"Be the Captain they remember"

Fandom Responses to Ageing *Star Trek* Protagonists

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Abstract: *This virtual ethnography focuses on fan responses to the SF drama series Star Trek: Picard and its ageing cast. The revival of a popular SF franchise after a pause of almost two decades, the reprise of iconic roles by visibly transformed cast members and the ensuing discussions in online spaces yield an insight into viewers' attitudes towards representations of age and ageing in popular culture. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of posts in a Facebook group dedicated to the series, this article maps out dominant cultural narratives on ageing and the meaning that fans ascribe to Star Trek: Picard within this landscape. Commentary on the ageing bodies of actors and actresses reveals what some fans consider "graceful" or "successful" ageing. Praise of those who are perceived to have aged "like a fine wine" demonstrates appreciation of older bodies, while reinforcing pressure to maintain attractiveness. Furthermore, online fan discourses show a marked discrepancy in the way male and female attractiveness are discussed, with female stars being continually objectified and sexualized. Conversations on characters' transformations over time often revolve around expectations of continuity and age-appropriateness. Significant changes to a franchise can challenge fans' sense of affective ownership. While ageing bears negative connotations of decline and decreased autonomy, some fans were inspired by Star Trek: Picard's depiction of ageing. The meaning of "ageing well" emerged as successfully managing change, staying true to oneself while still integrating the inevitable changes wrought by time rather than denying them.*

Keywords: *ageing; fandom; Star Trek; gender; cultural gerontology; fan studies; aca/fan; virtual ethnography; intersectionality; SF*

Introduction – Age, the Final Frontier?

In 2020, the iconic character Jean-Luc Picard, played by then 80-year-old Sir Patrick Stewart, returned to television screens for the first time in almost 20 years. In the SF drama *Star Trek: Picard*, interplanetary travel is commonplace, holograms can function as crew of a star ship and hot Earl Grey tea materializes out of nothing with a simple voice command. But one aspect, that *Picard*'s world at the eve of the twenty-fifth century shares with our present, is that people still grow old. With season two having aired in 2022, *Picard* forms part of a revival of the *Star Trek* franchise which began with *Star Trek: Discovery* in 2017. In the pilot episode of *Picard*, we meet the titular character, not onboard a star ship but tending to a vineyard in his retirement. When his assistant urges him to "Be the Captain they remember" ("Remembrance", 1.1), she echoes the expectations of many viewers. By analysing posts in online fan spaces about the transformation of well-known *Trek* characters and actors, I gained a better understanding of how these viewers interpret pop-cultural representations of ageing. Old age in popular culture is typically depicted through stereotyping – frail bodies and senile minds. However, due to a growing demographic of consumers past middle age, there is a trend towards catering to older audiences with more multifaceted depictions (Jones and Batchelor 2015, xii). Cultural gerontologists have identified age-as-decline as a dominant cultural narrative and developed a variety of counternarratives (Gullette 2004, 11). Some narratives centre defying age by maintaining a fit, youthful, attractive body, but this focus on individual strategies obscures underlying power relations and fundamentally reinforces the equation of age-as-decline (Laceulle 2018, 81, Katz and Calasanti 2015, 30). My research showcases another facet of ageing narratives, by asking people to consider ageing well in relation to fictional characters and celebrities they cherish or look up to. Commenters weighed the relatability of vulnerable ageing protagonists against aspi-

rational age-defying heroes. While there was no unified consensus on what ageing well entails, fans agreed that transformations must uphold the continuity of the story universe.

This article pays special attention to intersections of ageism and sexism. As outlined by essayist Susan Sontag (1972), patriarchal societies are more lenient towards male ageing, while women are held to a higher standard of beauty and subsequently suffer for failing to meet that standard in later life (30). Women have been chided as tools of the patriarchy for striving to adhere to sexist and ageist beauty standards but have also been framed as empowered for succeeding within this framework (Hurd Clarke and Bennett 2015, 134). The burden of choosing how to present themselves lies with women, who can only hope to minimize criticism and objectification, but not escape it, as their worth in a patriarchal society is so closely bound to their looks. The experiences of actresses from previous *Star Trek* shows reprising their roles alongside Stewart, including Jeri Ryan as Seven of Nine and Marina Sirtis as Deanna Troi, reflect this double standard.

