Research Article

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Double Trouble: Gender Fluid Heroism in American Children's Television

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Abstract: Gender fluidity makes only rare appearances on North American television, and remains almost completely absent from programming for children. In contrast, transgender characters are making inroads into mainstream North American TV for adults. Still, media depictions of transgender people in the late 1990s and early 2000s have largely shown them as aberrations, having illegible and/or unstable identities, joining mainstream Euro North American society which tends to medicalize and pathologize transgender identities. Thus, too often the representation provided serves only to reinforce binaries by making the character exceptional and noting their unconventionality, or to highlight gender fluidity as a problem. Examining the animated streaming TV series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018–2020), we use scholarship on gender fluidity to critique the show's representations of genders in addition to and beyond male and female. Looking at *She-Ra* through this lens, the show challenges assumptions about princesses, villains, helpers, and heroes. Ultimately transgressing traditional categories, the princesses and their allies, in their own distinct embodiments and self-presentations, use their differing magical and other skills to fight enemies in the Evil Horde to protect their planet, Etheria.

Keywords: transgender children's TV

I (Lou Lamari) first heard about *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018–2020) from word around the transgender community that there was a show on Netflix that created one of the first characters on television who explicitly uses they/them pronouns. On first watching *She-Ra*, it felt nostalgic to me, with its subtle references and connections to the *Sailor Moon* animated series that I grew up with. *She-Ra*'s fast-paced 22-min episodes contain stories highlighting the importance of friendship, love, and integrity. These moral arcs make for a feel-good series that anyone could appreciate. However, the series goes beyond normative expectations of children's television to also include a myriad of marginalized identities within its main characters and cast. For us co-authors as gender-fluid individuals, the representation within this show felt significant within North American society which often overlooks us. But we also appreciate how the creators have developed characters who demonstrate a range of identities, and the ways they have used voice actors across race and ethnicity to underscore their progressive, intersectional (see Crenshaw) depictions.

Gender fluidity, which refers to individual identities and self-presentations not fixed according to a rigid, simple male-female binary, makes only rare appearances on North American television, and remains almost completely absent from programming for children. In contrast, transgender characters, instantiating a form of gender fluidity involving those whose sex/gender identity differs from that assigned to them at birth, are making inroads into mainstream North American TV for adults. Still, media depictions of transgender people in the late 1990s and early 2000s have largely shown them as aberrations, having illegible

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and/or unstable identities (Halberstam, *Trans*, 92), joining mainstream Euro North American society which tends to medicalize and pathologize transgender identities (89).[1]

Thus, too often the representation provided serves only to reinforce binaries by making the character exceptional and noting their unconventionality, or to highlight gender fluidity as a problem. In particular, the transgender person's deceptive, even criminal, essence is embodied in their status as transgender. Sometimes the fact that the character identifies as transgender is the sole motivator for their appearance in an episode of an otherwise cis-focused programme (see "Victims or Villains"). And ironically, with rare exceptions (see Erbland), transgender characters are played by cisgender (non-transgender) actors (see "12 Cisgender Actors"). Additionally, white actors predominate, furthering a limited misconception of gender fluidity and transgender and avoiding an intersectional perspective that gender is complexly interwoven with other aspects of identity, such as race, class, ability, sexuality, and so on.

The failure to identify, address, and respect the broad range of gender fluidity in North American society causes harm to individuals who so identify. Limited representations may set back progress towards the acceptance and welcoming of folks who do not fit a binary. Alternatively, positive representations may herald the possibility of a radical cultural shift in perspectives. Children's media like *She-Ra* offer a reasonable place to begin addressing and challenging conventional negative attitudes; young audiences who view gender-fluid inclusive and positive content may grow up with a better understanding, and a more welcoming attitude, towards all. From our viewpoints as gender fluid individuals, we illustrate here how depictions of gender nonconformity that range through multiple aspects of identity and display qualities of approval, self-love, and heroism can contribute to greater recognition and support. We note that such representations, far from being new, have historical depth across cultures, including North America (see e.g. Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire; Greenhill, "Neither a Man nor a Maid"; Halberstam, *Trans*; Halberstam), "Animating Revolt".

Our focus show, the reboot of *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985–1987) created by Larry DiTillio and J. Michael Straczynski ("She-Ra: Princess of Power"), is an animated Netflix series created by American cartoonist and producer Noelle Stevenson (who self-identifies as nonbinary, see Stevenson). It debuted in 2018 and aired for five seasons leading up to its finale in 2020. The story takes place on the fictional planet Etheria, where a young woman named Adora (voiced by Dominican-American actor Aimee Carrero) finds out that she is a princess, destined to lead a rebellion against the Evil Horde, colonizers who control the planet through fear, imprisoning and killing those who oppose them. In this universe, not all princesses are white, wear gowns, and live in castles (though some do); they possess a variety of physical appearances, races, ethnicities, sex/gender presentations, interests, and housing. However, they have in common special powers, specific to their identities and interests.

