



TV/Series

1 | 2012

**Les Séries télévisées américaines contemporaines :
entre la fiction, les faits, et le réel**

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/1205>

DOI: 10.4000/tvseries.1205

ISSN: 2266-0909

Publisher

GRIC - Groupe de recherche Identités et Cultures

Electronic reference

Anne Currier Sweet, « “Unreal” Gender Messages in Late 90s Women-Centered Action Dramas », *TV/Series* [Online], 1 | 2012, Online since 15 May 2012, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/1205> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/tvseries.1205>



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“Unreal” Gender Messages in Late 90s Women-Centered Action Dramas

Anne Currier SWEET

The rise of women-centered action drama series such as *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* (1995-2002), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), and *Charmed* (1998-2002), in the late 90s was seen as feminist progress by some thanks to the shows' powerful lead female hero characters, yet the issue of women's emerging power is still at play in contemporary fiction series such as these. A critique can be made of these programs that the heroines are not “real” because the shows often contain some fantastical or science-fiction elements, which potentially limits the power of their “real” feminist messages.

The lead female characters of *Buffy* and *Charmed* women have supernatural powers; *Xena* takes place in an ancient Greece where the heroine has regular contact with Gods, monsters and other mythical creatures. Furthermore, beyond this unreal “reality”, some of the strongest messages about femininity and masculinity come from episodes in which there is a second degree of fantasy. These are episodes in which the characters are not living their real, everyday lives, but when the characters literally, through various plot devices, are someone else or live a different reality, such as when they are shown in a parallel universes, in a dream state, in an alternative future or past reality, in a fairytale, or when they are under a spell.

While alternate realities and identities of *Buffy*, *XWP* and *Charmed* involve change of appearance, there is often also an element of fantasy or magic involved that transforms more than the characters' outfit. Some of the strongest messages about femininity and masculinity are produced through the character's “other” identities as well. This paper will thus explore some of devices used to create these identities, and some of the messages contained within the episodes in which this other reality/identity of the characters is found. What “real” messages are proposed in this alternate version of “reality,” which is twice distanced from actual reality — first by the fantasy premise of the series, and second by a fantasy version of that “reality”? Do they fulfill a role of liberation or of containment?

Mermaids, princesses, housewives and sex changes are not the images that immediately spring to mind when conjuring up visions of the violent heroines in recent women-centered action drama series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1995-2002), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (syndicated, 1995-2001), and *Charmed* (WB, 1998-2006), and yet they are part and parcel of the characters' representations, the series' plotlines and their messages about gender. The rise of female TV action heroines in the late 1990s was seen as feminist progress by some thanks to the shows' powerful lead female hero characters. However, issues of women's emerging power are still at play in these kinds of contemporary fictional television programs. Some of the strongest and most overt messages about femininity and masculinity reside in episodes that contain a

“second level of fantasy”. These are episodes in which the characters are not living their real, everyday lives, which already involve a “first level of fantasy”, but episodes in which the characters literally, through various plot devices, transform into another identity. What “real” messages are proposed in this alternate version of “reality”, which is twice distanced from actual reality — first by the fantasy premises of the series, and secondly by a fantasy version of that “reality”? Do they fulfill a role of liberation or containment of progressive gender messages?

To analyze the interplay between the first and second levels of fantasy, the corpus chosen deals with episodes that combine both performances by the main heroines. The examples examined include the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, “Halloween” (2.6), in which Buffy transforms into a helpless 17th noblewoman to illustrate that passive femininity is dangerous and silly and that she is better off being a strong mod*ern woman; the episode “Lost and Bound” (4.12) of *Charmed* where Phoebe becomes a 60s-style housewife based on her favorite TV character Samantha Stevens from *Bewitched*, which illustrates how a woman can lose her identity in marriage and housewifery; the *Charmed* episode “She’s a Man, Baby, a Man!” (2.5) where Prue literally becomes a man which demonstrates the performative nature of masculinity and highlights the difficulties in navigating contemporary gender norms; and the *Xena: Warrior Princess* episode “Married With Fishsticks” (5.15) in which the warrior Gabrielle hits her head, falls into the sea, and ends up an amnesia-stricken housewife/mermaid living in an underwater world where she proves the importance of asserting oneself when faced with a bad husband and once again, not to accept a passive, feminine role¹. An in-depth examination of these episodes, after first examining their context, will illustrate how gender messages are conveyed through the second level of fantasy, often in contra-distinction with messages in the first level. These include not only some of the strongest and most straightforward feminist messages, but also messages about male and female roles, identity and sexuality.