Researching as an Aca/Fan

My approach is modelled after sociologist Christine Hine's definition of virtual ethnography as an immersive, multi-modal, and multi-sited ethnographic method (2016, 22–25). 'The' internet is not a single research field, but rather consists of various sites and contexts, which are interconnected with life offline and with each other. These enable varying practices and forms of discourse. According to Hine, the virtual ethnographer constructs their own field through "choices about which connections to follow rather than through tracing out a pre-existing location" (2016, 26). For me, this meant centring my research on a private Facebook group with roughly 20,000 members, then following links and references within the group to other sites, such as the subreddit r/startrekpicard. The group functioned as a semi-private, semi-public forum, since only group members could see posts, but most members were not anonymous and shared their 'offline' names, faces and

personal information on their profile pages. This group, where posts and comments were subject to clearly articulated rules, yielded more polite and restrained interactions than on more anonymous sites.[1] For instance, the moderator who gave me permission to pose research questions to the Facebook group requested that I monitor responses for 'hate'-comments, signalling that an effort was being made to cultivate a harmonious atmosphere. Fortunately, my questions prompted 16 responses expressing enthusiasm, frustration and frequently ambivalence, but no hate speech.[2] To protect the privacy of group members, comments will be quoted using pseudonyms and without direct links to the posts in question.

Taking a step back, why study *Star Trek* in the first place? A good deal of scholarship has been devoted to mapping the extensive *Star Trek* franchise, which now spans almost 60 years. This intergenerational reach is part of my motivation for conducting this research. My mother and I both grew up watching *Star Trek: The Original Series* with our families. While we both identify as fans, we practice fandom in different ways, we have different interpretations of characters, and we laugh at different memes. As literary scholar Janice Radway describes in her 1984 study of romance readers, consumers of the same media text can form various interpretive communities with variable literacies. Furthermore, she argues that "[i]nterpretive communities may not simply differ over what to do with metaphors and tropes; they may disagree even more fundamentally over the nature and purpose of reading itself" (Radway 1984, 54). This article does not aim to explain what the 'average' *Star Trek* fan thinks, since *Star Trek* audiences are a heterogeneous group. Some attend

1 From the group's 'about' page: "This is a positive themed group, we don't ignore the bad or the awful, but we just don't focus on it, we want the show to be successful, and get as many seasons as fate will allow us and as many spin-off shows and or movies as we can get out of this fantastic franchise."

2 I posted an explanation of my research interest as a student of cultural anthropology and fellow fan, along with these questions: "How do you feel about actors returning to their characters years later? What do you think about how the topic of age is treated in the story of *Picard's* first season? What does it mean to age 'well' or 'gracefully' in your opinion?"

conventions, some watch and re-watch favourite episodes while others write an academic paper about *Star Trek*.

Similar to fan scholar Henry Jenkins, I confess to being an aca/fan, a "hybrid identity" combining a fan's perspective and an academic one (2006, 4). Positioning myself as an aca/fan and attempting what Jenkins describes as an "insider approach to media ethnography", requires transparency and reflection of what this dual perspective brought to the table, whether it was advantageous or not (2006, 4). As a fan, I can follow online conversations without additional research into worldbuilding or terminology. However, my perspective is also informed by nostalgia, since characters like Spock, Uhura, and Picard were heroes of my childhood. My relationship to *Star Trek* has always been entwined with my evolving knowledge of and identification with feminism. I hold expectations that *Star Trek* stories should promote accepting, indeed celebrating difference. So, I entered my virtual field site keenly attuned to sexism among fans, and perhaps somewhat defensive of my own interpretation of the franchise's core values, which can be summed up by the in-universe axiom: "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations" (Memory Alpha). Writing this article required a conscious effort to make room for critical analysis to exist beside nostalgia.