Examining this animated streaming TV series, we use scholarship on gender fluidity to critique the show's representations of genders in addition to and beyond male and female. Looking at *She-Ra* through this lens, the show challenges assumptions about princesses, villains, helpers, and heroes. Ultimately transgressing traditional categories, the princesses and their allies, in their own distinct embodiments and self-presentations, use their differing magical and other skills to fight enemies in the Evil Horde to protect their planet, Etheria.

Representing Gender and Fluidity

Gender hegemony in North America appears in the form of white cisheteropatriarchy, which ultimately acts to support binary gender roles. Those who rarely (knowingly) encounter members of a specific minority are

1 We use the terms "gender fluid," "nonbinary," and "gender non-conforming" interchangeably to represent people whose identities and/or presentations challenge mainstream and dualistic understandings of sex and gender. We employ transgender as a category under the gender fluid/non-conforming umbrella. In our community, using "trans" is welcomed, but for absolute clarity, we use transgender here instead, as we understand trans may be understood elsewhere as othering. For more information see "LGBTQ2S Toolkit."

likely to rely on media portrayals in order to form opinions on that group (see Kelso). Gender fluid identities, including transgender ones, too often carry a social stigma, stemming from cisheteronormativity (the assumption that everyone should be cisgender and heterosexual, and that if they are not, they display a serious character flaw), and patriarchal societal values, which act to reinforce strict gender binaries. That is, North American patriarchy dictates that men must be masculine, and women must be feminine. Further, it holds that these identities are not only opposites but also immutable. The patriarchal imagination posits that once a person's sex is determined at birth, it is entirely fixed, and maps simply onto gender; the individual retains the essential qualities of being male or being female – and only one of those – for life.

This prescription does not allow for the fact of gender fluidity and variation in sex to transgress these categories, nor does it sanction nonbinary identities. Further, it frequently encourages those who do not identify as cismale or cisfemale to seek to pass as one or the other for social, cultural, and economic reasons. Positive media representation can be effective in addressing these kinds of social stigmas (Solomon and Kurtz-Costes 44), including those towards gender non-conformity, such as cross-dressing, androgyny, and using nonbinary language such as gender-neutral pronouns. Across media, telling stories containing complex representations of gender fluid identities that challenge cultural norms may lead individuals and society to shift towards having more positive attitudes towards such presentations.

Although the representations of queer identities (used to describe gay, lesbian, bisexual, nonbinary, and sometimes transgender individuals who challenge mainstream norms and categorization) and gender fluidity have increased and improved in media recently, too often characters depicted represent homonormativity. In the latter neoliberal formation, as Lisa Duggan sardonically puts it, "There is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture or of an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous queer politics. Instead, we have been administered a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever" (189). The creation of homonormative characters acts to uphold and sustain heteronormative values while promising a depoliticized queer subject (Kelso 1059). Such formations "support[] existing systems of oppression in exchange for institutional recognition" (Taylor 137). These safe images mostly benefit those gender fluid persons who already have relative privilege, such as white and middle-class folks. Normative inclusion of queer and transgender people actively excludes those who do not fit neatly within binaries, or otherwise exist on the margins.

That media with gender fluid representation are generally created for adult and teenage audiences (Kelso 1059) results in only rare depictions of queer and transgender children, especially prior to puberty. Gender fluid children may be too disruptive and challenging to the cisheteronormative social order and hegemony for conventional mainstream creators and audiences. The term "symbolic annihilation" (coined by Gaye Tuchman to refer to women in twentieth-century mass media) addresses the media effects theory that a lack or under-representation, often based on categories such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and class, operates to maintain social inequality (Kelso 1060). In action, such a scarcity or absence of non-conforming individuals in media serves to deny gender-fluid people their identities and can promote harmful stereotypes about their prevalence. Symbolic annihilation in mainstream media erases gender non-conforming individuals and community alike.

The male/female binary entrenched in the hegemonic North American mindset is cultural, not natural. When European settlers arrived on Turtle Island, some of which is now called Canada, they noticed that the Indigenous peoples included genders beyond male and female. As colonial history documents, settlers saw nonbinary Indigenous folks as deviating from the Christian European norms they presumed were normal. Seeing such identities as backwards and degraded, the colonizers sought to erase them from society. The expurgation and marginalization of transgender, nonbinary, and gender fluid identities in North America is an integral part and result of both the historic and the ongoing colonization of this land (Robinson). Colonial perspectives created a template for settler society to reinforce cisheteropatriarchal values. We explore the implications that pluralistic representations in children's television may have for improving cultural attitudes towards gender fluidity, demonstrating how characters in *She-Ra* challenge the symbolic annihilation of other gender presentations.

