

“Never Bury my Bones Apart from Yours.” *Iliad* Reception in *Xena: Warrior Princess*

The exact nature of Achilles and Patroclus’s relationship has been debated from the time of the *Iliad*’s composition to the modern day, worked and reworked throughout history to reflect the cultural and societal customs of the reception period. On September 4th, 1995, a new reinterpretation of classical mythology became available to the American public through the premiere of the television show *Xena: Warrior Princess* (henceforth *XWP*). Classical scholarship regarding *XWP* has focused on Xena’s characterization, with notable contributions examining Xena as a sexually active heroine (Strong 2018), a Greek Amazon (Blondell 2005), and a defender of the domestic (Futrell 2003). However, the relationship between *XWP* and the *Iliad* has never been acknowledged, aside from a single footnote (Kennedy 2003: 141n16). In this paper, I argue that Xena and Gabrielle are recognizable as reinterpretations of Achilles and Patroclus, a connection that contextualizes their relationship in a tradition of debated same-sex couples. I also suggest that the ongoing debate regarding the nature of Achilles and Patroclus’s partnership in the *Iliad* parallels audience reactions to the potential same-sex relationship between Xena and Gabrielle on *XWP*.

First, by examining how Achilles and Patroclus’s relationship has been characterized in Classical Athens and modern scholarship (particularly Davidson 2007 and Fantuzzi 2012), I review the pair’s narrative in the *Iliad*, framing their dynamic in the context of Halperin’s analysis of epic companionship (1990). By considering how Aeschylus, Plato, Xenophon and Aeschines each sought to define the sexual roles between the two men through the lens of their pederastic culture, I reassert the importance of conceptualizing the ancient authors as an audience reinterpreting Achilles and Patroclus based on their own experiences.

Second, I address the representation of Xena and Gabrielle in *XWP*, focusing on three episodes that reproduce distinctive aspects of the *Iliad*, using storylines for Xena and Gabrielle that directly reference those of Achilles and Patroclus. The Season One episode “The Greater Good” first establishes the link between the heroes when Xena encourages Gabrielle, disguised in Xena’s armor, to ride into battle on her behalf. By fighting as Xena, Gabrielle not only takes on the identity of her partner, but also enacts the plot of the *Iliad* by imitating Patroclus as he enters battle disguised as Achilles. This connection is reaffirmed in the episode “The Abyss,” when the dying Gabrielle paraphrases the ghost of Patroclus (*Il.* 23.82-92) and begs Xena to bury their bodies together in specific language that renders the episode an intertext to the *Iliad*. Furthermore, the finale of *XWP*, “A Friend in Need,” incorporates storylines from the *Iliad* and intimates that Gabrielle, by fighting to avenge Xena’s death and recover her body, has evolved from the Patroclus figure into fulfilling the role of Achilles. Throughout the episode, Gabrielle, like Achilles, becomes a hero who has lost her soulmate in battle. Encouraged by her companion’s ghost and determined to win back the body, she defeats her soulmate’s killer in order to perform a fitting burial. With these parallel story structures, the series finale solidifies the relationship between the warriors of the television show and those of the *Iliad*.

Finally, this paper asserts that LGBT viewer responses to Xena and Gabrielle, who were widely perceived as a lesbian couple, can inform potential audience reactions to performances of the *Iliad*, even in Archaic Greece. Fan response to the love story of *XWP* illustrates that audience interpretation is not restricted solely to the initial intent of the artist, whether that be a television producer or a Homeric bard. Just as LGBT fans interpreted Xena and Gabrielle according to their own experiences, just as classical Athenians used pederastic culture to examine Achilles and

Patroclus, the intent of the Homeric bards could not limit diverse audience reactions to the story of Achilles and Patroclus and to the exact nature of their love.

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