My material consists mostly of single comments, as well as one longer exchange with a group member, a self-described "walking Sir Patrick lexicon" who goes by "Mr. Picard".[3] Even as an aca/fan, much of Mr Picard's specialized knowledge about the actors and behind the scenes processes of *Star Trek: Picard* was new to me. Despite focusing on just a small portion of the vast online *Star Trek* fandom, my research turned up intense disagreement within this group. Mr. Picard shared that he has left other Facebook groups in which "too much hate and misinformation" were being spread and has blocked users for discriminatory and homophobic content. The negativity towards new entries into the franchise, above all the harsh criticism of attempts to make *Star Trek* more diverse by including queer characters and characters of

3 Our conversation in German has been translated for this publication.

colour, has strongly impacted his enjoyment of fandom spaces. Encountering bigoted or hateful posts in fandom spaces is disheartening, but in the interest of not sweeping unpleasant aspects of fandom under the carpet, let me make two important distinctions. Firstly, anger towards 'nuTrek' needs to be contextualized within broader current discourses on the role of representation and political correctness within pop-culture – this is not a problem unique to *Star Trek*. Secondly, as Mr. Picard explained based on his experience in various online spaces, hyperbolic hate can be a tool to drive engagement with content, get more clicks and, therefore, more advertising revenue (Mr. Picard, 19 August 2021). Further research could investigate the ways in which online platforms provide incentives for media criticism to escalate. Although it would be fascinating to explore many kinds of *Star Trek* fandom, this case study in virtual ethnography remains in orbit around one specific online community of fans. Perhaps future studies can seek out new groups and boldly go where no ethnographer has gone before.

Ageing "Like a Fine Wine"

Members of the Facebook group frequently posted pictures of *Star Trek* cast-members in or out of character, which were then showered with appreciative comments and heart emojis. These posts indicated the tone of interaction cultivated in this specific group. Rather than concluding that there is no derision or dislike towards the ageing physicality of *Star Trek* actors, I observed that to this group of fans it was important to express a positive attitude towards actors and characters. But this appreciation did not take place in a vacuum and can be seen as a reaction to widespread ageist discourses that ascribe decline, frailty, and a loss of attractiveness to growing old (Gullette 2004, 8). After all, there would be no need to explicitly comment that Sir Patrick Stewart is handsome "with hair or bald" or that he has "aged like a fine wine" if there were no latent expectation of decline. Additionally, appreciative comments were often paired with humorous self-deprecation ("my knees would never allow for that pose"). Photos of Stewart with his wife Sunny Ozell

(who is 43) provoked both compliments and light mockery. While some envied the "gorgeous couple" and Stewart, who "still rocks it", a joke about Stewart having "married his nurse?" implied an inappropriate age-imbalance. This comment presupposes not only that age entails frailty, but also employs the stereotype that care work is women's work. Still, relationships of older men with younger women are far more normalized than the reverse (Sontag 1972, 36–37). As critical gerontologists Toni Calasanti and Neal King (2015) write: "[T]he ways in which people mark or perceive bodies as 'old' vary with gender, race, class, and sexuality. For instance, women, accorded status in part for their sexual attractiveness to men, appear to be old at younger ages than do men" (196). I encountered comments about Marina Sirtis and Jeri Ryan that expressed a sexual fantasy, as well as innuendo-laden jokes ("I'd *still* bang it lad lol" [emphasis mine], "jerry ryan in a cat suit ooooh yeeeah" [sic]). There was no similarly proprietary or overtly sexual tone in comments on male actors. Jeri Ryan's costume changes, from a skin-tight catsuit in the late 90s and early 2000s to a less sexualized, more rugged outfit in *Picard*, was bemoaned by some, but deemed more appropriate by others. Ryan's clothes, body, appearance, and by extension her age, are treated as a core aspect of her character, while Captain Picard's clothes and appearance are treated as more incidental. Stewart may be called "handsome" or "sexy" by his admirers, but his character is not discussed time and time again with regards to sex appeal. Using Sylvia Spruck Wrigley's detailed examination of age in *Star Trek*, the discrepancy can be traced back to the *The Original Series* (2022, 423–424). In the 1967 episode "The Deadly Years" (2.11), members of the Enterprise crew find themselves rapidly ageing. While Captain Kirk and his senior officers primarily struggle with deteriorating physical and mental capability, the one female crewmember afflicted is the one most upset by how she looks. But filmmaking has come a long way since 1967. An interview with Marina Sirtis and Brent Spiner highlights how the former perceives the oft-cited double standard of ageing (Sontag 1972):