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power

Adora is the main protagonist of the show. Found as an orphan, she is raised on an Evil Horde battleship as a Force Captain, trained to lead Horde squadrons into battle. One day she finds a magical sword in the woods, and is faced with the truth about her identity the sword reveals to her, that she is the next embodiment of the mystical warrior hero She-Ra. On this adventure, she meets Princess Glimmer (voiced by Japanese American actor Karen Fukuhara) and her best friend Bow (voiced by mixed race American actor Marcus Scribner), who are fighters in the Princess Rebellion Army. They teach Adora that the Horde are in fact the bad guys, and eventually recruit She-Ra to join them in the rebellion. She-Ra is an elemental princess, who gets powers from the runestone in her sword. When Adora activates these powers through wielding the magical sword of Grayskull, she transforms into She-Ra, Princess of Power, an 8 ft tall, bold, blonde, Wonder-Woman-esque superhero.

Among She-Ra's gifts are strength, and the ability to heal ailments with her sword. Before Adora came, there had not been a She-Ra for a thousand years. When she is brought back to Glimmer's home, the latter's mother, Queen Angella (voiced by English Hindu actor Reshma Shetty), the red-haired, white Queen of the realm of Brightmoon, which opposes the Horde, identifies her as the protagonist of the oral history of a hero who would return to bring balance back to Etheria. Throughout the series, Adora and her team meet new princesses and Princess Rebellion fighters along the way. The femme Adora/She-Ra, though a beautiful, young, blonde princess, is a brave fighter. Despite her conventional femininity, she holds values and behaves in ways that do not always follow the hegemonic norms for women in hero stories.

In the many battles Adora faces throughout the series, she often saves the day without the help of men – or others. For example, in season 5, episode 5, "Save the Cat," Adora demonstrates her heroic qualities when she decides to embark on a rescue mission to save Catra (voiced by white American actor AJ Michalka). A force captain for the Horde, she is Adora's nemesis. The pair were raised by the Horde as if sisters. Catra appears part human and part cat, with a large mane, tail, cat ears, and claws. She also has feline-like abilities, such as jumping and exceptional hearing. Due to her training, Catra has few worries about following rules and instructions. However, when Adora leaves the Horde to join the rebellion, Catra feels betrayed, and this ignites her ambition to please her superiors in order to exact revenge.

Even though Catra is her foe, Adora decides to save her from Horde Prime, because even someone who has inflicted harm on her in the past deserves redemption. Horde Prime, a tyrant who created clones in his image to be his soldiers, seeks to colonize the universe in order to bring peace by wiping out all living beings on each planet he targets. His clones are connected with the hive mind, so he can access each one's memories, and inhabit their bodies. While on Horde Prime's ship, Adora finds Catra near death, struggling to breathe. When enemy guards arrive and have the two surrounded, asking if Adora is "ready to co-operate," this threat triggers powers that she does not know she possesses. Having destroyed She-Ra's sword, Adora thinks she can no longer transform into the princess. However, this scene reveals the true power behind She-Ra – that Adora holds so much magic within herself that she does not require the sword to be a hero. This passage also teaches a valuable lesson about personal strength coming from within, rather than needing validation or activation from external sources.

She-Ra follows its magical protagonists as they embark on missions, overcoming obstacles that they face along the way, until they ultimately save the day due to their bravery, strength, and wit. Hero stories like these fulfil humans' need for meaning, hope, and inspiration (Allison and Goethals 189) and reveal how social values can be introduced and reinforced through relevant fictional media (Smith 425). Each episode has a moral arc, teaching lessons about strength, friendship, and love. For example, in season 5, episode 12, "Heart Part 1," Adora is on her way to the centre of the planet, to prevent a disastrous energy bank from destroying it. In order to do so, she must absorb all of its energy into her own body. As She-Ra, Adora feels obligated to complete this mission, as she is the only one strong enough to have a chance of surviving. On her journey there, she meets Mara, a long-deceased former She-Ra, who asks:

> Mara: But at what cost? I never wanted to die. I sacrificed myself so you would never have to. Why are you doing this, Adora?

Adora: It's better this way. My friends will be safe. They'll be happy.

M: And you? What do you want when this is all over?

A: It doesn't matter. I'm She-Ra. This is what I'm supposed to do.

M: You're worth more than what you can give to other people. You deserve love too.

This episode offers a positive lesson to those who might extend themselves too far for the sake of helping others. It teaches that every individual is valuable and deserves to be loved. Ultimately, hearing this lesson from Mara does not prevent Adora risking her life to save her friends and the planet. However, she does so after reflecting on her intentions, and goes through with her original plan because of the love she feels for her friends, and not wanting them to get hurt, rather than from obligation alone. This development moves away from Adora's previous calls to action, which often result from her sense of responsibility to save the day, simply by virtue of being She-Ra. Instead, here Adora acts heroically thanks to the love and care she feels towards others.