Many scholars note that femininity is a performance, or masquerade. Mary-Ann Doane, for example, writes, “Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed².” Moreover, the technique of masquerade — of characters dressing up or disguising themselves — can create messages about gender roles. Danae Clark notes that when

¹ *Charmed*, “Lost and Bound” (4.12), dir. Noel Nosseck, scr. Nell Scovell; *Charmed*, “She’s a Man, Baby, a Man!” (2.5), dir. Martha Mitchell, scr. Javier Grillo-Marxuach; *Xena: Warrior Princess*, “Married With Fishsticks” (5.15), dir. Paul Gringer, scr. Kevin Maynard; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Halloween” (2.6), dir. Bruce Seth Green, scr. Carl Ellsworth.

² Mary-Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 66 [p. 60-71].

the two eponymous female detectives of the TV series *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS, 1982-1988) wear disguises or go under cover, it offers a critique of representations of femininity. According to Clark, “their disguises act as a visual statement on the fluid, potentially subversive quality of the female image and women’s ability to change and control the parameters of its representations³.” While masculinity is often considered to be the “invisible” gender, Chris Holmlund believes that masculinity is as much a masquerade as femininity. Holmlund also feels that this masquerading can have many levels and that “multiple masquerades” exist⁴. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Charmed*, the masquerade can go well beyond just changing clothes, and appearance, and involve elements of fantasy. Amanda Lotz notes the narrative potential for fantasy in 90s women-centered action series in general, as she writes:

Otherworldly components allow a far greater breadth of material than what is available to the “realistic” narratives of the other drama types. This enables the action dramas to explore a broader range of literal and allegorical themes, than the standard law, medicine and family dramas allow⁵.

What is interesting to note, and what Lotz does not directly address, is that when the series are being the most explicit about gender, it often involves a second level of fantasy, where things are even more unreal than in the first one, and that these representations often involve the literal transformation of self, and could at times seem even far out or silly, as if they dare not be this bold in the first level of fantasy (or reality).

The first level of fantasy comes into play in that all the series have supernatural elements in their everyday reality. The lead female characters of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* have supernatural powers. The eponymous heroine of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is supernaturally endowed with the strength to fight vampires; *Charmed* features three sisters, Piper, Phoebe, and Prue (and later Paige, when Prue is killed off) who also happen to be witches. While Xena (usually) does not have any special powers, *Xena: Warrior Princess* takes place in an ancient Greece where the lead heroine, Xena, has regular contact with Gods, monsters and other mythical creatures. And all the shows are loaded with special effects.

³ Danae Clark, “Cagney & Lacey: Feminist Strategies of Detection” in *Television and Women’s Culture: The Politics of the Popular*, ed. Mary Ellen Brown, London, Sage Publications, 1990, p. 132 [p. 117-133].

⁴ Chris Holmlund, “Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade: The ‘Mature’ Stallone and the Stallone Clone”, in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 215 [p. 213-229].

⁵ Amanda D. Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2006, p. 77.

In the second level of fantasy, through different plot devices — including magical spells, alternate realities, curses, dreams, body-swapping and stories-within-stories — the main female characters, as well as some of the male characters, at times, literally assume a different identity, and/or transform into different people or even creatures. Certain characters also have multiple selves, doppelgängers or versions of themselves that exist in other planes of reality, such as the dream state or an alternate world. Their different non-human forms can include mermaids, demons, goddesses, fairy tale heroines, werewolves, harpies, furies and vampires, as well as others. There can be an element of “camp,” a queer aesthetic that uses exaggeration and masquerade to critique social norms, often to humorous effect, in the second level of fantasy, as “camp” is the device employed to express different identities. As Susan Sontag writes, “To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater⁶.” However, the episodes can also be quite serious in tone. While the plots are often quite fantastical, the gender messages can be quite “real” and they are often overtly and directly stated in the dialog in these kinds of episodes. Moreover, there is often some “lesson” to be learned. Some examples will now be examined.

In the *Buffy* episode entitled “Halloween”, messages abound about the role of men and women in contemporary society, and the narrative uses role reversal to get these messages across. Buffy is usually the tough one; her male best friend Xander, is the weaker one, which already is a reversal of traditional gender stereotypes. In this episode, thanks to magic, their roles switch when the people of Buffy’s hometown, Sunnydale, are ensorcelled to become their Halloween costumes. In Buffy’s case, this means transforming into a 17th century noblewoman. Magic makes her actually assume this identity with no memory of her real self. She had chosen this costume because she felt insecure about her relationship her boyfriend Angel, a vampire with a soul, and wanted to be like the kind of woman he would have known in his youth. When Buffy expresses admiration for the beauty and lifestyle of the women of that era, her best friend Willow says, “I think I prefer being able to vote,” which sends a strong feminist message. When Buffy literally transforms into a lady, she becomes silly, helpless and scared of everything, instead of being her usual strong and intelligent self. She even faints at the first sign of danger, and spouts clichés of passive femininity like: “Surely some men will protect us” and “I was brought up a proper lady. I wasn’t meant to understand things. I’m just meant to look pretty, and then someone nice will marry me. Possibly a baron.” When the spell wears off, as Buffy comes back to herself, she

