PLEASURABLE CONTRADICTIONS:
PERCEPTIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS OF XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The syndicated television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* has exploded into cult status both on television and on the internet. In this thesis, I am interested in the ways in which fans of Xena mediate the contradictions Xena embodies, not only as femme fatal gone hero, but as an icon, role model and fantasy figure. Xena and her series appeals to a broad range of viewers in multiple ways and does so in highly contradictory ways: both as a feminist role model and a sex symbol; both as the first "real" portrayal of female friendship and an "escape" from daily realities; and both as silly light humor and a commentary on social roles for women. By using 43 letters that I have received from Xena viewers in response to a post placed on MCA/Universals official Xena netforum, I provide an investigation of the ways in which viewers of *Xena* negotiate these seemingly contradictory pleasures. I have identified reoccurring themes in these letters and centered my discussions around these themes: 1) the dynamics of a female action hero in a male dominated genre and audience responses to such a gender bender; 2) the importance and the effects of transformation of Xena from femme fatale to action hero (for both viewer pleasure and generic boundaries); 3) the multiple possibilities for viewer negotiations of Xena's sex appeal and her status as role model; and 4) the multiple possibilities for viewer negotiations of subtext and parody, under the subheading of camp.

These responses reveal the ways viewers negotiate meaning by fitting them within their own shifting positionalities, according to what they have invested and how they
choose to construct their own viewer pleasure. The multiple ways of interpretation are highlighted in the viewers discussion of the function of camp within the series, as camp and parody, ranged from being silly to being subversive. At the same time, producers of the series use tactics (such as subtext, parody, and camp) to broaden their audience base, all of which depend upon viewers abilities to negotiate meaning. Such dynamics exposes the interdependency between producers and audiences in terms of negotiating meaning. Things become even more complicated when the television producers are also cultural theorists who not only agree that audiences have agency in negotiating meaning but rely upon such agency in order to increase viewership. In this scenario, it is the producers of Xena who are providing the subtext (what might be considered counter-hegemonic texts), while viewers negotiate whether to pick up on it or not.

The need to reframe the ways in which we view popular culture becomes clear when investigating the relationship between the meaning makers and meaning negotiators of the television series, *Xena: Warrior Princess*. For both television viewers and cultural theorists, binary frameworks - such as domination vs. innovation, hegemonic vs. subversive, escapism vs. realism, sex appeal vs. feminist role model — can be counter productive. Looking at the ways spectators interpret their own positionality and formulate their own mechanisms of identification not only exposes how such contradictions are inherent in television and filmic images but also reveal the multiple ways viewers facilitate such contradictions in constructing their own viewer pleasure.
Dedicated to my mother, my sister
and all the women warriors of the world
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Judith Mayne, for illuminating the infinite possibilities television and film can offer to feminist research and for being such an inspiration to me. I also would like to thank her for her guidance, encouragement and most of all, her brilliant sense of humor throughout this project.

I would also like to thank Amy Shuman for her support and encouragement from the start of this project and for listening to my ramblings when I was first formulating my ideas. I am also grateful to Linda Mizejewski for the guidance she provided in the final stages of my writing.

I am grateful to my colleagues and for having the opportunity of working with such a wonderful group of women. Thanks to Sharon Ross, Misty Cummings, Julia Applegate, Sile Singleton, Lu Bailey and Nancy Golden for their support and feedback. In particular, I would like to thank Sharon Ross for reading over my thesis when I could not bear looking at it anymore. I am also grateful to Sean Kelly, who listened to pieces of the thesis over the phone and lent a critical ear.

Finally, I would like to thank my respondents, the internet Xenites, who provided me with such rich and insightful material and with whom this endeavor could not have been possible. In particular, I would like to thank Pam Williamson, a bard extraordinare in her own right, whom I met over the internet and who was an amazing source of information and encouragement.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"We might want to begin with the assumptions that [mass culture] is neither intrinsically 'progressive' nor 'reactionary', but highly contradictory."¹

The syndicated television series Xena: Warrior Princess can be seen as the embodiment of contradictions.² Prior to each episode of Xena: Warrior Princess, actress Lucy Lawless (as Xena) is shown riding her horse, fighting numerous male thugs and using her signature weapon (the Chakram). Accompanying these images is a male announcer's voice describing the birth of television's female action hero:

In a time of ancient gods, kings, and warlords...a land in turmoil cried out for a hero. She was Xena, a mighty princess forged in the heat of battle. The power, the passion, the danger...Her courage would change the world.

From the start, the announcer informs us that in this mythical place, where a "mighty princess is forged in the heat of battle," Xena is somewhat of an anomaly, living and fighting within a patriarchal world "in a time of gods, kings and warlords." At the tail end of this introduction, the camera zooms in for a close up of the hero's body - beginning low on her boots and moving up to her costume, her chakram and her sword, her cleavage - and cuts away before the camera reaches her face. However, the final images shown are of Lucy Lawless as Xena actively practicing the sword with a final close up shot of her face as she is looking back. The announcer then concludes with -- "her courage will change the world." Contradictions are apparent in this introduction, which attempts to encapsulate
"the power" with images of Xena as a fighter, "the passion" with images of Xena highly sexualized, and "the danger" with a combination of both these images -- implying that there are ramifications in being a female hero in a "man's" world. In the same vein, the camera is pulled back at first to show Xena's fighting scenes, but then zooms in on her body in an objectifying manner. Even her title is the combination of two incongruous images -- the warrior which conjures up images of strength and the princess who has been formulated in fairy tales as weak and dependent upon her savior, the prince.³

Television reviews and articles also reveal the contradictions inherent in Xena, who has been described as "a full tilt, strap-on, Greco-medieval....as much superfreak as super hero."⁴ In contrast, Ms. magazine featured a cover story on the warrior princess that dubbed the series as a show that "many feminists have been dreaming of...since feminism came into being."⁵ Xena's costume can clearly be read as sexual objectification. But even this aspect plays with gender contradictions. Clothed in a leather mini bustier with metal breast plates, Xena would be expected to play the part of the erotic object for other characters on the show and/or for spectators. At the same time, she wears combat boots, carries a sword and displays a sense of self confidence and self assurance that has often been reserved for television's most proficient male heroes. These contradictions have been described as part of the "camp" that is incorporated into the series. Susan Glanton of the Chicago Tribune wrote, "if the outfit seems a little exploitative for a feminist icon, a bit constricting for a superheroine, that's one of 'Xena's' little jokes."⁶

My first introduction to Xena was in spring of 1996. As I watched this striking woman in a leather mini take on and defeat five warlords, somersault on to her horse and ride away with her female side kick, Gabrielle (played by Renee O'Conner), my reaction was two fold: I was simultaneously critical and intrigued. I remained a closeted Xena fan up until August of 1996 when Ms. Magazine featured a front page article heralding her as a "feminist icon."⁷ As Stephanie Schorow remarked in the Boston Herald, "for the would-be Xenites, it was the equivalent of the surgeon general announcing chocolate fudge sauce
was good for you." Thus, this project stems in part from my desires to investigate my own contradictory pleasures as well as other viewers'. *Xena: Warrior Princess* has offered students in beginning women's studies courses at OSU excellent fodder for debates and discussion. While students can easily point out in their journals that her costume provides an excellent example of objectification or that she embodies an unrealistic ideal, what is most interesting are the ways viewer pleasure is revealed, despite a long list of reasons given on why the series is problematic.

Xena is the fearless warrior who can do just about anything, and doesn't need a man to do it either. But at the same time she is a beautiful, long-legged, big busted woman (if I didn't know better I'd think I was describing Barbie) who wears almost next to nothing. It's almost like their [sic] saying a woman can be strong and independent as long as she is pleasing to the eye.... but I have to say that all in all it was a very entertaining show; *I have found my new hero*. **JOURNAL 1** (emphasis mine)

She wears the same outfit on every show, a black leather, steel-reinforced body suit....It is the stereotypical male fantasy outfit. The story line, though, is quite different.... She alone demonstrates the conflicting female characteristics. *I do enjoy the show* although she is the unattainable perfection of women. **JOURNAL 2** (emphasis mine)

Wow! *This show is total female power!* ...As a female, I was pumped to see Gabrielle and Xena kick ass!! It was fun to see them as powerful, no-nonsense women...On the other hand, the two women are still sex objects that engage in passionate affairs with various men. I would account [sic] *"Xena: Warrior Princess"* as an androcentric show because of the way it is played out for men to observe. *But I still think I like Xena's attitude*. **JOURNAL 3** (emphasis mine)

What I am interested in investigating are the ways in which audiences actively negotiate meaning and engage in "guilty pleasures." Thus, I argue that while many Xena viewers are well aware of the contradictions that their television heroine embodies, they participate in constructing their own pleasure by negotiating the meanings pulled from images they see on the screen and fitting them with their own "shifting positionalities." At the same time, producers of the series use tactics (such as subtext, parody, and camp) to broaden their audience base, all of which depend upon viewers' abilities to negotiate meaning. Thus, both the viewers and the producers of the text are essential to this act of negotiation. As
Annette Kuhn notes, representations, contexts, audiences, and spectators may be seen as a series of interconnected social discourses, certain discourses possessing greater constitutive authority at specific moments than others.11

METHODOLOGY

Since I began this project in August of 1996, Xena has exploded into cult status and "is fast emerging as one of the hottest [attractions] on TV and the Net, where Xenites -- her numerous fans -- gather en masse."12 For those who have followed the series since the beginning, the internet has become a place where they can share their perspectives and for new viewers, the internet can provide background and context of the show and assist them in catching up with the rest of the Xenites. The emergence of the information super highway and the age of technology in which television, film and computers have begun to intersect (not only in terms of the reliance on computers for the creation of television and film production but also to instigate audience interest), has provided me with a rich source from which to extract audience responses. Similar to movie trailers and previews which often conclude with website addresses where curious audience members can search for information and possibly provide feedback about upcoming films, Renaissance Productions and the producers of the Hercules: The Legendary Journeys and Xena: Warrior Princess series are one of the first in television to jump on the technology bandwagon. They have begun to tap into the possibilities computer technology can offer to stimulate and foster a cyberspace dialogue among members of Xena's cult following. At the end of every episode, the MCA/Universal Xena website is advertised at the bottom half of the television screen while credits roll and images of Xena's fighting skills are shown on the top part of the screen. This lengthy advertisement of the Xena forum has become a formal invitation to Xena audiences to incorporate Xena into their cyberspace lives.
Following in the footsteps of Renaissance Productions, I posted my own invitation on the official MCA Xena netforum13 asking Xena audiences to write to me about why they watch the series:

REQUEST FOR LETTERS ON XENA
Would anyone like to write and tell why you began watching Xena and why you continue to watch? Or even things about Xena (or Xena episodes) that you might dislike? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis.

I began watching Xena: Warrior Princess because of the sheer enjoyment in seeing a physically strong woman overpower her male opponents. Since then, I have become fascinated with the ways Xena has come to represent many things at once, heralded as a feminist icon, a lesbian icon, a young girl's role model, and a male fantasy.

I am also looking for any volunteers who are willing to share video tapes of early episodes of Xena (e.g. from the first year it aired and/or favorite episodes).

Please write to my email address at:
park.225@osu.edu
OR send letters to:
S. Park
Department of Women's Studies;
286 University Hall; 230 No. Oval Mall;
Columbus, OH 43210-1311

In response to this request, I received 43 letters (41 emails, 2 letters), all of which have been central to my investigation of viewer pleasure and negotiations of meaning. However, using letters drawn from the internet poses several issues that need to be addressed.

First, it is important to note that computer access is not universal and limits my responses to viewers within an economic class which enables the ownership of or access to a computer and internet privileges. Second, given the nature of anonymity when using computers and the internet, audience members cannot be categorized with any certainty according to race, class, gender or sexual orientation. In viewing identity and identification as "shifting positions," one cannot ignore the importance of the performative aspects of identity. Judith Butler notes, "all gendering is a kind of impersonation and
approximation." It can also be argued that all labels of identity is to some extent performed. Thus, what will interest me in looking at these letters is not what category I feel the respondents should be placed, but rather how the respondent represents herself/himself and the ways revelations of identity interact with the responses presented in her/his letter. [See Appendix 1.] Although I do not always directly comment on the identities provided, when presenting the different responses it was interesting to note the information respondents felt they needed to provide along with their responses. For example, many respondents provided their education, professions and ages (often times listing their degrees) as an indication that they receive pleasure from the show despite their intelligence, their professionalism and their maturity. Respondents also provided information on their own sexuality in explaining their stance on their interpretations of Xena and Gabrielle's relationship.

Finally, there has been much discourse regarding the internet phenomenon of adopting "false" identities while interacting in cyberspace, particularly in chat rooms where conversations take place between internet users. The internet has become a space where participants are not only permitted to "pretend" to be "someone" else and play these roles without repercussions, but are encouraged to leave their assigned identities behind -- as reflected in a recent MCI commercial describing the internet as the utopian space where age, race and sex are non-existent. However, it is also important to acknowledge the flip side of identity politics in this so-called identity-less realm. Internet sites such as MCA's official net forum for Xena provide a space for hard core Xenites to find others like them and express their identities as "Xenites" without exposure to those who might not share the same passions for the series. MCA's Xena Forum allows for pseudonyms for its participants and participants post written responses, questions, etc. for other Xena net surfers to find and comment upon.

The posts function very much as ads, listed according to time and date posted. This set up was particularly useful in my research as I was able to post an advertisement for
letters. Because I had requested that letters/responses be emailed to my address or mailed, responses became more personalized. In other words, the responses I received were almost always accompanied by an email address that indicated names and sometimes places of work or names of universities/colleges attended. In this way, I was able to verify, albeit superficially, the identities of my respondents but more importantly, I was able to reply to all respondents personally as I received their e-mails. In some cases, I asked respondents if they wouldn't mind clarifying or elaborating on certain points they made. In this way, these letters had the potential of becoming internet interviews.

Finally, the information I have obtained through these letters is by no means a complete survey of audiences' responses or a wide-scale sociological examination. Rather, I hope to provide a qualitative and ethnographic study of a select few Xena viewers who watch the show, visit the net and explore the reasons behind their own viewer pleasure.

XENITES: THE SOCIAL AUDIENCE AS SPECTATOR

In her essay, "Women's Genres," Annette Kuhn distinguishes between the concepts of social audience and spectator that are so often undefined and/or conflated in film and television theoretical discourse. According to Kuhn, the social audience is "a group of people who buy tickets at the box office, or who switch on their TV sets; people who can be surveyed, counted and categorized according to age, sex, and socio-economic status." The social audience is "constructed by discursive practices, both of cinema and TV and of social science." In defining spectators, Kuhn explains that the "social audiences become spectators in the moment they engage in the processes and pleasures of meaning-making attendant on watching a film or TV program." Thus the social audience as spectator contends with both dimensions of containment (working within predetermined categories of meaning) as well as transgression (negotiating contradictions, decoding subtext and providing oppositional readings). In such a setting, it is important to pay attention to the ways audiences themselves formulate and contextualize their viewer pleasure as active spectators.
The intersection of television and the internet has encouraged viewers to become "active spectators," both by inviting viewers to join cyberspace discussions and by providing a "safe space" for this discussion. In his article for the internet magazine, Yahoo, David Sheff notes there are over 60 websites "about every aspect of Lawless and the show -- all fast and funny -- and reams of fan fiction, analysis of scripts, and inquiries that seek to pin down the show's obscure setting." In her interview with Yahoo, Lucy Lawless noted that "the internet covers the same territory [as television] but offers something else. It's not just a one-way thing anymore.... [it's] a tight knit community." Respondents also note the ways in which the internet has added a "whole new dimension" to their viewership, by allowing them to link with other fellow Xenites, affirm and validate their "addictions" to the show and create a cyberspace community.

The Internet Xenite Community--I think the internet news groups and forums have added a whole new dimension to inspired viewership and feeds the phenomenon. Before the internet folks had a harder time finding like-minded souls to share, validate and reinforce their feelings. Especially those in rural areas. The other big factor is the anonymity one has on the net. People feel more comfortable saying just about anything. You could always change your handle and become someone else. Lots of the folks on the netforum admit to netforum addiction. It is a place to express, find common ground and potentially make new friends. It also has the appeal that someone there will actually put down on the screen for all to view what you were feeling --things you would not have been comfortable saying. LETTER 4

I have never felt about a show the way I feel about this program, I'm addicted. I thought I was just being very weird until I started reading the Netforum and realized others were affected in a similar manner. LETTER 17

After lurking around various Web sites, chat rooms, etc. for some time, I finally became a regular on the Forum this month, and I can only say I love the community. I don't agree with everyone... but generally there is an air of respect there. LETTER 8

The internet community has, on occasion, left cyberspace to form social links at weekly Xena watching gatherings and attend Xena conventions. Lesbian bars have begun Xena nights, where viewers can act out the roles much like the cults that follow the Rocky Horror Picture Show.
The transition between social audience and spectator becomes clear in many of the responses sent to me regarding Xenite viewership. Xena spectators constantly express their own desires to better understand their own responses to the show.

