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Tigges, W.

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A Woman Like You? Emma Peel, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and the Empowerment of Female Heroes of the Silver Screen

WIM TIGGES

“Is a maiden all the better when she’s tough?”

(W.S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*)

“I NEEDED A WOMAN LIKE YOU, MRS. PEEL, A WOMAN OF—COURAGE, of beauty, of action—a woman who could become desperate and yet remain strong, a woman who could become confused, and yet remain intelligent, a woman who could fight back, and yet remain feminine—and you and only you, Emma Peel, had all these qualifications.” In these words Z. Z. Von Schnerk, “director, writer, producer and film maker extraordinary,” explains to Emma Peel in “Epic,” an episode from the 1960s British television series *The Avengers*, why he has captured her in his studio and made her into the protagonist of what he intends to become his masterpiece. The film is to be a horror movie in the style of 1960s sexploitation, and of Roger Corman’s early grindhouse films, and is to end with Emma’s violent death. This article’s position with regard to the ideal female superhero will turn out to be fairly close to that of the opprobrious Von Schnerk; however, his suspicion of sexism will be deconstructed as well.

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Much has been written in the last two decades about “tough girls” (Inness, *Tough Girls*), “fantasy girls” (Helford), “women warriors” (Early and Kennedy), “action chicks” (Inness, *Action Chicks*), “wonder women” (Robinson), “modern amazons” (Mainon and Ursini), “super-girls” (Madrid), “ink-stained amazons and cinematic warriors” (Stuller), and “action heroines” (with “dangerous curves,” Brown). These are the heroic female protagonists of films and TV series, not only often admired but also frequently considered to be flawed or deficient from a feminist point of view.

The question is whether “toughness” and “femininity” are mutually exclusive. Emma Peel (Diana Rigg), female protagonist in fifty consecutive episodes of *The Avengers* (seasons 4 and 5, 1965–67), who has been said to define “the heroine of the mod 60s” (Madrid 198), often shows the ambivalence of the victim–hero that some feminist critics consider to be a recurrent flaw of the female hero as compared to the single-minded attitude usually found in male heroes. Yet, she is one of the first female heroes and “warrior women” on the big or smaller screen to be fully the equal of her male colleague, John Steed (Patrick MacNee), rather than his secretary, lover, or subordinate sidekick. Mrs. Peel, in other words, is far from being a “Steed girl.” Xena (Lucy Lawless), warrior woman hero of the more recent American action-fantasy TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), “represents a new and different image of toughness for the 1990s and beyond” (Inness, *Tough Girls* 166). However, she still fails to “challenge the idea that a heroine should be gorgeous” (174). Inness has similar objections to Emma Peel, noting for instance that the program went often “overboard to make sure that she appeared as sexually desirable as possible” (36). True as this may be, it is unclear how this affects these heroines’ empowerment, or even their toughness.

The criteria various critics have used to define the nature of a warrior woman are problematical, and fail to differentiate a female superhero from a “tough” girl with an impulse control problem or so-called authority issues. This article presents a more categorical approach by ranking the female characters of action films and TV series on a ten-point scale, which offers a model for establishing and measuring the levels of female empowerment. Using *The Avengers* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* as prime sources of evidence, and addressing earlier feminist critiques of these shows, it will moreover be argued that their leading characters incorporate the highest level of female (super)

heroism. It will also be demonstrated that the idea of toughness is indeed fully compatible with femininity, in that although the female superhero differs in many respects from what characterizes the stereotypical woman, the former also distinguishes herself in subtle ways from the qualities generally found in the conventional male superhero.

In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan discusses the origins, characteristics, and manifestations of what he defines as a superhero, taking Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's comic-book creation Superman (1938) as his standard. Making a subtle, and occasionally confusing, distinction between a super hero and a superhero, Coogan defines the latter as a person with a prosocial mission, exaggerated powers, and an identity displayed through a codename and an iconic costume, and who features as the main character of a specific superhero-genre (31–43, 58). A superhero is different from a super hero, the latter being defined as “a hero who is super or superior to other kinds of heroes (typically by virtue of physical abilities), just as a super model is superior to other types of models,” or as “every day” is distinct from “everyday.” Super heroes, as distinct from superheroes, are “superior to ordinary human beings and ordinary protagonists of more realistic fiction in significant ways” (49).