⁶ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”, *Against Interpretations and Other Essays*, New York, Picador, 1966, p. 280 [p. 275-292]. Capital letters conform to original text.

says “Honey I’m home” to the male demon who is attacking her. This expression is a symbol of role reversal as fathers used to say this in classic 60’s sitcoms when they got home from work. Such intertextuality has a specific purpose, according to Tanya Krzywinska:

By making overt or covert references to other texts, whether they are fairy tales, horror films, or popular culture, the series⁷ engage viewers’ cultural or subcultural capital. In part, this [...] significantly, has the effect of making the characters as well as viewers into interpreters of texts. By placing characters and viewers in a similar cultural and interpretational space, topical tastes, debates, and antagonisms drawn from contemporary culture are introduced. The carefully forged illusion is that the viewer is living in the same cultural space and time as the Scooby Gang⁸.

Thus, the use of a well-known TV catchphrase makes the audience feel as if they share the same reality as Buffy and her friends (“the Scooby Gang”), as they possess the same cultural references, even though Buffy’s reality is quite an unreal one.

Once back to her old self, Buffy starts beating up the bad guy, and, as she violently defeats her foe, she says “It’s good to be me,” showing how she has come to appreciate her real self. At the end of the episode, she is seen alone with Angel who says he much prefers her to the women of his time whom he found “dull.” There is thus a positive message of the importance having self-confidence and valuing oneself. Being a strong woman means being appreciated by a handsome man like Angel; passive, weak femininity will make one a victim.

There is also a parallel message about masculinity. Jowett qualifies representations of masculinity on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as being either “old” or “new,” as she explains,

In simple terms old masculinity is macho, violent, strong and monstrous, while new masculinity is ‘feminized,’ passive, emotional, weak and human. Many male characters on *Buffy* display both at once, a kind of split personality⁹.

In this episode, Xander, Buffy’s very nice, rather “geeky,” (i.e. socially awkward), male best friend, who is a “new man”, is feeling as insecure

⁷ “Series” (plural) refers to both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off *Angel* (WB, 1999-2004).

⁸ Tanya Krzywinska, “Hubble, Bubble, Herbs and Grimoires: Magic, Manichaeism and Witchcraft in *Buffy*”, in *Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, ed. Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Lanham, Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, p. 189-190 [p. 178-194]. “The Scooby Gang,” which here refers to Buffy and her friends, is in and of itself an intertextual reference, as it refers to the main characters of the *Scooby Doo* cartoons, featured in various TV formats since 1969.

⁹ Lorna Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2005, p. 95.

about his masculinity as Buffy is about her femininity. At school, a big brutish bully named Larry, a representative of the “old” masculinity, demonstrates an interest in dating Buffy but then insults her when he tells Xander she is “fast.” Xander gets angry about this, and Larry asks him what he plans to do about it, to which Xander replies, “I’m going to do what any man would do about it. Something damn manly.” However, in the end, Buffy is the one who has to physically rescue Xander from getting roughed up by Larry, which Xander finds acutely embarrassing. Commenting on Xander’s moodiness over this state of affairs, Willow remarks, “Boys are so fragile.” This comment is usually reserved for girls, and in fact, the whole episode revolves around opposites, as symbolized by the fact that the magic spell originates from a bust of Janus, the Roman god who has two faces.

On Halloween, Xander dresses up as a soldier. When under the spell, he becomes quite virile and manly. He is garbed in a sleeveless army tank top that leaves bare his muscles and tattoos, whereas the everyday Xander is usually quite modestly attired. Military Xander carries a rifle and shoots often, in a sort of mockery of excessive manhood. As violence and masculinity often go together, with guns symbolically representing masculinity and male sexuality, Xander’s being trigger-happy is highly representative of his new self¹⁰.

In this episode, the split personality Jowett denotes is literal. When Xander becomes his costume, he beats up Larry, who has been transformed into a pirate, in order to save Buffy from being sexually assaulted by him. His soldier alter ego says he oddly finds satisfaction in that. Interestingly enough, the tough guy Larry, who seems to be the classic heterosexual athlete, actually turns out to be gay later on in the series. Jowett believes Larry’s toughness and “hypermasculinity” may be a way of “compensating for ‘unmasculine’ weakness or behavior¹¹.” Xander’s manly violent disguise is also a way of “compensating.” Perhaps because he commits violence for heroic reasons, the message in “Halloween” would seem to be that it was good for Xander to get to be another person and to exorcise his male demons¹².

It is important to note, however, that Larry, the bad guy who gets pummeled — and is shown as deserving it — is, at least in this episode, a true, full-time representative of the old masculinity, with none of the feminine “good” qualities of the new man, whereas Xander is often a hero without the need of excessive virility. Jowett notes that, despite the fact that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* features “new men” lead characters, it nevertheless needs to show that these “new men” can also

¹⁰ For a more complete analysis of male symbols in visual culture see Richard Dyer, “Male Sexuality in the Media,” *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 111-122.