Glimmer takes the throne of Brightmoon after her mother Queen Angella's death. In season 3, episode 6, "The Portal," Horde leader Hordak (voiced by African American actor Keston John) opens a portal which creates an imbalance, causing Etheria and time itself to fall apart. In order to close the portal and save the planet, the protagonists are told, She-Ra's sword must be retrieved from inside it, and whoever enters the portal will be trapped there for eternity. Queen Angella dies after sacrificing herself to save the others.

As a princess of power, Glimmer can teleport and create blasts of energy. Physically, she has a small stature, a high voice, and pink hair, and she wears feminine clothes. Despite this outward femininity, she has tomboyish tendencies such as her butch stance with her feet hip width apart, firmly grounded. Unlike her mother's hyper-feminine, slender, curvy physique, Glimmer, though short, has thick limbs and exudes a more gender-neutral energy than might be expected of someone whose name evokes a conventionally feminine image. When she walks, she does not glide, unlike overtly feminine characters like Angella. Similarly, her mannerisms consist of harsh, deliberate movements, rather than soft or gentle actions that may be expected from a princess robed in pink and purple.

Although a princess, Glimmer has a child's temperament and stubbornness. Among depictions of rebellious children who often get themselves into trouble, young boys and princes are more common than young girls or princesses like her. Consider, in contrast, *The Dragon Prince*, another Netflix show which instantiates gender nonconformity and progressive intersectional representation, but nevertheless focuses on two young hero prince brothers, whose adventurous rambunctiousness is conventionally male (see Bacchilega and Greenhill). Glimmer offers a fictional example of how individuals may exhibit gender non-conformity while associating with their sex assigned at birth. Despite her impulsivity and immaturity early in the series, she throughout shows her strength by always finding a way out of trouble either through her own powers or with the help of allies and friends.

One of these allies is Huntara (voiced by white American actor Geena Davis), a tall, strong, and clearly masculine-presenting fighter for the Princess Rebellion. While women and princesses commonly engage in combat on Etheria, Huntara has perhaps the most obvious visibly gender non-conforming bodily appearance. She physically towers over the other Rebellion fighters, is particularly strong, and has traditionally masculine features such as her large, well-defined muscles and strong brow. The design of Huntara's physicality signals a strength usually reserved for male characters in animation. Further, compared to the original television series, she appears much more masculine in the remake. Though some of her physical characteristics are similar, the 1985–1987 series' Huntara has features more conventionally acceptable for a woman. Her stance is less broad, her bodily contours are softer, and her face appears generally more feminine. In contrast, the remake's Huntara has large, body-builder musculature, and a size more associated with male superheroes than with their female counterparts.

However, as in all examples of gender non-conformity in *She-Ra*, Huntara's exceptional size, large muscles, and butch mannerisms never occasion any comment from other characters. In her debut episode, she flirts with a female bartender, suggesting that she is queer. While other characters notice her interest in

women, her apparent same-sex orientation does not lead them to treat Huntara differently. Nor does her perceived gender fluidity, instantiated in her – in binary terms – contradictory embodiment, occasion any notice in the diegesis. Instead, Princess Rebellion troops revere her for her exceptional fighting skills.

Throughout the series, Huntara is highly respected by everyone on Etheria, from both sides of the conflict. After defecting from the Evil Horde, she moves to the Crimson Waste, a vast, dangerous wilderness, and becomes the leader of its people. As such, and after joining the Princess Rebellion forces, Huntara is a force to be reckoned with. For example, in season 3, episode 2, "Huntara," she explains how, "There are only two rules in the Crimson Waste. One, the strong make the rules. And two, don't annoy [Huntara] when [she] eats." No one, regardless of gender or position, dares to question her authority. As a consequence of this personality trait, she intimidates most other characters. However, Huntara is not bold to a fault, as she apologizes for her misconceptions about those she has deemed weak. For example, in season 4, episode 2, "The Valley of the Lost," she is rude, and even misogynistic towards Perfuma (voiced by Venezuelan Cuban American Genesis Rodriguez) for her softness and affinity to flowers. After Perfuma receives a victory for the rebellion in battle in the Crimson Waste, Huntara apologizes for underestimating her, explaining, "I have been wrong about a lot. I was wrong to leave my home … . I hope I was wrong about you, because we need your help … . I'm sorry I doubted you."

Despite her unconventional stature, Huntara never becomes marginalized. On the contrary, she always decides her own fate, from leaving the Horde, to ruling the Crimson Waste, to joining the Rebellion, to finally going solo. In season 4, after returning to the Crimson Waste on a quest and seeing that her former home is in disarray, Huntara feels that she is needed there to restore balance, and respectfully leaves the rebellion. No one ever argues with Huntara or challenges her leadership as a woman in authority. *She-Ra* depicts her as trustworthy, honest, and reliable, effectively challenging the tradition of mainstream media depicting gender non-conformity as dangerous, treacherous, deceitful, and unpredictable.