> SIRTIS: [T]he man who invented that high-definition camera – and it was a man, because a woman would have never fucking invented

> it, excuse my French. May he rot in hell for all eternity!
> SPINER: Right. But see, in my case: CGI… so I look fine!
> SIRTIS: Yeah, it's all right for you, Mr. Android, the rest of us look like something the cat dragged in… (Sirtis and Spiner 2020)

Sirtis' exclamation implies that women are more conscious of a need to hide flaws in their appearances and are subjected to greater pressure to do so. The tone of this interview is light-hearted, but losing work-opportunities due to ageing is a serious concern. The sf drama *Advantageous* (2015) offers a dystopian deconstruction of where a cultural obsession with youth and beauty may lead. Struggling to provide for herself and her daughter, *Advantageous*' protagonist must subject herself to a risky new medical procedure to attain a younger body. In addition to physical agony, she suffers the erasure of her identity, the humiliation and rejection of having her 'less-marketable' traits, including her race, overwritten with a conventionally beautiful young, white face. *Advantageous*' intersectional critique of how ageism pits women against one another and exploits the desperation of those whose "erotic or cultural currency" is beginning to wane, grows more relevant as digital de-ageing continues to develop (Hurd Clarke and Bennett 2015, 134).

The pressure of ageing appropriately was felt by female members of the fan group as well:

> As I age, going from single woman, to married, to mom, and now grandmother I have asked myself what image I am trying to maintain, what makes for "graceful ageing"? I have tried to stay healthy and young looking. My husband appreciates that, but I need to do that for my own mental health. I feel better when I look better. I have to balance that with what is age appropriate. No tattoos, nose rings or revealing clothing can really disguise that I am 58. I feel the same about my favourite characters on Trek. I am thrilled to see them age, but I don't want to see them become worthless couch potatoes, or cringe-worthy for trying too hard to be young and cool. (Margaret, 18 August 2021)

The phrasing here connotes a sense of obligation. Calasanti and King (2015) explain that ageing individuals are often held responsible for fighting off the effects of time, as though ageing were a moral deficiency: "If people control their health, and others can infer that health from how their bodies look, then those who appear unhealthy and old can be seen to deserve their exclusion" (196). To further complicate the situation, denying one's own age was also described as inappropriate: "Ageing gracefully as an actor is like De Niro, or Pacino. They take on roles that fit their stage in life. Ageing badly is Tom Cruise. How many 60-year-Olds still jump motorcycles?" (Anthony, 18 August 2021) These comments evoke a sense of a delicate balance. How is one meant to satisfy demands to be active, to take responsibility for maintaining one's health, so as not to be "worthless", but simultaneously accept one's limitations with "grace, humility and dignity"? How to know when you are "trying too hard" or need to try harder? Commenting on a photo of Jeri Ryan with "53 and still beautiful" might be intended as a compliment, but it also reinforces the ageist equation of age as decline, decay, and deficiency. Such comments present celebrities as aspirational while exerting subtle pressure by suggesting that they are still beloved *because* they have succeeded in not ageing too visibly. As Sontag (1972) has observed, these exceptions "do not challenge the rule" (36). Failures are sanctioned with ridicule or speculation about plastic surgery. Ultimately, while this group of fans directed positivity towards the ageing bodies of *Trek*-actors, ageing "like a fine wine" emerged as a result of managing one's age with care, effort, and dignity. In other words, ageing well is not attainable for everyone. Cultural gerontologist Margaret Cruikshank (2013) has pointed out that modern societies value self-determination without accounting for the social inequalities which it is contingent upon, treating older people as though they were a homogeneous group with equal resources to manage ageing (10). As an alternative, Cruikshank suggests "comfortable" ageing. By becoming aware of the "social forces" at play in ageing, older people can be liberated from the individual responsibility to defy age. Perhaps this process, which Cruikshank (2013) calls "learning to be old", could make the tightrope of age-appropriateness a bit easier to balance on (210).