¹¹ Jowett p. 117.

¹² See also Jowett p. 134-135 for further analysis of the military theme.

be “real men,” which illustrates the “difficulty in negotiating a new gender identity”¹³.

When Xander goes back to his old self, there is no real “lesson” to be learned as with the Buffy storyline. The point of this episode, as it were, seems to be allowing Xander to enjoy being “real man”, while giving the audience a glimpse of another side of him¹⁴. This possibly undermines the seemingly progressive gender messages of the series as the “new man” Xander feels pleasure in engaging in the ways of traditional, violent masculinity and is not judged in the narrative for this. While it is shown as important for the heroine to reject old forms of femininity this is not necessarily the case for old forms of masculinity.

The renegotiation of men’s identities and men’s roles is also a theme in the *Charmed* episode “She’s a Man, Baby!” When a spell backfires, Prue literally becomes a man, complete with beard, body hair and male genitals, much to her chagrin. She decides to pose as a male cousin to help her sisters hunt a demon, a succubus who preys on human males using a dating service. Prue advertises herself/himself as a potential date to attract the monster. In order to succeed, Prue must learn how to be a man, which illustrates the performative nature of gender.

Being a man does not come easily to Prue: Piper and Phoebe have to coach her. The sisters have trouble deciding amongst themselves how Prue should act in order to be the most appropriately male, which highlights the difficulties of understanding contemporary gender norms. Piper says Prue needs “confidence” and “sincerity” to be manly, whilst Phoebe says, “Sports, men like sports.” As in the previously mentioned “Halloween” episode, this episode uses popular cultural references to help place the viewer in the same reality as the *Charmed* women. For example, Phoebe explains to Prue that according to *Cosmopolitan* magazine “what really makes a man is the clothes he wears, the car he drives and the money he earns.” The sisters make fun of Prue for her walk, which they say is like that of “Richard Simons” (a famous American gay man known for teaching aerobics courses). Then Phoebe says to act like the actor Tom Hanks, “Everyone loves Tom Hanks.” Prue ends up taking the name “Manny Hanks” as her male identity. When Piper’s boyfriend Dan comes over, Piper says “He’s a good man” by way of getting Prue to talk to Dan and to model herself on him. Prue then proceeds to try to imitate Dan’s mannerisms. Prue’s imitation of Dan shows how being a man does not automatically come with the fact of being male; it has to be learned.

While some clichés of male/female behavior exist in this episode (the fact of being male, for example, suddenly seems to render

¹³ Jowett 143.

¹⁴ See also Jowett p. 134-135 for further analysis of the military theme.

Prue proficient at making repairs around the house), it is clear that the sort of male who is valued is the “new man.” When Prue exhibits negative aspects of traditional male masculinity, dominance and violence, as she suggests “nailing” the Succubus and punches someone out, Piper takes her to task:

PIPER: Oh, you’re gonna nail her, are you? Oh, so this whole man thing, this sort of short-circuits the old “maybe I should consult my sisters” wiring, now, doesn’t it? Just step right in and take over.

PHOEBE: Didn’t start happening until she sucker-punched Owen.

MANNY/PRUE: You had a problem, I fixed it.

PHOEBE: Oh, you bet your butt, you did. You nearly broke his jaw

MANNY/PRUE: I saved his life. Look, you’re the one who told me I had to practice being a man, right? So I acted on instinct. And tell you the truth, the moment that I hit him, I felt powerful and strong. Like somehow that made me a man.

PIPER: You wanna know how to be a real man? Look at Dan. Honest, kind, good heart. The type of guy who would risk being late to work just to make you smile. Not some bully who walks around thinking one punch is gonna change anything.

This dialogue reveals that a “good man” is a “new man”, and that traditional male violence is no longer valued. The attractive man is the kind man, not the tough guy. Yet Dan also says in this episode that he is “old-fashioned” and he, like the *Buffy* male protagonists, represents a mix of old and new, retaining a traditionally handsome masculine appearance and demeanor, yet being sensitive and thoughtful towards others.

It is significant that the demon in this episode is a Succubus, a female who preys on men¹⁵. The Succubus tries to kill Prue/Manny by inserting its long, phallic-like tongue into/her mouth, which is representative of male sexual aggression, and is then defeated by Manny who becomes Prue once the demon is killed. Thus the female (the Succubus) takes the male role (of dominance) to try to kill a male (who is actually a female), but she does not succeed. Both she, and the male chauvinist of the episode, a police officer trying to solve the case, who makes comments like the fact that he would just like to “go a little caveman” with the ladies at the dating agency, die. Neither misogyny nor misogyny is acceptable, and both are punished in the narrative

¹⁵ See also Karin Beeler’s analysis of the character of the siren in *Charmed* in Karin Beeler, “Old Myths, New Powers: Images of second-wave and third-wave Feminism in *Charmed*,” in *Investigating Charmed: The Magic Power of TV*, ed. Karin Beeler and Stan Beeler, London, I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007, p. 108-109 [p. 101-111].