Unfortunately, Coogan does not discuss female superheroes (or even super heroes). Wonder Woman gets just four passing references, and a few well-known female supervillains are briefly referred to. Of course, if Coogan's generic distinctions are valid, they should equally apply to women such as Emma Peel and Xena, Warrior Princess. Among these distinctions, the degree of empowerment is the all-important characteristic, rather than selfless missions or the presence or absence of an identifying dress code.

A predominant part of Xena's activities consists in fighting. Her self-styled “many skills” comprise various martial ones, including those of a superhuman nature. She also demonstrates great endurance. Thus, she certainly qualifies as a “warrior woman,” as a “superwoman,” and as a “tough girl”—in fact, a “superhero” by all four of Coogan's definitional criteria (30–37). She possesses a codename, if not a secret one (Warrior Princess), as well as an iconic costume, including her uniquely personal weapon, the chakram. Her fighting skills and athletic agility are of an extraordinary nature. She practices a variety of fighting techniques, enabling her to take on complete armies, redoubtable supervillains, and even gods, even though she does not possess

typical superhuman traits such as invisibility or the ability to fly. Her mission is primarily prosocial. As the closing voiceover in the title sequence to each episode has it: "Her courage will change the world." Instead of a having a permanent second or secret identity—optional by Coogan's standards—Xena often appears in disguise.

The appellation of "tough girl" is also generally applicable to Emma Peel, who is never averse to a fight, and is able to stay stoically calm even when in the direst of straits. By Coogan's definition Mrs. Peel would surely qualify as a "super hero." As aptly described by Mike Madrid, she is as "brilliant as she [is] beautiful, witty, champion fencer, martial arts expert, modern artist, crack shot with a pistol, and fearless secret agent," and "a true force to be reckoned with, combining beauty, brains, and power" (198). Emma's fighting skills, mainly karate in season 4 and kung fu in season 5, are more realistic than Xena's, and most of her hand-to-hand combats are against single (male and female) opponents. They also are less lengthy and intense, and their choreography is far less sophisticated.

The problem with these categories of toughness and super(-)heroism, however, is that they are inconveniently broad. Going by the huge diversity of the female characters from the films and series in Mainon and Ursini's detailed and lavishly illustrated book on warrior women on-screen, almost any woman who wields a weapon or plays an active role in a physical and/or mental conflict could be classified as a tough woman, whether she be good or evil, a soldier in an army, a member of a gang or a singly operating character, a sidekick, a hero, or an avenging victim. For instance, Mainon and Ursini include characters like Eowyn of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001–2003) and Guinevere of *King Arthur* (dir. Antoine Fuqua, 2004) (41–48). These are quintessentially strong women operating as warriors, but their overall share in these overwhelmingly male-cast films is limited, and they are certainly not the super(-)heroes of these films, even if they make decisive contributions to the plot. Since physical conflict is a staple element in action films, almost any woman participating in one could be called a warrior woman, whether hero or villain, sidekick or (resistant) victim, human or alien, vamp or vampire, and no matter whether the action is set in a mythical or historical past, in a troublesome present, or in a (post)apocalyptic future.

A character who would certainly fit the tough or warrior woman definition, but missing from Mainon and Ursini's collection, is Xenia

Onatopp, ex-Soviet fighter pilot and 007's female opponent in *GoldenEye* (dir. Martin Campbell, 1995). Although in two hours she gets no more than about twelve minutes playing time altogether—only about twice as much footage as James Bond driving a phallic tank through the streets of Petersburg in pursuit of the escaping villains—we see her racing Bond to Monte Carlo in a red Ferrari, playing Baccarat in the Casino while smoking an elegant cigar, making savage love atop an admiral and strangling him between her powerful thighs, stealing a new army helicopter during a military presentation show and flying it to Russia, machine-gunning the personnel of the military space agency there, helping a former Soviet general-turned-traitor launch a world-threatening space weapon (the “GoldenEye” of the title), confronting Bond in Petersburg, where she makes love to him and fights him simultaneously but fails to strangle him between her thighs, being captured by Bond, escaping with Bond's former associate, now traitor, 006, and attacking Bond after a plane crash and getting crucified on a tree during a fatal moment of distraction (leading Bond to comment laconically: “She always did enjoy a good squeeze”). As Xenia turns from heroic antagonist into defeated victim, the girl Natalya, who survives the attack on the space agency and teams up with Bond in Petersburg after her escape, changes from a screaming victim into the perfect “Bond girl”: heroically brave but also submissively helpful (and available) when needed. Minor “strong women” in this film are Judi Dench's “M,” who refers to Bond as a “sexist misogynist dinosaur,” and Samantha Bond's Moneypenny, who tells him that some day he will have to be punished for sexually harassing her by making good on his innuendoes. Surely all of these are tough if not warrior women.

