opponent in the play does not get the opportunity to talk peace, but is beheaded and bloodily torn limb from limb—at least, a dressed up dummy is. Kaelus, one of the three warlord investors, peeps in and, liking what he sees, reports his enjoyment to Zehra and Milo: “I saw the play. [...] I loved it—Oh, the power, the passion, the danger” (a phrase from the *Xena* title sequence!), adding with foresight: “This show’s gonna run for years”.

When Zehra informs Gabrielle how much the warlords enjoy her revised “sex and violence” version of the play, and that they intend to bring their complete armies to the opening night, it is Gabrielle who gets worried, and she decides to revert to her original “vision”. Of course, at the opening night the warlords are heavily disappointed, but as they are about to disrupt the performance, the real Xena turns up, and exclaiming: “It’s time to act!” gives a much applauded rendering of her authentic role. One of the warlords, Cleon, tells her to “[g]o away— you’re not even a good actress”, and a couple of critics consider moving over to the opening night of “Buffus the Vampire Slayer” across the street. All the same, Xena takes her final bow from an enthusiastic audience. Kaelus’s prophetic words did indeed come true, as the show ran for six years, both in the United States and abroad, even if some twenty-odd centuries later ...

## 6. Conclusion: Xena as art television

Thompson (2003) defines “art TV” as “a sort of television comparable to art films” (p. 108), i.e. “small-scale productions that appeal primarily to an educated audience” (p. 107), and as “isolable from the scheduling flow and available for analysis” (p. 109). In view of the “campy” nature of *Xena*, and its high popularity with a wide audience (as testified by the generous ratings for the show; see Hayes, 2003, p. 236), the term may at first sight seem inappropriate for this series. However, bringing together, as Thompson does, under one heading such highly divergent series as *Twin Peaks*, *The Singing Detective*, *The Royle Family* and *The Simpsons* broadens the scope of “art TV” to an extent that makes it hard to apply. Perhaps in the case of *Xena*, the term “high art lite”, introduced by Julian Stallabras to describe a genre that “appeals to different viewers on a number of levels”, is more useful (Thompson 166f., note 29 to chapter 4).

All the same, in my view the five major traits of art cinema Thompson (2003, p. 110) refers to as discussed by Bordwell are definitely also the hallmarks of *Xena*: loosening of causality, for instance, is exemplified in the many loose-ended episodes, as well as in visual details such as appropriate clothing for disguises popping up out of nowhere. Then there is definitely a good deal of emphasis on psychological realism: Xena and Gabrielle have credible problems, e.g. with guilt. Instances of violation of classical clarity of space and time, and explicit authorial comment have already been shown to be present as well. As to ambiguity, the lesbian “subtext”, for instance, leaves nothing or everything to be desired by the curious viewer: Gabrielle may be the original mediator of the show, but she leaves the precise relationship between herself and Xena well between the lines of her scrolls. Taking all of these effects together, the series provides its viewers with a sophisticated pattern of narration—what Mittell calls “the hallmark of narrative complexity: an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling” (Mittell, 2006, p. 33).

At the end of the episode that concludes the fourth season, “Déjà Vu All Over Again” (4.90), Gabrielle’s voice is heard to say: “Xena, life is eternal. It has no beginning and no end. The loving friends we meet in our journey return to us time after time. We never die, because we were never really born”. This may well be one of the most basic statements about the series as an artefact. Possibly meant to comfort viewers after the “death” of their heroes on the cross in “The Ides of March”, and thus implicitly announcing their “rebirth” in the following season, it should also comfort those many fans who were understandably disappointed and even shocked at the series’ closure in “A Friend in Need”, Part II. The scrolls are only fiction-within-fiction, but the series is an artistic creation, which is bound to become a “classic”. Xena, Gabrielle and all the other characters in it live whenever we play a DVD of the show. They never die, because they were never really born.

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### Notes

1. For more detailed information on the series, see Hayes (2003), which includes an extensive episode summary; also Tigges (2007), which discusses various intertextual, feminist and comic aspects of *Xena*.

2. Thompson does not mention *Xena* in her book, nor is there a single reference in Jason Mittell's comprehensive paper on "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television". Most discussions of *Xena* published to date deal with the presence or lack of feminist impact of its main characters, or with the recognition of lesbian subtext, in particular in so-called slash (fan) fiction; Caudill (2003) places the latter aspect in the context of the conventional quest narrative; Fillingim (2009), Kennedy (2007), and Tigges (2015) investigate religious aspects of *Xena*; Tigges (2010) discusses *Xena*'s rewriting of the story of Antony and Cleopatra as rendered by Shakespeare; Morreale (1998) introduces the "campy" nature of the *Xena* narratives; Tigges (2013) places two of its episodes in the context of performance of memory; otherwise, narrative aspects of the series have thus far been generally ignored.
3. References to episodes of *Xena* are given between brackets in the main text when first mentioned; the first number refers to the season, the second to the episode number in absolute order of broadcasting; this is also the order in which the episodes appear on the DVDs and in the descriptions and commentaries in the online periodical *Whoosh!* (International Association of Xena Studies, 1996–2007). Quotations from the scripts are as they appear in the Transcript sections in that periodical. Individual episodes consist of a "teaser", followed by the main title sequence and mostly four "acts". Breaking points between "acts" were for the insertion of commercials in a one-hour time slot; actual narration time of individual episodes runs to about 40–42 min. Like Thompson (2003) I consider the aspect of "flow" (which she discusses at length in her first chapter) to be irrelevant for the analysis of "art TV".
4. For script writers and directors of individual episodes, the reader is referred to the episode captions in Hayes (2003, pp. 48–135).
5. Focusing on *Xena*'s continuing quest for atonement and on Gabrielle's search for a way of peace and how to combine this with her combative role as *Xena*'s sidekick, the series also touches upon such ethical, psychological and spiritual claims as justice, betrayal and vengeance, and on relationships of love and family life.
6. For more extensive discussions of other instances of regendered intertext, see Tigges (2007, pp. 33–55), on the Rheingold saga, Potter (2010) on Homer, and Tigges (2010) on Cleopatra.

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