Mind the Brand Gap

Star Trek: Picard does not shy away from showing the iconic Captain as a changed man. In the very first episode, we learn that Picard has resigned in protest from Starfleet ("Remembrance", 1.1). His age and faded relevance are repeatedly emphasized – the receptionist at Starfleet headquarters does not recognize him, he takes his favourite tea decaf, he is called "a relic" and "mothballed" ("Maps and Legends", 1.2). The first season forces its protagonist to face his mortality head on, while the second deals with Picard coming to terms with emotional wounds from his childhood. *Picard*'s depiction of the challenges of ageing, whether played for laughs or drama, resonated strongly with some fans' personal experiences. Joe explained becoming aware of his own nostalgia and idealization of Picard, a bittersweet coming to terms with change:

> I've said it before here in this group: getting to see these people again felt like home. It was a family reunion. Picard had aged and he still had that passion and intrigue we knew and loved but it was like getting to see your own Father, who for you as a kid growing up was the strongest, bravest, wisest, and then seeing him aged and now you are the adult... Does that make sense? Picard was the same man. But you got to see his fragility too. (Joe, 18 August 2021)

Commenters on the subreddit r/startrekpicard – which, unlike the Facebook group, did not nudge members towards positive posting – took a bleaker view of the characters' transformation. One described the aged Picard as an uncomfortable reminder of the fate that awaits everyone. Another, who mentioned watching the show with their father, found Picard's dismissal at Starfleet headquarters in the show emblematic of the disrespect with which older people are treated in the present.

Looking at more melancholic responses begs the question of how much change is too much change? Reviving a franchise or story bears the risk of causing controversy. Media scholar Matt Hills uses the term "brand gap" to describe the discrepancy felt by fans of the series *Twin Peaks*, whose expectations were drastically challenged by the show's revival (2018, 317). Briefly stepping into the neutral zone of aca/fan-

dom, I experienced a sense of "brand gap" myself when I watched the first episode of *Star Trek: Discovery* in 2017. The tone of the show was far darker and more cynical than I had expected. Though I overcame my disappointment and ended up enjoying *Discovery* more and more each season, I recall how jarring it was to turn on *Star Trek* expecting a hopeful vision of an sf utopia and see the protagonists bloodily stumble into war instead. I have found that many criticisms of *Picard* run along a similar line – the new series was breaking continuity to a degree that the universe and characters were unrecognizable: "Picard was a broken down wuss. This is not the man who kicked Son'a ass, not the man who gave the famous drumhead speech, or the speech about Data's rights, etc. And as for Seven? Clearly, she forgot everything she learned under Janeway because now she's a murdering vigilante." (r/startrekpicard) By referencing specific events from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager*, this commenter demonstrates a depth of knowledge and a strong emotional identification with the shows and characters. As Bethan Jones illustrates using the example of *X-Files* fans, this level of "affective ownership" may develop through intense investment of time, attention, and emotional energy in a media text (2017, 343). People who have spent years watching, reflecting on, and discussing *Star Trek*, who have perhaps spent money on merchandise, or created their own fan works, understandably develop a firm idea of what makes the beloved franchise good, and what a revival should look like (Jones 2017, 350). *Star Trek* has been a part of pop-culture since 1966, has been worked on and developed by scores of people, many of whom bridged the increasingly blurred fan-creator divide and helped to establish practices like fanfiction and conventions, which have since become cornerstones of fandom – is it any wonder that there is contention about what the *Star Trek* brand ought to be?

