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**Feminist heroines for our times: Screening the Amazon Warrior in *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) and *Wonder Woman* (2017), in: *thersites* 7 (2018), 30-57.**

KEYWORDS

Television & film studies, classical reception, Amazons

ABSTRACT

*Wonder Woman* (1975-1979), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), and *Wonder Woman* (2017) are films all feature a female action hero alongside Amazon characters based on the Amazons from Greek mythology. This paper discusses the pilot episode of *Wonder Woman* from 1975, the *Xena: Warrior Princess* episode 'Hooves and Harlots' (1995) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) in the light of contemporary feminism, to understand how far these popular media texts can be seen to promote feminism through their depictions of all-female Amazon societies, and their Amazonian female protagonists. My analysis is supported by viewer responses obtained from screenings and online questionnaires.

## 1. Introduction

*Wonder Woman* (Executive Producer Douglas S. Cramer, Warner Bros Television, 1975 – 1979), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Executive Producers Sam Raimi, R. J. Stewart and Rob Tapert, Renaissance Pictures, 1995 – 2001), and *Wonder Woman* (Directed by Patty Jenkins, Warner Bros, 2017) were all ground-breaking television series and films when they were first shown. The 1970's *Wonder Woman* was the first US action series to feature a female protagonist, *Xena: Warrior Princess* became famous for the subtextual lesbian relationship between the two primary female characters, and *Wonder Woman* (2017) was the first live action superhero blockbuster directed by a woman and devoted to the origin story of a female superhero, following many years of films about Superman, Batman, Spiderman and their other male compatriots. They all feature Amazonian female heroes as the primary character, and each of these heroes are supported by a community of Amazons. All are also considered by some viewers and critics to be feminist texts, whilst others qualify or contest this feminist status.<sup>1</sup> Using responses collected from viewers I aim to interrogate why the Amazons from Greek mythology continue to appeal through modern media representations and how convincing they are as ambassadors for feminism.

In ancient Greek mythology the Amazons are the barbaric other, women who behave like men and ultimately exist to be defeated, subjugated and domesticated by male heroes like Heracles, Theseus and Achilles. Living on the edges of the civilised Greek world, their all-female society where girl children are prized and women hunt and fight without the need for men is in opposition to the Athenian patriarchal norm.<sup>2</sup> However, for women and feminists, Amazons can be seen as admirable and attractive characters. Amazons were associated with feminism and female ability long before Won-

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of views on feminism in *Xena: Warrior Princess* see Magoulik (2006) and Morreale (1998), on *Wonder Woman* (1975-1977 see O'Reilly (2005) and on *Wonder Woman* (2017) see <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jun/05/why-wonder-woman-is-a-masterpiece-of-subversive-feminism> and <https://metro.co.uk/2017/06/24/why-wonder-woman-isnt-the-feminist-fantasy-weve-been-told-it-is-6731062/> (accessed 25 October 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Penrose (2016) for an innovative reading of the Amazons that puts them in the centre, rather than the usual Atheno-centric view

der Woman and Xena were conceived. In the early fifteenth century Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* included Amazons from Greek mythology among the women from history and mythology that made an important contribution to society. In 1979 American fantasy writer Jessica Amanda Salmonson lists examples of 'historic' amazons in her introduction to *Amazons: High Adventure in Heroic Fantasy*, a collection of short stories putting women in central, active and heroic roles in a genre that had lacked female protagonists. She expands on this in *Amazons II* (1982) and *The Encyclopedia of Amazons: Women Warriors from Antiquity to the Modern Era* (1991). It is Salmonson's work that inspired Steven Sears in creating the Amazons for the *Xena: Warrior Princess* episode 'Hooves and Harlots' (1995).<sup>3</sup>

'The Bodyguard' of martial-arts trained suffragettes charged with protecting Emmeline Pankhurst and other leaders of the suffragette movement in Edwardian London were dubbed 'Amazons' by the press.<sup>4</sup> Although Diana Prince, disguised Princess Diana of Themyscira, does not get involved in the suffrage movement when she visits London during World War One in *Wonder Woman* (2017), the character of Diana/Wonder Woman is strongly linked with the American suffrage movement via her original creator William Moulton Marston. Marston and his wife Elizabeth Holloway were supporters of the suffrage movement while at college, and Olive Byrne, who lived with the Marstons in a polyamorous relationship, is connected with early American feminism via her mother Ethel Byrne, and aunt, Margaret Sanger, who were both imprisoned for opening a birth control clinic in Brooklyn.<sup>5</sup> More recently the Amazons and Wonder Woman have been used by twentieth/twenty-first century feminists with opposing views; Camille Paglia and Gloria Steinem. Steinem, co-founder of *Ms* magazine and childhood fan of the early Wonder Woman comics, chose to put Wonder Woman on the cover of the first issue of *Ms*, and lobbied DC comics to

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<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with Steven Sears at the Hilton Metropole, Edgeware Road, London, 4 May 2008.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bartitsu.org/index.php/2012/07/the-amazons-of-edwardian-london-martial-arts-trained-suffragette-bodyguards/> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34425615> (accessed 25 October 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See Lepore (2015) 3-23 and 81-87. Marston's influences are also dramatized in *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (directed by Angela Robinson, Opposite Field Pictures, 2017).

return Wonder Woman's powers, which had been removed in a move to update her.<sup>6</sup> Paglia, antagonist of Steinem, and photographed as a 'Woman Warrior' in the 1990s, proposes a philosophy of 'street-smart Amazon feminism' where sexual difference and the achievements of men are accepted, with a 'mission [...] to strengthen the willpower of the individual woman to show her how far she can go on her own'.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. Fighting for your rights (in satin tights): *Wonder Woman* pilot (1975)**

Prior to the 1975 pilot, with the title of 'The New Original Wonder Woman' and subsequent *Wonder Woman* series starring Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman and Lyle Waggoner as Steve Trevor, there had been two previous abortive attempts to bring Wonder Woman to the small screen. The first, in 1967, was to be comedic take on the Wonder Woman story. A short pilot with the title 'Who's Afraid of Diana Prince?' featuring Ellie Wood Walker as Diana Prince and Linda Harrison as her alter ego Wonder Woman, was filmed but never aired. The second attempt, in 1974, featured the blonde Cathy Lee Crosby as a Wonder Woman without her powers or classic uniform, working as a government agent to retrieve a stolen list of spies. The pilot was aired but not taken forward as a series.