Indeed, the tough girl is at least as manysided as is the warrior woman. Inness (*Tough Girls* 12–14) defines “toughness” not just as implying the capability of great physical as well as intellectual or moral endurance. This is its primary meaning, emphasizing the ability to be firmly resistant. The *Oxford English Dictionary* adds the denotation “given to rough or violent behaviour.” This would encompass characters like Tara, the bratty teenager in *Xena's* third-season episode “Forgiven,” as well as Pippi Longstocking, who “could easily be a younger version of the punk hero *Tank Girl*” (Mainon and Ursini 284).

The unwieldy diversity of Mainon and Ursini's categories of warrior women, which include Amazons and jungle queens, vamps and

vampires, warriors and wiccan, spies and sportswomen, derives from their wide definition. To qualify, the women they discuss must fulfill a minimal requirement of “at least two or three” from a total of nine traits as described in their “Warrior Woman Checklist” (11–17). These nine traits, briefly summarized, are:

1. Fighting in an aggressive and physical manner when required.
2. Being more than just a sidekick to a man.
3. Being part of a female-run organization or culture.
4. Displaying some level of sisterhood.
5. Using classic warrior woman weapons and tools (notably bow and arrow).
6. Dressing and adorning herself in warrior garments (notably a catsuit).
7. Being independent, and not needing to be saved by a man.
8. Living in or hailing from a “lost civilization.”
9. Being possibly gay, bisexual, or simply not interested in men.

The authors’ selections based on these characteristics are problematic in defining the warrior woman; their criteria fail to differentiate a female superhero from a girl with an impulse control problem or authority issues. Emma Peel fulfils at least the criteria 1, 2, and 6, and to some extent (increasingly as the series proceeds) the seventh. Xena shows every single one except the third (she is not an Amazon). In theory, an assertive lesbian Girl Scout with an interest in Doris Lessing, wiccan, and archery, and who likes to dress in “Gothic” apparel, would qualify nearly if not quite as well. All three of them would also be “tough girls” by any of Inness’s definitions of that term.

Female protagonists and secondary characters of action films and series can be ranked more distinctively on a scale of increasing empowerment. Depending on their function in the narrative, a female character may fall into the following categories:

1. A (patiently suffering or resilient but powerless) victim.
2. A subordinate secondary character (prostitute, barmaid, secretary, etc.), usually showing stereotypically “feminine” behavior (see below).
3. The male hero’s (pliant or manipulating) lover.
4. The villain’s “moll” or sidekick, or the hero’s villainous lover (*femme fatale*).

5. The “token woman” on an otherwise all-male team (e.g., Mina Harker in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, dir. Stephen Norrington, 2003).
6. The member of an all-female action team (e.g., an Amazon).
7. The sidekick or companion to a female hero (e.g., Xena’s companion Gabrielle).
8. The leader of an all-female action group (e.g., Gail in *Sin City*, dir. Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005, who is at the same time victimized).
9. The leader of an all-male or mixed team (e.g., O-Ren Ishii in *Kill Bill, Volume 1*, dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2003).
10. A solitary woman in heroic action against many (e.g., Elektra in *Elektra*, dir. Rob Bowman, 2005).

Female characters often belong to the first two categories: they suffer or have a largely passive role to play and cannot be said to be empowered in any sense of the word, except insofar as a secretary or barmaid may serve to boost a male hero or villain’s morale. A victim may be tough, in the sense that she may suffer her situation bravely and resiliently, but she remains a powerless victim. The (usually male) hero’s female lover may have some power behind the screens (or in the bedroom), but she will generally be kept out of danger and away from the action, unlike the villain’s moll, who often offers assistance on the spot and is empowered through action. “Having sex with outlaws, fugitives, gangsters, and rebels is what turns good girls into hard-boiled dames, villainous vamps, and smart-mouthed molls” (Yaquinto 208). Yaquinto discusses tough women in gangster movies, but even from a postfeminist point of view, such “toughness” and the use of “sex as a weapon” (211) are insufficient criteria for defining a warrior woman, let alone a female superhero. An increased level of sex equality may indeed have made many women both tougher and more sexually empowered, but on-screen the type of women discussed by Yaquinto continues to play a subsidiary role.