Perfuma is the princess of Plumeria. After Bow, Glimmer, and Adora save Plumeria from the Horde, Perfuma is inspired to help Etheria and thus is the first to join the princess rebellion after Adora. Perfuma gets her powers from the Heart Blossom tree, which gives life to Plumeria. The people of this realm are unapologetically positive minded. Perfuma's magic enables her to have control over all plant life, especially flowers. In addition to shooting flowers out of her palms, this princess can draw roots from the ground to tie someone down and can attack enemies with poisonous vines.

Scorpia (voiced by white Canadian actor Lauren Ash) is an androgynous elemental princess ruled by a black garnet runestone. Before Hordak's arrival on Etheria, Scorpia's family ruled the Fright Zone. Having never fitted in with the other princesses, they defected from the princess alliance to join the Evil Horde. Like Huntara, Scorpia begins as an antagonist of the princesses, working as a Force Captain for the Horde, but she later switches sides to join the Princess Rebellion. In addition, she has the powers of super strength, and in season 5, control over lightning and electricity. The series heavily implies that Scorpia is queer, because like Huntara, she expresses romantic interest in other female characters.

Scorpia is identified using she and her pronouns, but she also presents gender fluidity. She and Huntara are represented similarly, with broad shoulders, towering height, and super strength. However, the two characters have vastly different personalities, mannerisms, and skills, showing range and variance among gender fluid characters. Starting out as a member of the Horde, Scorpia shows moral character growth as she leaves the antagonists' side to join the Princess Rebellion. While a member of the Horde, Scorpia is insecure, has a poor sense of self, and lacks overall confidence when dealing with superiors. After switching sides, she gains self-assurance and becomes an important member of the Rebellion forces. This story arc exemplifies her growth as a character in a hero story. Scorpia has scorpion-like parts such as pincers for hands and a large, poisonous tail. She has short, platinum hair in a style that may suggest her queerness, along with a flat chest that appears to be bound. Personality-wise, Scorpia stands out for her earnestness among other characters who often make use of deceit.

Perhaps the most remarkable gender non-conforming character in *She-Ra*, and one who frequently lies and misleads, is Double Trouble, who first appears in the fourth season, voiced by nonbinary actor, writer, and activist Jacob Tobia. When introduced as a new character, Double Trouble explains that they are a shapeshifter, a quality Tobia themself finds personally significant and also associates with transgender:

> When people are like, "Oh, what's your gender identity?," nonbinary is what I name because it's like shorthand … .But when I was growing up, particularly how my relationship to my body works, my dream identity would be shapeshifter. I would love to be able to physically change my body. Just live in the world as different genders, whatever I wanted to, physically as well as emotionally. It's really cool to play a character with the skill set that trans and nonbinary folks have: navigating the world and shaping how we're putting on ourselves often to survive or to get by. It's really a survival skill for folks in the trans and nonbinary community, to shapeshift and blend in to be as you need to be, when you need to be it for your safety. Double Trouble has taken that survival skill and turned it on its head into a superpower – into something magical that really shakes the foundation of an entire world. I wish I could shapeshift in real life physically, although I think I'm pretty good at shapeshifting, sartorially and emotionally already. (Quoted in Rude)

The interpretation of Double Trouble as trans is shared in media descriptions of the character. For example, "Double Trouble follows in the footsteps of other animated shows that have paved the way with regards to transgender and nonbinary representation" (Brown). An article on their webpage notes: "GLAAD had the chance to chat with [creator] Stevenson and Tobia about the queer history of She-Ra, Double Trouble, and the importance of queer and transgender stories in kids' and family programming" (Deerwater). Double Trouble is referred to exclusively with they/them pronouns by all other characters. Even the most evil being in the show's universe, Hordak, uses the correct pronouns for them. It appears that no one on Etheria values one gender over another, exhibiting their egalitarianism.

Double Trouble combines gender-fluid characteristics. They have no discernible gender within a binary, when considering hegemonic markers of what makes someone look like a man or a woman. They have green skin, reptilian eyes, and long, pointed ears. Their slim body is dressed in a black, unisex unitard, and they wear black booties with a considerable heel. Tobia's voice as Double Trouble is quite androgynous, as is the way they carry themself, gliding with each step as if on a catwalk or walking across a stage in musical theatre. When not posing as someone else, thus representing nonbinary, they shapeshift into others regardless of gender, potentially manifesting transgender. However, we cannot be certain they would be considered transgender within the *She-Ra* universe, since we do not know if the binary categories of male and female exist within their species. Double Trouble works for both the Princess Rebellion forces *and* the Evil Horde, an ambivalent character switching sides as they please. In particular, their usual purpose is to masquerade as someone else in order to infiltrate and spy on the other camp, then report back to those who sent them.