Mr. Picard mixes wit and frustration in his description of fan reactions to the 'new' Picard: "He's only wanted as a glowing never-ageing hero. Which he never was in TNG [*Star Trek: The Next Generation*] either, […] but people just don't pay close attention. Sometimes I think they're watching a completely different series than I am" (Mr. Picard, 18 August 2021). This comment suggests that divergent interpretations are not ex-

clusive to so-called 'nuTrek', but rather that arguments over the new series reveal previous divisions between interpretive communities. During our conversation, I was struck by Mr. Picard's careful distinction between himself as a fan of Sir Patrick and long-time lover of Jean-Luc Picard, and "the Trekkies": "I aged with Jean-Luc. I never saw him – unlike the Trekkies – as a static character whose story ended with *Nemesis* [the 2002 film]. For the Trekkies he remained that Jean-Luc and now they're shaken because he's suddenly so different for them." (Mr. Picard, 18 August 2021) To Mr. Picard it is clear that "Trekkies" are disappointed with the new series because they idolized Picard as a role model, while he has always seen Jean-Luc as fallible and changeable.

The consistent use of the character's first name corresponds with Mr. Picard's insistence that the role of "Captain" is just one aspect of the man, even a "mask" worn by Picard. This view of the character is not incompatible with the aged, frail, embittered Picard that other fans take issue with or are saddened by. So perhaps instead of asking how much change is too much, we ought to ask what makes some changes palatable? As a science-fiction series, *Star Trek: Picard* boasts a cast of characters who do not all age as ordinary humans do. In the case of the android Data, played by Brent Spiner, computer animation was used to make Spiner's appearance more like it was 18 years ago. In fact, Spiner is quoted as saying that CGI-technology was part of what convinced him to return to the role (Lovett 2020). Even so, some viewers were dissatisfied with Data's appearance:

> Getting to see Riker and Deanna again was a delight. Again, akin to a family reunion. I needed to see them. I needed to see my family. […] Age was handled well in my opinion. It felt natural. These seemed like natural progressions. For Data's character – visually it was rather off-putting. But I understood the reason. I just wish more attention to detail could have been done. It was Data. But it wasn't Data all in the same breath. But I liked getting to revisit with him. (Joe, 18 August 2021)

While the ageing of humanoid characters felt like a "natural progression" to Joe, seeing a character who is supposed to be a machine age was "off-

putting". Data and Brent Spiner were not given the same leeway to visibly age as other actors, because an aged Data troubles the continuity of the story universe. Given the heterogeneity of viewership, opinions are bound to diverge on how characters would 'naturally' develop over time. As the conversation with Mr. Picard demonstrates, some viewers are far more comfortable with embracing changes than others. Season two presented a similar conundrum with the return of Guinan and Q, played by Whoopi Goldberg and John de Lancie, two characters who were originally presented as ageless in *The Next Generation*. Though my research unfortunately concluded before season two aired, the fan group reacted to the announcement of Q's return with ambivalence similar to Joe's comment on Data. Many (myself included) were excited to see Q again, but wary of how his character might develop. When I asked group members how they would feel about Q being digitally de-aged, most replies favoured the character appearing older, but with a plausible in-universe explanation. Season two did just that, as both Guinan and Q's altered appearance was not ignored, but relevant to their respective subplots about personal growth.

Warts and All

Ageing well, ageing successfully, ageing gracefully – what do these ambiguous terms imply? Medical researcher John W. Rowe and psychologist and social scientist Robert L. Kahn outlined a medical framework of "successful ageing" which comprises maintaining physical and mental health as well as interpersonal relationships through making the 'correct' lifestyle choices (Rowe and Kahn 1997, 433). This model has become quite widely used but has been called into question by critical gerontologists more attuned to intersecting social inequalities (Katz and Calasanti 2015). Rowe and Kahn's emphasis on individuals' actions to fend off decline fails to address the injustice of marginalizing people whose physical, mental, or social wellbeing has decreased with age. Instead of questioning power relations which make certain demographics more vulnerable to illness or isolation than others, the model places responsibility