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to express my feelings about XENA and opinions on the Xena Phenomenon. I knew someone would pick this up for a thesis topic—it is just so perfect. I've been thinking about this for months—trying to understand my own response to the show/characters and analyzing how our culture is affected by it and what kind of cultural shift has allowed this show to be such a success. LETTER 4

I enjoy answering your inquiries, I think it helps me to understand my personal "Xena Phenomenon" better. (I drive everyone around me crazy with Xena this or Lucy that.) LETTER 22

They want to contextualize and historicize their viewer pleasure:

It seems that men are much more comfortable with women in the far future (aliens) or in the far past (that's what sci-fi and fantasy is all about after all). Those women aren't threatening. Of course, producers of science-fiction cannot deny the fact that women are more and more part of society these days; they are military officers, police officers, politicians and so on. So it's only a natural progression. LETTER 9

They also want to demonstrate their awareness of the debates and discourse pre-existing their own written responses:

I know the great debate rages, but I am on the 'friends side'. I don't know what the people on the show have in mind for the characters down the line, but from what they have shown us so far, I don't think anything supports the debate. LETTER 35

Without prompting, many respondents not only express a desire to explore their own responses further and identify the importance of context, but have gone so far as to identify the ways in which television is not an isolated entity like cinema, but rather influenced and in direct contact with other programming, such as commercials. In this case, this respondent suggested that I look at the commercials as an indication of the intended audience for the series.

One more observation. I've always felt you could tell a lot about who different show appeal to by watching he advertisements that air with the show. Last night while watching Xena, I saw an ad for platex tampons. So who's watching? There were also ads for Chef Boy Ardee, playschool toys, and cold medicines. I'm no expert, forgive me if I'm off base, but it appears the audience must be largely female. LETTER 13
"Active" spectatorship can go beyond simply discussing the show on the internet and towards using the net to mount campaigns, such as the move to get Oprah to do an entire show on the "startling popularity" of Xena.

Don't know if it will actually happen, but there is a campaign being mounted on the Forum to get the Oprah show to do an entire show on X:WP. Even I have written them (suggesting the theme of the show be an attempt to solve the mystery of the startling popularity of X:WP).

LETTER 3

Internet activities continue to increase as more and more viewers link up to available netforums and internet chatrooms dedicated to the warrior princess. There is even an internet journal called Whoosh, created by the International Association for Xena Studies where members are invited to think critically about the show and submit papers on different aspects of the show for its monthly electronic publication. Through these cyberspace activities, as well through newsletters, fan clubs and Xena conventions, Xenites are not simply switching on their televisions but are and have been actively engaged in "the processes and pleasures of meaning-making."

AUDIENCE NEGOTIATIONS

In this thesis, I am interested in investigating the ways in which fans of Xena (affectionately called Xenites) mediate the contradictions Xena embodies, not only as femme fatale gone hero, but as an icon, role model and fantasy figure. I have identified recurring themes in the 43 letters I have received by Xena viewers and centered my discussions around these themes: 1) the dynamics of a female action hero in a male dominated genre and audience responses to such a gender bender; 2) the importance and the effects of transformation of Xena from femme fatale to action hero (for both viewer pleasure and generic boundaries); 3) the multiple possibilities for viewer negotiations of Xena's sex appeal and her status as role model; and 4) the multiple possibilities for viewer negotiations of subtext and parody, under the subheading of camp.
Following in the footsteps of feminist cultural analysts Jackie Stacey, Julie D'acci and Ien Ang, my interest is to focus on the role of the audience, looking at the production of meaning drawn from the series and its main characters in terms of how audiences construct them.21 Like Ien Ang, I am interested in also investigating the function of fantasy (in the form of escapism and camp) in television fiction, fiction "not as a mere set of images to be read referentially but an ensemble of textual devices for engaging the viewer at the level of fantasy."22 However, while Ang viewed such fantasies as opportunities for audiences to take up positions not possible in "real life" and allowing them to explore other situations and identities, I would argue that there is also the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between fantasy/escapism and reality-- that fantasy can inform self definition. The pleasure that stems from such links between fantasy and reality rely greatly on identification/recognition on the part of the social audience as spectator.

In this thesis I am not referring to either literal notions of identification or even psychoanalytic notions of identification, both of which have their benefits and their limits. Rather, I would like to rethink identification, as suggested by Judith Mayne, and acknowledge the process of identification as a "series of shifting positions" that is as "fragile and unstable as identity itself."23 And while the positions themselves shift, interpretations of such positions must continually shift as well. And while other frameworks, such a psychoanalytic reading of audience response, could be interesting and revealing -- particularly in terms of audience pleasure and fantasy -- I am much more interested in reading the ways spectators interpret their own positionality and formulate their own mechanisms of identification and thus viewer pleasure. Thus, while my own work is undeniably an interpretation of audiences responses within my own feminist framework, I attempt to look directly to the respondents' written texts and the ways that they articulate their own viewer pleasure rather than looking for the ways pleasure functions outside of their own accessible knowledge base.
As Richard Dyer points out, often times in film and television studies, "the audience has been conspicuous by its absence" due to a preoccupation in "manipulation...consumption...ideological work" that frames such concepts as "identification...reading...placing..." around semiotics, psychoanalysis, and narrative analysis.24 As pointed out by Jackie Stacey in her article "Feminine Fascinations" that investigates the relationship between female Hollywood stars and women in the audience, "attention to genre, to narratives, and to forms of looking have tended to dominate the feminist agendas of the 1980s," all of which have "shared a common reliance on textual analysis, ignoring the role of the audience."25 Like Stacey, rather than "focus on the production of particular significations within the film text, or within other aspects of the cinema industry," I attempt to focus on "how audiences might read them within particular cultural and historical contexts."26 But at the same time, I do not want to disregard the value of textual analysis. My point is, when investigating audiences negotiation of contradictions, why not go straight to the source?
ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION


2. On the official MCA/Universal Xena page, the series is described as follows: "Set in the 'Golden Age' of myth, long before ancient Greece or Rome ... Xena was first introduced in a March episode of "Hercules" as an intrepid warrior bent on destruction, who sets out to kill Hercules in her quest for power. But when a single act of compassion causes her own army to betray her, she undergoes a radical conversion. Determined to make amends for the sins of her past, she defends a small peasant village from a band of soldiers. There she meets a spirited young woman named Gabrielle (Renee O'Conner), who secretly follows the warrior princess in search of a more exciting life. [Xena is] joined by the feisty and fast-talking Gabrielle... [as she] continues her battle against the forces of evil. Xena's amazing skills in the arts of combat and warfare are constantly put to the test as she travels across the land. To defeat her foes, she relies on strategy, agility, acrobatics, martial arts, and a variety of weapons including her chakram, a razor sharp discus-like weapon. Smart, fearless and heroic, she always tries to solve things peacefully; but once committed to a course of action, she is unrelenting."

3. The incongruity of these two titles is parodied in an episode called "Warrior...Princess," where Xena encounters a passive, feminine and defenseless princess who happens to be a mirror image of the warrior.


7. In her article on Xena, Stephanie Schorow (among other journalists) have referred to Minkowitz' article in *Ms* magazine as a verification of Xena's status as a feminist icon. Stephanie Schorow, "Xena: It's those thighs," *Boston Herald*, October 9, 1996, 049.

8. Ibid.


13. After posting my request for letters on the MCA Xena forum and receiving a number of responses, I also contacted the editor of Whoosh (the newsletter of the International Association of Xena Studies), who in turn sent out my request to several of her list servers.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Sheff, 49.

19. The first convention was held in Burbank, California in March of 1997 and was followed by another in New York in May/April of 1997.

20. According to David Sheff, Meow Mix (a local lesbian club) "presents Xena Night, featuring a screening of -- and Rocky Horror-esque interaction with-- three episodes, followed by a toy-sword fight in honor of the Warrior Princess." Sheff, 40-1.


22. Ang, 83.


25. Stacey, 142

26. Ibid.
CHAPTER 2
XENA AS NOVELTY, SPECTACLE AND HERO: A WOMAN IN ACTION

"What is it about her, that show, that New Zealand setting? How do we relate to that? The music, the expression on her face. Why do we relate to her? The seeing in the mind's eye, the feeling in our hearts when we watch her cry. Conquest through conquest, she enraptures us away, away to another place and time. It seems as if we need her, her willful smile and her guiding hand to lead us through our own perils.

She speaks upon the wind, as it blows her spirit through me. I succumb to the seasons of New Zealand as they sing. Her echo calls to me in a rampant way, guiding me through perils and setting me free. I hasten to divide, and come to her command. Her spirit reaches onward as her voice takes my hand. Reaching, we will, and try to once again live."
-- Poem posted on the Xena Net Forum

A recent article in Entertainment Weekly displays Xena, television's warrior princess, in a centerfold photo standing, arms tensed and to her side, eyes closed and mouth open as if she were screaming. From her mouth shoots out the following prose:

*Fans of 'Xena' have fomented a cultlike passion for TV's most ferocious and fetching heroine. But is their devotion enough to cut a swath for future female action stars?*¹ The question is interesting in that it assumes that Xena fans, a diverse group made up of both men and women ranging from children to grandparents, gain their pleasure in watching the series specifically due to its generic elements as an action series. Judging from the fan activity surrounding the series - the sixty plus web sites, Xena-Hercules Conventions, the plethora of fan fiction and an International Association of Xena Studies - the fact that audiences derive pleasure from Xena is obvious. But my question is - what is it about this television series that has had such an impact on its viewers? Is Entertainment Weekly
correct in suggesting that audiences desire a feminist coup of the historically male-only
genre of action?

I would argue that indeed, generic elements play an essential role in providing
viewer pleasure for Xena audiences by providing an ideal format in which Xena can play
with both generic expectations and the desire for novelty within generic boundaries.
Described as a "snarky, kitchen-sink warping of TV's most notoriously formulaic genres --
the super hero odyssey," Xena: Warrior Princess has been identified time and time again as
television's first. Xena is the first female character "who is totally independent of a male
figure" and the first to "walk the world like so many male adventurers." Similarly, many
respondents reveal the appeal of Xena's novelty as a female action hero/protagonist in their
descriptions of Xena as television's "first."

It happened to be "Sins of the Past" and I was immediately hooked. Why?
I'm not sure. It could be that it was the first TV series that had a female
protagonist (now two) that wasn't subservient to some nonessential male.
LETTER 43 (emphasis mine)

I watch Xena: Warrior Princess because it is the only TV show that is about
a woman with no regular male characters. Xena does what she wants, her
life does not revolve around a man. She can take care of herself and
controls her own life. LETTER 29 (emphasis mine)

Both women epitomize the feminist ideal. They are self-sufficient women
who don't let men take advantage of them, they are intelligent....smarter
than most of their male co-stars. I have read of women who were given the
strength to leave abusive situations because of XWP. Xena showed these
women that no one had the right to hurt them and that they have worth.
Feminists? Yes. Perhaps the first feminists (in TV land anyway, along
with their friends, the Amazons)... For me, its the only television show that
has female leads, who are witty smart and physically strong. I like that in a
TV show. LETTER 21 (emphasis mine)

Such revelations of the pleasure in novelty and the appeal of seeing "television's first" is
indicative of the ways television and film genres are shaped by the contradictory needs of
simultaneously fulfilling expectations and offering novelty. Perhaps 'Xena' is the answer
to such contradictory needs, as she herself is an embodiment of contradictions. As a
woman warrior in the male domain of action, Xena manages to fulfill expectations by
following the formula for the action/super hero while adding a unique spin with (as well as a commentary on) her own gendered existence.

**ACTION GENRE: EXPECTATIONS AND TRANSGRESSIONS**

As discussed by Richard Maltby and Ian Craven in their comprehensive book, *Hollywood Cinema*, the function of "genre" is multiple -- providing a means for the audiences to shape their expectations, for producers to accommodate those expectations and for critics to frame their criticisms.\(^4\) When a film is labeled an "action film," a certain element of predictability is formed which requires fulfillment. In this way, genre functions as a commercial guarantee for an audience whose expectations will push them towards the box office. Audiences might expect that the action hero, assumed to be male, will physically overcome obstacles in the form of nature or human opponents (often times in large numbers), in order to save or avenge a female lover, a friend or partner, or a community or country. But beyond such narrative expectations, the label of "action film" creates the expectation of visual spectacle, an emphasis on physical movement or action (hence its title). It is then up to the producers of such films to fulfill this expectation with multi-million budgets to support such action stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone, and to provide spectacular stunts and amazing back drops. However, while this generic expectation of "visual spectacle" functions well between action genre fans and the producers of action film, it is perhaps this aspect of the genre that has led to a historical absence within theoretical film criticism.

According to Yvonne Tasker, it is the action genre's "primacy of body over voice, spectacle over dialogue" that has led to its historical exclusion from the theoretical discussions of filmic genres and to its reputation as "dumb movies for dumb people" or as "inferior products."\(^5\) Ironically, many of the filmic genres of classic Hollywood films that have been recognized and noted for their narratives, have been exposed by feminist film critics as also placing primacy of body over voice and spectacle over dialogue -- that is, the
primacy of the female body over her voice and feminine spectacle over dialogue. As introduced by Laura Mulvey in her oft-cited essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," while the male protagonist controls the gaze and thus embodies the active masculine position within the narrative, the female heroine is relegated to the passive position as the object of a scopophilic gaze, not only of her male counterparts, but of the cinematic audience as well. However, as Tasker points out in her discussion of the male action hero, the gaze of the audience is not directed towards the female form but rather on the "action" of and the "display" of the male body. It is interesting to speculate on the discomfort such a shift might foster, when the male protagonists, while remaining in active control of the narrative, simultaneously become the spectacle and the object of the gaze.

Interestingly enough, the action film shares many characteristics with the classic western, a "recognized" filmic genre in film criticism. And while the western is officially recognized by film theorists as a worthwhile genre as opposed to the "low brow" action film, the discourse surrounding the western could easily be used to describe the action film. Maltby and Craven have noted how, like action films, westerns provide a space where "it is the male rather than the female body that is displayed and celebrated." Within the action genre and arguably the western, the hero's performance of "action"/masculinity places his body on display. Because in both action and western film, the emphasis is on the gun fight, the sword fight and the physicality between the hero and his enemy, both the action hero and the western hero become the object of the gaze and a spectacle, not only for the movie audience, but often times for the diegetic spectators within the film. But Steve Neale argues that while scenes of "combat" place male bodies as "spectacle," they somehow remain "unmarked as objects or erotic display" as they are "marked not by desire but by fear, hatred or aggression." This escape from the potential sexual presentation of the hero's body is accomplished in both westerns and action films by the emphasis on the hero's actions which are inextricably linked to violence as masculine performance. It is only through the medium of violence that their bodies can be marked by "fear, hatred, or
aggression" rather than and object of "desire." As Maltby and Craven note of Robert Warshaw's observations of the western:

It is not violence which is the 'point' of the Western so much a 'a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence'. Warshow's Westerner lives in a world of restrained violence: 'There is little cruelty in Western movies and little sentimentality; our eyes are not focused on the sufferings of the defeated but on the deportment of the hero.'

In other words, in the western, and arguably in action films, violence becomes a means for deportment of the hero from "hero as spectacle" to his "enactment of spectacle." And while the narratives of such films are extremely predictable and standardized, it is the "enactment of spectacle" through violence (the different ways the hero pulls it off, the visual effects and spectacular stunts) that provides viewers with the pleasures of novelty. Thus violence not only becomes a means to de-emphasize the spectacle and emphasize "action" but has also become an essential component of the "pleasure of the visual spectacle" expected from action films.

Thus, the genre of "action" comes with a set of expectations: a predictable story line where the hero will prevail over overwhelming obstacles through the "enactment of spectacle" and through violence as a means of "deportment." Such expectations shaped by generic categorizations encourage what Maltby identifies as a "sense of pleasurable mastery" that is associated with entertainment. Pleasure in entertainment is derived from "the promise that their fictional events will unfold with a measure of certainty for the audience." However, when producers follow generic formulas and produce familiar fictions, they do so with the hope that they fulfill their audience's requirement that movies be "just like...but completely different from each other." As Christine Gledhill points out regarding generic constructs, while "the formulaic plots, stereotypes and stylistic conventions of the different genres were developed in response to the needs of a mass industry to predict market demand in order to standardize and so stabilize production.... a
contradictory demand of the market, however, is for novelty, innovation.\textsuperscript{16} For, while the pleasure associated with entertainment has been identified as a "sense of pleasurable mastery," it is difficult to deny the pressures for films and television shows to distinguish themselves from the rest. Historically, Hollywood has had to negotiate between these two demands - predictability and pleasurable mastery versus novelty and the pleasure of surprise - by "balancing recognizable features with elements of difference and variation" in order to set their film apart and distinguish them as "something new."\textsuperscript{17} As Yvonne Tasker notes, "the establishment and transgression of limits is the stuff of Hollywood cinema rather than an occasional by-product."\textsuperscript{18} Within film and television, there exists a history of setting generic boundaries and breaking them by combining genres or looking for new ways to rebuild older elements.

XENA AS LIKENESS AND NOVELTY

In this atmosphere of contradictory desires for likeness and novelty, the popularity of Xena makes perfect sense. While the warrior princess and her series follow the action hero formula, fulfilling the "pleasurable mastery" of audiences, her mere existence as a woman in this role provides novelty. Respondents describe Xena:Warrior Princess not only as television's first, but more specifically, as something new and different as a "super hero" within the genre of action. Her appeal is based on her being something rare and new, and in some cases, as something not seen before.