Double Trouble's most significant characteristic in the show is that they are a shapeshifter. They frequently deceive, echoing the ways that transgender individuals are seen as untrustworthy in both real life and fiction. Too often, mainstream media represents transgender people as dishonest and unstable (Halberstam, *Trans*, 96). Double Trouble fails to counter these notions, disturbingly echoing the notion that transgender folks are duplicitous, tricking others by misrepresenting themselves as someone they are not. They can be considered an anti-hero. Although they possess prodigious power, intelligence, and wit, they often choose to use these strengths to inflict harm and create chaos. Yet their story arc, unlike conventional transgender representations, is not about hardship. Instead, being nonbinary helps them perfect roles of any gender when impersonating someone to get what they want.

The lack of conflict around Double Trouble's gender identity challenges the need for transgender pain, the phenomenon of over-representation of narratives wherein a transgender person suffers, while storylines containing transgender joy are under-represented, or not presented at all. Madelyn Detloff explains how unpleasure and pain are present in archetypal narratives of butch and female-to-male (FTM) transgender people: "While there are narratives of butch or FTM subjectivity that are not angst-filled … [T]hese tend to be less often cited as narratives about the butch or FTM experience than pain-filled narratives such as *The Well*, *Stone Butch Blues*, or *Boys Don't Cry*" (93). The phenomenon is not unique to those who are AFAB (assigned female at birth), but also applies to male-to-female transgender people, and non-binary people of any birth-assigned sex. Double Trouble directly counters this trope, making their gender fluidity an asset. This move marks a departure from the canon of superheroes as strong men and women in capes. Seeing the incredible things that Double Trouble and others can do with their powers, while recognizing them as gender fluid, is an example of how positive representation in children's media may have an impact on gender non-conforming children who do not see themselves represented in the stories they consume.

Male-identified characters are not absent from the series, though they are in the minority. Bow is one of the main protagonists, a non-magical member of the princess rebellion, best friends with Princess Glimmer. He lovingly nicknames the trio of Glimmer, Adora, and himself the "Best Friend Squad." Bow is a sweet mannered, brilliant-minded, master archer. In combat, he combines his facility with technology with his archery skills, making arrows that do all kinds of things such as shoot nets, ropes, and water. Bow's eternal crop-top wearing combined with his personality and two gay dads suggest queerness. Further evidence comes in Bow's attitude of awe towards Sea Hawk, a charismatic sailor who brings humour into battle scenes with his grandiose but usually misplaced sense of self. Like Bow, Sea Hawk is not magical, but uses his skills to aid the princess rebellion. However, at the end of season 5, Bow and Glimmer confess their romantic love towards each other, indicating his sexuality is probably plural.

Hordak is the leader of the evil Horde. His army base is called the Fright Zone, and his goal is to conquer and rule Etheria. As revealed in season 3, episode 2, "Huntara," Hordak is a clone of Horde Prime, who was seen as defective and thus sent into battle to die. However, he transported through a portal and ended up on Etheria. His mission to conquer the planet comes from his need for validation, to be seen by Horde Prime as valuable. Hordak appears to be towering and strong, but is actually scrawny and frail until he puts on his armour. As a leader, Hordak is ruthless, and treats his soldiers as disposable. This was the motivation for Huntara to defect from the Horde.

Other than Bow, who appears in 49 episodes, eclipsed only by Adora/She-Ra's 52, few men are major characters. Glimmer (48), and Catra (47) both eclipse Hordak (38), and after ten further female characters, next comes Sea Hawk at a meagre 21 episodes. However, there is no lack of masculine energy or representation in the show, with characters such as Huntara, Scorpia, and Catra embodying this trait. The character arcs of these fluid, female-identified characters expose the possibilities of non-hegemonic binary genders.

Duplicating or Challenging Gender Norms?

GLAAD co-founder, Vito Russo, created a test to analyse how [2S]LGBTQ[IA+] (Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans/Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Plus other identities that cannot be subsumed in conventional sexes, genders, and/or sexualities) characters are portrayed in media, inspired by Alison Bechdel's similar test for appropriate inclusion of women (see Selisker). In order to pass this test, the following must be true of a production:

> The film contains a character [who] is identifiably [Two Spirit] lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, [queer, intersex, asexual, and/or plus]. That character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity (i.e., they are made up of the same sort of unique character traits commonly used to differentiate straight/non-transgender characters from one another.) The [2S]LGBTQ[IA+] character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect, meaning they are not there to simply provide colorful commentary, paint urban authenticity, or (perhaps most commonly) set up a punchline. The character must matter. ("The Vito Russo Test")

She-Ra clearly passes this test, challenging media performativity by creating diverse characters with complex gender-fluid personhoods. Through its cisgender female characters, *She-Ra* certainly challenges hegemonic expectations around womanhood and femininity, with numerous female warriors and leaders. However, *She-Ra* also duplicates some aspects of harmful transphobic rhetoric in Double Trouble, making them an antagonist not a hero to cheer for, as are other gender fluid characters. The only arguably transgender character, whose (sometimes) evil character manifests from their deception, works against the other positive narratives about gender fluidity.

