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Xena: Warrior Princess and Darwinian Analysis

The cult phenomenon *Xena: Warrior Princess* premiered on September 4th, 1995. In the thirty years since, the show has grown a cult following. It features a strong female protagonist set on seeking redemption for her past atrocities. Set in the world of mythical ancient Greece, *Xena* features themes like forgiveness, acceptance, and growth. As the titular character, Xena, along with her companions, undergo radical changes, often as a means to survive the world in which they live.

Xena first appeared as a brutal warlord on the parent series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* during an episode titled “The Warrior Princess.” Over the course of this three-episode arc, Xena begins her transformation into a hero. She tells Hercules, “There’s so much in my life I have to make amends for” (“Unchained Heart”). This change of heart leads Xena down a path of redemption that is the focus of her own show. Though her development is often shown through flashbacks, present-day dialogue also provides viewers with the necessary knowledge to understand Xena’s behaviors.

As Xena begins her journey to discover her new self, she allies herself with various other characters, beginning with one who will go on to serve as her partner and lover throughout the series. Gabrielle, a weak, naïve villager, becomes enamored with Xena after she is saved by the warrior princess. She tells Xena, “You’ve got to take me with you and teach me everything you

know” (“Sins of the Past”). Gabrielle, having almost been sold into slavery by barbarians, realized she needed to adapt. Furthermore, she understood that by traveling with Xena, a much stronger individual, she could not only have protection, but she could learn important skills that could serve her in the future.

Xena herself had to learn to survive. Her impetus for becoming a warrior occurred when she was a teen and her village was attacked. She rallied her friends to form an army, one which not only defended her village but also went on to raid others. Her mother, Cyrene, reminds her of this in the pilot episode when Xena tries to encourage the town to once again take up arms. Cyrene states, “You think we’re fools? We all remember what happened the last time you talked like that” (“Sins of the Past”). While Xena does defend her village once again, she is able to do so because of the knowledge and skills she had learned.

Just as Gabrielle sought to ally herself with Xena who was stronger than she was, so too did Xena throughout her past. One of the more significant characters Xena had encountered during her travels was Julius Caesar. She had captured him, and after a discussion of destiny, she informs him, “Well, I can tell you one thing about your destiny. You’re fated to have dinner in my cabin tonight” (“Destiny”). She later tells Caesar, “This life I’m living is beginning to bore me. I’d love to join forces with you... We’d make an unstoppable team” (“Destiny”). Unfortunately for Xena, Caesar betrays her and goes on to build an empire. Despite this betrayal, however, Xena continues to ally herself with strong partners.

One partner is Borias, a warlord with whom Xena had a child. At a point in Xena’s past the couple attempted to wage war against the centaurs, but Borias’ wisdom caused him and Xena to part ways after the birth of their child. Xena’s quest for power drove them apart. Later, when Xena and Gabrielle encountered the same centaur tribe, Gabrielle remarked, “I can see why the

centaurs tried to stop you, and why Borias turned against you” (“Orphan of War”). Xena responded that “Borias was a very wise man. He found his way a lot sooner than I did” (“Orphan of War”). Prior to their separation, Borias and Xena had traveled to ancient China. There she met another powerful character to whom she would ally herself.

While Borias and Caesar were men, Xena’s desire to preserve and survive did not limit her to partnerships with those of the opposite sex. Instead, however, she sought out anyone with strength from whom she could learn. During her time in China she met Lao Ma, whom the writers imply to be the wife of Lao Tzu, the founder of Daoism. Much like the real Lao Tzu, Lao Ma provides Xena essential wisdom. She explains “The entire world is driven by a will, blind and ruthless. In order to transcend the limitations of that world, you need to stop willing, stop desiring, stop hating” (“The Debt II”). As a part of her imparting wisdom to Xena, Lao Ma also teaches her how to use spiritual powers similar to telekinesis. While such skills would ultimately make Xena far too powerful for the context of the show and are ultimately limited, they demonstrate her ability to learn and adapt.