She is the first woman's role model that is unabashedly a 'tom-boy' (hate that term). She is strong, athletic, controlled, moral, wise, smart, loving, independent as well as interdependent, capable beyond belief, and a real woman.....She is the first actual woman super hero on the order of Chuck Norris or Arnold Schwartzeneger [sic]. \textbf{LETTER 4}

A few of the reasons I like watching the program is because it stars a woman in the lead role.....what I liked, like in La Femme Nikkita [sic] and Point of No Return, was that it wasn't yet another hero series with a male hero. The woman wasn't relegated to yet another housewife or the damsel in distress week after week. They might not be as well documented as the men but there are several women through out history that got down and dirty with the guys. \textbf{LETTER 34}  
21
I continue watching Xena almost every week because I haven't seen anything quite like this character before. I'm still not quite sure what to make of her. LETTER 14

This need for likeness and novelty was one that producers of Xena attempted to address in creating the series. In an interview with Donna Minkowitz for Ms. Magazine, producer Mark Tapert revealed his desire to "try his hand at a fantasy story with a female hero." Tapert states, "I believe, in the basest and crudest of ways, that there's a formula to stories about heroes and no one had ever tried to do it before with a woman hero. Or if they did, they made excuses for her being a woman." Here Tapert acknowledges the function of genre in his description of the hero-formula, a description which he labels "base" and "crass," going against the audiences' desire for novelty. However, he is able to counter such crassness with his doing "what never was done before," using a woman in this formula. And by disrupting the codes of femininity simply by being at the center of an action-based genre generally reserved for men, Xena embodies what Tasker calls a "symbolically transgressive iconography." While Xena follows all of the expectations of the genre - the long journeys, the enactment of spectacle (rather than mere spectacle), the fighting and beating of her adversaries - she is the embodiment of novelty, she is the "something new."

The novelty of Xena not only stems from the novelty of a female in "action" but is closely tied to the influences that Hong Kong action films have had on the development of the series and her character. As Producer Mark Tapert admits, "we weren't afraid to break [Western] rules of fight realism and go for action that's entertaining and something that the American television audience has never seen before." Pulling from what journalist Craig D. Reid dubbed "Fant-Asia" - "Hong Kong sci-fi, fantasy, horror, and period-piece movies that feature supernatural overtones and frenetic, martial arts action -- and in which anything goes," Tapert tapped into a "wild and wooly, frenetic-paced action formula" that fits into the expectations of the super/action hero genre and gives it yet another twist.
Such appropriations of Asian films and themes are not new to American cinematic history and have proven to be lucrative in the past: e.g. the appropriations of Akira Kurosawa's *The Fort* and *The Seven Samurai* for the films *Star Wars* and *The Magnificent Seven* as well as the appropriation of Bruce Lee's conception for the television series *Kung Fu* which was then promptly Anglicized. These appropriations are indicative of the belief that the Americanization of audiences must be accompanied by the Anglicization of filmic and television images in order for such Asian-based projects to be accepted.

"Fant-asia" was the not the only thing appropriated into the successful series. The inspiration for a female action hero came from Hong Kong action films as well. While the female action hero in the United States is viewed a novelty at best and at worst, as transgressively "perverse", Hong Kong Cinema has been and "may be the only place in the world where men and women fight as equals"... that is until Xena. In a guide to Hong Kong films, Stefan Hammond and Mike Wilkins note that such images stem from China's tradition of woman warriors stretching back fifty centuries or so. The stories of Fa Mulan, a Chinese woman warrior who provides inspiration for Maxine Hong Kingston's stories in *Woman Warrior*, as well as the legacy of the women's armies established to help overthrow the Manchu rule of the Ching Dynasty, have led to an atmosphere where military training for young women students is "commonplace" and where "more women, young and old... than anywhere else in the world,...have been trained in weapons." It is perhaps this context that has allowed for numerous Hong Kong films that portray women as "lightening-quick and unapologetic" female fighters. Hong Kong's images of women warriors have also been the source of inspiration for America's emergent female action heroes, such as Sigourney Weaver who "drew on these legends for inspiration when gearing up to fight the hideous critters in *Aliens*." Producer Mark Tapert revealed that similar inspirations were drawn from Hong Kong action films in conceptualizing *Xena: Warrior Princess* and complains that "there weren't really a lot of television precedents [in the United States] to draw from or that [the producers] wanted to draw from." Many
respondents had similar complaints about the historical lack of heroic female images in American television -- prior to Xena. Although Wonder Woman and Bionic Woman were some of the few strong female protagonists mentioned, even these past representations are criticized when compared to Xena, who is described as a desired and long-awaited "role model."

I realized I've waited for something like this for a very long time: ever since 'The Bionic Woman' and 'Wonder Woman' I've waited for an action/adventure series with a woman lead. Finally Xena was there! LETTER 9

I grew up watching such shows as Wonder Woman with Linda Carter and although I always enjoyed the series it was very disappointing that she could only be a physically strong woman when there was a crisis. She also had to keep her identity a secret as if she could be strong and smart as long as she didn't flaunt it and allowed the males in her life to believe they were the smartest and strongest. I know that Wonder Woman is off the subject but everything that I felt was missing from that and similar shows of the 70's and even 80's could be found in XWP. It seemed to me that XWP was the role model I had been waiting for all my life. LETTER 17

I think Xena is the heroine I wanted when I was a baby-boomer little girl, instead of the lame Lois Lane, Annie Oakley type of women. Emma Peel was a start, but even she was second-fiddle to John Steed. Modesty Blaise (comic strips and books) was the closest thing to Xena, but in retrospect, not as good. Xena W. Princess has everything: tough, strong, not male dependent, interesting relationship with another character. (How do they invest so little dialogue with so much significance?) LETTER 20

...unlike Wonder Woman, she is not hopelessly in love with some loser male, spending all her energy protecting him...unlike Thelma and Louise, she has not died, after finding her "core" and establishing her independence...with her sword and chakram she produces the same fire power output of Sigourney Weaver in Alien(s) and Linda Hamilton in T2...she takes on lovers but doesn't "pine away" about wanting to be married and having a family...her only wish is to be buried in her home village...each episode reveals another layer about Xena...I could go on and on...LETTER 24

The lack of American female fighters/action heroes led Tapert to emulate the performances of Hong Kong's female action stars. In interviews, Tapert admits "I have to give a great deal of credit to Bridget Lin. In some respects, we westernized her character from Swordsman and Bride with White Hair films. A volatile dark character, yet still very feminine; you never know what she's going to do next."
Hercules: The Legendary Journey which first introduced the character of Xena ("Xena: Warrior Princess," "The Gauntlet," and "Unchained Heart"), not only is the concept of "a volatile" yet "feminine" character borrowed but actual scenes are identical to those found in Bride with White Hair.\textsuperscript{31} And once again, such appropriations paid off. While "stations were really wary at first because they just didn't think women action heroes were big sellers...[the producers of Xena] found that there is a certain element of society that really likes to see women in that role."\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the push and pull for likeness and novelty, one respondent supports Tapert's statements by acknowledging the tendency for television executives to play it safe by leaning towards fulfilling audience expectations.

Xena accomplishes her tasks without any male help. There is no male hero to rush in and save the day. This is rare in television. Believe me, I work in the television industry and Xena: Warrior Princess is the exception to the rule. Profitable shows generally feature male leads or a combination of a male and female lead. Having a female character carry the show by herself defies the odds of good ratings.

In this context, Xena serves as "transgressive iconography" not only in the realm of the action genre, but also by defying "the odds of good ratings." And for many respondents, Xena's transgression into television provides her audience with much more than just entertainment. As one respondent explains, what begins as an appeal to novelty in the realm of entertainment (being television's first) can eventually become influential in the realm of the social, setting new standards or extending pre-existing ones. What might be viewed as initially transgressive (unexpected) for women can become "normative" and eventually "cool" and "admirable."
She is to me what John Wayne characters must have been for men and boys.... She doesn't have to pretend to be strong/athletic as did the old Linda Carter-Wonder Women. She (Xena) is held in high regard for all the features I felt I had to hide for all [these] years. Now she has made them cool. Cool being what personal aspects our society tacitly or overtly acknowledges as normative first then as admirable. What a freeing feeling that is. I know the appeal cuts across age and gender lines but there must be a special subcategory for women of my age group (I'm 43). - LETTER 4

In many of these responses, Xena's status as role model is possible through the viewers' ability to identify with the character which they see on their television screen.

And while Xena is often described often as someone to emulate, she is also described as validating characteristics that viewers feel they have always had or portraying someone who they "in many ways" are. As actor Lucy Lawless explains regarding her acceptance of her/Xena's status as a role model, "I finally realized that being a role model doesn't mean people are encouraged to be like me -- they're encouraged to go out and be more of themselves."33

When I watch XENA I see the woman I would like to be-and in many ways-am. LETTER 4

Ultimately I believe that Xena is so popular because so many people see in her what they have in themselves, and what they wish they could express more often. LETTER 18

I feel almost idealistic after watching the show because then anything seems possible. I am the only female employee in my dept. because my chosen career is and has been a male dominated field. Xena is like a kindred spirit. She survives as a warrior which is a predominantly male occupation. She is a role model for women in the 90's---independent, assertive and successful. The fact that Xena has baggage (who doesn't) doesn't deter her from taking on difficult or emotionally painful jobs. LETTER 26

When I was a little girl I was very much a tomboy and I could have used a role model like Xena back then, when the only appropriate (according to society) role model was Barbie. I played soldier, I played soccer (soccer is considered a man's game over here), I was one of the guys so to speak. Fortunately my parents accepted this but I know other parents that don't. They think that girls have to be pretty, be sweet, do girlish things, in short they want them to be Barbies. According to society, girls have to act that way, boys the other way....Thanks to characters like Xena and Gabrielle (but also Kira, Janneway etc) girls get to see new role models. LETTER 9
I love Xena because she is strong, but not perfect. She's not a "Dumb" beauty queen of a character. I think that she is a perfect role model for young women, even though she does get a bit too violent sometimes. That violent side is, however, something that I admire about her. The fact that she can take care of herself, and those around her. I suppose that is because as a child I was a victim of sexual abuse and later an abusive marriage that last 10 years. I like the way that she just takes charge like a force of nature. For every action there is a like and equal reaction...She is a great role model. I would like to be her, but alas, I have no horse! In my mind however, I can be like her and she has made a difference in the way that I view myself. Not bad for a TV warrior. LETTER 42

In relation to these viewers' own lives, Xena was recognizable -- someone whom they could identify with. It was simply within the realm of television that she was "novel" or "something new."

Thus, Xena not only moves from being spectacle to "enacting spectacle" through the deportment of violence as an action hero, but also through her "transgressive iconography" and her status as a role model. While Xena was something new on the television screen, she also provided likeness in the form of familiarity, as she embodied and validated characteristics that viewers expressed they had within themselves. Thus Xena is able to negotiate the contradictory demands for predictability and novelty by both working within and transgressing generic boundaries and viewer expectations. While she is heralded for her novelty and being "television's first" and for her transgressions into a male-dominated realm, she simultaneously is able to fulfill generic expectations and provide viewers with the pleasure of familiarity and a means for identification in shaping their viewer pleasure.

2. Ibid. 41.

3. Ibid.


7. Tasker, 2

8. In both Maltby's and Tasker's works, Westerns are discussed as valid genres. Also see Barry Grant's (editor) *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*. (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977) and *Genre Reader II*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

9. In their discussion of Terence Butler's discussion on the emphasis of male relationships in the Western, Maltby and Craven tie such an emphasis on male display. Maltby, 130.

10. Tasker, 2


13. Maltby, 112

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. 113.


17. Maltby, 113.

18. Tasker, 150.


20. Ibid.


22. Craig D. Reid, Dr. "What Puts the Punch in Hercules and Xena?" *Black Belt*, September, 1996, 36.

23. Ibid.

24. George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola presented a Life Time Achievement Award at the 1990 Academy Awards to Akira Kurosawa in recognition of his influences on their work; The television series, *Kung Fu*, was conceptualized by Bruce Lee but given to David Carradine for fear that American viewers would not be able to identify with the a Chinese actor. However, producers thought the idea of a Chinese man would be acceptable if properly Anglicized.

25. According to Yvonne Tasker, "women who wield guns...and take control of ...the other technologies that have symbolized power [and] mobilize a symbolically transgressive iconography [which] at the most fundamental level... disrupt conventional notion[s]" of gender. Tasker, 132. In her discussion of *Red Sonja*, "exaggerated sexual characteristics" and "exaggerated physical powers, in swordplay or marksmanship" are strengths which mark her as "transgressive [and] perverse." Tasker clarifies her use of the terms perverse as being "a refusal of the 'normal' development of (hetero)sexuality and the restrictive roles that it involves." Tasker, 30. Also see Stefan Hammond and Mike Wilkins book for references to women as fighters in *Sex and Zen & A Bullet in the Head*, (New York: Fireside, 1996), 49.


27. Hammond and Wilkens note Hong Kong action films like *Princess Madam, Satin Steel, She Shoots Straight* as examples of many films that portray women as accomplished fighters. See Hammond and Wilkins, 50.

28. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. In "The Gauntlet," Xena is only allowed to leave her war party by walking and surviving "the gauntlet," where warriors physically attack her on both sides -- a dismal and dark scene that is practically an exact duplicate (in terms of story line and cinematography) of the gauntlet scene for Bridget Lin's character in *A Bride with White Hair*.


CHAPTER 3

TRANSGRESSIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS: FROM FEMME FATALE TO FEMALE ACTION HERO(ES)

As indicated in chapter two, Xena's appeal is not only in her novelty as television's first female action hero, but also in the possibilities her transgressions (into a male-dominated genre) bring about in transforming social situations (for viewers who parallel their own situations in male-dominated working environment or in abusive situations). Such transformations are fundamental to Xena's status as a female action hero and popular role model. In her discussion of the "hero" within narrative, Teresa de Lauretis notes that "a transformation is predicated on the figure of the hero.....who crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. In doing so, the hero is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of difference."¹ Because the "female is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death," she argues, sexual difference is thus conceived as placing "male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; the female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other."² Such gender structures parallel the narratives of many action films - the Superman & Lois Lane scenario - in which the female protagonist, while validating the hero's heterosexuality, serves as an obstacle to the male hero's function as hero to others. But where does Xena, the Warrior Princess fit within this framework?

Interestingly enough, Xena's entrance into television began as a female obstacle to the male hero Hercules on his television series, Hercules and the Legendary Journeys. In her debut as the classic femme fatale, Xena began as a threat and obstacle to the friendship between the good hero Hercules and his adventuring buddy, Iolaus. As characteristic of
the femme fatale, Xena began as a "deadly woman" who derived her power from her sexuality as she attempted to seduce Iolaus into killing Hercules in order to increase the strength and reputation of her army. The femme fatale, has been recognized as one of cinema's first powerful - though destructive - female roles. Although the deadly woman is an image found in film and literature reaching far back in history, the femme fatale emerged in full force in film noir, a genre described by Janey Place as "one of the few periods of film in which woman are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality". One respondent found Xena's role as a "deadly woman" to be appealing in itself, recognizing the agency Xena gained as a femme fatale that allowed her to transgress the boundaries of the roles historically allotted to women.

When I saw Xena on Herc[ules] to begin with, I like her for her evil, greedy character. She was a great nemesis to Hercules and Iolaus. Needless to say I was also excited to see a female warrior in Ancient Greece, cuz except for the Spartans, there weren't any. In fact, women were owned and oppressed. It was nice to see a new twist to Ancient Greece. This isn't to say that a woman like Xena couldn't have existed, but it was never recorded and I would think that a woman like that would have made history even if she was defeated. LETTER 40

This respondent not only found the introduction of such a strong female, in the form of a femme fatale, to be appealing, but states that the true appeal was in the ability of Xena to transform herself. Here, the respondent refers to Xena's second and third appearances on Hercules:Legendary Journeys in which her army defies her authority (when they killed women and children) and then turn against her (in "The Gauntlet"). The combination of joining forces and having an intimate relationship with the good Hercules "unchains" her heart, transforming her from "deadly woman" to "warrior princess" ("Unchained Heart"). This transformation was quickly followed with the warrior's own series in which she constantly contends with her haunting past ("Sins of the Past").
The reasons I continued to watch were numerous. Like many others, I like the way she changed. I like the fact that her character is deep with room to grow. I like the fact that her major antagonist is herself. LETTER 40

Another respondent found Xena's introduction to television as a femme fatal to be an utter disappointment, noting the ways the centrality of sexuality leads to a one-dimensional female archetype, defined solely in relation to men. However, despite these criticisms and much like the previous respondent, what this respondent did find appealing was Xena's transformation.

Originally, I did not like the Xena character in the original Hercules episode. A typecast female villain who used sex to defeat her enemies. Joan Collins with a chakram. I was really disappointed. Hello Mr/Ms. Producer. Give me something new. I did not watch the first few episodes. By accident, I did catch a later episode (Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts), and by now the show had settled into its rhythm. I was surprised by the changes. The slut had been replaced by a woman who didn't rely on men either in figuring out what to do or going about and doing it. She acts decisively, wields an awesome sword, gets to ride a cool horse, and can kickbox her way out of any situation better than Batgirl ever did. LETTER 24

As described by these respondents, and in contrast to de Lauretis' argument against women's inability for transformation, Xena does the impossible. She experiences a metamorphosis (influenced by the good Hercules) and transforms from femme fatale- "obstacle-boundary-space" to female-"hero-human, on the side of the subject." And in doing so, as television writer Eileen Glanton writes, "she pulled off a true feminist coup: she got her own series." Such a transformation requires the warrior princess to "cross the boundary" into the traditionally male domain of "action" and "penetrate the other space" of masculine performance, not only through the deportment offered by masculinized violence but also through her "masculine performances" via gestures, body movement, behavioral traits, grain of voice, all of which hold the "self assured command of space" which "enacts empowerment." If de Lauretis' argument holds up, such transformation would allow Xena to be the "active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of difference." Perhaps it is the hope that Xena will function as an "active principle of
culture" that leads to the appeal of such transformations. Xena's transformation indicates possibilities for one (often respondents referred to themselves) to "change," "reform," and "overcome past mistakes" or "overhaul one's situation."