The “token woman” may have power that is equivalent with that of the men with whom she forms a team, but unlike the fully fledged member of an all-female collective she is likely to be side-stepped at decisive moments by male heroes or to be required to use feminine charm as a weapon. Representatives of both categories five and six may be only as powerful as a small cog in the wheel, whereas the

sidekick of a hero is indispensable at crucial moments, and therefore likely to be still more empowered. Team-leaders have still more power; if they lead a mixed or all-male group, they will have more power than in leading an all-female collective. The woman who operates by herself must be most powerful, both vis-à-vis single opponents and when combating hostile collectives.

Often working separately from a single companion or sidekick, both Emma Peel and Xena fit in the highest rank of superheroes or tough women. In addition to their functional roles, a female superhero's powers and special skills and the character of her mission are important to an analysis of empowerment. Powers and skills may range from ordinary human (say, athletic) to superhuman or even divine powers (Wonder Woman has god-given abilities), and missions may range from the very personal (Xena, in her quest for atonement) to the (inter)national (Emma Peel as a British agent) and the universal (Xena as the hero whose "courage will change the world").

Of course there are differences, if only because of the time lag between the production and broadcasting of *The Avengers* in the 1960s (without extras and without special effects), and of *Xena* in the 1990s. Both Mrs. Peel and Xena are experts in martial arts, but as the former mostly limits herself to a few regular karate or kung-fu blows, she ranks somewhat lower in this respect than Xena, who practices a variety of wuxia moves, in addition to being superhumanly agile. Her expertise with the chakram, which always hits its targets and returns to her hand even after describing the most unlikely trajectories, definitely outranks Emma's occasional use of a gun, and as the latter's catlike leaps remain within the bounds of reality, they do not measure up to Xena's enormous forward or back flips: truly catlike, Xena can jump up to many times her body length. Also, since Emma Peel and John Steed have an equal share in their exploits, the former often gets less footage in certain episodes compared to Xena, who with few exceptions is on screen for practically the whole of each individual adventure. As in the case of *GoldenEye*'s Xenia Onatopp, the amount of footage allowed to a warrior woman should not be entirely left out of account. It could be argued, of course, that it is the result that counts: both Mrs. Peel and Xena generally defeat their opponents. Although Emma most often finds herself fighting a single (male or female) opponent, Xena is mostly up against a whole band of them,

and on one occasion she even single-handedly rebuts a whole army ("One Against An Army").

Characters may also shift from one level to another in the course of a narrative, and so the scale includes a certain amount of fluidity. We often see gang-members or sidekicks promoted or promoting themselves to leadership. Victims may climb up to the level of solitary heroes, and heroes fall to that of victims. Moreover, in series like *The Avengers*, *Xena*, *Buffy*, or *Nikita* characters tend to become more multidimensional than in films, due to the fact that there is generally much more script and screen time for them to develop depth of character. On the other hand, the protagonists of many action films as well as series, in particular those based on comic books (Wonder Woman) or computer games (Lara Croft), are likely to be more static, due to the formulaic nature of such narratives. It will be relatively easy to assign a level of empowerment to such characters.

Even more so than Emma Peel, Xena primarily belongs to the last and highest category. Like Mrs. Peel, she often acts out or even temporarily suffers other roles as well, including the lowest rank of victim. In "Chariots of War" she is shot down with an arrow and temporarily unable to act; in "The Debt, Part I" she is betrayed by Gabrielle, and captured and humiliated by Ming T'ien; in "The Ides of March" she is struck down by her recurrent avenging enemy Calisto, and crucified by Caesar; and in "Coming Home" she allows herself to be pummeled into an icy pool and is nearly drowned by fury-infested Ares. She is unlike Emma Peel in that when the latter is truly victimized she generally has to be released by John Steed, who turns up just in time. Xena either overcomes such problems by herself, or is rescued by her sidekick and friend Gabrielle in a preplanned maneuver.