Lao Ma is not the only strong female character Xena seeks to learn from. On her journey back from China, she and Borias encounter a tribe of Amazons. They also meet a shamaness named Alti whose allure and power draw Xena in. Borias warns her that “A shamaness like her can only be trouble” to which Xena responds “I like trouble, Borias” (“Adventures in the Sin Trade”). While in the present Xena had informed Gabrielle of Borias’ wisdom, in the past she certainly did not heed his warning. Xena’s desire for strength and power, and her decision to partner with Alti, only lead to trouble.

Xena is not the only one to seek out strong partners. Gabrielle, who had initially sought to travel with Xena to learn and grow, does so as well. Prior to her departure from her village

Gabrielle was betrothed to a man named Perdicus. Upon reuniting with him after he had joined the military and become a soldier, she found him far more enticing. She tells Xena of Perdicus, “I’ve never known anyone that I’ve ever been so comfortable around – besides you” (“Return of Callisto”). Despite Perdicus’ newfound military training and strength, he was still killed by Callisto, a recurring villain on the show. With Perdicus’ death, Gabrielle remained with Xena, and despite their partnership, Gabrielle was still searching for strong companionships.

During the course of their journey Xena and Gabrielle encounter Najara, a warrior who hears voices of beings she calls the Jinn. Gabrielle is amazed with Najara’s abilities and her mission to fight evil. Najara woos Gabrielle telling her, “You’ve suffered much, Gabrielle, but you’ve retained your good heart. And you have chosen to fight the darkness within you. What courage that takes” (“Crusader”). Unfortunately for Gabrielle, Najara proves to be quite problematic and not what she originally portrayed herself as. Though Najara initially defeated Xena in battle, Xena ultimately gets the upper hand by the episode’s end, demonstrating that she is stronger and more skilled than Najara. Gabrielle stays with Xena as a result.

Though both Xena and Gabrielle have aimed to ally themselves with strong companions, they are not all mortal. Given the nature of the show, they also interact with divinities, most notably Ares the god of war. Ares played a prominent off-screen role in Xena’s development as a warlord. When he appears to her for the first time, she remarks, “I used to wonder what you look like” to which he responds “Ah, now that’s the problem. You used to wonder. I can’t tell you how disappointing that is” (“The Reckoning”). Ares, as one of the twelve great Olympians, is certainly a powerful being, and as a result, it is not surprising that Xena once sought him out as a partner. With her quest for redemption, however, her desires towards him change, but they do not entirely disappear.

Though both Xena and Gabrielle had sought out partnerships with strong individuals as a survival strategy, their willingness to learn new skills also served to help them survive. One of the first skills Xena learns as a warlord occurs during her initial encounter with Julius Caesar. A slave girl that had hidden aboard Xena's ship taught Xena pressure points, most notably "the pinch" which was a way of cutting off the flow of blood to the brain, potentially resulting in death if not undone ("Destiny). After years of travel, Xena teaches this technique to Gabrielle during a pivotal moment in which Xena needed to reach the verge of death ("The Haunting of Amphipolis").

Xena's passage of knowledge and skills to Gabrielle throughout the series comes to a head in the penultimate episode of the series. Upon arriving to a town engulfed in flames, the pair seek to provide aid. Here Xena asks, "Gabrielle, what would you do?" ("A Friend in Need") and her younger partner demonstrates all that she has learned. Though Xena ultimately dies at the end of the series, through her passage of knowledge onto Gabrielle, she is able to survive.

Through their many travels as Xena attempts to seek redemption for her past sins, she takes the time to impart wisdom and skills to Gabrielle. Much of this knowledge and skills had been acquired through Xena's allying with strong partners. Gabrielle saw in Xena a strong partner as well, and through their combined efforts, they were able to survive numerous adventures. Had they not taken the time to learn these skills, their deaths would have ended much sooner than at the end of six seasons.

Works Cited

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