I like the redemption element as well, proving that one can change one's attitude and overhaul one's situation through self will alone. ........when Xena faces adversity and wins, we win right along with her. LETTER 7

(emphasis mine)

There are so many reasons why I started following the show. First and foremost was Xena, her physical and emotional strength (I like seeing a woman kick butt), intelligence (there were brains with that muscle), and the fact that she had a dark past (It's nice to think that we can overcome our mistakes). LETTER 17 (emphasis mine)

I like the show for many different reasons [such as] Xena changed her life she is now a positive force in the world [and the] ..... re-occurring theme that life is what we make of it. LETTER 36 (emphasis mine)

Xena's selflessness, her heroic nature, awakens something in all of us, something we long to be? Her search for deliverance from the sins of the past is our search, too. LETTER 27 (emphasis mine)

From another psychological standpoint, Xena is very representative of someone in a healing process/reforming/changing process from past abuses, maybe alcoholism or some other thing and in the first season moves forward in that process. LETTER 10

Not only is the "transformation" appealing on a personal level (as it affects the viewers themselves), but I would also argue that there is an allure that stems from the possibilities Xena's "transformation" presents for female representations in film and television. While Xena was introduced and gained power through her role as a femme fatale, she was able to make a transformation to hero while retaining her power.

Besides providing audiences with "possibilities" for different "transformations," a female action hero's entrance into the masculine domain of "action" has further ramifications which in many ways "transform" and complicate the boundaries of the genre itself. The move which Xena makes from femme fatale to action hero not only changes the setting (who can do what) but in effect changes the rules (what can one do). She moves from being outside of the system of patriarchal law and becomes the law herself.8 And
while it was her role as femme fatale that had enabled her to enter the realm of the action genre by allowing her access to power through her sexuality, her shift to action hero created tremors in her character. For one thing, she must leave Hercules, the impetus of her transformation and initial love interest (in "Unchained Heart"), and find her female side kick Gabrielle (in "Sins of the Past"). While the femme fatale's power is tied completely to her (hetero-)sexuality, her new status as hero requires her to deflect such heterosexual coupling. And where before as a femme fatale, violence was inextricably linked to her sexuality, as an action hero, violence has become a means to display "enactment of spectacle" and has the effect of countering her sexuality, or at least her heterosexuality.

TRANSFORMATION FROM LONELY FEMME FATALE TO HERO AND GAL PAL

As Tasker points out of the action genre, traditionally the female functioned as a point of differentiation, deflecting the homoreroticism between adventurous buddies while remaining an unwelcome figure. Similarly, Laurie Schultz, in her discussion of female bodybuilders, argues that a tension exists for females who are linked to masculinity (which in this case is masculinity as it connects to "action"). If such a link exists, "she must be anchored to heterosexuality or would slip into the cracks in the hegemonic system into an oppositional sexuality that would be irrecoverable." However, the female action hero who has entered the realm of "action" and thus masculinity, enters a paradox. While such links to masculinity make it imperative for her to anchor herself to heterosexuality, such anchoring serves as an obstacle to her status as hero. Heterosexual coupling often times means the loss of the hero's powers (as in Superman). As a result, action narratives often kill off heterosexual partners of heroes or heroes continually change their lovers from film to film/ episode to episode (as in the series of Batman films). In other words, heroes just can't be tied down. Of course there are numerous attempts in the series to anchor both Xena and her female companion to heterosexuality, but in the action genre these anchors can never last more than an episode. By the end of any given episode, when either Xena or
Gabrielle is exposed to heterosexual coupling, both Xena and Gabrielle's boyfriends/lovers either leave or die and it is only Xena and Gabrielle who are left walking towards the sunset and towards their next adventure. The result is an emphasis on the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle, an emphasis that has been welcomed whole-heartedly by many Xena viewers.

This aspect of the series has been identified time and time again as one of the main reasons for watching the series. Within these responses, novelty is once again tied to transgression. Just as respondents took note of the ways Xena represented television's first, the series' emphasis on the relationship of Xena and Gabrielle is also seen as a rare occurrence for television.

Finally, while there have been many TV shows that feature the friendship between two men, this show devotes a lot of time to building the relationship between two women. LETTER 29

The friendship between X[ena] and G[abrielle] is the kind I think we would all like to have. It reminds me of loves past and the hope for this kind of love in the future. Their relationship seems real to me--much more than any others currently on TV (Cagney and Lacey came closest in their time). LETTER 4

As noted by producer Liz Friedman, "the reaction to Xena shows how few substantive portrayals of women's friendships we see on TV."11 Respondents not only take note of the historical lack of female "buddy" stories in film and television but also note the tendency for television industry to stick with the "safer" combinations of male-male and male-female partnerships. Again, it is noted that when television executives are faced with the contradictory desires for likeness and novelty, fulfilling familiar expectations often wins. As Liz Friedman has noted, the anxiety over ratings has made television more often than not "the medium of the familiar" rather than of "breathtaking new changes."12
I think it's a very bold move what the producers have done. Sure, it was only logical to give Xena her own series but to give her a female partner was something entirely different. They could have stuck to the more secure (in terms of viewers) woman-man combination. It's what they do in cop shows all the time; you have one of two combinations: man-man or man-woman. Somehow producers tend to think that two leading ladies won't do the ratings any good. Of course there's Cagney & Lacey but there were more regular characters in this series than just the two women. (And it isn't really an action show of course). So this woman-woman team-up is really refreshing. The producers have taken a chance and, I think, they've won the bet. The relationship between the seasoned Xena and the brash, young Gabrielle is great and a large part of the show's success. Again it shows that women can carry a show as well as their male counterparts. Let's hope that other shows pick up on this. LETTER 9

As noted by several respondents, perhaps television's first breakthrough in focusing on a female, rather than male, partnership was the 1981 police series, Cagney and Lacey.

When the series premiered, the novelty of portraying and emphasizing a female partnership on television was recognized by television producers and audiences alike. The idea of "a female buddy movie" was at that moment in history an "extraordinary" concept. Interestingly enough, despite the success of that show and the fact that this female relationship was recognized as "a vital element in many fans' pleasure" and "fundamental to the program's appeal," almost fifteen years later, the concept of a female partnership is equally noted as "new" and "refreshing."

It seems television history repeats itself as viewers of Xena: Warrior Princess also note how the relationship, friendship and partnership of Xena and Gabrielle play "a vital role" in their viewer pleasure.

Many of the themes are very adult in their depth and shadings, and I think the loving relationship that the writers have built between Xena and her friend Gabrielle ranks among the best I've seen on TV. It's a show I'm glad to watch with my 5 year old daughter precisely because of how Xena is portrayed. LETTER 31

37
I also liked that she had a female sidekick and it has been interesting to watch that relationship grow. I liked that Xena was a woman of relatively few words and didn't wear her heart on her sleeve (I know you're thinking she doesn't have sleeves). I don't remember what episode it was in but I could really relate to Xena in a scene where Gabrielle was upset and crying about something and hugged Xena for comfort and Xena just kind of looked at her with surprise not knowing quite how to respond to such a gesture. **LETTER 17**

While it was Xena's transgressions in the generic realm that made her a "novelty" in television, it was also this transgression vis-a-vis her sidekick that led to her status as a "role model" and validated for viewers characteristics that respondents often recognized in themselves. Similarly, the discourse surrounding the relationship between the two women also moves from "novelty" to familiarity, as respondents relate the relationship of Xena and Gabrielle to their own (or to potential) female friendships.

The evolution of Xena's friendship with Gabrielle is probably the biggest reason I watch...I have paid attention to the physicality of their relationship as a way to track how it has evolved, with reference to Xena's acceptance of Gabrielle's friendship and her willingness to reciprocate...Gabrielle is exactly the sort of person Xena needs in her life, the one true friend we all search for our entire lives...the one who knows us inside and out, and loves us anyway. Xena can trust that no matter what Gabrielle finds out about her past, Gaby's in for the long haul. **LETTER 35**

I do not necessarily see Xena as a feminist icon, but see more an excellent representation with plenty of positive messages about how women can communicate in relationships, especially with other women, which is a major problem for a majority of women. In many episodes there are great examples of how Xena and Gabrielle talk - communicate difficulties, problems, get them out in the open and discuss them. A thing many women in friendships do not do well. Most women tend to distance themselves, feel competitive or simply end the relationship in some manner. **LETTER 10**

I began watching Xena Warrior Princess because I was thrilled to see a physically strong woman on TV. A woman who could give it to the boys as good as she got - or better then she got. I kept watching because of the story lines, which have gotten better, the female friendship expressed in the show and because of the acting abilities of Lucy Lawless and Renee O'Connor...XWP also explores the complexities of a female relationship, in that of the friendship between Xena and Gabrielle...The fact that Xena and Gabrielle show their friendship in thought, work, and deed on a television show is not only unusual, it's a definite plus for the make up of the show. We, the audience, see how much they mean to one another and this is comforting to those of us with a best friend relationship. **LETTER 21**

38
THE AMBIGUOUSLY GAY DUO

This emphasis on female partnership has also sparked what has been identified by numerous articles as a "lesbian cult" following. This lesbian subtext adds yet another dimension of novelty that adds to viewer pleasure. And again, while such novelty is acknowledged as potentially "push[ing] the edges of the social norms," respondents also reveal the ways this lesbian subtext validates the familiar, giving them "some room to breathe."

Besides the production values and funny scripts there is the wonderful love story between Xena and Gabrielle. It is a love story whether there is physical intimacy or not.... Their friendship has intensity, is still growing as they get to know more about each other, is deep and committed, has youthful faith in eternal love, and has an erotic element. Again I would watch just for the action and the warm interaction of the characters but the erotic element is addictive. I like many others (expressed on the netforum) watch for the physical expression of the affection. These two women are very attractive and they have formed a great chemistry between the characters. I find my self hoping for more intimacy between the characters and would not think it out of character for them to have a full physical relationship. No one expects this to happen on American TV or even thinks this would be good for the show but the potential is there and I find it very titillating. The sex appeal of the actors and its expression through the characters is obvious. There isn't very much new psychological territory to be explored here. But again it seems very real to me and there are so few true expressions of woman/woman relationships in the media that aren't stereotypical or shallow or homophobic. The show pushes the envelope. I've always liked shows that push out the edges of the social norms! Give me some room to breathe!!!!

I also admire the true feelings between the two characters alike. There has never been a show that has held the line of lesbian - friendship before. They do it quite well. I wish the show continued success because it is what keeps me going through my week. Like a drug if you will....

Then came the wink, wink with Gabrielle. I was watching a show with my roommate, when one of those "situations" arose. We both looked at each other and said "I can't believe they did that." I was hooked. I started taping. It was better than watching Sandra Bernhard on the Roseanne episodes. Occasionally, I'll watch Hercules. Now, if I only could get a date with Lucy....
That woman is such a dyke.... I feel good about the fact that they are
catering to the lesbian population. I think that maybe we (lesbians) are
going noticed. **LETTER 15**

As pointed out earlier, heterosexual coupling -- used to deflect the homoreroticism between
adventurous buddies -- becomes even more imperative for females who have entered the
masculine realm. In Laurie Schultz's terms, because Xena cannot be anchored
heterosexually without compromising her status as hero, she risks "slip[ping] into the
cracks in the hegemonic system into an oppositional sexuality that would be
irrecuperable."17 However, this "slippage" does not appear as "irrecuperable" as Schultz
may suggest. Many respondents who are aware of the lesbian subtext drawn from Xena
and Gabrielle's relationship attempt to negotiate the "irrecuperability" of such slippage into
"oppositional sexuality."

I do not believe in the lesbianism idea, especially, because I see it as very
limiting, short-sighted and narrow minded to conclude all close
relationships between women must be sexual in nature to be considered
acceptable. It is entirely possible for 2 women to exist in a close
companionship without sexuality, and again it's the communication that
makes the big difference. When things are brought out into the open,
discussed and hashed over, the usual result is better understanding and a
closer friendship as a result. **LETTER 10**

Right now there is a lot of discussion concerned with the issue of
lesbianism. Personally, I believe it is a non issue in the show, but that since
Xena is such a strong character people feel the need to label her a lesbian
because of some of the characteristics associated with lesbians. Nothing I
have seen about Xena would indicate she is a lesbian—all of her past lovers
have been male, and she has never expressed any sexual desire for another
woman. So unless you count all close female/female relationships as
lesbian (which some feminism do), Xena is not a lesbian in my opinion.
Further more, I wonder why it matters so much to fans whether or not she
is a lesbian. **LETTER 18**

Such a resistance to a lesbian reading of Xena and Gabrielle's relationship can be read in
several ways. Resistance to homosexual representations on television and film has been
encountered time and time again as exposing the fear in validating such relationships (a
phenomenon now seen in full force with the controversies surrounding *Ellen*).18

However, it seems that the "debate" that exists for these viewers revolves around their...
attempts to establish a personal identification with their hero/role model. Thus, in a debate over ownership of meaning, respondents' resistance to viewing the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle as a lesbian relationship is inexplicably tied to a desire to validate their own heterosexual identifications with their "role model."

I see Xena and Gabrielle as best friends only, perhaps this is because I am straight. But, to me, Xena as a lesbian icon is reading more into the friendship between Xena and Gabrielle than is there. Yes they care for and love one another. The same way in which I and my best friend (female) do. I can identify with this friendship, and I believe that the friendship and camaraderie between Xena and Gabrielle is one of the reason people watch the show. LETTER 21

I know that lots of people talk about all the sexual interaction between Xena and Gabby, but you know, before I got on this list, I never picked up on it. I actually find those postings thought provoking though. My view of Xena is heterosexual. However, when you look back at the early Greek[s], sexuality was a whole different thing. The ole bisexuality was really more the norm. I feel that her sexual preference in really unimportant. She is what and who she is, nothing more, nothing less. I have a friend whose relationship reminds me of Xena and Gabby. There is nothing sexual going on between us, yet people (esp. men) try to tag us as lesbians. The "oh, I didn't realize that you didn't like men" sort of statements. Therefore, I don't see anything odd about X&G. That closeness that is more than family or friendship does not require sex! LETTER 42

The debate is not only framed around attempts to establish personal identification, but is also a debate on the group of women to which Xena's characteristics, as a feminist hero, will pertain. As pointed out by Susan Douglas, in this era where the phrase "I'm not a feminist, but...." has become an infamous cliché, many women may desire the same objectives as feminist groups but fear being identified as "lesbian, dominatrix, man-haters."

In this atmosphere, heterosexual women might resist having the characteristics that Xena exudes (strength, independence from men, and substantial female relationships) automatically identified as part of a lesbian identity. Lengthy explanations have resulted regarding the ways in which heterosexual women can and do carry some of the positive characteristics that Xena and Gabrielle exude.
I am of the firm opinion that Xena and Gabrielle are just friends and nothing more. I know the great debate rages, but I am on the 'friends side.' I don't know what the people on the show have in mind for the characters down the line, but from what they have shown us so far, I don't think anything supports the debate. I think the debate stems from a tendency on the part of the viewers to judge their relationship in terms of 20th century America. Assuming you have had sociology and know about how 'personal space' differs from era to era and from culture to culture, I think they see the physicality (touching, hugging, etc) of their relationship as more than it is, because of today's society's accepted methods of expression of affection. Also, Americans are known to be more stand-offish with reference to the distance they stand from a stranger and from friends and family than most Europeans are and Xena does take place in Greece, at a far different time.... Why I wouldn't want to see Xena and Gabrielle develop a romantic involvement: I think it would hurt the image of Xena, in a couple of different ways. For one, I think it would make it appear as though she had some dastardly ulterior motive in befriending Gabrielle and letting her tag along. Also, I think it would perpetuate the stereotype of gay women, as leather-wearing, dominating, man-hating females. I don't think that is fair to the character or to gay women everywhere. I don't mean to offend anyone, but to make Xena gay would be, to me, making her just another 'dyke'. I hate that word, but it so embodies the stereotype. Why can't Xena just simply be a woman who can kick a guy's butt, but still like them? I hope they never go that way with the characters. As if every strong, self-assured woman has to be gay. LETTER 35 (emphasis mine)

Although the debate is framed around ownership of Xena as a role model, it is difficult to overlook the ways homophobia can emerge in such debates. Although this respondent argues against the stereotyping of "gay women," a potential lesbian interest in Gabrielle on the part of Xena is described as a "dastardly ulterior motive." Such revelations expose a layer of homophobia that can characterize these debates and exposes a heterocentric resistance to having to identify with and search for a heterosexual subtext within the framework of a lesbian relationship.

Interestingly enough, the reverse scenario - searching for a lesbian and gay subtext within heterosexual images - is a situation homosexual men and women have had to encounter historically. As Danae Clark notes in her essay "Commodity Lesbianism," because "lesbians (as members of a heterosexist culture) have been taught to read the heterosexual possibilities of representations, the 'straight' reading is never entirely erased or replaced."20 Perhaps it is this historical context that leads these self-identified lesbian
respondents to be less resistant to the possibilities of Xena and Gabrielle's heterosexuality and open to viewing their relationship being simply a friendship.