In the first sixteen episodes of *The Avengers'* fourth season, Steed has to rescue Emma on at least ten occasions; after this, the plots generally end in both agents defeating their opponents individually or together. In the fifth season, the outcomes are more evenly spread, Emma releasing Steed in seven of the twenty-four episodes; in nine episodes it is the other way around. However, on no occasion is she treated as a mere sidekick to her male companion—a situation that is often experienced by Gabrielle. In "Epic," Steed ultimately tracks and saves Mrs. Peel from Von Schnerk. She does fight and repeatedly defeat the aged actor whom the mad director Von Schnerk has cast as

a stock villain, but she mostly plays the conventional stereotypical role of helpless victim until Steed shows up and ends the shooting just in time. What is less stereotypical, however, is that all through Von Schnerk's procedures she remains completely stoic and alert, even making witty jokes in the face of apparent death.

Within the empowerment categories, there are subtle distinctions: for instance, between the purely powerless victim and the victim who offers some opposition, or between the permanent lover treated loyally by her male lover even if she is otherwise subordinate, and the temporary flame. In "Who's Gorkhan?" Xena sets herself up as a slave girl to be sold into Gorkhan's harem. In the course of this episode, she is severely bashed by order of Gorkhan's first wife and has to perform a humiliating erotic dance, which temporarily puts her in the category of victim-lover. In the end, however, she becomes the victorious, avenging, and liberating hero. This episode is reminiscent of the final fourth-season *Avengers* episode "Honey for the Prince," in which Emma Peel also masquerades as a dancing girl and joins the harem of a Middle Eastern potentate. One of the differences between Xena as a (super)hero and similar movie and television characters is that Xena can perform these roles without losing her basic position as an independent warrior woman with many skills that enable her to retain supremacy and achieve victory. In this respect, she resembles Emma Peel, who repeatedly masquerades in a disguise appropriate to the *Avengers'* current mission.

From a feminist stance, this reassessment of what constitutes a female superhero is counterintuitive. For instance, in her article on *Xena*, *Nikita*, and *Buffy*, Mary Magoulick argues that these series, often acclaimed as feminist, are in reality "male fantasies" (729). She writes that "[f]emale superheroes are fantasies of male writers who shape them according to their experiences in this world," tying these fantasies to "sponsors whose bottom line must be to uphold the military-industrial complex" (750–51). To support this thesis, she adduces that these heroes fight not only with their enemies but also "with romantic love partners, family, and friends" (729), arguing moreover that "[f]eminists can hardly consider images like... one of two women in mortal combat positively" (730).

Magoulick notes a distinction between male super(-)heroes, such as James Bond, Superman, and Batman, and a female superhero like Xena. Although the former "keep their good and bad women

straight,” so that we get to see perfectly good lovers as their friends and helpers, and utterly evil vamps as their enemies, for the women “good and bad men are conflated” (743)—in other words, whereas male heroes caress their lovers and fight their vamps, female heroes like Xena caress and fight the same men. Perhaps the writers of Xena realize that there is no such phenomenon as a perfectly good and pure, or an utterly bad and rotten, man.

Magoulick also notes that in order to be as “sexy” as possible, women heroes wear “ridiculously impractical outfits for warriors,” and “even Xena’s armor leave[s] many vital parts vulnerable to attack” (743). First of all, Xena’s potential vulnerability is part of what makes her into a hero, and, secondly, male heroes are also usually represented as sexy—and not only in modern action series. Homer’s Odysseus has a physique that makes a great impression on the nymph Calypso and on Nausicaä, daughter of the Phaeacian king, and Virgil’s handsome Aeneas breaks the heart of Queen Dido of Carthage. Early renderings of the ancient Greek warrior show that even the hoplite, the heaviest-armed Greek soldier, has about as little of his body covered with armor as has Xena. Unlike her, the hoplite carries a spear, a large shield and a heavy helmet, but his skirt is actually shorter than Xena’s, especially in front. The lightly armed peltastes wore hardly any costume to speak of, and neither did many other warriors in the first millennium BCE.