Then, in 1975 Princess Diana of the Amazons AKA Wonder Woman spun onto our television screens personified by former Miss World America Lynda Carter, and went on to inspire a generation of girls. 1975 was a year when US male-led action series dominated the small screen (*Starsky and Hutch*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*). It was also the year before we were treated to the joys of *Charlie's Angels* and *The Bionic Woman*, in 1976. The ABC *Wonder Woman* series, set during World War 2, with a female lead who was strong, intelligent and brave, as well as beautiful, must have felt very new to viewers. In fact, The 1975 pilot stuck closely to Marston's original comic book material, and the World War 2 setting continued throughout the first season with ABC, then moved to contemporary 1970s America for two subsequent seasons with CBS. Screening the 1975 pilot episode in London in 2017 and 2018 many viewers were surprised at how relevant the episode still was to feminist debates, once you get past

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<sup>6</sup> See Daniels (2000) 131-132.

<sup>7</sup> Paglia (2018) xxviii and 143.

some of the dated special effects (invisible plane displayed as Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor flying through the air on the seats of a plane with no outer shell) and costumes (Amazons running around in 'babydoll' night-dresses).

The plot of the pilot episode, and Marston's first Wonder Woman story, published in *All Star Comics* #8, in 1941,<sup>8</sup> centres around the crash landing of an American pilot on Paradise Island. This is an uncharted island inhabited by Amazons, who have lived apart from men since their withdrawal from man's world in the times of Ancient Greece. On television it is a beautiful tropical island, with lush vegetation and sandy beaches. The pilot, Steve Trevor, is nursed back to health with the help of Princess Diana. Diana wants to accompany Steve back to his home in man's world but is forbidden to enter the sports competition to decide which Amazon can complete this task. Diana participates in disguise and wins the competition, on television shown as a montage of different Olympics-style events, culminating in tie-break 'bullets and bracelets' between the two top competitors. This is a contest that showcases the superior powers of Amazons women; in the television pilot Queen Hippolyta says 'only women have the necessary speed and co-ordination to attempt bullets and bracelets without the loss of life'. As winner of the contest Diana takes Steve back to America, where she assumes the pseudonym Diana Prince.

The plot of the pilot episode continues to follow the plot of the second Wonder Woman comic book story, published in the first issue of *Sensation Comics* in January 1942. Diana looks at dresses and comments on the amount of material used (compared to her skimpy outfit and clothes on Paradise Island), stops a bank robbery and agrees to take part in a stage show to make money from her bullets and bracelets act, then prevents the agent who recruited her from swindling her out of her earnings. However, the pilot diverges from the comic book story by having Wonder Woman save Steve from a Nazi plot led by his secretary, Marcia (Stella Stevens), who turns out to be a Nazi spy. And rather than initially taking a job as a nurse, as in Marston's original comic book story, on television Diana becomes Steve's secretary.

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<sup>8</sup> The early *Wonder Woman* comics have been reprinted in Thomas (2015). See Gietzen and Gindhart (2015) on Wonder Woman's 'metamorphoses' from the 1940s to the 1970s.

The episode adds humour that is missing from the comics. For example when Diana stops the bank robbery and gives her name to the police as 'Wonder Woman', repeated by the policeman as 'last name Woman, first name Wonder', and when she is told that she will need to fill out forms exclaims 'They steal money, and I have to fill out forms, what a country this is!' Later, when Diana is taking part on the stage show, Marcia brings an old lady to test out Wonder Woman's skill against bullets, and the old lady brings her own gun out of her bag, which turns out to be a machine gun. And at the end of the episode Steve says 'I have had it up to here with pretty girls', and wants an 'ordinary looking secretary' after being duped by the attractive blonde, Marcia. His boss, General Blankenship (John Randolph) 'anticipated' this and has picked out the candidate who scored highest in the aptitude tests but is 'duller than a fat lap dog after dinner'. Of course, the secretary is in fact Diana, disguised with glasses and hair scraped back; the same person as the beautiful Wonder Woman, who Steve is already 'captivated by'.

The episode also provides us with two pictures of feminism. The first, espoused by Diana's mother, Queen Hippolyta, and leader of a civilisation of immortal women who have survived and thrived for thousands of years without men, is that of the radical, separatist feminist. She tells Diana:

You're too young to remember how we were slaves in Rome and Greece, I promised myself it would never happen again. We found this island where we could live in harmony, peace, sisterhood. [...] I named this island paradise for an excellent reason. There are no men on it. Thus it is free of their wars, their greed, their hostility, their barbaric masculine behaviour.

Hippolyta believes that in an all-female society, without the distraction of romantic relationships with men; 'we are stronger, wiser and more advanced than all those people in their jungles out there, our civilisation is perfection' and 'young Amazon minds are best occupied with athletic discipline and higher learning'. These are areas that modern viewers would associate with the Ancient Greek male-centred society, which brought us the Olympic Games and Philosophy. Diana, though, thinks that there is 'something missing' from the Amazon society, and has a more optimistic view for the future of men and women. She says to her mother 'surely some men can be trusted' and that 'thousands of years have passed, perhaps men are now different. Perhaps they have come to think as much of peace as we do'.

Although Hippolyta initially tells Diana that she cannot compete in the competition to go to man's world, when Diana wins her mother is proud of her. She provides Diana with her golden lasso of truth, and her costume, and her parting words of advice are 'There are many things you don't know about the world of men, there are even some women there who are less than out Amazonian ideal', but Hippolyta knows that her daughter can handle them. The first woman Diana faces who is 'less than the Amazonian ideal' is Nazi spy and 'Nuremberg judo champ' Marcia, who doesn't 'fight fair'. She is the first adversary who takes Wonder Woman more than a few seconds to defeat (all the men she fights in the episode are very easily defeated). However, Wonder Woman prevails and saves both Steve and stops the Nazi plane from destroying the Brooklyn Naval Yard. Diana quickly sees through Marcia, when Steve and General Blankenship have been unable to see past her pretty face. Diana tells Marcia 'and to think that Steve Trevor was fooled by you. I'm going to have to get accustomed to men, and devious women'. Diana as Wonder Woman later tells Steve that Marcia 'was the leader of the pack' and 'a most untrustworthy associate', implying he lacks perception, a trait he later finds in Diana the secretary, and Diana explains her perception by simply saying 'I am a woman. Where I grew up women were taught to respect honesty'. Marcia is the first in a line of devious women that Diana will encounter. Her next main adversary is another Nazi woman, the formidable Baroness Paula von Gunther, who appears in the next episode, and was an important villainess in the early comic books.