Xena was different. Somewhere along the line, the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle began to change. I felt it become more intense and the writers, directors, producers or actors seemed to be doing this on purpose. I began to wonder where they were going to take it. I also began to watch every episode and examine them more closely. By the time that "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" showed, I was convinced that something rare and unique was taking place. I have been watching tv since 1955. I have read every comic book that has featured the classic Xena type warrior. I have never seen a relationship between two women like this one. There has never been a Gabrielle. Whether or not they become more than just friends is not important. What is important is their undying loyalty, love and devotion to each other. I find this very satisfying and validating. LETTER 13

I also love watching because of the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. Are they or aren't they lesbians? I am a lesbian and I find it interesting how they are intimate yet they do not sleep together. My partner and I have been together for 10 years, and our friendship started the same way. It took me over a year to understand my feelings for her. Today, I don't want to live my life without her. I also love the fact that two woman can be friends on the level that the show portrays. I find that I am very happy in my current relationship yet I also have close woman friends who I know I can count on in a heart beat and I have no desire to have an intimate relationship with them. LETTER 15

It seems that audiences negotiate the "friendship" between Xena and Gabrielle according to what they have invested in how they wish to define their own identifications with their role model. For if the role model is not merely someone to emulate but a validation of who the respondents are themselves, in a homophobic environment, her sexual identity can become personally threatening.

THE FUNCTION OF SUBTEXT: AMBIGUITIES AND GAPS

As indicated by the multiple ways viewers negotiate meaning, audiences not only have the ability to be active in their spectatorship, but have demonstrated that it is in their interest to do so. But this is not a one way street, and in order for different viewers to negotiate what Xena means to them in different ways, multiple meanings need to be present in the images they see. As Liz Friedman notes, in an arena like television which often leans
towards the safe and familiar (and I would add, where homophobia is still rampant), "the best way to convey more challenging ideas is to make something that functions on a mainstream level but that has subtext that people can pick up on -- or not."21 Subtext, in the form of "sapphic double entendres," appears often in Xena scripts. As Friedman explains in an interview, in the opening of "Altered States," the "episode starts with the camera looking at some bushes. We hear Gabrielle asking, 'How was that?' Xena answer, 'Very nice!' Gabrielle says, 'Really? I wasn't sure,' and Xena replies, 'No, no, you're doing great.' Then we see them, and they're fishing-- naked!"22 Such double entendres border on the explicit as one does not have to dig too far for the subtext.

As one respondent points out, the beauty of the Xena:Warrior Princess is that it does allow audiences to negotiate and choose their own interpretations of Xena and her relationship with Gabrielle.

I enjoy watching Xena because of the interaction between her and Gabrielle. The writers put together a unique friendship that both hetero[sexuals] and homosexuals can identify with. LETTER 6

Multiple meanings, in the form of subtext, allow for safe passage of controversial issues to television despite the executives who "came down on" Robert Tapert "because they wanted to make sure no one perceived Xena and Gabrielle as lesbians."23 When the only romance between Xena and Gabrielle "is the sublimated one," it becomes more difficult to point the conservative finger.24

Even in answering questions regarding the series' potential lesbian representations, both producers Liz Friedman and Robert Tapert use subtext and ambiguity. When Tapert is asked about Xena's sexual orientation, he tells reporters that "she has had a string of lovers in her life and that now she is trying to get control of her emotions."25 In The Advocate, Friedman - "who is openly lesbian herself" - is also ambiguous in describing Xena and Gabrielle's relationship: "In terms of what is explicitly presented, Xena and Gabrielle are very close friends who, I do believe, love each other, whether or not there's a
degree of sexual intimacy. But in addition, she also admits that "it's not our show, it's the audience's show. If the fans want to read Xena that way, great." It's hard to determine which came first, the audience's desire to read Xena and Gabrielle's relationship as a lesbian relationship or the lesbian "subtext" provided by producers and writers which certain audiences are willing pick up. What is certain is that both sides of this negotiating coin are necessary for subtext to work. But the beauty of a subtext is not only what is offered but also, what is missing. As Friedman concludes in her discussion regarding Xena and Gabrielle's relationship: "What they do between episodes, I don't know." In other words, the producers will leave it open for the audience to decide. One respondent agrees that it is the possibilities (the gaps) of the subtext that has led to many viewers' pleasure.

I'm not sure I can explain this as my writing abilities have never been a strength but I'll try my best. I have never felt about a show the way I feel about this program, I'm addicted. I thought I was just being very weird until I started reading the Netforum and realized others were affected in a similar manner. The only explanation I can come up with is that the writers leave so much to the imagination. They tell a great story but leave out a lot of little details (like when did Gabrielle get bit by a bacchae sp? in Girls Just Want to Have Fun). It allows the viewer to fill in the blanks. I eagerly await for Xena and Gabrielle to fill in some of the missing details towards the end of the show before they start off toward their next adventure and I am usually left there waiting with very few answers. One can imagine whole adventures just trying to fill in all the details. I think that is why Xena and Gabrielle are different things to different people and why their relationship can be interpreted as straight or lesbian depending on one's point of view. LETTER 21

As a female action hero transgressing an historically male-dominated genre, Xena presents numerous possibilities for her viewers. Much of the appeal of Xena as a role model has been attributed to her ability to transform herself. Through her own metamorphosis from femme fatale to action hero, she represents the potential of transformation for women's roles in media as well as for viewers themselves. As a role model, Xena not only functions as someone to emulate, but validates that which viewers see in themselves. Her partnership with her sidekick, Gabrielle, suggests that negotiations
are made according to what viewers have invested, and more importantly, what they desire to validate via their role models. These negotiations are made possible, not only by the agency of viewers and their abilities to be active spectators but also by the multiple meanings that are made available by the producers via subtext. Through ambiguities and gaps presented in the series, Xena's transformation from femme fatale to action hero disrupts, not only gender expectations, but also the imperatives of heterocentrism as well -- as both are inextricably bound to one another. As suggested by Ian Green, the drawing together of all of these dynamics --"social stereotyping, fictional production and the viewer's own experiences and fantasies"-- is the "key mechanism" to viewer pleasure.28
ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 3

TRANSGRESSIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS


2. Ibid. 121.


4. Ibid. Place discusses film noir and the femme fatale as a male fantasy. Also see Molly Haskell who notes how femme fatales were aggressors by male design in *From Reverence to Rape: Treatment of Women in the Movies*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 90.


7. de Lauretis, 113.

8. By moving from outside of the law and embodying the law itself, she defies the idea that even when empowered, a woman must remain outside of the symbolic -- challenging the conceptualizations of women's position within a Lacanian/psychoanalytic framework.


12. According to Julie D'acci's study on the audience reception of *Cagney and Lacey*, the producers of the series were influenced by Molly Haskell's book, *From Reverence to Rape*, which revealed the lack of films featuring female "buddies." Julie D'acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 16-17. Also see Haskell, 24 for a discussion on the mythology of American buddies in film.

13. D'acci, 182.

15. This title is borrowed from the Saturday Night Live cartoon skit called "The Ambiguously Gay Duo," which portrays Batman and Robin-like comic heroes and parodies the inability of such a partnership to link itself to heterosexuality, leading to an ambiguous sexuality.


17. Schultz, 61.

18. Recently, Ellen DeGeneres has "come out" on her show, *Ellen*, as well as in the public eye causing an uproar in the entertainment scene. Numerous interviews with different segments of the "American" viewers were interviewed for specials on the reaction of this event as different sponsors and communities reveal their resistance to such an action by pulling out support and banning the show.


21. Flaherty, 42.

22. Stockwell, 81-82.


24. D'eramo, 47.

25. Minkowitz, 75.

26 Stockwell, 81.
27. Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

SEX SYMBOL, ROLE MODEL...OR CAMP?

As discussed in chapter two, because of the "primacy of body over voice and spectacle over dialogue" within the action genre, the male action hero must emphasize his "action" (often in the form of enactments of violence) in order to counter his role as "spectacle." In contrast, the female action hero slips easily into this role of spectacle -- almost as if it were a second skin. Because women in film and television have historically held roles that have limited them to passive desired objects, it is not the role of "spectacle" but rather the role of "action" that is new and uncomfortable territory. As noted by both Yvonne Tasker and Susan Douglas, the "activity" of television's first female heroines was invariably compensated by an emphasis on sexuality and glamour. As Mary Anne Doane argues, this masquerade of femininity (embodied in sexuality and glamour) may function as a "mask to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it."

Such compensations and masking of "action" stem from what Susan Douglas has pinpointed as a "schizophrenic relationship" resulting from the media's efforts to "capitalize on feminism while containing it." Many 1970's television programs presented strong female protagonists that were simultaneously contained by a "rather conventional coding of glamour." Such shows as Police Woman, Charlie's Angels, Wonder Woman, and Bionic Woman allowed women to enter the realm of the "active" as long as they remained excessively feminine. While these female heroines might have brandished guns and apprehended criminals, they remained fashion plates and an emphasis was placed on what
they wore and how they looked rather than how they could possibly outrun their
opponents in their spiked high heels. Considering this legacy, it is tempting to claim that
Xena's "look" is simply a fetishization -- an attempt to contain her transgression into the
historically male-dominated realm of the "active" and an indication of the limits placed upon
a female within the action genre.6

Upon first encounter with television's Warrior Princess, it is difficult to ignore
Xena's costume and the image it provokes. This aspect is constantly highlighted in the
introductions of most television reviews, featured articles and even talk shows regarding
the warrior princess and her syndicated series:

We don't need another hero, except for Xena, Warrior Princess. Like
something out of Russ Meyer combined with Betty Page and projected onto
the walls of the Clit Club, Xena is full-tilt, strap-on, Greco-
medieval realness, as much superfreak as superhero in her
leather minidress and breastplates, her thigh-high lace-up
leather boots, her coal black hair, her piercing blue eyes, her fetching
way with a spear.7 -- Village Voice (emphasis mine)

It's those thighs. Long, muscular and massive as a young oak. And the
sneer, contemptuous and controlled, framed by inky tresses. And that
iron breastplate, as inviting as a Gothic fortress.8 -- Boston
Herald (emphasis mine)

You will notice her breasts. Really there's no way not to, what
with all the swirls and twists of metal buttressing her leather
bustier.

And the thighs -- long and muscular beneath the flaps of her
leather miniskirt. And her ululating battle cry: "Iyi-iyi-iyi-iyi-iyi!"9 --
The Washington Post (emphasis mine)

Try to imagine a time before history began, in a faraway land shrouded in
mist and cloaked in green, where gods and mythic heroes walk the earth and
mingle with mortal men. Try a little harder, and picture those mighty
figures wearing the leftover costumes from a Hollywood B
epic, and speaking dialogue that begins in classical Greece and winds up
in the San Fernando Valley. Try extra hard, and summon up the vision of
a statuesque, leather-clad brunette with major-league cleavage
and a lethal steel frisbee who roams the countryside righting wrongs.10 --
New York Times (emphasis mine)

"A leather mini dress, metal breast plate, thigh high boots...
you're going to take notice."11 -- Mike and Marty (emphasis mine)
Initially, my interest in investigating the ways Xena is negotiated by her audiences was prompted by my desire to understand my own viewer pleasure despite what some have identified as exploitative costuming. My request that letters include things both "liked" and "disliked" about the series reflects a hope for multiple reactions and strategies in negotiating between Xena's physical appearance and her status as a feminist icon. Thus, what I expected from my respondents was direct commentary on Xena's costume and answers to the questions prompted in media articles on the series: In what ways did Xena's "look" pull in viewership? How do audiences who see Xena as a feminist icon contend with the typical reaction to the warrior's appearance that she might be "just another R. Crumb drawing in the guise of feminist hero"?

MEDIATING "FEMINISM" AND SEX APPEAL

In some cases, Xena's costume and her "look" were non-issues. Respondents emphasized the ways in which the character Xena herself refuses to be preoccupied about the way she looks, perhaps as an indication that audiences should do the same.

There are a lot of Xenas out there! Our media driven culture has held up the super models as the feminine ideal. Who among us aspires to that or could attain that image!? Xena is another option...another way to be that is acceptable. Xena doesn't care about fashion! Xena doesn't care if men in general find her attractive. LETTER 4

[Xena is] someone who doesn't give a damn about what other people think of her (in terms of outer appearance)...she just is who she is. LETTER 9

It is possible that these respondents are referring to what Village Voice journalist Stacey D'erasmo describes as Xena's "truly superhuman power of utter sexual unself-consciousness." If so, her costuming would provide a true test of her (as well as the audiences') sexual unself-consciousness.

However, as the emphasis on Xena's physical appearance and costume in articles and television reviews indicates, is difficult to deny that Xena's "look" can and does offer viewers scopophilic pleasures. Producer Mark Tapert admits in an interview with the Los
Angeles Times, "sex sells and there's no denying both of these shows [Xena and Hercules] have a certain eye-candy appeal." 15 But as Minkowitz asks at the end of her Ms. article on Xena -- if Xena is sexually objectified by the show, does it matter? 16 In terms of audience negotiations, do audiences find they need to negotiate Xena's sexual objectification with their identification with Xena as a "role model"? As indicated by Minkowitz, such negotiations are necessary and are exhibited in debates which take place on the internet, where (as Tapert explains) men and women argue "whether she's a hero for women or a hero and sex symbol for men." 17 Interestingly, several respondents raised similar issues in their letters as they describe an incompatibility between Xena's status as a feminist role model and her sex appeal.

I still don't get the Xena-as-male-fantasy part. I thought men would be a bit put off by her because she acts so aggressive. LETTER 14

Here are some of my thoughts...
1) Xena fans are predominantly female - many men find her threatening. To quote a friend "She is too butch". But women find a role model in Xena, and in Gabrielle too. I believe that women admire Xena physical, emotional, and mental strength. She is ultimately free of and unintimidated by a male dominated society. LETTER 18

According to several self-identified female respondents, this incompatibility between her status as role model and her "eye candy" appeal did not exist for them. As Minkowitz claimed, "many women fans somehow manage to bring together an appreciation for Xena's feminism with an appreciation of her body." 18

Finally there is Lucy Lawless herself. In my secret life I am tall, blue eyed with thighs of iron. I also look very good in leather. She has a wonderful quality on screen. A tough tenderness that keeps her from being boring like the always do-gooder Hercules. I just like looking at her. LETTER 11

Plus, the special effects, cheesey [sic] script, outstanding scenery, along with the six foot frame, black hair, baby blues and "the look" didn't hurt either. LETTER 24

I also love to watch Lucy Lawless. That woman is such a dyke. LETTER 15
She may not be the next Meryl Streep, but there's something mesmerizing about her performances. Those expressive blue eyes, that smirking mouth, that husky voice... And no, I'm not a lesbian. I just find her fascinating to watch. **LETTER 5**

These self-identified female respondents claim an ability to negotiate Xena's feminism with her sex appeal. As Minkowitz asked in her article, "why is it so difficult to imagine men doing the same?"19 Interestingly enough, most of the letters I received from self-identified male respondents argued just that.

First for me, it is Xena's ability, couragelessness, and, attitude: she is never passive. And, is always decisive in taking charge of a situation. She is for that reason also a fine role model. Lastly, on a different note, she is lovely. I think any person who is attracted to a beautiful woman would love to love Xena. This includes myself. **LETTER 36**

According to these letters, not only could these self-identified men negotiate feminism and sex appeal, but in some cases, they expressed a desire to move past the scopophilic pleasures and enjoy the pleasures of Xena as a source of identification (as a subject to model themselves after).

I should add that Hercules I think is more inclined to appeal more to the lust of its male viewership. Which is not to say that Xena's (or Gabrielle's this season) outfit doesn't, but it feels less crude to me. *And seems more to include the subject fantasy (I would like to be like that)* according to some of my fellow (female) Xenites than object fantasy (*Boy, I'd like to see her like that in my bedroom*). I can honestly say that I have never fantasized about Xena or Gabrielle (Lucy or Renee). I'm not sure I can explain, but it's something I've never wanted to do, I certainly find them both attractive (in both the "pretty" and sexual senses). My fantasies just don't seem to go there. Maybe it has something to do with fantasies themselves being so artificial, and my inclination is to pull Xena and Gabrielle in the other direction and see them as more "real", at least within their own world which I visit every few days. **LETTER 8** (emphasis mine)

Or as in these final two examples, when an incompatibility exists for male-identified viewers between her status as a role model and her sex appeal, they opt to choose her status as role model and describe Xena and her companion as not having sex appeal at all.
I think people see Xena as an underdog in a hostile world. *I don’t see Xena as sexy* (*Renee O’Conner isn’t that appealing, either*) although almost every episode features some very sexy actress or two. **LETTER 12** (emphasis mine)

Male fantasy? Not to me. *I really never think of Xena as a sex object.* Though I admit that Aphrodite on Herc is an entirely different matter! **LETTER 27** (emphasis mine)

Ironically, these letters do not suggest a debate between men and women over whose hero Xena is (role model or sex symbol) as described by Mark Tapert. Rather, in these letters, it seems that self-identified males argue for the ability to negotiate between feminism and sex appeal or the ability to choose to view her strictly as a role model. And as was discussed at the end of chapter three, the debate revealed by many responses was really between those who identified her as a heterosexual role model and those who identified her as a lesbian role model. But what is most interesting to note is that the debate never questioned whether she could be a hero (dressed as she was). Rather the debate was over the ownership of meaning. Whether as a debate between men and women, or women and women, there was never a question of her status of hero, simply a question of what kind of hero and whose hero.