A more positive narrative that transgender women are real women, transgender men are real men, and nonbinary identities are valid becomes especially important to make this claim as transgender exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) launch campaigns claiming that transgender people are fakes, deceptively pretending to be another sex. Detloff explains the term "false consciousness" to illustrate the transphobic idea that transgender people are pretending to be someone they are not (90). Those who use this term misconstrue

sex and gender as inherently connected, with gender merely the expression of one's sex assigned at birth. This limited understanding prohibits the possibility of gender fluid identities and is harmful to actual transgender people.

However, Double Trouble's position could be seen from another perspective as well. Their powers are fun and likely desirable to many more than voice actor Tobia themself. Perhaps creating a character who is unabashedly confident, capable, and powerful is *She-Ra*'s way of elevating transgender identities. Double Trouble is not a hero, and is allowed to be imperfect, however we would prefer their evil be accounted for in the narrative as is the case for other characters such as Catra and Hordak. No secondary arc challenges Double Trouble's negative representation and evil aspect, no backstory or motivation is provided.

For example, Hordak, primarily an evil character lacking a moral compass, benefits from small glimpses where his humanity peeks through. Entrapta, a science-obsessed, genius-minded princess, helps Hordak improve the technology in his laboratory. He grows to enjoy her company. When she is sent into exile without his knowledge, he never admits to missing her, but it is obvious that he does, nonetheless. In the series finale, Entrapta, who is equally fond of Hordak, meets him on Horde Prime's ship. Hordak ultimately sees the power of love over the power of evil, and turns against his creator, Horde Prime, to save the princesses and Etheria.

Similarly, Catra, nemesis and enemy of Adora and the princess rebellion, gets redemption. Though her initial position is working for Hordak to help the Horde conquer and rule Etheria, when Horde Prime becomes the series' main antagonist, rendering Hordak powerless, Catra is conflicted as to where her loyalty stands. After being saved from Horde Prime's ship, she joins with the princesses to stop the destruction of Etheria. In the finale in season 5, episode 13, "Heart Part 2," Catra's vendetta against and sense of abandonment by Adora resolves, as the two confess their romantic love for each other.

Particularly given that media representation of queer men remains more common than representation of queer women and people of other genders (Asher 65; Kelso 1062), *She-Ra* offers an alternative, avoiding the cultural phenomenon of femme erasure – the absenting of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals who present as feminine from queer and other spaces. Used to describe people of all genders, femme erasure particularly applies to AFAB queer people who present as feminine, like Adora. That the audience may not have hitherto considered her queer could be attributed to femme erasure. Adora as queer femme contrasts with Huntara, a queer masculine-presenting woman. Femmes are often not seen as queer until they are in the presence of more visibly (as conventionally understood) queer folk:

> While sexual identity is visible only relationally, normative assumptions link gender performance to sexuality. This produces confusion when it comes to the femme, whose performance of femininity is assumed to connect her to heterosexuality. Generally, femmes are made visible as queer women when they are seen as part of a couple. Historically, femmes have been most recognizable when paired with butches, whose overt masculinity marks the relationship as legibly sexual, partly because the butch-femme dynamic is assumed to recall heterosexual norms of attraction. By making explicit the sexual economy that she is a part of, the butch's presence makes the femme recognizable as something other than heterosexual. (Musser 56)

Although Huntara and Adora are not romantically connected, this phenomenon concerning butch-femme visibility can still hold true when looking at platonic relationships.

Though the realm of Brightmoon has men, the women are most often in charge. Princesses' feminine physical appearances range from the small, unintimidating, but remarkably powerful Glimmer, to the soft speaking, beautiful Perfuma, who wields power over all plant life. In *She-Ra*, characters' presentations of gender fluidity are only one quality among many; their characters emerge holistically. In the *She-Ra* universe, this norm manifests a radical difference from North American society. Friends and enemies alike treat characters according to their qualities and abilities, not due to their physical appearance, sexuality, or place of origin. While this openness to visible difference could represent a positive model for viewers, it also follows conventional American mythology that such a meritocracy unquestionably actually exists.

While mainstream media too often reinforces rigid binaries including gender, *She-Ra* challenges them. In conventional TV, being transgender has negative value, or a character's gender fluid characteristics present an obstacle to their being able to overcome hardship. In *She-Ra*, by contrast, a character's gender

forms only one aspect of their life, experiences, and story arc. For example, Adora's gender fluidity stems from her bravery, strength, and personality, so unlike stereotypical female characters within children's media. With the exception of Double Trouble, whose transgender identity is central to their story line, other characters' gender fluidity is rarely the sole motivator for a story plot within the *She-Ra* universe. Countering the usual under-representation, misrepresentation, focus on extremes, or pity (Kelso 1078), showing a range of gender fluid characters with emotionally satisfying lives in *She-Ra* offers viewers alternatives to the same old same old.