on individual people to avoid negative consequences of age for as long as possible (Calasanti 2016, 1095). While members of the Facebook group did not cite "successful ageing" verbatim, I recognize elements of Rowe and Kahn's framework in their replies to my questions, mainly a desire to remain healthy and active instead of, to quote Margaret, "couch potatoes" (18 August 2021). Ageing gracefully was often associated with physical appearance, but some responders named non-physical attributes: "I think many long-time fans of *Star Trek* are getting older ourselves, so we enjoy seeing older characters portrayed as heroic, wise and active. Also, seeing people like Betty White, Mel Brooks and Dick Van Dyke who are still sharp and funny while pushing 100 gives one hope for your own future brain!" (Jonathan, 18 August 2021) Jonathan emphasised the feeling of ageing in tandem with an object of fandom, which illustrates how significant narratives can be as a source of inspiration for people entering old age.

Many commenters showed apprehension of ageing, explicitly or implicitly through phrases like "warts and all", but were nonetheless able to imagine ageing positively:

Ageing gracefully. That comment has never sat well with me. In my experience, those using this comment were judging older people's looks rather than looking at the person they have become. I like the term ageing well and to me that means being comfortable in your own skin, warts and all. It means accepting who you've become and continue to strive to be a person that people want to be around. (Susanna, 18 August 2021)

> I think Picard's essence remained despite his frail voice. I admit that seeing him more frail and less tough looking as in TNG hit my heart. It reminded me of my own fears around vulnerability of the body and being old, not just older. But what compellingly stood out is the way Picard handled it with incredible grace, humility and dignity. He stood for an ideal, not his ego as THE great Picard with that tough body and mind. He played a softer, more emotional Picard. His greatness was in his character's humility and determination to do the honourable thing, that cool head despite the aching heart. Patrick Stewart is incredible. Stunning in fact. In an age where hon-

> our is old fashioned, the way he played Picard made honour sexy and relevant. (Sara, 6 December 2021)

Whether you focus more on the body or on personality, it would seem based on these comments that self-acceptance and self-determination are at the core of 'ageing well'. Health is not dependant on lifestyle choices alone, as an individual can't control genetics or health care infrastructure – but anyone can make the decision to strive for humour, humility, or honour. Another fascinating aspect is how fan's criteria of ageing well resemble the qualities which Sontag ascribes to conventional masculinity: "[C]ompetence, autonomy, self-control – qualities which the disappearance of youth does not threaten." (1972, 35) According to Sontag, men can more easily accept the physical consequences of ageing as part of human existence, while women as a "more *narrowly* defined kind of human being" struggle to be seen (and see themselves) as worthy separate from their fleeting beauty and sexual desirability (1972, 33). The ideal of ageing well which commenters described to me included the freedom to be judged by more than your looks.

In an attempt to overcome the binary of age-as-decline and age-defying narratives, philosopher Hanne Laceulle (2018) calls for "narratives of becoming" containing "both the potential for growth and flourishing that later life harbours, and its radicalized confrontation with existential vulnerability" (258). Put another way, declining physical health or increased dependence on others does not preclude self-realization. Laceulle builds upon the work of cultural gerontologists such as Gullette (2004) and Cruikshank (2013), who have argued for the socially constructed nature of ageing, but focuses on reframing the ideal of self-realization to offer a meaning-generating cultural narrative on later life (Laceulle 2018, 126).

