



**Universitat**  
de les Illes Balears

## **MASTER'S THESIS**

***SHE-RA AND THE PRINCESSES OF POWER*  
(2018): INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF A  
QUEERNORMATIVE CHILDREN'S CARTOON  
SERIES AND ITS GROUND-BREAKING  
APPROACH TO QUEER THEORY**

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**Master's Degree in Modern Languages and Literatures**

**(Specialisation/Pathway *Literary and Cultural Studies*)**

**Centre for Postgraduate Studies**

**Academic Year 2020-21**

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Key words:

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Dissidence; *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been an increase in queer representation in children's audiovisual media, despite it being a generally traditional medium. This has been recognized by organizations such as GLAAD, which implemented in 2018 the category of "Media Award for Outstanding Kids and Family Programming," following the rise in queer representation in children's television shows. However, despite this growth, not all television series have the same depth in characterization or queer world-building that *She-Ra and the Princess of Power* (2018) puts forward. This cartoon series, a reboot of the 1985 eponym series created by Filmation Associates, challenges the pervasive stereotypes commonly associated with gender and sexuality, while also naturalizing queer relationships in its overall plot. It is through its characters and their relationships, that the show encourages its young viewers to step into a world devoid of binary stereotypes, which values all forms of love and self-expression without the prejudices that can be found in traditional media or even the outside world. This research project will analyze how *She-Ra and the Princess of Power* takes old-fashioned categories of difference to make them get merged, inflect, and transform one another, thus creating a queernormative world within children's media.

**Key Words:** Queernormativity; LGBTQ children's media; Gender Studies; Queer Theory; Sexual Dissidence; *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

## Resumen

En los últimos años ha habido un incremento en la representación de identidades *queer* en los medios audiovisuales para niños, a pesar de ser un medio con discursos muy tradicionales. Esto ha sido reconocido por instituciones como GLAAD, la cual implementó en 2018 la categoría de “Premio mediático al mejor programa infantil y familiar” tras el aumento de las representaciones *queer* en las series de televisión infantiles. No obstante, a pesar de este crecimiento, no todas las series tienen la misma profundidad en la caracterización ni en la creación de mundos *queer* que *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018) lleva a cabo. Esta serie de dibujos animados, un *reboot* de la serie homónima de 1985 creada por Filmation Associates, desafía los estereotipos dominantes comúnmente asociados con las cuestiones de género y sexualidad, a la vez que naturaliza las relaciones *queer* en su propia trama narrativa. A través de los personajes y sus relaciones, la serie anima a sus jóvenes espectadores a adentrarse en un mundo libre de estereotipos binarios, que tiene en cuenta todas las expresiones de amor y de expresión propia sin los prejuicios que existen en otros medios más tradicionales, o incluso en el mundo real. Este proyecto de investigación analizará como *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* utiliza antiguas categorías de diferencia para que se combinen, influyan y transformen unas a otras, creando de esta manera un mundo *queernormativo* sin etiquetas dentro de los medios audiovisuales infantiles.

**Palabras clave:** *Queernormatividad*, medios audiovisuales infantiles LGBTQ, Estudios de género, Teoría *Queer*, Disidencia Sexual, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