Diana sees that men can be gullible, but Nazis are the enemy. She likens the Nazis to the Greeks and the Romans, civilisations who did not 'care about their women'. She tells Marcia that 'any civilisation that does not recognise the female is doomed to destruction. Women are the wave of the future and sisterhood is stronger than anything.' Diana, then, has taken her mother's philosophy about strong women, but she does not see that this should preclude men. The success of the pilot is due to the creation of a protagonist who is sincere and capable, and who provides a believable feminist role model for viewers, including young girls. The series therefore takes forward into the 1970s Marston's original aims when writing the comics, to inspire the young girls of the 1940s.<sup>9</sup> The conception of a believable Wonder Woman character is carried through into *Wonder Woman* (2017), inspiring a new generation of young girls. In the episode commentary in

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<sup>9</sup> Marston (1943).

the DVD Season One box set Carter states that she ‘made a very specific choice to play her absolutely for real [...] I believed in her’.<sup>10</sup> Executive Producer and series creator Douglas Cramer agreed that ‘the believability’ of the character was a key element to the show’s success, and he found that Carter as Wonder Woman was ‘the lynchpin of the show’, while other actors could add comedy. The series adds a catchy theme tune, tongue-in-cheek humour, and action sequences, providing popular appeal, alongside a non-radical feminist message for a 1970s family television audience.

I screened the *Wonder Woman* pilot episode in January 2017 at the Petrie Museum in Bloomsbury, London, and then again in June 2018 at the London School of Economics (LSE) Library. Both events were accompanied by a talk, providing some context to the episode, although at the Petrie Museum this focussed on the Amazons from Greek mythology, and at the LSE Library this focussed on feminism. At each event viewers were encouraged to complete the same questionnaire on their reactions to the episode. Responses were obtained from 33 female viewers and five male viewers in total across the two events, across a range of ages from late teens to mid-seventies.

36 of the viewers stated that they enjoyed the episode. Most viewers cited the humour in the episode as the main reason for enjoyment (many viewers found the episode funnier than they expected), although other adjectives used to describe the episode were ‘fun’, ‘charming’, ‘camp’ and ‘more overtly feminist than expected’. One viewer from the Petrie felt that ‘the feminist content feels timely’, and so relevant today as it was in the 1970s. Those who did not enjoy the episode had different reasons; one viewer from the LSE Library was ‘slightly disturbed by how [Diana] is perceived as a woman, particularly with the outfit, the training side and love interest’, and the other viewer, from the Petrie Museum felt that the episode ‘doesn’t do justice to the ideal of Amazons’ and did not like the ‘soft, weak and feminine’ version of Wonder Woman.

When asked whether they liked the portrayal of Wonder Woman in the episode again most viewers stated that they did (30). Many found her to be ‘strong, intelligent and witty’, ‘capable, and competent, and gets stuff done’, and an older viewer from the Petrie who had seen the series when it first

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<sup>10</sup> Episode Commentary included in *Wonder Woman: The Complete First Season* box set (2005).

aired found that 'it was a real change in the perception of women'. Some qualified this, preferring Wonder Woman to be stronger, and disliking the 'romance' plot with Steve, which was 'unnecessary'. Popular Culture Scholar Sherrie Inness similarly had issues with this aspect of the series and found that Wonder Woman's toughness was curtailed, as she 'languished for a date with the handsome Steve'.<sup>11</sup>

The portrayal of the Amazons fared slightly worse, with 20 viewers stating that they liked the Amazons in the pilot, 14 that they didn't like them, and four were unsure. Wonder Woman's costume had changed only slightly over the years, and Lynda Carter is dressed very much like Wonder Woman in Marston's early comics, complete with red bustier embellished with a gold eagle, and a short blue skirt decorated with white stars that can be removed, Hippolyta advises, 'if it proves too cumbersome', to reveal the more usually worn blue hotpants, also with white stars.<sup>12</sup> However, the televisual Amazons on Paradise Island in their short floaty pastel coloured dresses resembled neither Marston's Amazons with their halter neck bikini tops and gym skirts nor the comic book, televisual and filmic conception of the female warrior as a 'chick in a brass bra' or a fur bikini.<sup>13</sup> Some viewers commented that they would have expected the Amazons to 'be more like the Greek Amazons' in 'warrior costumes'. Many viewers thought the costumes were 'overly feminine' and 'impractical', a sort of 'girly camp', and a few viewers found them to be 'overly sexualised' and directed at 'the male gaze'. Before viewing I asked the viewers to list up to three pieces of information they knew about the Amazons (if anything). 18 out of the 21 respondents at the Petrie Museum and nine out of the 17 respondents at the LSE library were able to list some pieces of information, with the most common response being that they were women and warriors, but also that their society was a matriarchy, living without men and they were skilled archers

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<sup>11</sup> Inness (1999) 144. On Wonder Woman's relationship with Steve Trevor also see Douglas (1995) 216-218, and O'Reilly (2005).

<sup>12</sup> On Wonder Woman's costume see Bergstrom (2017) 87-90. In Marston's comics, as in the television series, the skirt is short-lived and the hotpants remain.

<sup>13</sup> There is a strong tradition of Amazons and other warrior women as scantily-clad beauties dressed in leather, fur and metal, in comic books, film and television. See Mainon and Ursini (2006) 19-29 on films from the 1930's to the 1970s, and also Kastor (1996) interviews science fiction writer Gregory Feeley, who compared Xena to earlier 'chicks in brass bras', a term taken up by Inness (1999) 164 and Helford (2000) 138.

and good fighters.<sup>14</sup> With almost three quarters of the viewers having an expectation that the Amazons would be an all-female warrior race, the warrior part of this expectation was not met by the portrayal of the Amazons on Paradise Island.

Viewers who liked the Amazons in the *Wonder Woman* pilot episode managed to see past the outfits, so for example viewers stated that ‘they seemed strong and powerful and Paradise Island looked idyllic’, ‘liked feminist and socialist ideals’ and ‘utopian society’ and the ‘emphasis on sisterhood’. This is definitely a strong message in the episode, but as I have stated the ideology espoused by Diana and by the episode as a whole is not one of radical feminism. While one viewer commented that ‘the Queen is amazing and everything she says is 100% accurate. Very modern feminism’, another found the portrayal of Hippolyta ambivalent, as ‘a “militant feminist” but covered in jewels’. The comedic performance by Cloris Leachman of a ruler who often appears trivial despite her high-minded words, for example she is distracted by finding the best piece of fruit in the bowl rather than holding her resolve to keep Diana away from Steve Trevor. One viewer also commented that the Amazons were ‘all white’, so there was no diversity in terms of ethnicity. The shortfalls in the depictions of the Amazons on Paradise Island in the 1975 pilot are addressed in the 2017 film, so that viewers experience a utopian society of women played by actresses of diverse ethnic backgrounds, shown to be skilled at fighting and ruled by a queen who has *gravitas* as well as feminist ideals.