**POSTMODERN BI-SEXED PERFORMANCE**

Xena’s costume did not seem to take away from her status as hero despite the ways her "look" might appear a "little exploitative for a feminist icon."20 In fact, this leather and metal combo may be the perfect combination for a postmodern icon of female empowerment. Contemporary television and cinema images exist in what many have identified as a postmodern era, where gender codes and categories are continually scrambled, binaries by-passed, if not deconstructed, and gender often revealed as artifice. Yvonne Tasker offers a definition of postmodernism in her discussion of contemporary action film.
Postmodernism offers a way of speaking about the operations of culture in which almost anything can be commodified. More controversially, postmodernism has been used as a framework through which to address the supposed political potential of popular forms associated with the play of surfaces, the appropriation and recycling of popular forms within the realm of art - the appearance of self reflexive, parodic texts and self conscious mobilization of "style" within narratives that stress plurality.21

According to Tasker, new Hollywood films "work to stitch together sometimes seemingly contradictory genres, styles and star images from past and present in a variety of complex ways" to form "bricolage."22

It is in this atmosphere of the postmodern that Chris Straayer discusses the appropriation and plurality of gender as style and performance. As Straayer points out in her essay, "The She-Man: Postmodern bi-sexed performance in film and video," a stage was set in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when "second-wave feminists (in dress-for-success suits) abandoned 'femininity', disrupting feminine signification to steal the phallus."23 According to Straayer, the eighties marked a shift for feminists, moving away from the abandonment of femininity (and media's counter-attempt to preserve it) towards self-conscious and perhaps "feminist" femininity. These "feminist femmes (in leather mini skirts)....created, via a process quite the reverse of fetishism, the phallic-femme whose phallus was locked into a revived feminine mode of signification."24 This atmosphere of "bi-sexed" performance in which sex roles stereotypes were 'up for grabs' in the 1980's seemed to have rolled into and shaped the setting for gender construction and deconstruction in 1990's. In addition, because feminism has permeated American culture, "it is now possible for feminist practice to be taken for granted and feminist thought quoted as rhetoric" which provides "the necessary distance and self-reflexivity to combat stasis."25

Such practices are described in Danae Clark's essay, "Commodity Lesbianism," in which younger lesbians are beginning to challenge the look of their predecessors in which "lesbian-feminist anti-style" attempted to "replace the artifice of fashion" and "gender roles" and have begun to find pleasure in "playing" with the possibilities of feminine fashions.26
In a similar vein, the following respondents express Xena's appeal as coming from her ability to negotiate her strength and femininity by breaking the molds and still remaining a "woman."

Thanks to characters like Xena and Gabrielle (but also Kira, Janeway etc) girls get to see new role models; they are all independent women who can take care of themselves but who are also still women! **LETTER 9**

A woman fighting like a man and also be respected as a person! I thought for sure that this was some kind of a show that was only on once or maybe twice and we would never see her again. I thought wow, we have a woman who is driving the star ship voyager and know a woman who fights like a man, yet she is sensitive and wears her makeup everyday!!! Life is getting good. **LETTER 15**

Such a retro-movement back to femininity does not necessarily indicate a retro-movement back to binary divisions. These responses suggest that the categories of femininity and masculinity can be in continual flux, allowing men like RuPaul to follow feminine fashion while Ellen DeGeneres seems out of place in a skirt. What was once considered solely masculine, physical ability and "masculinity" (muscular appearance), have even become commercially promoted as another feminine ideal attainable through the ab-roller or step machines. In other words, postmodernism not only "addresses the flexibility and the ambiguity of popular culture" but is a medium through which flexibility and ambiguity can express themselves.27

The "playing" with the possibilities of gender has blurred the divisions between butch and femme allowing for the creation of what Misty Cummings (a colleague and fellow Xenite) describes as femmy butch and butchy femme. According to her, the Warrior Princess Xena seems a femmy butch - "naturally butch," but who dresses in a fetishized and hyperfeminized outfit, while her trusty side-kick Gabrielle seems a butchy femme - "initially more feminine," but constantly displaying "butch" performances in her attempts to be like Xena. A similar bi-sexed performance is embodied in what Straayer identifies as the "She-Man" -- a man masquerading as a woman but maintaining actions of a man. However, according to Straayer, different strategies would be required for a "He-
Woman." Straayer argues that because female sexuality is doubly present (through the display of the female body and the masquerade of femininity), where as male sexuality is doubly absent (avoided through an emphasis of violence and of action), bi-sexed performance on the part of women is dependent not on transvestism - simply putting on male clothing - but upon "action" as masculine performance. Thus, it is not simply the label of action hero nor transvestitism in the conventional sense that allow Xena to accomplish a bi-sexed performance, but rather her actions (her gait, her stance, her sneer, her ability to fight) that are essential. And this bi-sexed performance allows Xena to move beyond transvestism, highlighting that she is not a woman dressed up as a man or even a woman desiring to be a man.

In the few contemporary films that have introduced female action heroes - such as Alien's Ripley who was presented as androgynous, Terminator's Sarah O'Conner who transforms herself from a flustered waitress to a self assured muscle woman in army fatigues, or Thelma and Louise's protagonists who wipe off their make-up as they gain more agency - women often downplay their femininity in order to gain a more serious acceptance of their "actions." This downplay of femininity suggests that women's placement into the action genre requires the loss of femininity. And while such steps may be viewed as progress away from objectification, we might consider Mary Anne Doane's claim that because of the links that have historically been made between femininity and the female body, "to desexualize the female body is ultimately to deny its very existence." Such desexualization and required loss of femininity have led to criticisms that female action heroes are not necessarily empowered women, but rather simply "men in drag." In light of these criticisms, Xena's hyperfeminized costume becomes an essential component of her bi-sexed performance. Unlike her female action predecessors, Xena does not shed her exterior femininity in exchange for full access to action. Despite her status as a "warrior" and her "masculine" performances of "action," Xena's appearance guarantees that she will never be mistaken as male-gendered. And after constant exposure
to this bi-sexed performance, it is possible for Xena's performances of "action" to become less identified as "masculine." It could even be argued that perhaps Xena's costume enhances, rather than contradicts or contains, her performances of "action," allowing her mobility without the restrictions of her arms and legs. In fact, Xena's hyperfeminized appearance has been recognized as a natural part of her "warrior" status by Donna Minkowitz in the introduction to the *Ms.* article on *Xena*:

A six-foot woman dressed like a warrior walks into an ancient "bar" filled with men. When one pats her ass, she knocks him down across the room. After that, every man in the bar is polite to her and her woman companion.\(^{31}\) (emphasis mine)

One respondent links Xena's being clad entirely in leather to her ability to "kick ass,"\(^{32}\) a logical connection when considering the association of leather and metal with such images as bikers, punk rockers, butch dykes, and the female dominatrix. As a guest character remarks of Xena's costume in "Blind Faith": "leather..... bold choice." Images of women in leather are bold as they are linked to illicit and uncondoned concepts of power. Like the femme fatale, from which Xena's character emerged, such leather-donning women may project a "bad ass" image allowing for them to be linked to concepts of power. But at the same time, they are often considered sexually deviant, outside the norm, improper and/or unsanctioned. While Xena makes a transformation from femme fatale to hero, she is constantly reminded by her haunting past that her power (and really her entrance into television) stemmed from the illicit power and sexual deviance of her previous role as femme fatale. And what can be more sexually deviant than a woman clad in leather and metal carrying a whip? By allowing Xena to display this history of sexual deviance in her appearance while emphasizing her "action" (which as noted earlier defines masculinity or male power), Xena pays homage to that history which first allowed her and her predecessors entrance into the "active." Xena's costume can also function as a reminder that such a transformation can and has taken place -- a transformation from the femme fatale as a woman with illicit and deviant power to a female action hero.
Connections between female power and feminine sexuality are picked up by the series itself and displayed through Xena's "sidekick," Gabrielle, who begins the series wearing long skirts and long sleeved shirts, and is unable to fight and is thus completely dependent upon Xena. However, as her character evolves and she learns to fight with a staff in her encounter with Amazon warriors (in "Hooves and Harlots"), her costume evolves as well. Directly after learning to "fight" and becoming "active," Gabrielle's outfit is transformed into a cropped shirt and short skirt -- a transformation that frees her arms and legs from obstruction for her fighting scenes and suggests a link between feminine power and sexuality. Similarly, Xena's "revealing" costume not only reveals her cleavage and her long legs, but also reveals her muscle and thus her strength. In an interview, producer Mark Tapert describes the warrior princess as projecting a different kind of image: "she doesn't fall into this svelte, silicone image. She's a big woman with big shoulders, big hipbones, and big thighs." Thus, the skimpiness of her costume allows viewers to take note of her "iron" thighs and "big shoulders" which differentiate her from Hollywood's conventional "silicone image" of women -- an image which many respondents agree is epitomized in the program Baywatch.

They got the right people for the job, meaning they didn't go with some buxom blonde who looks like she's so top heavy (sorry if I offend) that she'll fall over just for ratings, like in Baywatch. - LETTER 34

I'm tired of beach blondes running around in swim suits that leave nothing to the imagination. I want strong females that stand on their own, with or without a man's help. - LETTER 42

I am also pleased that Lucy Lawless, the actor who plays Xena, isn't beautiful in the more conventional Baywatch/Hollywood mold: she's isn't an airhead, is quite tall, doesn't have a huge bustline (although her costume does indeed make the most of what she has), doesn't have a waspish waist and prominent rear end, and has strong, substantial legs rather than anorexically thin ones. In other words, she's about the polar opposite of Pamela Anderson Lee, and more power to her. - LETTER 31 (emphasis mine)
XENA AS BODICE-BOLSTERING CAMP

But perhaps all of these possibilities are too serious in tone for the syndicated series whose audience has been dubbed as "pop-savvy adolescent couch potatoes, urbane camp addicts and postfeminist professionals."34 Within an atmosphere identified earlier as postmodern, where "humour provides the necessary distance and self-reflexivity" to allow "dogma [to] approach kitsch,"35 it is possible that Xena's costume is simply an indication of camp, where "exaggeration... so easily crosses over into parody."36 In other words, perhaps Xena's appearance - her leather mini and breast plates - goes beyond a simple act of containment and is rather a " flaunting [of] femininity" in order to expose the "sadism of male desire."37

Within the series itself, both Xena and Gabrielle call attention to (often by making fun of) the potential objectification caused by Xena's leather "look." In "A Day in the Life," when a male villager falls in love with Xena, she and Gabrielle determine her costume as the cause and joke about ways to change it.

Gabrielle: Another one's fallen for you.
Xena: Again! Why does this always happen?
Gabrielle: It's the blue eyes, the leather... some guys just love the leather.
Xena: I think a wardrobe change is in order
Gabrielle: You could wear chain mail.
Xena: Yeah, but I think that will just attract a kinkier group.

This exchange, presented in a 90s-style dialogue, almost seems more like a direct address to audience conceptualizations of Xena as a "male fantasy" and reveals an awareness, on the part of writers and actors, of potential problems of Xena's "eye candy" appeal.38 Such self-reflexive parody exposes the "sadism of male desire" and at the same time excuses
Xena from having to change her costume -- as it is the center of the parody and, as Xena suggests, a wardrobe change just might "attract a kinkier group."

The "flaunting of femininity" not only exposes the "sadism" of desire but also the "dangers" of male desire. As one respondent notes, Xena's costume leads men to "ogle," but such ogling is cut short.

Of course, there are some things about the show that I have a problem with, like the amount of clothes she wears. It angers me when she is oogled (sp?), but she usually kicks the guy's ass who does the ogoling [sic]. **LETTER 23**

In numerous episodes, when Xena's enemies (almost always male) make the mistake of objectifying her body rather than eyeing her sword -- it can be a fatal mistake.39 This point is emphasized in the humorous and self reflexive dialogue between Gabrielle and Xena in "Dreamweaver." As Kastor notes , the show is so "self-consciously campy" that "when Xena hides a small dagger in her bustier, her sassy blond sidekick, Gabrielle, arches an eyebrow and says, 'As if your breasts weren't dangerous enough!'"40 Gabrielle uses humor and parody to reveal the "danger" -- not of Xena's sexuality (as was the case when she was a femme fatale) -- but rather of mistaking Xena's power as stemming from her sexuality and ignoring her skills as a warrior.

But in some cases, Xena's past experiences as femme fatale/"deadly woman" was played upon as a strategy, in which sexuality served not as a source of empowerment but rather as a masquerade. As Pamela Robertson notes, the self-conscious masquerade "discovers a discrepancy between gesture and 'essence' and not simply between anatomy and costume."41 In other words it makes the "natural" "unnatural."42 In "Cradle of Hope," "King of Thieves," "Warrior ...Princess," and "Here Comes Miss Amphibolis,"43 Xena goes undercover in female drag as a sex slave, a concubine, a princess, and a beauty contestant. In contrast to Xena's drag, her daily leather and metal combo seem like church clothes. When dressed in flowing chiffon with maximized cleavage, Xena not only dresses in female drag but acts out femininity in excess -- with small gestures and performed
passivity. These "gestures and poses" of exaggerated femininity seem "un-natural" and out of place for the warrior princess whose viewers are accustomed to seeing her walk tall, with confidence and self possession. The "un-naturalness" of femininity is exposed and becomes comical, particularly when Xena is punching, kicking and jumping in her female drag, revealing the imitative structure of gender itself.44 One respondent comments on the "un-naturalness" of femininity when she sees Lucy Lawless on a talk show.

I recently saw Lucy Lawless on Jay Leno and half expected her to be butch in real life. It was a little weird seeing her being so, well, ladylike.

**LETTER 14**

In *Guilty Pleasures*, Pamela Robertson argues that a female form of aestheticism stems from such female masquerades and are expressed in "feminist camp practice(s)" where "images and culture making processes are articulated and subverted."45 Like the concept of masquerade, camp also works to destabilize, reshape and transfer the existing balance of sexual roles and sexual identities. As Robertson notes "the concept of masquerade allows us to see what the gender parody takes as its object is not the image of the woman, but the idea -- which in camp, becomes the joke."47 So perhaps Susan Glanton was right in claiming that Xena's costume is "one of Xena's little jokes."48 The question that might follow and which I will attempt to address in the following chapter is -- do the viewers get the joke?
ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 4

SEX SYMBOL, ROLE MODEL...OR CAMP?


6. Tasker discusses both "the limits and possibilities of the cinematic representations of the action heroine" and points to the climactic action sequences of the film *Alien*, in which Ripley undresses before her final confrontation with the alien and the ways it has generated a good deal of debate. Tasker, 15.


12. See Introduction and excerpts from Women's Studies Journals which describe Xena's costume as examples of objectification and exploitation. Also see Kastor, C01.
13. Donna Minkowitz, "Xena: She's Big, Tall, Strong -- and Popular," _Ms._, July/August 1996, 77. ALSO CITE OTHER EXAMPLES OF "LOOK" AS THE APPEAL.

14. When Stacy D'eramo describes Xena as having "the truly superhuman power of utter sexual unself-consciousness" she is referring to the ways in which evildoers, when faced with Xena, in her low cut breast plates, will inevitably be interested only in fighting her. See D'eramo, 47.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Minkowitz, 77


21. Tasker, 110.

22. Tasker, 54. Tasker refers here to Dick Hebdige's use of "bricolage" to explain how subcultural styles are constructed. Hebdige appropriates the term from Levi-Strauss' work in _the Savage Mind_ to describe how "basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them." Also see Dick Hebdige, _Subculture: The Meaning of Style_. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979), 102-104.


24. Ibid.

25. While Straayer also uses the term "post-feminist" to describe the contemporary environment, I prefer to describe the ways feminism has been reshaped by a postmodern era. As Tonia Modleski warns, the term infers a moving past feminism or even that we have moved completely past the need for the category of woman. See Tonia Modleski, _Feminism Without Women_, (New York: Routledge, 1991).


27. Tasker, 110


29. Mary Anne Doane, "Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," _Screen_. Vol. 23, Nos. 3-4, 1984: 80.
30. Tasker discusses the ways in which "the action heroine must be masculinized" in order to "function effectively within the threatening, macho world of the action picture." She argues that "despite the arguments advanced by some critics that figures like Ripley are merely men in drag" that they are still marked as women. Tasker, 149.

31. Minkowitz, 74.

32. In Letters 5, the respondent writes, "I began religiously watching Xena because... well, let me put it this way. A six-foot Amazon of a woman, clad entirely in leather, kicking men's asses -- what more could you want in a one-hour show?"

33. Minkowitz, 77.


35. Straayer, 266.

36. Tasker, 30.

37. Doane, 74.

38. Several television reviews dub Xena as a "male fantasy" - CITE SOURCES


40. Kastor, C01


42. Ibid.

43. John Graves writes about this episode: "A few weeks ago, Xena was a contestant in the worlds first beauty contest where one of the other contestants, Miss Artyphis, happened to be a drag queen. According to the special, February 18 "Gay TV Guide" issue of the Advocate, Miss Artyphis was played by real-life HIV-positive drag queen, Geoff Gann better known as Karen Doir. At the insistence of Xena star Lucy Lawless, who was aware of Gann's HIV status, the two shared a passionate kiss at the end of the contest." Gay People's Chronicle, February 21, 1997, 22.