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## 1. Introduction

In 2014, the landscape of children's cartoons was forever changed by the final episode of *The Legend of Korra*, which confirmed the romantic relationship between the protagonist and her best friend Asami. This was a pivotal moment for two main reasons: the protagonist and her love interest were neither white, nor straight. It was the culmination of a change that had begun in 2005 with the release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. These two animated series subverted the storytelling and world-building at the time with its positive and diverse racial representation, body positivity, and by breaking gender and sexual stereotypes (J. Robinson 2014). Other children's cartoons followed a similar trend by including characters that stood outside the sexual and gender binary that had been normalized in said programming for most of its history. Animated television series such as *Adventure Time* (2010) and *Steven Universe* (2013) continued with the "growing trend of representations that challenge or subvert traditional notions of gender and sexuality" (Reinhard, Olson, and Kahlenberg 2017, 1) and their critical and popular acclaim paved the way for other series to continue the same groundbreaking work. Barring their popularity among viewers of all ages, GLAAD has also recognized the importance of these shows among the youngest generation of queer viewers. For this same reason it established the "Media Award for Outstanding Kids and Family Programming" in 2018, and the newest "Media Award for Outstanding Children's Programming", awarded for the first time in this year's ceremony. Both *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* have received two and five nominations respectively, while *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* has received three nominations and won the award in the 32<sup>nd</sup> annual GLAAD Awards. This increase in representation partly responds to the fact that "(LGBTIQA+) young people have gained attention as a category of social and cultural identity distinct from LGBTIQA+ adults" (McInroy and Craig 2017, 32) and as a result, many television studios have decided to include queer characters in shows whose target audience are children or teenagers.

What these shows have in common is the exploration of a wide array of formulations regarding gender and sexuality. These different configurations inspire the viewer to wonder, on the one hand, if the world they are seeing resembles theirs in any way; and, on the other, if their reality can be reconstructed to successfully incorporate the diverse representations of gender and sexuality they see on screen. Taking as example one of the abovementioned shows, in the series *Adventure Time*, the viewers are transported to a post-apocalyptic world in which

its characters come in all shapes and sizes, where the rulers are magical princesses, and its main character, Finn the human, “is a hero whose multidimensionality, complexity, and frailties are a far cry from the dominant tropes associated with masculine leads” (Jane 2015, 237). Likewise, in *Steven Universe* the representation of agender or transgender characters highlights the importance of children understanding that “all identities are socially dependent, and that queer bodies or identities can present both a space for wonderfully subversive gendered play and open up different (and sometimes negative) social interactions based upon that gender play” (Dunn 2016, 55). By creating the series *She-Ra*, its developer Noelle Stevenson wanted to “inspire people to create more queer relationships and characters who are textually queer whose lives affect the plot, and having as wide variety of those as possible” (Knight 2020). This is accomplished, on the one hand, by including a spectrum of queer sexual and gender identities; and on the other hand, by creating a truly queernormative world in which queer identities are not seen as deviant, but rather a constitutive part of the universe.

This research project offers an intersectional analysis of Noelle Stevenson’s *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, which I consider to be the only truly queernormative children’s series released to this date. This show, which is addressed to seven-year-old children and above, follows the story of Adora, a girl who discovers the sword of protection which allows her to transform herself into the legendary warrior She-Ra. Then, she decides to join the Rebellion and leaves behind the Evil Horde as well as her best friend and love interest Catra. Their relationship and their conflicts are what drive the plot forward, culminating in a mutual declaration of love in the series finale. By doing this, the show’s developer places a queer relationship at the core of the narrative arc when usually queer characters could only occupy a secondary position. The incorporation of a wide array of gender identities, including a non-binary character, and sexual orientations, provides abundant samples to identify and scrutinize the ways in which these queer identities are explored through its characters, and a world that shows them as complex and complete, rather than a simple stereotype. The main objective of this research is to explore the depiction of gender and sexual identities in the show and how it moves away from heteronormative configurations in order to create a queernormative universe. The semiotics of gender identities within the series will also be examined, as well as the naturalization of queer desire, and the landmark that this audiovisual product represents in terms of LGBTIQ+ representation and empowerment.