### 3. Forged in the heat of battle: *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001)

Twenty years after *Wonder Woman* first aired, Xena, a new statuesque dark-haired female action heroine with links to the Amazons, joined us in our living rooms in 1995. Although *Xena: Warrior Princess* followed iconic big screen action heroines Ripley from the *Alien* franchise and Sarah Connor from *Terminator*, when Xena, played by Lucy Lawless, high-kicked her way into many a viewer’s heart we had not yet met small screen vampire slayer Buffy Summers, or the television female action leads who were to

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<sup>14</sup> It is unsurprising that viewers at the Petrie Museum had a greater knowledge of the Amazons from Greek mythology, as they had chosen to attend an event at an archaeological museum, with a primarily Egyptian but also classical collection.

follow. This series with a female hero and a female sidekick also featured a subtextual lesbian relationship between the two leads that eventually went main text, with on-screen kisses and vows that Xena and Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) are 'soul-mates'.<sup>15</sup> The Xena look, with her short leather outfit embellished with metal that gives a nod to armour while showing plenty of Lawless' long legs and cleavage, has influenced how we think of fantasy warrior women. The portrayal of the Amazons in *Xena* was also highly influential, with one of the viewers at the Petrie finding the Amazons in the *Wonder Woman* pilot to be unexpectedly 'fairy-like', when she had 'the *Xena* idea of an Amazon village'. *Xena* is a series that was created by a male production team with feminist aims. The premise behind the series was to rewrite ancient myths by putting a female hero at the centre, as if her pivotal role in the stories had been written out of the history books, as co-executive producer Steven Sears explains:

As the vast majority of ancient history was written by men in a time when strong women would not have been accepted, it was easy to believe that Xena would have been omitted from the final telling.<sup>16</sup>

Amazons are introduced in Season One episode 'Hooves and Harlots' (1.10) as a tribe of women warriors led by a queen, Melosa (Alison Bruce). Sears was the writer of this episode, and he had originally been directed to the made-for-television film *Hercules and the Amazon Women* (1995) as inspiration, but although he found it to be 'a fine episode' he 'couldn't write those Amazons' because he had 'read up' enough to know about this history of the Amazons and warrior women across different cultures, including the work of Jessica Amanda Salmonson, that when at the end of *Hercules*:

The Amazons were suddenly falling into the guys' laps getting very friendly, very sweet, wanting to look girly and beautiful for their men [...] in my mind it was a betrayal of what Amazons were.<sup>17</sup>

In order to create the Amazons for *Xena* Sears told me that he therefore came up with the idea that the 'Amazon nation had become fragmented into so many different tribes and they now had their separate cultures [...]. My

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<sup>15</sup> On the lesbian subtext see for example Helford (2000) and Kvistad (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Personal email correspondence with co-executive producer Steven Sears in 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Personal interview with Steven Sears at the Hilton Metropole, Edgware Road, London, 4 May 2008. See also Blondell (2005) on the 'domestication' of the Amazons in *Hercules and the Amazon Women*.

tribe was a much stronger tribe, a tribe that did not apologise for its sexuality'. Sears appears to be using the word 'sexuality' to make a contrast between the 'girly' Amazons in *Hercules* who choose a heteronormative lifestyle and the Amazons in 'Hooves and Harlots', who are just as sexually attractive but choose to live separately from men. These Amazons should not necessarily be read as lesbian, but as women who have sexual freedom to choose their male or female sexual partners and are able to live in an all-female society without the constraints of being part of a nuclear family. By creating a 'tribe' of Amazons it is unsurprising that the production team looked to more recent tribal societies for inspiration for the costumes and culture of the Amazons. Sears commented that costumes were made to resemble 'buckskin' and the types of clothes 'high plains Indians' would have worn, and also Maori influence came from members of the team in New Zealand, where the series was shot. The Amazon's home is a tribal village made up of wooden dwellings within a forest.

In 'Hooves and Harlots', Xena, the nomadic female warrior who is atoning for her murderous past as a power-hungry warlord by helping others, and her relatively new friend and sidekick, Gabrielle, find themselves in Amazon territory. Gabrielle is excited to meet the Amazons, but Xena is more wary, and they give the Amazon sign for peace when they meet three Amazons including Terreis (Rebekah Mercer), sister of the queen, and Xena asks for 'safe passage through the Amazon 'hunting grounds''. Terreis comments that the visitors 'know the Amazon ways, and yet, you're not one of us' to Xena, who is dressed in a revealing costume made of leather and metal, like the Amazons, 'and you're really not one of us' (to Gabrielle, who is wearing a long blue dress).

Gabrielle, the would-be bard, who left her village to avoid marriage, is attracted to the Amazon way of life, which sounds like a feminist utopia, with a progressive mode of schooling that contrasts with life for a girl in Gabrielle's Greek village of Potidea:

Gabrielle: I want to read philosophy and learn about history and science. But they didn't consider me a normal girl.

Terreis: Philosophy and history are among the first things taught to Amazon children.

Gabrielle: Really?

Amanda Potter

Terreis: It is a man's world, Gabrielle. Not because it should be, but, because we let them have it. It's based on a woman's weakness. The Amazon world is based on truth and a woman's individual strength.

This feminist separatist society, like the world of the Amazons on Paradise Island, is undermined by the initial attitude of its ruler. Melosa is leading her people into a war with the Centaurs, a male race of 'disgusting animals', who Melosa believes is trying to take the Amazon hunting grounds. Although Melosa says she will not start the war, she intends to execute Phantes, son of the Centaur leader Tyldus, for murdering her sister, knowing that the Centaurs will retaliate. Xena does not believe that Phantes killed Terreis, and she works with the Amazon Ephiny (Danielle Cormack) to find out the truth, which is that a warlord, Krykus, killed Terreis and framed the Centaurs to cause a war that would decimate both Amazons and Centaurs, in order that he could take their lands. Ephiny tells Phantes that Terreis had admired the Centaurs as 'a brave and noble people' and 'felt that one day we could work together'. Terreis' beliefs, that allowed for peace between the male Centaurs and the female Amazons, echoes the feminist beliefs of Diana in *Wonder Woman*.