To at least some fans in the community I studied, *Star Trek: Picard* functions as an example of a narrative of becoming. The depiction of ageing was even framed as continuing an established *Star Trek*-ethos of inclusivity and being ahead of its time: "Brilliantly written, as ever *Star Trek* explored one more thing, boldly going where no one has dared to go before, a heroic captain ageing on mainstream TV and an amazing actor

daring to touch vulnerability with such grace in front of us all." (Sara, 6 December 2021) Season two sends an arguably even stronger message that one is never too old to change, as Picard confronts childhood trauma and opens himself up to a romantic relationship. In this aspect, *Picard* aligns more closely with Laceulle's (2018) desire for representations of continuing development than with those fans who focused on continuity and defying age. Instead of "self-realization as a process of becoming the best that is in you" (Laceulle 2018, 254), some members of the fan group articulated self-acceptance as staying true to yourself. This suggests an idea of an unchanging true and authentic self, which Laceulle does not subscribe to (2018, 213). Her deconstruction of essentialist authenticity and concept of the narratives of becoming is echoed by Mr. Picard, who emphasised repeatedly, that he viewed Sir Patrick Stewart and the character of Jean-Luc Picard as subject to change and welcomed these changes:

> So I've seen Sir Patrick change as an actor and as a person (that's why I can understand perfectly why Jean-Luc has changed as well, but many fans who don't know Sir Patrick like I do have problems with this). He himself said that with age he's becoming more and more relaxed and is trying out more and more what he could never try out as a teenager. He's more open about his feelings (he likes to kiss Sir Ian McKellen and other men often), he's more open about roles he probably wouldn't have taken back then, and he values doing things and playing characters he's never played before. Variety is the big buzzword of his career. So he's getting richer in experiences, impressions, etc. as he ages. (Mr. Picard, 18 August 2021)

To Mr. Picard, change throughout an actor's lifespan is not a problematic breach of authenticity, but a positive development. I would argue that the text of the show supports self-acceptance entwined with accepting change as well, as the first season culminates in Picard being reborn into a synthetic android body – but a body which looks exactly like his aged human body did up to that point, a body that is programmed to die after living a usual human life span. Despite its commentary on the challenges of ageing, *Star Trek: Picard* ends its first season not by 'clean-

ing up' its protagonist's age as though it were a problem, but by keeping it on board as an integral part of him. It would be naïve to ignore practical production reasons for this writing choice, but in-universe the choice remains salient: Picard could have been given any synthetic body, and yet he is given a body resembling his 'old' self as closely as possible. Continuing this thread, season two presents Picard as perhaps more vulnerable than ever, by showing him as a frightened child as well as the old man shaped by the traumatic events of childhood. However, the season concludes with Picard choosing not to alter his past and thereby his personality, instead accepting it and forgiving his younger self. In doing so he is "unshackled from the past" ("Farewell", 2.10) and is free to become, as Laceulle would say, "the best that is in him".

Achieving Equilibrium

Star Trek: Picard ultimately refuses to settle on the side of age-as-decline or age-defiance. The series instead presents Jean-Luc Picard as both "the Captain they remember" and a changed man – a continually changing old man – which may help us to understand the wide variety of reactions from fans. This article has revealed that even a comparatively small online group of fans is not a homogeneous collective. Fandom is not purely worshipful, but can encompass disappointment, wistfulness, and conflict. Additionally, the responses from this Facebook group have demonstrated that negative opinions do not simply stem from a generalised dislike of aged celebrities or of contemporary storytelling, but more specifically from a perceived breach in continuity. To a portion of audience members, *Star Trek: Picard* successfully integrates change and vulnerability into the ageing casts' stories. Others hold the opinion that the series fails to tell a story that is coherent to what came before and fails to stay true to the spirit of the characters and narrative universe.

As gendered double standards continue to shape the experience of ageing, advances in anti-ageing technologies have the potential to increase pressure on women to defy age. How the experiences of fans and creators are shaped by sexism and intersectional discrimination in fan-

dom spaces, such as the widespread use of objectifying language briefly touched upon here, deserves further study.

In conclusion, while commenters seem to view ageing as a transformation with many negative consequences, they nevertheless hold hope that ageing can be weathered well. This transformation was not conceptualized as inevitably affecting everyone the same way, but as a tricky process that must be successfully managed. The meaning of ageing well thus emerged as achieving an equilibrium between staying true to yourself, taking charge of the aspects of ageing which are in your own power, and accepting those vulnerabilities which we must all inevitably face, whether we live in the twenty-first century or at the dawn of the twenty-fifth.

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