

THE FEMINISM OF XENA, PRINCESS WARRIOR



The 1990's saw the television program *Xena: Warrior Princess* ('XWP') become a popular mainstream vehicle for feminism. Set in an ancient, fictional meta-world of religious and spiritual plurality, Xena introduced the concept of the independent and strong female heroine, whose supernaturality provided purchase from which to launch modern feminism from an inaccessible and insular concept to a widely appealing and positive doctrine. 'XWP' was integral to the contemporary generation's developing perceptions of gender as fluid, not binary (Gauntlett, 2002). Xena was one amongst a range of courageous women popular for their physical, emotional and spiritual strength as role models for adolescents (Gonick, 2006, p. 10), alongside other characters such as Buffy Summers of 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' or the Halliwell sisters of 'Charmed', that are all but extinct in current popular culture (Busch, 2006)

There is much debate over Xena's feminism. Some theorists argue that her origins belie her feminist message. Her character was introduced in the series "Hercules, the legendary journeys" as a cruel, ruthless and immoral warlord, however while being romanced by Hercules, a man, he convinces her to use her power for good, not evil. Thus began the spinoff show "Xena: Warrior Princess", and while Hercules does feature in it as a love interest and morally positive influence, he is not individually credited with her reformation as he is in "Hercules". The significance of her origin is debatable when discussing her contribution to media as a feminist role model, however modern feminists generally agree that a more positive feminist message would have been to have Xena either reformed through her own devices, or influenced by another woman. She is a strong feminine woman with masculine qualities. indeed her very name is ambiguous. "Warrior" implies a strong, powerful and masculine person, whereas "Princess" softens its inference, defining Xena as feminine and even to an extent vulnerable (compared to if she was called a "Queen", for example).

Approaches to gender in 'XWP' are very much ahead of their time, and concepts addressed by it have rarely been attempted in subsequent mainstream entertainment almost fifteen years later. Xena's ambiguity allowed 'XWP' to mainstream the concept of gender as positioned on a spectrum; a concept explored by de Beauvoir (1953), as opposed to a masculine/feminine dichotomy, and it also challenged other gender perceptions.

Another feminist message of 'XWP' was in the strength of Xena's relationship to Gabrielle. Their relationship began with a young, naïve and audacious Gabrielle idolising Xena from the stories she'd heard about her, and following Xena to satisfy her lust for adventure. The ambiguous sexuality also cemented 'XWP' as a cult show to a lesbian audience, and is widely heralded as the original and most normalising depiction of lesbians in mainstream media.

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