When Gabrielle tried, unsuccessfully, to save Terreis from being killed, she granted Gabrielle her 'right of caste', which means that Gabrielle is successor to Queen Melosa. This right also comes with an obligation. Melosa explains that Gabrielle must avenge Terreis by killing Phantes, or must die herself. For Melosa the only way to obtain 'justice' is through revenge. Even when Xena and Ephiny bring proof that Phantes is not the murderer, Melosa still wants to have him killed. In order to satisfy Melosa and her Amazon traditions, Gabrielle challenges Melosa as queen, and has Xena fight as her champion. Melosa is defeated and the execution stopped. The Centaurs and Amazons are united against the warlord Krykus and his army, but Melosa does not kill him, rather she says he must 'stand trial' for his 'crimes against the Amazons and the Centaurs'. Peace between the female Amazons and the male Centaurs is achieved without unnecessary bloodshed. The Amazons continue as strong women warriors who can co-exist with honourable men and maintain their feminist beliefs. These beliefs are taken forward by Ephiny, who later will become queen and an important recurring character in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, then marries and has a son with Phantes. It is

only the dishonourable Romans, led by Caesar, that cause the demise of the Amazons, from the end of season four.

As part of my doctoral research I obtained feedback from 29 viewers of 'Hooves and Harlots', focussing on the portrayal of the Amazons. Viewer responses were obtained via questionnaires between 2007 and 2011. The viewers who took part were either fans of fantasy television, postgraduate students in classics, or viewers who were neither fans nor classicists but had agreed to take part as they were my colleagues or partners of the postgraduate students. I supplemented this with feedback obtained from 6 viewers who attended a screening of 'Hooves and Harlots' at the Petrie Museum in June 2014. All the viewers at the Petrie, the fans and classicists, and a small number of the non-fan, non-classicist viewers who took part in my doctoral research project knew something about the Amazons before watching the episode, and as at the *Wonder Woman* pilot screening the most common pieces of information given was again that they were women and warriors. Many of the fans used the word 'tribe' (this was less prevalent among other groups). This description was probably influenced by the way the Amazons are portrayed in *Xena* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999). Expectations were therefore set that the Amazons in *Xena* would be warriors, and viewers of the episode were not disappointed in this.

Most viewers liked the portrayal of the Amazons, who stood for 'female empowerment'; they were seen as 'strong female characters', 'independent, free-thinking women who didn't need men', part of a 'sisterhood' and 'noble warriors' who also show 'reason and compassion'. They were seen as 'not man-hating' and not good or bad but 'they seemed instead 'different', with their own 'strong moral code' that can lead to an 'horrific outcome' when it required 'blood vengeance' but also have a 'readiness to create peace' and a 'liberal education programme'. These Amazons provide a progressive view of an all-female society, which is not at odds with liberal feminism. One postgraduate classics student was pleased that the portrayal of the Amazons was not 'overly-feminist' but rather 'independent', 'which worked better for a modern audience', equating feminism with radical feminism/man-hating feminism that arose as part of the second-wave in the 1960s and 1970s, when she took part in my research in 2008. When I showed the beginning of the episode to groups of students aged between 15 and 17 in 2017 and 2018 they felt that the overtly feminist words of Terreis would have been relevant in the 1990s, when the episode was first aired, but were

less relevant to them. These students all saw feminism as a positive movement but felt that in most areas by the twenty-first century sexual equality has been achieved.

Many viewers commented on the Amazons' revealing outfits, that were not in practical keeping with their warrior status (similar comments can be made on Xena's own costume and the costumes in *Xena* as a whole, which classics postgraduate student Nadia describes as a 'warrior-woman/sexy-rustic gym kit kind of look'). One viewer thought that we 'would expect to see more scratches on the exposed skin' from moving through the forest and climbing trees, never mind fighting, and 'they must be very cold in Winter'. *Xena* fan Cathy commented that the Amazons in *Xena*:

were nearly ALWAYS skimpily dressed. Some people did wonder whether their main purpose on the show was as eye candy. Chubby or unattractive Amazons were not seen! Whether you liked the leather bikinis (and most fans did) or not, the dancing or the perfect hair and make-up, the producers definitely did want them to be attractive, but I think their portrayal was also very positive.

These Amazons, from the 1990s, can be seen in the context of third-wave feminism, a term coined by Rebecca Walker in an article for *Ms* magazine in 1992.<sup>18</sup> With its focus on intersectionality, individuality and sex-positivity, third-wave feminism allows for women to have the choice to dress as they choose, have sex with whom they choose, and be included irrespective of race, class or sexuality.

Of course the Amazons in *Xena* can appeal to both the male and the female gaze (as *Xena* fan David commented, quoting Lucy Lawless, 'skin sells') and so the series producers can give us characters who espouse feminist values but who are also 'eye candy'. On balance, though, as one viewer from the Petrie put it, 'I liked that they were portrayed as warriors first and foremost, rather than just sexy women in "fur bikinis"'. As Blondell states, the Amazons in *Xena* 'spawned an enormous fan base among young women, as evidenced by a large number of Amazon nation websites'.<sup>19</sup> *Xena* fan David also described how the Amazons 'became a metaphor for the lesbian community, a 'great example of a modern myth serving the

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<sup>18</sup> Walker (1992).

<sup>19</sup> Blondell (2005) 203.

needs of its listeners' and one of the reasons why David found 'the Amazons sympathetic characters'.

Lynda Carter as Diana/Wonder Woman tried to represent a feminism that has room for men and women in 1975 America in the *Wonder Woman* pilot, but the all-white Amazon society sporting their 'babydoll' night-dresses are not inclusive and now seem slightly ridiculous. One of the main criticisms of second-wave feminism of the 1970s was that it was 'essentialist' and 'universalist' and so did not take account of individual experience, particularly the non-white, non-Western, non-middle class experience.<sup>20</sup> In 1995 *Xena* offered us an alternative view of the Amazons that is more diverse, with actors of different ethnic backgrounds playing Amazons, and other characters (although admittedly the lead characters are white American and New Zealand actresses). With Amazons still scantily dressed, but more in keeping with expectations of fantasy warrior women, viewers were ultimately able to accept the Amazons in *Xena* as possible feminist role models. Fast-forward to 2017, in the wake of terrorist attacks and sex abuse scandals in the UK and the US, would *Wonder Woman* (2017) offer viewers a different take on feminism?

#### 4. Only love can truly save the world: *Wonder Woman* (2017)

In 2017, Wonder Woman finally hit the big screen in her own live action film, played by Israeli actress, Gal Gadot, former Miss Israel and combat trainer during her military service in the Israeli Defence Force, and directed by Patty Jenkins.<sup>21</sup> Following a plethora of superhero movies with male leads, from the Marvel and DC universes, it was *Wonder Woman* that captured the zeitgeist in a post Brexit, post Trump, post Manchester terrorist attack world (and immediately prior to the London Bridge attack which occurred just after I had seen the film for the first time and coloured my immediate response). The film achieved the highest gross box office of any film with a female director and is the highest grossing superhero origin film

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<sup>20</sup> On third wave versus second wave feminism see Gillis, Howie and Munford (2007).