44. Judith Butler states that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself- as well as its contingency" and is subversive only "to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality." See Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 137, 141.

45. Robertson, 9.

46. Robertson, 12.

47. Glanton, 28
CHAPTER 5
THE POSSIBILITIES AND POLITICS OF CAMP

While Xena's leather "look" was the topic of choice for articles discussing the warrior princess, when it came to the show itself, the word of choice was "camp." Xena: Warrior Princess has been dubbed a "syndicated hour of Bronze camp,"¹ noted for its "campy one-liners"² and its "campy, comic action."³ William Grimes of the Boston Herald described the show as a "recipe for superior cheese" in which the ingredients are "a campy blend of adventure, martial arts and loony dialogue" and where "virtually anything goes."⁴ In the Washington Post, Elizabeth Kastor described the show's camp in terms of its use of artificial sounds, exaggerated movements, and multiple meanings. According to Kastor, "the show's campiness -- the swoosh of Xena's sword whizzing from its scabbard, the flash of absurdly exaggerated stunts [and] the goofy double-entendres" -- is part of the appeal."⁵

The term "camp," which stems from the French verb "se camper" (to posture or to flaunt), has been historically linked to "actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis."⁶ Susan Sontag's famous essay, "Notes on Camp" -- one of the first to discuss notions of camp and the first to attempt to provide a definition of camp -- ascribes camp with a "failed seriousness, a love of exaggeration and artifice, the privileging of style over content, and a being alive to the double sense in which some things can be taken."⁷ These are all characteristics which can be tied, not only to the use of eccentric and revealing costumes in Xena: Warrior Princess, but to the show's comic undertones, its "air of unreality," its
exaggerated fight scenes accompanied by artificial sounds, and its 90's humor consisting of one-liners "packed with multiple messages aimed at varied audiences."  

Respondents often referred to "camp" as a defining characteristic of the series, both as a positive aspect of the series and also as a negative characteristic which they need to counter with other aspects of the show. The diversity of responses to camp reflects the diversity of reflections within discourses on camp and its effects. Considering the emergence of "camp" as a subversive tool within the gay community, it is not surprising that Sontag noted "an affinity between camp sensibility and homosexual aestheticism and irony."  

Using excess, satire and parody as weapons of resistance (often times in the form of drag), "camp" was used as a subversive tool for critiquing dominant ideology regarding sexuality and gender expectations. 

According to Pamela Robertson, camp has undergone "important changes since the 1960's to become a more overt, more public sensibility, and a mainstream fashion."  
The concept of camp was picked up and transformed into "pop camp" as such strategies of parody worked well within the emerging postmodern environment. In fact, Andy Medhurst calls postmodernism a "heterosexual version of camp....in which both the play of multiple identities and acts of appropriation are fundamental."  

Due to this transition of camp -- from a subversive tool used by marginal and subordinate groups to a popular form of parody (what Paul Rudnick and Kurt Anderson refer to as "Camp Lite") -- "the commercial control of the gay subculture" which existed as a "network of codes of concealments" was now out of the closet, so to speak. Such changes resulted in what Moe Meyer calls "camp traces" or "residual camp" in which "the same performative gestures [of camp are] executed independently of queer self-reflexivity."  

Camp's political edge seemed to be dulled further by Sontag's influential essay, which identified "camp" as simply a matter of sensibilities and taste -- and thus apolitical. Since its publication in 1964, many critics (including Sontag herself) have argued for the recognition of the political potential of camp -- such as a second more recent shift of to an "overtly
politicized camp and radical drag" revitalized by "queer politics." 17 The meaning of camp in mainstream culture has become quite mixed and the term is used in many ways, from a description of the subversive to a description of the frivolous.

In many of the responses I received, the term "camp" is often used to describe Xena: Warrior Princess and is often limited to concepts of humor, of silliness and of light entertainment. In some instances, a love of camp is expressed while in others "camp" is contrasted to the more "serious" aspects of the show, indicating a trivial or frivolous quality associated with camp.

I watch Xena for many reasons. . . . The campy nature of the show, its bombastic action, the distaff humor, and insider jokes are also appealing. LETTER 27

At first, I thought Xena: Warrior Princess was just another stupid action show. My husband would watch it and I teased him about it. He kept telling me how hilarious it was, so I finally gave in and watched an episode. I was expecting "Walker Texas Ranger" in Greece. I was hooked as soon as I heard the first "whoosh". I loved the camp. LETTER 32

I watch Xena because it is campy light entertainment. I particularly enjoy the modern style dialogue in a 2000 year old setting. It is light entertainment. LETTER 37

I love the modern day speech that is used. I love the campy humor. LETTER 40

The show IS really campy, and even downright silly from time to time, but it presents the character of Xena, as such, fierce intelligence and physical beauty who struggles to do the right thing. LETTER 31

I like the show because they do "campy" things, and turn right around and have a scene that I'll almost make you cry. I end up defending myself to friends and coworkers because of my love for the show. LETTER 38

When realism and "believability" are identified as the essential source for viewer pleasure, camp's use of artifice and excess is identified as particularly problematic for viewers.
What I could do without: Somehow I have some problems with the acrobatics. The fight scenes are believable but I just can't get into the 'salto's [somersaults] over people's heads' thing (in the barn, Xena leaping over the crowd). [In "Chariots of War"] jumping on a table to floor your opponent. Opponent lands back on table (he flies meters through the air and lands on table) and Xena saltoes back on horse. Not very believable. **LETTER 9**

Again excess and artifice become drawbacks of the series when camp is not seen as parody but rather as a gratuitous and unnecessary appeal to objectification. As indicated in Chapter three, the excess (of femininity) can become an obstacle for viewers who find feminism and sex appeal to be incompatible.

"Xena" is a very attractive warrior princess to this end the producers of the show seem to feel the need to "prop up" some of her attributes, give her face high drawn cheekbones and make her costumes unrealistically short or skimpy. In other words they first must make her fit the "every male fantasy" look (i.e. Wonder Woman the T.V. Show, I dream of Jennie (how do you sp that) a fantasy a do not share. **LETTER 22**

Even respondents who identified their viewer pleasure solely based on the pleasures of identification felt the need to address the "camp" within the show, inferring that Xena's function as a strong female role model somehow (for them) mediated the obvious "silliness" of the series.

I began watching Xena when it first aired. I was attracted to the strong image of a woman wielding a sword and fighting the forces of evil while doing a fair amount of male bashing. I saw it as being rather silly and comical at first and only watched occasionally. I have always enjoyed the idea of the woman warrior that was frequently portrayed in comic books that I still read to this day. Xena was and is different.... **LETTER 13**

I'm a middle-aged professional woman (JD)(hetero, if you're interested, or if you're not) who used to watch Xena with the kids. Didn't actually watch. I thought it was stupid. Last spring some students (female) expressed the feeling that Xena was a strong and worthy (and not anorexic) role model. So I paid more attention to the next episode. It was the Ties that Bind, and the scene with Ares at the conclusion was electrifying for me, to say the least. I was hooked. **LETTER 20**
Respondents also described the series in terms of their embarrassment in contending with outside impressions of the show. And while the reasons for embarrassment are not always explicitly revealed, respondents hint at the ways the show is not taken seriously by others.

Why I Watch Xena - It all began with Hercules. I managed to find the show a couple of years ago, while channel surfing on Sat nights (doesn't say much about my personal life). I liked the combination of Greek mythology, fairly cool special effects, cheeseey script and outstanding scenery. Kevin Sorbo's chest and biceps didn't hurt either. Plus, the show didn't take itself too seriously. However, I was an embarrassment to my friends when I told them about the show and that I watched it. Just didn't grab their fancy. Still, I tuned in every Sat night for the show. LETTER 24 (emphasis mine)

I have also noticed that not everyone (friends and at work) shares my enthusiasm for the show and that I have to control my impulses to talk about it among non-fans for fear of revealing too much about myself (the show certainly must be filling a need somewhere). LETTER 4 (emphasis mine)

I generally don't hide that this is the only show I watch regularly, although sometimes friends don't understand. A female friend (who has never seen the show) thinks of it as an ancient Baywatch and doesn't believe me when I try to correct her. LETTER 8 (emphasis mine)

Can't believe you're doing a thesis on Xena, but I'll try to help you out with this question. It's a tough question because my friends tease me about my 'secret' love for Xena (the show not the woman) that you'd think a career minded 31 year old single woman(with a BFA degree) would not have. LETTER 11 (emphasis mine)

Thus, it often was the "camp" of the series which gave both first time Xena viewers and outsiders (non-Xena viewers) less than favorable first impressions. For some respondents, this first impression was quickly surpassed by their ability to look past the "camp" and towards the ways the show fostered a positive/alternative image of women. However, for some respondents, it was not the ability to look past the "camp" but rather the realization of "camp's" conscious use of excess and artifice that became appealing. In other words, rather than seeing past the "camp" and towards other aspects of the series in order to validate their viewer pleasure, they looked deeper into the "camp" and found pleasure in camp itself. For these viewers, the pleasure in camp stemmed from the conscious lack of realism that excess and artifice provided and which allowed for pleasures
of escapism. Television reviewer Stephanie Schorow describes "Xena to be bodice-bolstering, camp, but she does for a generation of women what James Bond did for a generation of men - provide a healthy dose of escapism with a twist of the tropical." It seems however, at least according to the respondents, that this "escapism" is not in spite of the camp but rather is fostered by it.

Perhaps it is the fantasy / mythology (which I have always loved) but I find the show a real escape from reality. I very much enjoy the 90's humor in the ancient Greek setting and that the folks making the series don't take themselves too seriously. I'm not sure that makes sense but they seem to be able laugh at themselves. LETTER 17

I love the modern day speech that is used. I love the campy humor. It is a pleasant escape for me after a hard day of taking care of my mentally disabled children. LETTER 40

In one instance, the fact that Xena (as opposed to her counterpart Hercules) is completely fabricated became the determining factor allowing a self-identified History major to engage in the pleasure of camp, guilt free of "any damage" to "existing material".

I am an adult male with a degree in (among other things) History. When Hercules first started airing I thought it might be cool, but when I watched it I was appalled. The show made a complete mockery of the actual mythological character, had no sense of time, and generally offended my sensibilities on such matters. I never made it through one episode.....Many moons later I was up late (very late) one Saturday night and happened to catch what I thought was a movie. I loved it. It was funny, and yet drew me in more for the interaction of the characters.....Why didn't Xena upset me the way Hercules did? The (don't tell my fellow Xenites I said this) fact that Xena is a wholly fabricated character helped in that I didn't fear any damage was being done to existing material. LETTER 8

REALISM VS. CAMP

Thus, camp becomes simultaneously the pull of the show and its repulsion factor. While "camp" offers viewers the pleasures of escapism, it potentially interferes with viewer's desires for "realism." As discussed in chapters one and two, generic categories are defined by expectations -- to be fulfilled (pleasurable mastery) and to be surpassed
According to Steven Neale, these expectations "involve various regimes of verisimilitude -- various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification, and belief." Because generic expectations often operate under a strict "ideology of realism," films must reach a certain level of "verisimilitude" to be considered "serious." When genres such as science fiction, Gothic horror or slapstick comedy transgress the boundaries of cultural "verisimilitude," they are often "despised or at least misunderstood, by critics in 'quality' press" (and I would argue, by some critical viewers). Considering that Xena:Warrior Princess combines Greek mythology, with special effects, a costume like a "gothic fortress" and slapstick fights.....this series already is guaranteed to transgress most boundaries of verisimilitude.

But on top of cultural expectations of verisimilitude, Xena viewers have an added interest in locating "realism" within the program. As noted in Chapter one, respondents not only described the appeal of Xena as a role model (I could be like Xena) but also made references to literal identification (She is like me). Len Ang states that "popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition" and part of recognition is linked to realism -- (she is real to me so I can identify). This concept of realism becomes key in respondent's ability to view Xena as a role model and to enable them to experience this pleasure of identification which are inevitably tied to viewer pleasures.

She is strong, athletic, controlled, moral, wise, smart, loving, independent as well as interdependent, capable beyond belief, and a real woman. The fact that L[ucy] L[awless] can do these activities in a very convincing manner makes this all real for me... She doesn't have to pretend to be strong/athletic as did the Old Linda Carter-Wonder Women. LETTER 4 (emphasis mine)

Maybe I'm to critical but I need to see characters that can pull me into a story, that are real (to me) otherwise the show gets a thumbs down and I won't watch it again. LETTER 9 (emphasis mine)

As to why I like Xena, I see her as a representation of what every women (and man) has the potential to be. She is not flawless, but that makes her real. LETTER 18 (emphasis mine)
Things that strike me: Lucy can pull this off. I mean the fight scenes: Lucy (and the stuntwomen of course) is very believable as warrior. The strength of Xena is very believable. Many times movie makers can't pull this off. You see women warriors (say Kira) kicking men against a wall but somehow it doesn't look real. The women don't seem to have the necessary strength to 'make it happen'. LETTER 9 (emphasis mine)

Realism may seem antithetical to "camp." While "realism" is tied to concepts of "real life," "truth" and "credibility," camp is linked to excess, exaggeration, artifice and escapism.²² But as Flaherty writes in Entertainment Weekly, "while the show might be a 'goof,' Xena's power is not"²³ -- and viewers found different ways to negotiate the "camp" of the show with Xena's status as a role model. Viewers who referred to the "campiness" of the series as "taking away" from their pleasures in identification by making it less "believable" overcame "camp" by emphasizing the potentials of pleasure in identification. Some respondents who embraced "camp" as a form of escapism described their viewer pleasure strictly in terms of the light humor the show provides. However, many viewers were able to negotiate these seemingly oppositional pleasures through their own transformation, from "ignoranti" to cognoscenti."²⁴

As discussed in chapters three and four, subtext and gender parody -- like camp--require viewers to read against the grain -- and as Liz Friedman states, "people can pick up.... or not."²⁵ Beyond the pleasures of escapism that "camp" offers its viewers, when respondents identified their pleasure in "camp" itself, their letters also revealed the ways in which camp requires an active spectator to be able to note the differences between pure excess/artifice and camp as self-conscious parody of both these concepts. For Xenites, the viewer pleasure tended to shift according to the ability to differentiate between pure excess/artifice and camp (often defined as the producers ability to laugh at themselves). It was this ability to differentiate that distinguished them from outsiders or non-Xena viewers. In other words, the recognition of the potential of camp involves a "celebration, on the part of the cognoscenti, of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the very process by which hitherto unexpected value can be located in some obscure or exorbitant object."²⁶
When viewers make the transformation from ignorati to cognoscenti and realize the ways in which "camp exists in the smirk of the beholder,"27 the program's camp goes from being "stupid" to being "humorous."

Ok, my personal Xena experience: When I first saw the commercials for Xena, I thought 'what a stupid show.' I never watched it. Then my brother moved in with me...he liked Herc and Xena, so we started watching. I got sucked in right away. I've always liked mythology, so I liked that aspect of it. I love the humor, too. We still tend to make fun of some of the fight scenes, but we enjoy them anyway. Xena is what I call mindless entertainment (not usually some deep meaning or lesson) and I think that is very important. By referring to it in that way, I do not mean to belittle the show at all. To me, entertaining and making someone laugh is the most important aspect of the industry. You have to be in the mood for drama, but you can laugh any time. Not that I don't think Xena has drama.....**LETTER 35**

I thought the acting was not very good, the character was sort of goofy and the show was a jumble of things they couldn't make up their minds about. There wasn't enough skin to make it a skin show. It wasn't funny enough to be a comedy. It wasn't serious enough to be a drama. Then I realized they were doing that on purpose, and it was working. The character wasn't goofy, just different, and different in interesting ways that got real real interesting. The acting wasn't bad it was great. Lucy was portraying that character exactly right. She is doing for Xena what Sean Connery did for 007. She makes the campyness, humor, comedy, drama and significance of the character work all at the same time. **LETTER 41**

I was ridiculed by some people for my poor taste until they "discovered" the innuendoes regarding the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle and suddenly they are ardent fans. Me, I like it cause it's cheezey and makes no pretense otherwise. **LETTER 1**

Once this awareness is reached, respondents were able to experience the "guilty pleasures" of camp... they were able to forgive the excess, knowing that such excesses would be simultaneously critiqued or laughed at. For these viewers the subversive ironic flavor used in the show becomes part of the appeal.28 Thus the respondents could engage in "the porousness of pleasure, its locally overlapping features of passivity and activity, affirmation and critique."29 In this way "camp" becomes -- high parody -- "doubly coded in political terms... both legitimat[ing] and subvert[ing] that which it parodies."30 Such "porousness" requires a "model of negotiation to account for the overlap between passivity and activity" and between legitimating and subverting. According to Robertson, camp
offers this model of negotiation in its ability to wear two masks at once - one of seriousness and one of ridicule. Camp in many ways becomes a tool for interpreting existing contradictions.

Camp's ability to negotiate contradictions by allowing oppositional pleasures to co-exist simultaneously, also allows for guilty pleasures often not afforded to women, such as the pleasure of violence. Such pleasures are mediated in several ways, placated by the portrayal of violence in slapstick style and mitigated by Xena's ability to "maintain her own standards and morality." What woman wouldn't have a secret fantasy where with one kick she could defeat a man threatening her? .....I also love the dry humor that underlies everything. They don't take themselves too seriously especially in the fight scenes where the stunts get more ridiculously fantastic every time. The violence is almost slapstick comedy (and I normally detest that).