What is surprising here is why women (or men for that matter) are not supposed to look “sexy.” Sexist as it may be to present women as objects of consumption, were they to be presented as dull and unattractive that too might well be accounted for as inimical to the valuation of women. Women warriors like Xena or Emma Peel are not presented as mere sexy bimboes, damsels in distress or icy ball-breakers, which would indeed be objectionable, but as women who are physically attractive as well as independent, strong, brave, agile, energetic, intelligent, wise, caring, tender to friends and hard to opponents (male or female), serious and witty. Unlike the female heroes of so much pulp fiction and many a B-film, but like Emma Peel, Xena has a multidimensional personality. She can be vulnerable as well as moody or cynical, but mostly she is happily active. Also, no matter what her plight, she always retains her dignity. For example, she effectively deals with sexual harassment in the teaser of the early episode “The Path Not Taken,” quasicasually beating off one dirty

young fellow after the other; after that, personal remarks and lewd gestures quickly diminish and almost disappear from the series, and even the most opprobriously macho-type opponents respect her as a warrior and a woman. Xena is as much a woman's fantasy as she is a man's, and that is her charm—as well as her power.

Few if any of the aforementioned warrior women qualify as completely tough women in Inness's sense of the word. In Inness's selective discussion of women warriors, only Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* trilogy (respectively directed by Ridley Scott, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and David Fincher, 1979–92), “one of the toughest women ever to hit the big screen” (105), is outstanding as a female hero, although her emotional and maternal feminine side emerges as the series progresses. In Inness's view, as in Magoulick's, toughness and femininity are mutually exclusive. “Despite Mrs. Peel's tough image,” Inness writes, “her toughness [is] undermined in a variety of ways, such as through her repeated use of masquerade and disguise” (*Tough Girls* 35). As evidence, Inness points to a number of fourth-season episodes, in which Mrs. Peel disguises herself as a nurse (“The Gravediggers,” “The Master Minds”), a lingerie salesgirl (“Death at Bargain Prices”), and a harem dancer (“Honey for the Prince”). She goes undercover as a secretary (“How to Succeed . . . at Murder”) and, Xena-like, impersonates a “Queen of Sin” (“A Touch of Brimstone”). She also dresses up as Robin Hood (“A Sense of History”).

In all of the fifth season, however, Mrs. Peel masquerades only twice—as a photo model in “The Bird Who Knew Too Much,” and as a Georgian lady in a farthingale, to make her own “Escape in Time.” As with the mutual rescuing of Emma and Steed, it seems that the series was developing away from having its female protagonist assume the roles of subservient women, no matter for what useful purpose. Xena, on the other hand, creatively adopts the most extravagant disguises all through her six seasons, ranging from that of a concubine (“The Royal Couple of Thieves”) to that of a “Celtic Goddess of Sex” (“The God You Know”). She plays a variety of feminine roles, such as a contestant in a Miss Known World beauty pageant (“Here She Comes . . . Miss Amphipolis”), a phoney dealer with a hunchback lover (“Vanishing Act”), a rich Roman lady (“Legacy”), and Cleopatra (“Antony and Cleopatra”).

Of Emma Peel's role-playing, Inness remarks that “her toughness can be seen as only another example of her play with disguises; we

need not fear her if we can believe that underneath the tough exterior a 'true' woman resides," and that "masquerade is often used to reveal that a woman's attitude is only skin-deep" (*Tough Girls* 35–36). Like Magoulick, Inness voices an objection to Emma's revealing clothing. This, and her toughness being further reduced "by having her repeatedly rescued by Steed" (36), leads to Mrs. Peel's having "helped to reinforce stereotypes about women" (37). What Inness seems to overlook here is that both *The Avengers* and *Xena* present a recurrent contradiction between "conventional" feminine roles of low female empowerment (nurse, secretary, dancing girl, vamp, model—my categories 1–3), and those of the forcefully victorious warrior woman (category 10). The way these roles are emphasized actually serves to deconstruct the original contrast by suggesting that the subordinate roles are only "performed," and not ultimately indicative of these female characters' "real" personalities. This is precisely what Joanne Morreale argues in her seminal discussion of *Xena's* beauty pageant episode, for instance when she concludes that "*Xena*... a woman who typically wears a 'male' mask, must masquerade as a woman" (83), and that her masquerades "convey a sense of ironic distance from gender types" (85–86).

Inness's later remarks about the campiness of *Xena*, which is also the topic of Morreale's paper, are apposite, but at the same time ambivalent:

Camp reveals the artificiality of things we accept as the norm (such as gender roles)... Camp creates a *safe space* in which the producers of the show can develop a tough woman *who is clearly identified as make-believe*. The campy quality of the show also enables such a character to be shown on mainstream television and to become phenomenally popular. Camp opens a space in the hero world, allowing *Xena* to exist. *If she were serious, she would never have been so successful*. She helps people get used to the idea of women who are tough, paving the way for the eventual acceptance of more serious female heroes. (173, emphasis mine)

Inasmuch as all fiction, whether visual or verbal, realistic or campy, is make-believe, such statements question the representative truth-value of cultural artifacts like *The Avengers* or *Xena*. These campy shows create fantasy worlds which they simultaneously deconstruct.