<sup>21</sup> Prior to this the character of Wonder Woman, played by Gadot, was introduced in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (directed by Zack Snyder, Warner Bros, 2016), lifting this otherwise lacklustre film. Also an animated film was produced, and the Lego Wonder Woman had appeared in the Lego Movie prior to 2017.

to date.<sup>22</sup> Gadot's Amazon from Themyscira, like the 1970s Wonder Woman before her, displays innocence, strength, and resolve, but most importantly, the capacity to love.

The film begins in the present day with Diana in her office at the Louvre in Paris, where she works as a curator, and in voiceover Diana says 'I used to want to save the world [...] a beautiful place [...] full of magic and wonder' but also 'great darkness shimmering within'. As viewers we are led to ask whether Diana has changed her mind about the world and why. We are then transported to Themyscira, a city built around caves in a rocky hill (a visually enhanced Matera, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Italy). Designer Aline Bonetto chose this site because it is made of a 'harder' substance than wood, and also helped to create 'a culture that utilized the natural stone of their surroundings' but also full of 'feminine' curved lines.<sup>23</sup> The costumes of the Amazons, designed by Lindy Hemming, are made of leather for training and then supplemented with metal armour when in battle.<sup>24</sup> With the much larger movie budget armour and weapons were individually created for each of the main Amazon characters. Although the skirts of the armour are short, the Amazons wear long boots, and so little flesh is exposed. The outfits are therefore more practical for training and for fighting, and less revealing, than the costumes in the 1970s series and in *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

A young Diana (Lilly Aspell) runs through the streets to avoid her tutor, and asks her mother, Queen Hippolyta (Connie Nielsen), if she can start her 'training' to be a warrior with her Aunt and the General of the Amazons, Antiope (Robin Wright). The Amazons in training are seen to be strong and skilled, with Antiope as a fierce and powerful general, but Hippolyta will not let Diana train, and so Antiope trains her in secret. When Hippolyta finds out, she insists that Diana is trained hard, in case she ever needs to come up against Ares, the god of war. Years later Diana finally achieves her

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<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jun/05/wonder-woman-breaks-us-box-office-record-female-director-overtakes-fifty-shades-of-grey> (accessed 25 October 2018) and <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2017/11/02/wonder-woman-is-officially-the-highest-grossing-superhero-origin-film/#594c6ceebd9> (accessed 25 October 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Gosling (2017) 18.

<sup>24</sup> On costumes see Gosling (2017).

true powers and knocks Antiope through the grass in training. The same day a World War One pilot, Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) crash lands in the waters around Themyscira and is saved by Diana. The story therefore follows the narrative of the original Marston comic but set in the First World War rather than World War 2 and modifies the story to provide Diana with a more active role. Instead of finding Steve on the beach, she swims out to him and returns with his unconscious body to the shore, actively saving his life. He is also followed by the Germans in boats, and the Amazons take heavy casualties, fighting on horseback and with bows and arrows and swords against the guns of the Germans. The Amazons fight bravely and are victorious, but Antiope is killed, saving Diana from a bullet.

When Steve tells Diana of the war Diana is sure that this war must be caused by Ares. She has grown up believing that the Amazons' 'sacred duty to defend the world' and stop Ares. Hippolyta is unwilling to let her daughter go. Like Hippolyta in the 1975 television pilot, this Hippolyta is distrustful of men and tells Diana that 'men are easily corrupted'. Diana will not be stopped, and takes Steve to a boat at night. Hippolyta follows and Diana explains to her mother 'I cannot stand by while innocent lives are lost'. Hippolyta tells Diana that she cannot stop her, but if she leaves she cannot return. Her parting words are words of warning; 'be careful in the world of men, Diana. They do not deserve you.' This Hippolyta is as distrustful of men as the Hippolyta in the 1975 pilot episode, but instead of playing Hippolyta as a comic character, Connie Nielsen's Hippolyta is seen to be strong and just, a believable ruler whose motivation is to protect her people and her daughter.

Diana accompanies Steve to London, where she meets Steve's secretary, Etta Candy, who is reinvented from the sorority girl in Marston's comics. The realities of life for working women in the early years of the twentieth century are brought to life humorously when Diana asks Etta what a secretary is:

Etta: I do everything. I go where he tells me to go and I do what he tells me to do.

Diana: Well, where I am from, that's called slavery.

Etta: I like her.

Etta mentions that women 'use our principles' rather than fight, and 'this is how we are going to get to vote'. This is the only mention of suffrage in the film, in a missed opportunity to have Diana involved in the early twentieth

century women's rights movement. Diana is dressed in a long grey coat and glasses in order to 'make her look less distracting', like Diana's military uniform as disguise in the 1975 pilot, and she is introduced by Steve as his 'secretary' when she accompanies him into the council chamber where the future of the war is being debated.

The ministers and generals will not listen to Steve and Diana, even when Diana decodes the book written in 'Ottoman and Sumerian' that Steve has taken, proving that the Germans are creating a new gas. Diana proves that she has greater language skills than all the men present, but they will not accept her, as a woman. She needs to be dragged from the council chamber by Steve, telling the commander-in chief that he 'should be ashamed' for not fighting and dying with his men on the battlefield, which is what we have seen the Amazon general do.

Without official permission to go to the front, Steve recruits 'reinforcements' from his old colleagues, and one of the ministers seems willing to help them, Sir Patrick Morgan (David Thewlis). Once in Belgium Diana climbs from the trenches and runs across no man's land in her Wonder Woman costume, deflecting the German bullets so that the British can follow, a fearless Amazon warrior in the mould of her aunt Antiope. She saves the village of Veld from the Germans, and she and Steve infiltrate a German party, only to find that the Germans are testing the gas on the village they have just saved. Diana goes after the German commander, Ludendorff, believing that he is Ares, then is surprised that the fighting continues when he is dead. She then finds that Ares is actually Sir Patrick Morgan. He says that mankind 'don't deserve our help, they only deserve destruction' as they are 'cruel, selfish, weak and capable of the greatest horrors'. Ares wants Diana to join him, and reveals that she is the daughter of Zeus and Hippolyta, not made from clay as he mother had told her (an origin story that came from Brain Azzarello's run of the Wonder Woman comics for DC's *New 52* series – Marston's origin story was that she was made of clay). Ares' words cannot dissuade Diana from her mission, although she now knows that her mother has been lying to her.