The point of the episode as it were, is to show that it is difficult for both sexes to navigate the new gender roles and rules. At the end of the episode, Piper says to Prue, "Looks like you learned a few things about being a woman by being a man." Prue responds:

Actually, I did. I mean, we're different, which I'm glad about that. But we're also similar in many ways. You know, we all feel the same emotions. It's just that if we don't communicate honestly, then we read between the lines and tend to get everything screwed up.

The very clear message of "She's a Man, Baby!" is that differences between men and women are superficial, and that the two sexes should not be at odds. The world of *Charmed* is shown as being a post-feminist one, in which men and women should get along¹⁶.

In the episode "Lost and Bound" of *Charmed*, the traditional roles of husband and wife and the expectations of each are explored through the bias of a famous popular cultural icon when Phoebe is put under a spell and transforms into a version of Samantha Stevens, the witch from the famous 60s sitcom *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972), which was Phoebe's favorite television program when she was a child. At the beginning of the episode non-ensorcelled Phoebe expresses concerns about becoming "Samantha" when proposed to by her boyfriend Cole.

PHOEBE. It's just, becoming a wife. I mean, I like Samantha but I never actually wanted to become her. See, Samantha, she was married to a human, Darren. And Darren completely repressed Samantha's magic, completely denied who she was. And it wasn't because he didn't love her, it was just... that's the way it had to be.

COLE. And this was one of your favorite shows?

PHOEBE. Well, not that part. It's just growing up that was my only role model for a typical marriage, so that's all I knew. And he was able to meet people and leave the house and go to work and build his career and she had to stay home and you know, cook dinner and do the laundry. She went from being Samantha to being Mrs. Darren Stevens overnight.

Once under the spell, as a 60s housewife, Phoebe is seen as being obsessed with cooking and preparing food for her family and man. Comical twinkling music plays whenever she appears on screen. Her makeup, hair and clothes are quite feminine: big curly hair, dark pink lips, pink button-down top with red trousers. As a traditionally feminine woman, Phoebe appears to be silly, vulnerable, helpless, and

¹⁶ See also Karin Beeler's analysis of the character of the siren in *Charmed* in Karin Beeler, "Old Myths, New Powers: Images of second-wave and third-wave Feminism in *Charmed*," in *Investigating Charmed: The Magic Power of TV*, ed. Karin Beeler and Stan Beeler, London, I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007, p. 108-109 [p. 101-111].

a victim. When a demon appears in her kitchen, she screams in fear and then reproaches him for his atrocious manners rather than trying to combat him as she usually would. She is much sillier than the real Samantha Stevens, who was generally gifted with good sense and who possessed strong supernatural powers — arguably stronger than those of any of the *Charmed* sisters — and who could have probably caused the unwelcome demon to disappear with the twitch of her nose. In fact, Susan J. Douglas notes that Samantha represents both women's new power at the dawn of the feminist movement — following the publication of Betty Friedan's treatise on the miseries of housewives, *The Feminine Mystique* — as well as the containment of that power¹⁷. Even though she was technically not supposed to use her magic (although she often did anyway), she could and did outsmart the men, notably her husband Darren, and often saved the day. In fact, Linda Baughman, Allison Burr-Miller, and Linda Manning note that all modern pop culture witches, including the *Charmed* witches, owe their representations to Samantha and comment that "*Bewitched* opened a space for the possibility of intelligent domestic women, who happened to be magical." Yet the light *Charmed* casts on this representation is not a flattering one¹⁸.

It turns out Phoebe was under the spell because she was wearing her grandmother's wedding ring. Her grandmother, or "Grams," was a witch who had been married many times wearing that very ring, and cursed it to remind herself what she hated about marriage. She engraved it with the saying, "To gain another, to lose yourself" to keep herself from ever attempting to get married again. Cole defines what Grams disliked about marriage as "the loss of identity, the subjugation by a man, the focus on housework." Cole reassures Phoebe by saying, "But Grams was from a different era, that's not gonna happen to us. Sitting and knitting is not the woman you are, just like sitting and typing is not the man I am."

Charmed thus shows masculine and feminine roles as being redefined, deliberately distancing itself from the past through a well-known popular culture reference, *Bewitched*. The episode "Lost and Bound" makes it clear that Phoebe is not her bitter grandmother, and will not be miserable like the women of the *Feminine Mystique* generation, but that she is a modern woman living in a postfeminist world and, as such, hopes to have it all¹⁹.

¹⁷ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, New York, Three Rivers Press, 1995 [1994], p. 126-138. See also Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique*, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001 [1963].