Inness also notes that "[t]he self-reflexivity that is evident in *Xena* is one way the show examines and reimagines what it means to be a

hero," pointing to a refreshing self-reflexivity "when it comes to the creation of heroes," then already increasingly shared by the popular media (176). *Xena* shares its "campiness" with *The Avengers*, which Jennifer Stuller describes as "filled with kinky fun, fashion, and story-lines that often bordered on the absurd" (37). Both *The Avengers* and *Xena* are set in what Brian Clemens, creator and producer of the former series, called "a fairy-tale world" (qtd. in Carrazé and Putheaud 169). The two series also lavishly engage in intertextual play. "Too Many Christmas Trees" (*The Avengers*) and "A Solstice Carol" (*Xena*) take off from Dickensian hallucination. Episodes share the standard mystery plot involving an invitation to a mystery house where a series of deaths take place. These include "The Superlative Seven," in which Emma Peel saves Steed (but in which Hana Wild, the only woman among the seven invitees, ultimately saves the day), and "Ten Little Warlords," in which Xena, in the body of Callisto, saves a temporarily mortal war-god Ares' life. Other episodes in these series intertextually share themes of aberrant physicality, such as body-swapping, shrinking, invisibility, and resurrection from death.

What remains problematical to some feminist critics is an uncomfortable incompatibility between heroism and (conventional) femininity. Inness states: "The female hero can rescript stereotypes about what it means to be a woman" (143). And yet even the most unconventional female heroes, including Emma Peel and Xena, share at least some of the qualities that are stereotypically ascribed to women. It is too easy to blame this primarily on (male or masculinist) producers, directors, script writers, sponsors and others involved in, as Magoulick phrases it, "uphold[ing] the military-industrial complex" (751), or, more directly and pragmatically put, in attracting a male voyeuristic audience as prime consumers of what are after all commercial products. It is true that the creators of Emma Peel were more chauvinistic than those of Xena—even though the idea of selecting a female partner for Steed with "man appeal," "M appeal," and hence "Emma Peel," has been ascribed to the "brainwave" of a woman, the production's press officer Marie Donaldson (Rogers 87). Chris Manheim, one of the co-writers of *Xena*, on the other hand, is reported as saying: "We don't write Xena as a woman, we write her as a person" (Stoddard Hayes 136). Most female viewers, including feminists, may very well be interested in seeing women who are sexually attractive to men (or to women, as the case may be) as well as

independently empowered. The female (super)hero does not differ much from, on one hand, the male (super)hero, and, on the other, the stereotypical woman. If the female hero is generally “gorgeous,” so, traditionally, is her male colleague, from Homer’s Achilles and Odysseus down to their modern descendants like Tarzan, Superman, Bond and, not to forget, Xena’s friend Hercules. If the warrior woman is generally dressed to kill (Inness specifically notices the “toughness” as well as the seductiveness of leather, 57–58), so is her confrère—and in either case “dressed to kill” may mean hardly dressed at all.

Emphasizing the heroic aspects rather than the mere warrior-like or tough qualities that women may have and share, or fail to share, with men, the main elements of the stereotypical woman can be set out against those of the female as well as the male hero. This results in the following outlines, which are clearly evident in the representation of such characters in film and on television:

Stereotypical woman	Female hero	Male hero
Passive	Active	Active
Focused on personal appearance and clothes	Naturally beautiful	Naturally handsome
Dainty	Well or scarcely dressed	Well or scarcely dressed
Emotional and irrational	Agile	Athletic
Intuitive	Sensible	Rational
Skills: cooking, nursing, needlework	Intuitive	Savvy
Talkative	Skills: fighting, hunting, inventiveness	Skills: fighting, hunting, inventiveness
Communicative	Silent and restrained	Silent and restrained
Sociable	Communicative when necessary	Communicative when necessary
Incomprehensible, wily, etc.	Loner	Loner
	Inscrutable	Simple

The superhero, male or female, possesses some or all of the defining characteristics, in particular his or her combat skills, to such a hyperbolic extent as to amount to the superhuman. Moreover, the female hero corresponds in many respects with the male hero, whereas she differs materially from her stereotypical sister—hence perhaps that duality so often noted in warrior women. But then, the archetypal male hero’s qualities have an uncanny resemblance to those of the stereotypical or ideal male, whose list of qualities has not been added here because it would be practically identical with that of the male hero.