Steve sacrifices himself to destroy a plane carrying the poisonous gas heading for London. He tells Diana 'I can save today, you can save the world'. As he blows up his own plane Diana finds the strength to defeat Ares. She also refuses to kill the female villain Dr Maru AKA Dr Poison, the creator of the poisonous gas. The film ends with Diana's words that 'Now I

know that only love can truly save the world, so I stay and fight and I give for the world I know can be. This is my mission now, forever'. The Diana of the twenty-first century present sees the potential for both good and for evil in mankind and finds on balance that the world is worth saving. This Wonder Woman, then, is a character who sees hope for both men and women. She has encountered misogynist attitudes in early twentieth-century London, but by the present she has achieved a career as a museum curator, a non-military role that maintains a link with her classical Amazon roots, as well as her twenty-first century role as superhero.<sup>25</sup> A feminist role model for the present day, this Diana is an independent woman who manages a life with two roles and who can love a man, but her power is not reduced nor is she defined by her relationship with him.

*Wonder Woman* (2017) achieved critical and popular acclaim, although Gadot as Wonder Woman is not without her critics. When she was cast as the female superhero in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) many reviewers found her military service as a combat trainer in the Israeli Defence Force to be a suitable training ground for the character.<sup>26</sup> However, following the release of *Wonder Woman* (2017), some reviewers have taken issue with Gadot's support for the Israeli military in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, referring to a tweet the actress made in 2014.<sup>27</sup> It is, of course, as difficult for an Israeli actress to stand for all women as it is for the white, statuesque, scantily-clad character that she plays to be accepted by all women. When the United Nations announced that Wonder Woman was

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<sup>25</sup> Although Diana in her various incarnations usually has a government role, she works in the Gateway City Museum of Cultural Antiquities as a lecturer on Greco-Roman mythology in John Byrne's Wonder Woman comics from the 1990s, collected in Byrne (2017). For my discussion of the prominence of Diana's classical roots in *Batman v Superman: The Dawn of Justice* see <https://theconversation.com/who-cares-about-batman-v-superman-wonder-woman-finally-steals-the-show-56963> (accessed 4 September 2018).

<sup>26</sup> See for example <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2706849/FIRST-LOOK-Gal-Gadot-leather-clad-sexed-new-Wonder-Woman-Batman-Vs-Superman-far-cry-Lynda-Carter.html> and <https://www.glamour.com/story/gal-gadot-wonder-woman-cover-interview> (accessed 4 September 2018).

<sup>27</sup> See for example <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/more/entertainment/gal-gadot-wonder-woman-white-feminist-hero> and <http://toofab.com/2017/06/02/wonder-woman-gal-gadot-lebanon-israel-palestine-conflict-reviews-criticism/> (accessed 4 September 2018).

the Honorary Ambassador for Empowerment of Women and Girls in 2016, tied in with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the comic book character, over 45,000 people signed an online petition that Wonder Woman was an inappropriate choice, and a protest was held at the inauguration ceremony.<sup>28</sup> She was hastily withdrawn as ambassador after less than two months in role, although the UN advised that the appointment was only ever meant to be temporary.

As a feminist as well as a Wonder Woman fan I can sympathise with the ambivalence of others. However, on balance, I find Wonder Woman to be a character who can be admired, and *Wonder Woman* (2017) to be a film that is worthy to inspire a new generation of (feminist) girls, as the Marston comics inspired Gloria Steinem and as Lynda Carter in the later 1970's set *Wonder Woman* series inspired the pre-teen me. Particularly in its portrayal of the Amazons, *Wonder Woman* (2017) improves on the campy Amazons from the *Wonder Woman* pilot episode and on the fur bikini-clad Amazons from *Xena: Warrior Princess* to create a plausible all-female society made up of strong and able warriors. We see them training and fighting the Germans, and their costumes and weapons. Although Patty Jenkins states that Marston's comics were used as 'the bible' for the film,<sup>29</sup> by replacing the school sports day-style contest for Diana to accompany Steve to man's world with a battle with the Germans that the Amazons take part in, their prowess as warriors is confirmed. Designer Aline Bonetto created a world where the Amazons can live at one with nature, but while they are 'libres (free)' and 'intelligentes (intelligent)' they have maintained their strong military tradition.<sup>30</sup>

I created an online questionnaire in March 2018 to obtain viewer responses to *Wonder Woman* (2017) and in particular the portrayal of the Amazons.<sup>31</sup> I shared the link to this questionnaire with members of Wonder Woman fan sites and obtained 28 responses between March and June 2018.

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<sup>28</sup> See for example <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/world/un-wonder-woman-campaign.html> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38300727> (accessed 4 September 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Patty Jenkins for *DC Exhibition: Dawn of Superheroes* at the O2 London in 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Aline Bonetto for *DC Exhibition: Dawn of Superheroes* at the O2 London in 2018.

<sup>31</sup> The survey is available at <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/PSPS527>

90% of respondents were male, with a mix of age ranges from under 17 to 46-55. The high percentage of male viewers who took part is likely to be driven by the fan sites I posted to, as these were DC comic fan sites rather than the television fan sites that I have previously used for research, where the majority of participants are female.<sup>32</sup> As the online questionnaire provided limited opportunities to obtain in-depth answers (with ten questions in total, including demographic questions), I also asked a small group of five sixth form students from Mascalls Academy, Paddock Wood, to watch the film together and complete a written questionnaire, in order to supplement these responses. The students were aged between 16 and 17, four female and one male, and were studying a range of subjects at 'A' Level, but not classics or ancient history. These students had taken my seven-week extra-curricular course on Greek mythology on film and television that had included a tutorial on the Amazons, and so they already had some knowledge about the female warriors from Greek mythology, and had seen the opening scene to the *Xena: Warrior Princess* episode 'Hooves and Harlots'.

The fans mostly enjoyed the film, with over 75% scoring it at eight out of ten or above. Reasons for enjoying the film including Gal Gadot's portrayal doing 'justice' to the character of Wonder Woman, showing her 'overall compassion and idealism'. The chemistry between Gadot and Chris Pine were also called out. As the first DC film featuring a female lead it was well received by the fans, one even finding it to be the best film from DC so far. Fans liked the way that the character of Wonder Woman was not overly sexualised and instead 'was treated like her male counterparts', In the words of one fan 'it's a rare example of a movie with a female protagonist that doesn't shove that fact in the audience's face or make every male character an idiot'. One female respondent enjoyed the film 'because it promotes feminism, not as man hating but as a way of showing women are strong too'. However, some respondents disliked Diana being made the daughter of Zeus,<sup>33</sup> and also the 'formulaic' ending to the film, with the obligatory CGI villain (Ares) meant that many of the respondents rated that film less highly. Some specifically commented on how the end of the film let down what had

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<sup>32</sup> For example the DC Universe Extended Wiki Wonder Woman pages at [fandom.wikia.com](http://fandom.wikia.com)

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the use of Zeus as Diana's father in the film see <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/6/7/15740202/wonder-woman-origin-story-amazons-marston-explained> (accessed 5 September 2018).

been a very good version of the Wonder Woman origin story, a sentiment I tend to share.