¹⁸ Linda Baughman, Allison Burr-Miller, and Linda Manning, "Back to the Future: The Brilliant Witches in *Bewitched*", by in *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 107 [p. 103-119].

¹⁹ See Friedan for information on the challenges that housewives faced before the advent of the feminist movement in the 60s and 70s. See Hannah E. Sanders, "Living a Charmed Life: The Magic of Postfeminist Sisterhood", in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, ed. Yvonne Tasker

In another send-up of the housewife, the campy *Xena: Warrior Princess* episode *Married with Fishsticks* deals with the issues of marriage and family, and once again strongly rejects traditional feminine and masculine roles. When Xena's sidekick Gabrielle hits her head, she falls into the ocean, and — in what is either a dream or an alternate reality — finds herself an amnesia-stricken housewife/mermaid named Crustacea with three kids married to a man named Hagar (who is played by the same actor who plays her friend Joxer outside the dream reality) in a brightly colored underseas fantasy world.

This episode, as evidenced by its bright colors, and over-the-top situations, especially uses “camp” as previously defined to get its message across. “Camp” is often used to blur gender and sexual borders in *Xena: Warrior Princess*²⁰. It is sometimes used to create the “subtext” that codes Xena and Gabrielle as potentially being in a relationship with each other, but in this episode, it is used for the audience to envision a different Gabrielle, a straight Gabrielle. The use of a campy fantasy scenario in this episode allows the audience to imagine Gabrielle, the possibly lesbian warrior, as a straight supermom married to Joxer, who in the actual reality is enamored of her.

Once again, clichés and stereotypes of the 60s housewife are used to make a point. For example, in one scene, Gabrielle appears in a sheer pink nightgown with curlers in her hair, a blond Barbie-like wig. Her hair and makeup are always styled and overdone and feminine in this episode, which contrasts with her usual appearance. In fact, in the series at this time, in reality she sports quite a butch short haircut and wears strapped to her legs her weapons of choice, two pointy daggers called sais, which are significant in-so-much that knives, like guns, are considered to be phallic symbols associated with masculinity²¹.

Joxer, who has been described by Lotz as a “nonhegemonic male”, and is generally a bit of a bumbling but kind wannabe warrior, who never has much success in life or with the ladies, plays his opposite in this episode. According to Jowett, Joxer and Xander have comparable roles in their respective series, as they both want to fight and be heroes, but often need to be saved instead:

and Diane Negra, Durham, London, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 73-99, for an analysis of postfeminism in *Charmed*; see Beeler p. 101-111 for an examination of the representation of the inter-generational conflict on *Charmed*.

²⁰ For a more complete analysis of the ways in which Camp blurs gender boundaries in *Xena: Warrior Princess* see Anne Currier Sweet, “Camp, Masquerade, and Subtext: The Subversion of Sexuality Norms and Gender Roles in *Xena: Warrior Princess*”, *GRAAT* issue # 2, June 2007, p. 88-102. <http://www.graat.fr/queertvo6.pdf>, consulted June 30th, 2011. See also Joanne Morreale, “*Xena: Warrior Princess* as Feminist Camp,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1998, p. 79-86.

²¹ For further analysis on weapons and male sexuality, see Richard Dyer p. 111-122.

In a less exaggerated but similar way to the hapless male 'hero' Joxer from *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Xander's lack of physical prowess affords pleasure to the viewer through role reversal (the opposite of Buffy's strength and action)²².

In this episode, Joxer (or Hagar) is his opposite: the dominant male, a "hegemonic" male, running for political office, and attractive to the ladies. Lotz notes that "hegemonic" male characters generally in late 90s female action series are usually bad guys:

Those male characters who do exude a hegemonic masculinity — exhibiting physical power and achieving occupational success as valued by capitalism, controlling a family as a patriarch, manifesting characteristics of the frontiersman, and displaying heterosexual power — are most often villains²³.

Joxer as Hagar is a villain. He drugs Gabrielle so she believes she is his wife because his real wife left him. The children, who in this underseas world are part fish, are difficult and try to pull nasty pranks on Gabrielle/Crustacea, but she perseveres and takes them in hand. When Hagar comments that she does "nothing" all day, just does her hair and hangs around the house, she gets angry and throws a knife at him warrior-style right into the wall next to his head. Then she berates and slaps him and waves a knife at him as she says: "Look what you did to my wall! Now, look, mister! You and I are going to raise these children together because I will not have them treating their spouses the way that you treat me!" She uses violence to intimidate her husband instead of accepting a passive feminine role, and Hagar eventually does fall in line and even attempts to woo her. Moreover, she reciprocates and is attracted to him. When she recovers her memory, she decides to leave Hagar/Joxer, but not before one last kiss. When she revives in reality, the real Joxer is giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. She pulls him close and kisses him, but then hits him when she becomes aware who is really kissing her.