Although *She-Ra* can be enjoyed by teens and adults, it was produced as a children's show, one of the pioneers in creating gender fluid fictional characters on a mainstream media streaming service. Since children engage in world-building employing, among other inputs, the media that they are exposed to, it is strategic to engage young people through inclusive television to build more tolerance and acceptance of gender fluid individuals in society (see Kelso). But *She-Ra* may be so successful at creating a positive representation of gender fluidity since the cinematic universe, the planet Etheria, and its inhabitants, are fictional. In this fantastic universe, transphobia does not appear to exist.

The people of Etheria have a system of understanding gender and its possibilities that offers an alternative to Euro North American conceptions. The audience can understand that Double Trouble is nonbinary because they are exclusively referred to using gender-neutral pronouns and have no discernible gender. However, they are never explicitly called out as other, and no labels are attached to their gender nonconformity. Similarly, Huntara flirts with a woman, implying that she is (in Euro North American terms) queer, but is not assigned any such designation. While labels can be useful for people's self-understanding, they often segregate marginalized communities into unwanted categories. One such, "the closet," refers to the positioning of those who are 2SLGBTQIA+ but who have not "come out" to others, either publicly or privately, to specify that they do not identify as straight. Of course, mainstream culture presumes everyone is straight. The lack of labels in *She-Ra* implies that there is no closet, and therefore no need to come out. While coming out can be an important step in a nonbinary person's life, it can also put them at risk. *She-Ra* effectively creates a utopian society in which 2SLGBTQIA+ people are fully liberated from the othering that too commonly happens in real life.

Representation of sex, gender, and sexuality in an open and progressive fashion is significant, but *She-Ra*'s intersectionality extends to how it offers good examples of race-ethnicity mixing in representation and casting. Adora's animated image is white and blonde; Angella's is white and red-haired; Glimmer's is white and red-haired. All are voiced by actors of colour. Huntara has purple skin and is voiced by a white actor. Two princesses have animated representations that correspond with the actors who play them: Perfuma (a character of colour) and Scorpia (white). Race has great relevance to intersectional perspectives, which recognize the interdependence of aspects of identity. Yet erasure of race becomes commonplace in discussions of gender wherein whiteness becomes an "unmarked category against which people of colour are judged" (Lucas 101). Too often, categorization of gender happens through a white frame, with stereotypes and values imposed upon individuals and communities, and those who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) opposed and othered to a white norm.

In animation in particular, media producers too often think they can avoid criticisms of whitewashing (using white actors to voice characters of colour) because voice actors are not actually seen. However, as the casting by stop-motion animation creators Laika shows, elements of character, knowledge about an actor as a person, and even their facial features and bodily kinesics can affect representation of animated characters (see Greenhill, *Reality*, 58–60). Further, avoiding using actors of colour leads inevitably to "the circular logic of systemic discrimination that works against actors of colour. They tend to be less familiar than white-identified actors; they get less work because they have less experience; so they get less exposure and are thus less familiar" (59). *She-Ra*, in contrast, successfully avoids linking represented race with voice actor, showing an excellent example of both diverse casting and diverse animation.

Indeed, the *She-Ra* universe messes with earthly understandings of race, creating new phenotypes such as characters with bright pink and purple skin. Indeed, new species appear – not only Double Trouble, but others who appear as congeries of human and non-human animals, like Scorpia (part scorpion) and Catra

(part feline).[2] Further, Huntara's purple skin and straight white hair allows her to stand for a free exploration of gender without the expectations or connotations of racial stereotypes.

These alternatives to the cultural mainstream, where princesses are superheroes; not everyone is white; non-white characters are not either the first to be killed or the villains; and gender non-conformity is accepted, are too often absent from academic discussion due to the idea that fiction, and particularly fantasy, is a utopian and naïve view that fails to address "real" engines of power (Halberstam, "Animating Revolt" 265). This misconception ignores the importance of positive representation in media, and how seeing stereotypes challenged can lead to better understandings of the complexities each individual in society holds. It also ignores the power of fiction and fantasy, which can offer their own forms of double trouble against the depredations on progressive thought and action perpetrated by those who claim to tell the truth. Often, fiction is more honest and more accurate than the rantings of conservative politicians and their cronies (see Greenhill, *Reality*, 229–231). We prefer *She-Ra*'s open-ended discussion about gender that also addresses what it might mean to be human, or for that matter, non-human. Embracing the inclusion of racially diverse, gender fluid, and transgender fictional characters may lead to greater cultural acceptance and a shift in individual attitudes. Perhaps if we had such characters to whom we could relate growing up, it would have been easier for us to understand our nonbinary gender identities as something normal, non-deviant, and positive.

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