The five students all enjoyed the film and the portrayal of Wonder Woman, although Elspeth qualified this as she felt that 'the character was strong and dominant which is empowering however the plot still revolved around a man/romance'. Daisy found that 'Wonder Woman is often portrayed in a way appealing to a male gaze but given the context of the feminist attitudes of the film, she was portrayed as strong and independent, with a believable (and not too objectifying) costume'. Overall Daisy found that the film 'provided a good female role model for younger viewers'. Wonder Woman's superhero costume was designed by Michael Wilkinson for *Batman v Superman: The Dawn of Justice* as armour in metallic red white and blue, and so although it does comprise an updated version of a red and gold bustier and short blue skirt, with boots, greaves and, of course, armour bracelets, like the costumes of the Amazons in the film, it is more practical and less sexualising than previous versions of the Wonder Woman costume.<sup>34</sup>

Unsurprisingly the fans all had extensive knowledge of the various incarnations of Wonder Woman, and also had some knowledge of the Amazons from Greek mythology. When asked for up to three pieces of information about the Amazons most referred to them as warrior women. Additional popular pieces of information included were the inclusion of the Amazons in the labours of Heracles/Hercules and the Trojan War, that they are said to have cut off a breast to improve archery skills and that they were linked with or created by Zeus, Artemis and/or Ares. The different gods referred to is likely to stem from different versions of the origins of Wonder Woman and the Amazons in comics, as well as different stories from books on mythology, websites, and films, which were the most popular sources of information.

26 of the fan respondents liked the portrayal of the Amazons in the film. Reasons given for liking the portrayal were that they were 'strong', 'confi-

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<sup>34</sup> In *Justice League* (directed by Zack Snyder, Warner Bros, 2017) costumes were again designed by Michael Wilkinson. For an analysis of how costuming and camera angles objectify Wonder Woman and the Amazons in this film compared with *Wonder Woman* (2017) see <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/how-justice-league-fails-wonder-woman> (accessed 28 October 2018).

dent' 'powerful' and 'fierce in battle' but also 'a peaceful society' and 'reasonable when it came to dealing with the threat which arrived on their shores'. One respondent positively mentioned the mix of ethnicities, and two respondents stated that the Amazons were not 'sexualised'. One fan found the scenes on Themyscira to be the best in the film as a whole. However, this overall positive reaction was qualified by many who felt that their 'technology was primitive' and that they had remained a 'static society'. The designer Aline Bonetto explained that the production team had wanted to portray a 'monde préservé/preserved world' that had been a gift from the gods,<sup>35</sup> however the fans, who were familiar with the advanced technology of the Amazons in some comic versions found that the Themyscira in the film was lacking. Viewers who disliked the portrayal had wanted to see more of their culture, including the 'healers, scientists, farmers, scholars, inventors' rather than seeing them just 'smashing swords together'. Their martial ability, missing from the 1970s series, is seen by most to be a positive move, however it is left to Diana rather than her fellow Amazons to be the ambassador of peace.

When asked to write down up to three things they knew about the Amazons they all therefore recalled that the Amazons were warrior women, and some added additional information about Hippolyta and Penthesilea, who were covered on the course. All of the students liked the portrayal of the Amazons in the film. Deanna thought that 'their gold clothing and combat skills gave them a look of superiority in comparison to the men.' Both Deanna and Daisy found that the film had 'feminist' elements, and the portrayal of the Amazons was a key part of this, so according to Daisy 'the positive values of the community of woman that lent itself well to the feminist angle of the film.' Similarly, Deanna 'thought the portrayal of them added to the feminism within the film as they were able to maintain a peaceful lifestyle whilst everyone else was fighting. I think their strength and intelligence was also admirable at portraying them as capable individuals who were uninhibited by their gender.' Christopher stated that each Amazon, when fighting the Nazis off seemed to have a warrior's attitude and their costumes weren't sexualised in any way.' Christopher, the only film studies student of the group, compared the Amazons costumes favourably

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Aline Bonetto for *DC Exhibition: Dawn of Superheroes* at the O2 London in 2018.

to the 'provocative' men's costumes in *300* (2006). Like the fans, Christopher found *Wonder Woman* to be one of the best DC films produced.

For the twenty-first century viewer the portrayal of the Amazons in *Wonder Woman* (2017), including the portrayal of Princess Diana/Wonder Woman herself, are mostly admired and are specifically seen as feminist portrayals by some female viewers. Their portrayal is a progression from the campy babydoll nightdress-clad Amazons from the 1970s and the fur bikini-clad Amazons from the 1990s. Their imagined all-female society may be seen by some as having its flaws, as it is firmly rooted in the past, however, as student Emma commented, 'they thrived and maintained a harmonious lifestyle'. Perhaps in 2017 the creators of *Wonder Woman* did not feel the need to make the overt references to sisterhood that are spoken by the Diana of 1975, or that 'it's a man's world [...] because we let them have it', according to Terreis in *Xena: Warrior Princess*. As Diana leaves Themyscira Hippolyta tells her daughter to 'be careful in the world of men, Diana, they do not deserve you', but men like Steve Trevor are deserving and accepting of Diana's help, and the misogyny in the film is firmly rooted in Edwardian London. However, films featuring female protagonists in general, and particularly films with female superheroes taking lead roles, are still in abysmal short supply. Young feminists of the twenty-first century may be still trying to grasp what fourth-wave feminism might be, but perhaps *Wonder Woman* and her fellow Amazons can show them the way. With *Wonder Woman 1984* due to be released in November 2019 we can look forward to a strong villainess, Cheetah, with a storyline set in the 1980s, a period when second-wave feminism was starting to pave the way for third-wave, and we were listening to the up-and-coming young American singer Madonna's number one hit *Like a Virgin*, whilst Margaret Thatcher was in power as the first female Prime Minister in the UK.<sup>36</sup> Connie Nielsen as Hippolyta and Robin Wright as Antiope are among the cast members, and so we can hope that more of the Amazon society is revealed.

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<sup>36</sup> In 1990 Camille Paglia controversially lauded Madonna as 'the future of feminism', see <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/14/opinion/madonna-finally-a-real-feminist.html> (accessed 4 September 2018), although more recently the feminist critic has stated that the singer is on 'a path of self-destruction', after Madonna spoke out against Paglia in her acceptance speech for the Woman of the Year award in 2016, see <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-4029528/Feminist-Camille-Paglia-hits->

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