

Book Reviews

Athena's Daughters, Television's New Women Warriors. Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy, eds. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003; xvi + 175 pages; ISBN 0-8156-2989-3; \$19.95US (paper).

As female heroes like Xena, Buffy and Chyna increase in popular culture, so do feminist studies of this phenomenon. *Athena's Daughters* situates itself in an emerging genre constituted by such works as *Tough Girls* (1999), *Fantasy Girls* (2000), *Reel Knockouts* (2001), *Action Chicks* (2004) and *Girls Who Bite Back* (2004). The collection under review here brings to the literature an academic focus on contemporary American television.

Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy, the editors of *Athena's Daughters*, set out to address the following questions: "Do images of just warrior women disrupt and challenge the dominant male-centred war narrative? If so, in what ways and by what means?" (2). The book delivers on its claim to provide a diversity of perspectives on the issue. There is commentary from historians (four), literary scholars (two) and media scholars (two) as well as a playwright. The strong contingent of historical perspectives is a welcome addition to media studies. For example, Alison Futrell's opening article on *Xena's* feminist reinterpretation of our Greco-Roman heritage provides an excellent context for a discussion of the female warrior. Futrell answers the editors' questions by arguing that Xena represents a female-centred warrior who privileges home and family over heroic conquest. Similarly, Kathleen Kennedy holds that *Xena, Warrior Princess* presents images of pacifist and anti-individualist women warriors in the characters of the reluctant fighter, Gabrielle, and the Taoist Lao Ma, respectively. At the same time Kennedy notes that the show remains caught within a discourse of orientalism because its Asian women warriors need Xena's rescue.

Another strength of Early and Kennedy's book is its incorporation of several audience studies in addition to its studies in representation. Lee Parpart's study of gay and straight male fans of *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* in particular shows how heterosexual men alone resist dominant readings of the show's feminism: "For such viewers, the novelty and entertainment value attached to the show's key gender reversal holds more importance than any potential for cultural or ideological shifts in the construction of femininity" (86). Unfortunately this article does not address the research question and thus weakens the overall coherence of the collection.

These three articles are nonetheless among the highlights of the book, which also includes another article on *Xena* as well as three more items on *Buffy*. There is a

very nice symmetry between these two sections as the collection addresses the historical context, representation of gender, race and sexuality as well as viewer reception for each. Marring this symmetry are two additional articles on *La Femme Nikita* and *Star Trek Voyager's* Seven of Nine. Consequently the volume is neither a focused look at two popular women warriors nor an examination of the diversity of television's female fighters. Not being a fan of Xena or Buffy, I would have preferred more discussion beyond the typical "action babes" (*Action Chicks*, xxx). Or at least another example of the cyborg feminist warrior, particularly a human-animal cyborg such as, say, Chyna of the Worldwide Wrestling Federation.

In addition to this unevenness in content there is also an unevenness in quality here. Several articles offer only brief and incomplete grapplings with the issues. In "Buffy? She's Like Me, She's Not Like Me," for example, Vivian Chin laudably invokes Trinh Minh-ha, who is central to her thesis (and her title). But unfortunately Chin does not engage with her ideas. Also in "We Who Are Borg, Are We Borg?," Edrie Sobstyl attempts the difficult task of developing a Cixousian critique of Haraway's feminist cyborg as played out in *Star Trek Voyager* in a mere thirteen pages. In both of these cases the arguments would have benefited from more depth of analysis. In my opinion, then, this collection will be of most interest to Xena and Buffy fans as well as to specialists in women and media.

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Heroines & History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord. Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002; illustrations; xii + 368 pages; ISBN 0-8020-4784-X (cloth) and 0-8020-8330-7 (paper); \$75.00 (cloth).

Historians Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan have collaborated to produce a well-crafted and probing disquisition on the complex relationship between social memory and historical understanding as revealed in the processes associated with the commemoration of two Canadian heroines, Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord. The real women who form the focus of this study, Coates and Morgan insist, deserve to be understood on their own terms. Thus, the authors have aimed to interpret "in a fair manner the words and actions of the heroines" as well as those of their commemorators (x). Coates has written the chapters on Verchères, a *seigneur's* daughter