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Elena Maris

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## Too old for leather? Aging out of a 1990s TV reboot

Elena Maris

University of Pennsylvania

The “strong female protagonist” flourished on 1990s television. Murphy Brown dominated newsrooms on *Murphy Brown*, Buffy battled the undead on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Agent Scully investigated the paranormal on *The X-Files*. Another notable 1990s feminist favorite was *Xena: Warrior Princess*, a hit TV series that aired from 1995 to 2001. The series chronicled the adventures of a fictional, leather-clad ancient Greek warrior, Xena, and her sidekick, Gabrielle. *Xena* became an international hit and an icon for feminist and queer fans (Rosalind Hanmer 2014; Elena Maris 2016). With a host of TV and film franchises from the 1990s currently being revived for nostalgic audiences (Bill Keveney 2017), *Xena* has recently re-emerged in the popular imagination. Media industries’ unwillingness to cast the original actresses in a possible reboot has communicated to fans that the aging actresses are no longer valuable, and thus, neither are they as a potential market for content. Further, *Xena*’s activist-fans have been placed in the problematic position of having to prove the sexual marketability of the original stars. The story of *Xena*’s continued inability to be successfully rebooted illustrates contemporary limitations for 1990s era feminist content and audiences, and serves as a reminder to scholars to revisit feminist media’s success stories as they, and their audiences, age.

In 1998, Joanne Morreale declared *Xena* a “feminist text,” “notable as one of the first television series to place a woman in the role of the archetypal hero on a quest” (79). Today, the show’s feminist strengths endure, with Wim Tigges (2017) stating, “More than almost any other female hero of the silver screen... *Xena* demonstrates that femininity is not a liability but an asset to the hero” (143). With recent announcements that 1990s heroines Roseanne Barr and Gillian Anderson were revisiting their roles in TV revivals, rumors circulated that a new *Xena* series might also be in the works. Indeed, the online fan group *Xena* Movie Campaign (XMC), whose Facebook page currently has over 90,000 “likes,” has long lobbied media executives to revive the franchise with the original actresses Lucy Lawless (*Xena*) and Renee O’Connor (*Gabrielle*). In August 2015, NBC confirmed that a *Xena* reboot was in development, but the studio was not considering casting the original actresses. Many fans suspected the studio was loath to place 49- and 46-year-old women (Lawless and O’Connor, respectively) in the starring roles of a “sexy” action series. Fans demanded the original actresses at least be included in an episode or arc to hand off their roles to new actresses. When NBC Entertainment Chairman Bob Greenblatt said Lawless’s involvement might

“overshadow” a new actress set to play Xena (Lesley Goldberg 2015), fans grew agitated with what they identified as Hollywood sexism and agism.

In my research on XMC, I have discovered a building tension between these fans-turned-activists and the television industry. What began as love for iconic feminist characters and the actresses that portrayed them has morphed into outrage at a media system that no longer values those same women’s worth. XMC holds two primary concerns: (1) that media industries do not see value in casting the aging original *Xena* actresses in a contemporary series, and (2) that the industry does not value the age/gender demographic of the original fans. On average, male actors’ careers peak at age 46, while actresses typically reach the pinnacle of their career at 30 (Chris Wilson 2015). Colin Milner, Kay Van Norman, and Jenifer Milner (2012) demonstrated that media representations of aging create a distorted view of aging. Amanda Haboush, Cortney Warren, and Lorraine Benuto (2012) found that the more people internalize beauty ideals from mainstream media, the more negative their attitudes toward the elderly. It is in this cultural context for age and gender in the media that the *Xena* case must be considered.

As it became apparent the *Xena* reboot was moving forward without the original actresses, XMC began highlighting the entertainment industry’s tendency to exclude older actresses. They created and shared hashtags, memes, and other digital content about the *Xena* case. One article XMC shared on its Facebook page, titled “Casting sexism: Unlike actors, actresses have an expiration date,” discussed *Xena* and the wider problem of discrimination against older actresses in Hollywood. It framed *Xena* fans as additional victims of sexist casting, noting that unlike fans of recently revived male-led franchises like *The Terminator* and *Indiana Jones*, *Xena* fans would not experience their favorite characters “as they originally knew them” (Emily Coday 2015). XMC urged its followers to share the article with the hashtag #LLROCNtoTooOld.

XMC also focused on proving that Lawless and O’Connor are still attractive enough to fulfill mainstream requirements for female action roles. Each time an older actress saw success, XMC rushed to capitalize on the news:

We are thrilled by yet another revival of a classic show with the original cast! Better yet, Gillian Anderson, who is the same age as the beautiful Lucy Lawless, proves that women in their 40s are sexy, strong female leads who bring the fans and the ratings... (XMC Facebook post, March 24, 2015)

XMC also frequently called out media sexism, responding to one article critiquing an outfit worn by Lawless: “... You know we think Lucy still looks amazing... so head on over to the article and let them know that you think Lucy still rocks so-called non-‘45-year-old’ outfits!” (XMC Facebook post, October 10, 2013). The feminist implications of having to prove the actresses had “aged well” largely remained unexplored.

Fans who played a large role in the success of the original series now find themselves frustrated at their decreased value as a market. Such concerns are not new for *Xena*. Although the original series was noted for its lesbian subtext, many charged that, “... the relationship is disguised enough that teenage boys ... might consider her heterosexual” (Mary Magoulick 2006, 731). Unlike Xena, Roseanne and Scully are characters whose heroism resides mostly in their intelligence and whose costumes reveal little or no leg or cleavage. Indeed, it seems *Xena* still constitutes complicated terrain for media industries that equate action and sexiness with youth. In August 2017, NBC announced they had scrapped the *Xena* reboot.

Susan Douglas (2010) noted: "... enlightened sexism rests crucially on ageism, on severing young women from their elders" (11). Media in the 1990s featured increasingly feminist content, consumed by increasingly feminist audiences. The material made such an impact that popular culture seeks to revisit it today. What do we make of those impulses when they also exclude the very women who produced and consumed the original content? The failure of an aged and still leather-clad Xena to appear on screens filled with revived 1990s-era characters demonstrates what is retained, and who is left behind, in contemporary media nostalgia. Scholars should attend to aging feminist media and their audiences, or we indeed risk contributing to the erasure of feminist elders.

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