However, she still has the ring Hagar gave her on her finger, showing the viewers that maybe it was not just a dream, maybe it was real. This episode allows for the possibility that Gabrielle is actually attracted to Joxer in reality, making her sexuality ambiguous. What is certain is that the episode contains a message of rejecting passive femininity, and of the importance of being strong and confident: one can achieve whatever one sets one's mind to if one takes charge of a situation with confidence. After this experience, Gabrielle feels as if she can take care of Xena's baby with ease, whereas before she had been

²² Jowett, p. 134.

²³ Lotz, p. 78.

doubting herself. As in the other episodes, the heroine has learned something important through having been someone else.

In the aforementioned episodes the masquerade is more than mere dressing up. The characters are literally not themselves in some way, and are no longer living their everyday reality. The strongest and clearest outright messages on gender and gender roles often exist and are told in this second level of fantasy, when the characters literally assume a different identity. It is as if the series have to make things more fantastical in order to convey this sort of message, and some of these plot premises can seem fantastical to the point of ridiculousness.

So should they be taken seriously?

Karen Backstein notes that “as most science fiction writers have cogently asserted, it has always been easier to deal with troublesome social issues when they’re applied to some other universe or level of reality²⁴.” Douglas calls 70s TV superheroines, like those in *Wonder Woman* (ABC 1975-79) and the *Bionic Woman* (ABC, 1976-78), “bionic bimbos” and notes that

[...] women’s emerging power — their political power, their sexual independence, their growing individual assertiveness — was either too scary or simply too incomprehensible to portray with any realism. So, once again we got metaphors and kitsch: women with magical, superhuman powers made possible, the viewer knew, not by the woman herself but through the wizardry of special effects, designed and controlled by men²⁵.

Like the action heroines of the 70s, the action heroines of the 90s were beautiful and sexy and quite unreal in some aspects. Moreover, Lotz, for one, believes there is a potential “containing” aspect to these heroines’ “otherworldliness²⁶.”

While it is certain that the series were appreciated given that they were all commercially successful and lasted for several seasons, without a reception study, it would be impossible to know for sure how the specific gender messages were received and understood by the audiences. The very fact that gender issues were being explored at all, means they were not in essence being contained. Baughman, Burr-Miller, and Manning, for example, note that having women be witches is way to hide what is in plain sight. Distracted by the special effects, and supernatural powers, audiences do not often notice that female witches are actually very intelligent women. They write:

²⁴ Karen Backstein. “Flexing Those Anthropological Muscles: *X-Files*, Cult TV, and the Representation of Race and Ethnicity” in *Cult Television*, ed. Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 116 [p. 115-145].

²⁵ Douglas, p. 219.

²⁶ Lotz, p. 74-75

The modern witch has become everything women want to be. Yet, the witch also comforts those who see these traits as unlikely or dangerous in women; after all, witches do not exist, so it is equally as easy to dismiss their other positive qualities, should audiences chose. Unfortunately, audiences can, and do, happily see around the intelligence of these modern magical beings. They usually perceive modern witches as powerful but miss their intelligence.²⁷

One could thus wonder if series like *Charmed*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, take stories about strong messages of identity to the second level of fantasy in order to make them less threatening and to avoid offending the audience, even if they are in the not-so-distant past, when feminist progress would have seemed to have been made. Yet, the very need for this sort of camouflage — of characters having to disguise themselves and use a second level fantasy to depict strong gender messages — shows that maybe feminism may still have a long way to go. Interestingly enough, the main executive producers of *Charmed*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* are all men, as well as a majority of the writers, directors and producers. In fact, of the four writers and four directors involved in the production of the episodes examined for this article, six are men²⁸. The elaboration of women's issues was here being dominated by males, as is often the case with some of the most iconic women's series, from *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-) to *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) to *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004)²⁹. This does not mean that there are no positive interpretations to be made of these representations, that there is no progress to be seen, and that no women were involved in the production of the series³⁰. But the potential for male input and the fact that men were in charge of the representations of the 90s most successful television superheroines cannot be denied. Moreover, one could hypothesize that in contemporary society, where young girls consider feminism to be “uncool,” having your tough ladies be mermaids may be one way of keeping a lid on things³¹.

²⁷ Baughman, Burr-Miller, and Manning, p. 117.

²⁸ See footnote no. 4 for names of production staff.

²⁹ It is relevant to note here that the main producers and series creators of these shows are men: Marc Cherry, David E. Kelley, and Darren Star respectively.

³⁰ While *Charmed* was actually created by a woman (Constance Burge) who was executive producer for two seasons along with Brad Kern, he was the main executive producer and show runner of the series. All of *Xena: Warrior Princess*' executive producers were males, and Joss Whedon was the creator, main executive producer and show runner of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. imdb.com provides lists of producers, writers and directors of individual episodes for each series.