Unless she is completely androgynous, the modern female superhero—featuring superhuman or at least highly expert fighting skills—does not completely give up stereotypical feminine traits, such as the ability to express emotions or display a conventional feminine attractiveness. Other stereotypically feminine qualities, such as intuition and the ability to communicate, may in fact stand her in good stead. Both Emma Peel and Xena are more than mere warrior women or tough girls whose task it is, whether self-imposed or not, to solve personal problems. Fighting and toughness are part of the hero's expertise, whether male or female.

Like some of her modern or futuristic sisters, Xena is herself a myth created out of myth. Her character deconstructs the exceptional nature of the strong woman in classical or early medieval Western mythology or legend, such as Hera, Athena, and Artemis—all goddesses—or Atalanta, the Amazons, Brunhild, Jeanne d'Arc. Through this adaptation, she rescripts female stereotypes. That *Xena* is set in a quasi-antique mythological context does not mean that such women as Xena or her sidekick Gabrielle cannot exist in our time. More so than in the case of *The Avengers*, the timeless and placeless setting of *Xena* invites viewers to rethink the meaning, not only of issues like good and evil or right and wrong but also those relating to gender identity.

In fact, the most impressive of the many skills exhibited by Xena, as compared to almost any other tough girl, warrior woman, or female hero or superhero on-screen, is her feminine finesse. For example, at the end of "Soul Possession" Xena kisses Ares with both tenderness and passion, as if to answer his naïve "what if" question about her feelings for him so that he will not need to manipulate her or force her hand. Xena then withdraws, saying: "Guess you'll never know." As if this is not yet sufficient feminine ambivalence, making him leave her in some confusion, we realize that although the ambivalence of her true feelings for Ares remains (they may range between none at all to more than she likes to admit to herself), she has in fact been duping him through distraction. While he is distracted by her kiss, which he cannot rationally interpret, she steals from his belt the binding marriage contract for a future life, which only he can destroy. To top it all off, when Ares is able to reclaim the contract in the year 2000, after it has been recovered by modern location techniques, Xena tricks him into destroying the document,

thereby ultimately liberating herself. In a woman's body (ironically also Ares's doing, as she was originally reincarnated in a man's), she can once again reunite with her friend Gabrielle, whose female reincarnation is also present at the scene.

Like Emma Peel, Xena is the ideally cast heroine as envisaged by Von Schnerk: a woman of courage, of beauty, of action—a woman who can become desperate and yet remain strong; a woman who can become confused, and yet remain intelligent; a woman who can fight back, and yet remain feminine. In other words, a woman of many skills, including that of feminine finesse. More than almost any other female hero of the silver screen, but very much like Mrs. Peel, Xena demonstrates that femininity is not a liability but an asset to the hero. Insofar as she is ever a victim, it is by her own choice and for a good cause. “Forged in the heat of battle,” to quote another phrase from the title sequence, but primarily in an impressive combined effort on the part of her creators (male and female) and of the actress who so convincingly and engagingly plays her role, Xena is the ultimate hero as well as the “ultimate woman”—a phrase she applies to herself in “Kindred Spirits.” What men can learn from her is never to scorn a woman's love, never to belittle a woman's generosity, and above all never to underestimate a woman's courage and power. What women can learn from her it would be presumptuous to specify. What everyone can learn from her is that heroism, in word or deed, is not restricted by gender. As a latter-day development of Emma Peel, Xena enables us to recognize that, whether we are “tough” or not, we too may have many skills.

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Wim Tigges is a retired assistant professor and current guest lecturer and research fellow in English-language literature and cultural studies at the Faculty of Humanities of Leiden University. He has published both in English and in Dutch on a variety of literary subjects. The focus of his current research is on aspects of popular culture, both literary and visual. He is the author of *Her Courage Will Change the World: An Appraisal of Xena: Warrior Princess* (2007), and has published four scholarly papers on this TV action-fantasy series.