I began religiously watching Xena because... well, let me put it this way. A six-foot Amazon of a woman, clad entirely in leather, kicking men's asses -- what more could you want in a one-hour show? Xena rocks! .....Her best friend, Gabrielle, provides a good foil -- sweet, innocent, naive, blond, petite. Gabrielle annoys me on occasion, as I'm sure she does Xena, but I can put up with her and any other irritation just so I can see Xena kick some ass... Oh, I'm sorry, I mean stand up for herself and those too weak to protect themselves.

She beats up a lot of boys, which is cool. Not that I want to beat up a lot of boys or anything, but it's like and hour of sweet revenge on the patriarchs. I kinda feel like I'm doing something I'm not supposed to do when I watch. Like, when we were all watching together and giggling, it was like we were having a secret, hidden party that men weren't supposed to know about, because if they did we would have all gotten in a lot of trouble. I like that feeling. I like to feel that what I am doing or feeling is something that society tells me I'm not supposed to enjoy. And, I really enjoy feeling tough.

The "camp" which allows women to enjoy the guilty pleasures of violence (or reversal of roles in representations of violence) by providing the "slapstick" can also play a role in allowing male spectators to maintain their viewer pleasure. In this instance, literal male-bashing becomes part of the accepted formula for the "hero" of the show and is viewed as a "running gag."
Some men ARE sexist pigs, and they deserve what they get when Xena beat them up. This is done mostly as running gag, and the show doesn't give the impression that ALL men are like that. There are many positive male characters shown as well. Ex: Herc, Iolas, Perdicus, Toris, Marcus, various male good guys, etc. So it balanced. It also no bother that she better warrior that most (or all) men she encounters. She is hero of story, she's SUPPOSE be better! LETTER 19

Interestingly, respondents often acknowledge an understanding of the ways realism and verisimilitude function in terms of audience expectations. In these instances, respondents have offered explanations to counter the notion that "camp" makes Xena less believable and hence, less respectable. In the following responses, viewers describe the ways in "camp" promotes originality and ingenuity in the show by presenting the challenge of making "camp" somehow work. In other words, the fact that so many fans can enjoy and identify with the show, despite the camp, excess and artifice .... must mean good acting, writing and producing.

I end up defending myself to friends and coworkers because of my love for the show. They see the things like Xena jumping 2 stories into the air while doing flips, and some how connect that with her being a bad actress. Just because that wasn't believable. I think they have also done a VERY good job on character building, there are many aspects of all their "lives" that we know about, and it feels like we really get a feeling of who they are. LETTER 38

I also think that LL and ROC are very talented and that the writers are great. LL's talent for different voices and accents has made for some of the funniest television I have ever seen. Her ability to play several different characters at the same time is amazing (WPT). I have been impressed since day 1 with both actresses. I never expected the kind of talent they have from a syndicated show. I think that, more than anything, keeps me watching. LETTER 35

But yet there's more; Special effects that shouldn't be it a weekly series, even though sometimes they're a little hokey, they've got to do this every week. Writing that doesn't follow a formula. World class acting. A cast of real people, who don't think they're the god's gift to the world. A firmly tongue-in-cheek attitude. Exploration of issues that no other show would touch, even with a six foot Amazon staff. How did this get on broadcast TV, an otherwise moronic wasteland? So I say to myself "Self, don't ask, enjoy it while it's there, and just hope it's there for a long time, because you know the imitators will be coming in droves (or chariots, or Plymoughs) and they won't be anyway near as good." LETTER 43
In one case, a respondent sent me a letter he sent to a co-worker defending his Xena fandom. He presents an extensive argument regarding the ways "making camp work" successfully is the series' greatest challenge and attribute.

What follows is a note I wrote to a colleague here at UCSD. The context is one of her wondering how someone of my "obvious intelligence" could be taken in by "medieval t&a."

Well, um, like, jeez...OK, here we go. YES! I AM A FAN OF XENA DESPITE MY PH.D.! There, I've said it. Now lemme try to explain why:
When all is said and done Xena reminds me a lot of my wife. No foolin'. The show IS really campy, and even downright silly from time to time, but it presents the character of Xena, as such, fierce intelligence and physical beauty who struggles to do the right thing.

For an action show, I think the acting is of a very high caliber as well. I am also pleased that Lucy Lawless, the actor who plays Xena....There's a "something else" that she brings to the role, which the writers build on--and which gets her tagged as beautiful, I think--and that's her ability to project a full range of emotions AND that fierce intelligence in an utterly convincing way despite the costumery and occasional eye-rollers in the script. On a larger, more lasting scale--perhaps because of film as a medium--Kathryn Hepburn has also brought the same quality to her acting. Helen Mirren and Susan Sarandon also regularly pull of the same feat. Finally, Christopher Reeve comes to mind as someone who made a character in a REALLY SILLY suit come alive in a believable way--which isn't easy for an actor to do.

.....After getting my note she actually watched the show and was won over completely by Lawless and O'Conner. Very gratifying, lemme tell ya.

LETTER 31

Such arguments counter the notion that "camp is good because it is awful." In the following response, good acting provides pleasure in addition to the parody of the series' camp.

I would have to say that, thus far, my favorite episode (and please keep in mind I haven't seen them all yet) is "Is There a Doctor in the House?" Although it was one of the relatively serious ones, it still made me laugh in spots (Xena invents the Cesarean section, CPR and sterilization of surgical equipment and everything she says and does is written down by a very young Hippocrates). More than anything, however, Lucy's acting in that one (specifically when Gabrielle dies and Xena CPR's her back) is truly astounding*. There is no doubt in my mind that, if this was a mainstream show on one of the big four networks, she would have, at the very least, been nominated for an Emmy for that episode. LETTER 3
FANTASY MEETS REALITY

Considering camp's ability to embrace contradictions, it is not surprising that camp itself is the embodiment of contradictions. Camp's ability to legitimize and parody simultaneously, calls for viewers to negotiate between the pull of both characteristics. Those viewers who recognize the ways camp functions as a tool to interpret contradictions describe an ability to experience both the pleasures of identification and escapism simultaneously.

I like the show because they do "campy" things, and turn right around and have a scene that'll almost make you cry. LETTER 38

The show was a jumble of things they couldn't make up their minds about. There wasn't enough skin to make it a skin show. It wasn't funny enough to be a comedy. It wasn't serious enough to be a drama. Then I realized they were doing that on purpose, and it was working. LETTER 41

As this respondent indicates, despite the "fantasy environment," its "escape from reality," and its campy style, the "realistic character development" was more genuine than "your average TV series."

It happened to be "Sins of the Past" and I was immediately hooked. Why? I'm not sure. It could be that it was the first TV series that had a female protagonist (now two) that wasn't subservient to some nonessential male. It could be because the show didn't take itself too seriously. I could be because it was a good escape from reality. Yet it has become more. What other show can have an inter-racial love situation that isn't preachy about it. I said to myself "Self, Marcus is Black, Xena is white, and they don't make a big deal about it, these people either have a lot of nerve, or they can approach things in a much more adult manner then I've ever seen on TV and expect their audience to be equally adult. They can approach the feeling of guilt, that all warriors experience, without getting on a pulpit. Then can show, even in a fantasy environment, realistic character development. They can show a female, who doesn't trip, scream, or need a male hero to rescue her every ten minutes. They can show two women who truly love each other, without being unrealistic. This isn't your average TV series. LETTER 43
As Andrew Ross points out, camp's attention to artifice helps to undermine and challenge the presumed naturalness of gender roles and displace essentialist versions of authentic femininity and masculinity.\textsuperscript{34} While camp and artifice provide a context in which viewers can enjoy the "guilty pleasures" through excessive displays of stereotypical images and slap-stick violence, it is also camp's ability to disrupt gender roles through parody that nurtures the existence of a female warrior -- an anomaly which does not fall comfortably within defined categories of gender. Thus, the "realism" desired by respondents to support their pleasure of identification is not as opposed to the concept of escapism/ camp as it might seem. Camp not only disrupts the naturalness of gender roles, but disrupts the notion of "realism" itself. When respondents refer to Xena as a "real woman" or as being true to their own nature, they are referring to a suppressed identity that existing social norms in "real life" suppress. In this way, fantasy and camp seem to provide more "truth" than what is accepted as "natural" and real by the widely understood societal standards regarding gender categories.
ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 5

THE POSSIBILITIES AND POLITICS OF CAMP


8. Grimes, 4; Kastor, C01

9. Robertson, 1 and Sontag, 275-292.

10. However, Robertson notes that after Stonewall and the birth of the Gay Liberation Movement, camp was regarded as an "artifact of the closet" and its complicity in working within oppressive represenations was critiqued "as fueling gay stereotypes." Robertson, 1.

11. Ibid. 119.

12. Andrew Ross argues that "camp" offered a negotiated way for a pop ethos to be recognized by a "more skeptical intellectuals." He cites George Melly in arguing that "pop camp" is an contradiction in terms, because camp is the 'in" vast of a minority elite, while Pop, was supposed to declare that everyday cultural currency had value. See Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 150.

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14. See Robertson, 120 for a discussion regarding the "cashing in on camp." Also see Paul Rudnick and Kurt Anderson, "The Irony Epidemic," *Spy*, March 1989, 94 for a discussion on the "world of heterosexual camp."


17. Robertson, 119.

18. Schorow, 049.


20. Schorow, 049.


22. Gledhill, 6 and Robertson, 21.


24. Ross describes camp as a subjective process in which the "line between kitsch and camp particularly reflects a division of audience labor between, in camp terminology, ignorati and cognoscenti." See Ross, 145.


26. Ross, 146.

27. Ibid., 144.

28. In an interview, Lucy Lawless states, "The fact is, there is that kind of subversive, ironic flavor that we use a lot in our show. There are certain twists in our psyche and I think that's part of our appeal." See David Sheff, "Xena: Web Princess," *Yahoo*, 3:5, May, 1997, 111.

29. Robertson, 16.

30. Ibid. 4.

31. Ibid. 15.

32. Letter 7: "I like the action, I like watching a woman kick butt and not take any crap from anyone, while still maintaining her own standards and morality."
33. See Ross, 152 for a discussion of Susan Sontag's formulation of "the ultimate Camp statement; it's good because it's awful." According to Ross, the statement "there is not question that Camp's initial patronage of bad taste was as much an assault on the official cannons of taste as Pop's eroticization of the everyday."

34. Ibid. 6.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Audiences rely on film and television to fulfill their expectations (as defined by generic categories) as well as their desire for novelty. In this capacity, Xena is a perfect solution as she follows the super/action hero formula but adds a new twist with her gendered existence. And while respondents acknowledged the pleasure of novelty in their descriptions of Xena as "television's first," they also described a pleasure of identification. As a role model, Xena not only functions as someone to emulate, but validates that which viewers see in themselves. Thus Xena's transition from "deadly woman" or femme fatale to a female action hero provided a major source of viewer pleasure as respondents noted the ways such transformations indicated possible transformations in their own lives. Such strong identifications create equally compelling incentives for viewers to be active negotiators of meaning, particularly in negotiating the "friendship" between Xena and Gabrielle. Respondents were either resistant or open to a "lesbian subtext" depending upon how they wished to define their own identifications with their role model. For if the role model is not merely someone to emulate but a validation of who the respondents are themselves, Xena's identity becomes a serious and personal matter.

The producers of the series seem more than aware of abilities and desires of their viewers to negotiate meanings and literally bank upon on these negotiations. Thus, the producers of Xena admit to providing queer subtexts presented in double entendres and ambiguities with the expectation that these gaps will be filled in by "active" spectators, who will either "pick up" on the subversion or not, depending upon his or her positionality.
Through the use of camp, multi-layered meanings are offered. The excess and artifice of camp simultaneously legitimates and subverts that which it parodies and allows viewers to experience "guilty pleasures." Within this framework of camp set within a postmodern environment, that which seems obviously problematic (Xena's sexual objectification) can be viewed as potentially transgressive (as bi-sexed performance) or even political (as a critical form of gender parody). And although "camp" initially functions as an obstacle to viewer pleasure, the transformation from igno renti to cognoscenti/Xenite is dependent upon one's ability to understand the ways camp functions and eventually becomes the source of viewer pleasure.

Such dynamics exposes the interdependency between producers and audiences in terms of negotiating meaning. Considering the current trend of mass media discourse, it seems contemporary research on television and film focus upon resisting old school frameworks that view popular culture as an "ideological machine" that "dupes" its audiences into hegemony.¹ Recent works on mass culture have revealed the ways such frameworks that view subjects as "inscribed" and "constructed" by popular texts "ignores the actual subjects who by virtue of their complex histories and multiple affiliations, exceed the subject implied by the text."² However, an opposing view, which focuses solely on audience agency and labels the spectator as subversive agent while producers of the text are seen as a part of the hegemonic machinery, is equally problematic. As revealed in this thesis, things become even more complicated when the television producers are also cultural theorists who not only agree that audiences have agency in negotiating meaning but rely upon such agency in order to increase viewership. In this scenario, it is the producers of Xena who are providing the subtext (what might be considered counter-hegemonic texts), while viewers negotiate whether to pick up on it or not.

The need to reframe the ways in which we view popular culture becomes clear when investigating the relationship between the meaning makers and meaning negotiators of the television series, Xena: Warrior Princess. As Dana Polan suggest in his discussion
of the polarization between mass culture and modernist culture, "we might want to deconstruct the whole underlying philosophy of a critical practice that places innovation and domination in opposition" -- as often times what is hegemonic and what is counter hegemonic (or subversive) are closely tied to one another. For both television viewers and cultural theorists, binary frameworks -- such as domination vs. innovation, hegemonic vs. subversive, escapism vs. realism, sex appeal vs. feminist role model -- can be counter productive. While some viewers developed intricate strategies to overcome such dichotomies, many respondents found ways (such as translating camp) to embrace the contradictory elements inherent in their viewer pleasure.

By looking at the ways viewers themselves negotiate and discuss their own viewer pleasure, it becomes clear that a "preoccupation with dualistic categories of critique" can prove to be a restrictive and even inadequate framework to work with. This is particularly true within a postmodern environment, where it becomes more difficult to maintain such binaries as categories are constantly being played upon and simultaneously legitimized and critiqued. Coming full circle, it would be beneficial to consider the advice of Patrice Petro who suggests that we not look for that which is "progressive" or "reactionary" within mass culture but rather search for the possibilities within contradictions. Because as John Ellis notes, identifications are multiple and fluid -- even at points contradictory. It is within the contradictions that things can get interesting.
ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

1. Tony Bennett discusses the debates between structuralism and culturalism in his Introduction to *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woolacott, (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986); Stuart Hall coined the phrase, "people are not cultural dupes" and that popular texts must therefore "allow audiences to make meaning that connect with their social experience." See John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and TV," *Channels of Discourse*, 1987, 271.


5. Patrice Petro, "Mass Culture and the Feminine: The 'Place' of Television in Film Studies,' *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 3 (Spring, 1986), 17.

APPENDIX

IDENTITY AS PROVIDED BY THE RESPONDENTS

Letter 1 - adult female, lesbian
Letter 2 - unknown
Letter 3 - adult self-employed female, self identified as "older"
Letter 4 - 43 year old female, self identified as "profoundly effected" by Xena
Letter 5 - female, college student, women's studies major, English minor, heterosexual
Letter 6 - adult female, professional veterinarian
Letter 7 - 20 year old female, from midwest, sci fi fan, college grad, living in Washington D.C.
Letter 8 - adult male, degree in history, normally "hates action movies"
Letter 9 - 22 year old female, studying Cartography, born & lives in Netherlands, sci fi fan
Letter 10 - adult female (inferred by name)
Letter 11 - "31 year old career woman with BFA"
Letter 12 - 29 year old male, sci fi fan
Letter 13 - 44 year old self identified "gay" female, self employed
Letter 14 - unknown
Letter 15 - adult female, lesbian
Letter 16 - 2 females (inferred by names)
Letter 17 - female, self identified as "addicted" to Xena
Letter 18 - adult female, college student, Women's Studies major (prelaw)
Letter 19 - adult male
Letter 20 - "middle aged professional woman, JD, hetro"
Letter 21 - 26 year old female, straight, school teacher, Scottish/German descent
Letter 22 - adult male, response to personal email request for a male perspective on Xena
Letter 23 - adult female, college student
Letter 24 - adult female (inferred by name)
Letter 25 - adult male, founder of a software company (inferred by name); doesn't consider self as a "Xenite" cuz likes Callisto
Letter 26 - adult female, with MBA, working in a "male dominated field" related to television industry
Letter 27 - unknown, pseudonym = "leather fringe"
Letter 28 - adult male (inferred by name)
Letter 29 - adult female (inferred by name)
Letter 30 - 20 year old female
Letter 31 - adult male, w/ Ph. D., professional, wrote a memo to a UCSD colleague re: why he loves Xena.
Letter 32 - married female
Letter 33 - unknown
Letter 34 - adult male (inferred by name)
Letter 35 - 31 year old female, heterosexual, AA liberal arts, AS criminal justice, Surgery Materials coordinator
Letter 36 - adult male
Letter 37 - 57 year old male, Caucasian, living in Toronto, Canada
Letter 38 - 27 year old male living in Washington State
Letter 39 - 11 year old female
Letter 40 - 38 year old single mom
Letter 41 - unknown (though, intuitively thought the respondent was a male, father)
Letter 42 - 42 year old, divorced (for 16 years) and heterosexual female; victim of sexual abuse and abusive marriage
Letter 43 - unknown
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