³¹ Sanders notes that: “The backlash against feminism has successfully created a culture in which it is not cool to be feminist” and also discusses ways in which female heroines must be constructed to subvert this problem. Sanders p. 96.

Before concluding, a look at the recent state of women's television will shed some light on the issue of the representation of strong women on television and the containment of action heroines. A recent *New York Times* article proclaimed the abundance of tough women in today's TV series saying that they have now "become an unremarkable part of the television landscape." However, it also mentions that the "more interesting" ones are often part of ensemble casts and that there is still some "eye candy" to be had, such as in the character of Kono on the new version of *Hawaii Five-O* (CBS, 2010-)³². While there has been some evolution and change, notably, in the rather butch character of Jane Rizzoli, a female cop in the recently launched series *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-), a breakout cable hit, which is about two women who solve murders and which has addressed issues of sexism in the police force and lesbianism head on, it is also important to note that remakes of *Wonder Woman* and *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 1976-1981) were both being planned this year to be launched in the Fall of 2011. This new Wonder Woman, according to a recent *TV Guide* article, was to have "three lovers" (all men), "three identities," and to want "a more normal existence"³³. And her costume? Skintight pants with prominent cleavage on display in a sort push-up bustier get-up³⁴. Why not a lesbian Wonder Woman? Why so many disguises? Why not have her be herself and "out" as a hero? And why should yet another female superheroine find it a burden to have superpowers? David E. Kelly, who produced the series *Ally McBeal*, which despite being grounded in everyday reality, had elements of fantasy as the lead character saw her imaginings come literally to life on screen, was put in charge of production of this modern take on an old iconic superheroine.

While *Wonder Woman* did not make it past the drawing board, the new version of *Charlie's Angels*, developed by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, creators of the series *Smallville* (WB/CW, 2001-2011) about Superman, will be broadcast on ABC this year. As for the *Charlie's Angels* remake, it still has plenty of the "jiggle factor" that made the original 70s series a hit³⁵. Maureen Dowd of *The New York*

³² Mike Hale, "Sugar and Spice and Vicious Beatings", *The New York Times*, March 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/arts/television/women-bring-the-beatings-to-ncis-and-elsewhere.html>, consulted on March 13th, 2011.

³³ William Keci, "Today's News: Our Take. Keck's Exclusives: New Wonder Woman to Have Three Identities — and Three Love Interests!", *TV GUIDE*, February 11, 2011, <http://www.tvguide.com/News/Kecks-Exclusives-Wonder-1029226.aspx>, consulted May 3rd, 2011.

³⁴ Arianne Thompson, "First look: Adrienne Palicki suits up for 'Wonder Woman'", *USA Today*, March 18th, 2011, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/entertainment/post/2011/03/first-look-adrienne-palicki-suits-up-for-wonder-woman-/1>, consulted May 3rd, 2011.

³⁵ The mid-70s are what Julie D'Acci qualifies as "jiggle era" of TV, which makes reference to the fact there was a change from showing mainly domestic female characters to showing female characters as sex objects and their bodies as "spectacle". This phenomenon, which

Times remarks that the new version “is a masterpiece of subtlety. It takes at least 15 minutes before the three girls get wet³⁶.” ABC’s boss Paul Lee freely admits that it is “pure candy³⁷.” Therefore, there is a possibility that representations of “the bionic bimbo,” as previously defined by Douglas, could once again reign supreme on the small screen.

To conclude, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy*, *the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* represented a new model for women’s heroism, albeit a limited one. Playing on the two levels of fantasy, the shows tended to contain the potential for disruption of women’s liberation by putting some the strongest gender messages in the second level of fantasy, which was also a site of exploration, subversion and mockery of gender roles and norms. Even though the characters the heroines were playing characters that were not “real,” in all of these episodes, “lessons” were learned that had applications in their “real” lives. Still rare is a series that dares to show feminism is “cool”, in reality. Writing about various shows for new 2011-2012 TV season, including the new *Charlie’s Angels*, Dowd notes that “Hollywood is a world ruled by men, and this season, amid economic anxieties, those men want to indulge in some retro fantasies about hot, subservient babes³⁸.” Perhaps when women get more power of production in Hollywood, female characters will one day have a bit less cleavage, and give more of a “real” voice to women’s issues.

lasted to the early 1980s, was also called the “T & A’ (‘tits and ass’) period”. See Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1994, p. 14.

³⁶ Maureen Dowd, “Corsets, Cleavage, Fishnets”, *The New York Times*, May 14th, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/opinion/15dowd.html>, consulted June 19th, 2011.

³⁷ Lacey Rose, “ABC Boss Paul Lee Goes After Fantasy, Comedy and ‘Pure Candy’”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/abc-boss-paul-lee-goes-189117>, consulted July 1st, 2011.

³⁸ Dowd. No page number (internet article).