With this objective in mind, this research project is divided into four main sections. In the first section, the theoretical frame of this work will be established through a general overview of the principal authors of queer theory, queer studies, and media studies, as they will provide the critical background for the analysis of the series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* that will be carried out. Since queer studies and queer theory usually undertake analysis of adult programming, this section will also include relevant studies that have been made using queer theory in the field of children's series. Additionally, the show will be contextualized within the recent history of children's queer animated series, starting in the year 2010, acknowledging that this increase in queer representation has been pushed forward by a distinct socio-political context that began in the early years on the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This first section will also examine some of the main characteristics of queer media that the series presents, as outlined by Benshoff and Griffin (2004); The second section will carry out an in-depth intersectional analysis of the representations of gender that can be found in the series and how they break away from traditional "heteronormativity" (Warner 1993). In order to do so, the focus will be placed on three topics: firstly, the representation of female characters will be examined, as well as the ways in which their femininity is portrayed, their body is designed, and the roles they occupy within the overall plot; secondly, male characters will be explored, to scrutinize whether there are any indications of toxic masculinity in their characterization and their relationship towards other characters, mainly the female ones; this second section will conclude by paying attention to the characters who identify themselves as non-binary and transgender, their characterization, allegiances, as well as the ways in which other characters refer to them.

In the third section, the means in which sexuality is explored and represented on traditional cartoons will be examined in contrast with the innovative portrayals depicted by *She-Ra*. This analysis will start by showing the usual modes in which LGBTIQ+ characters have been portrayed, and how *She-Ra* breaks these traditional modes of representation. It does so, firstly, by providing depth and complexity to all of its characters; secondly, by disenfranchising the heroes and the villains from their binary compositions of "straight hero" and "queer villain"; and finally, by allowing its characters to evolve and grow throughout the narrative, allowing them to move from one part of the hero-villain spectrum to the other. By doing so, the series provides its young viewers with rich characterizations that go beyond the binaries of good and evil, decentering the normative narrative, and placing emphasis on values

such as showing empathy, forgiveness, and allowing everyone to express their emotions in a safe environment. Finally, in the fourth section, the focus will be placed on how all these elements contribute to the creation of a queernormative world. Instead of considering individual modes in which gender and sexuality are treated in the series, the analysis will be centered in the much more interesting relationships that are portrayed in the show and how they evolve over the course of the five seasons. This will be crucial in order to prove that the characters' desire and romantic relationships contribute to create a queer atmosphere in line with Fielding's queernormative values (2020).

## 2. *She-Ra* in the History of Children's Queer Media

When Noelle Stevenson was asked to helm the reboot of the 1985 series *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, she knew she wanted to give its fans something familiar but more in line with contemporary children's animation.<sup>1</sup> As with his webcomic series *Nimona* (2015), Stevenson wanted to incorporate LGBTIQ+ themes and feminist representations of characters, being further encouraged by the positive reception and commercial success of other trailblazing shows such as *Steven Universe* (T. Robinson 2018). From the start, the development of the series rested on the desire to create a diverse and complex series, which could be enjoyed equally by children and adults. Much like J.J. Abram's new *Star Wars* trilogy, Stevenson wanted to appeal to a new generation of viewers, while also continuing the legacy of the original *She-Ra* and *He-Man* universes. In doing so, they collaborated with a multitude of artists in order to create a show that would celebrate diversity in all of its forms, ranging from character design, color schemes, music, animation styles and so on. There was of course backlash from certain [male] fans, who claimed that *She-Ra*'s new design was not "sexy enough," "too boyish," or that it made her look like a "boyish lesbian", which of course created its own uproar from feminists who defended not only Stevenson, but fought against the misogynistic discourse that women, even girls in children's cartoons, should be "sexy" so they can appeal to a male audience (Chen 2018). This MA thesis will not only focus on the discourses that surround female and male representation in children's entertainment, but it will also address all the ways in which *She-Ra* has fought back against these normative discourses and advocated instead for a queernormative view of gender and sexuality that until now has not been the norm in children's entertainment media.

Most critics discussing children's entertainment media tend to overlook the overwhelming lack of queer representation, focusing instead on issues of consumerism and cultural value. In fact, when one does a search on children's popular media, namely films or television shows, the results are not nearly as numerous nor as insightful as those carried out in its adult counterpart. This oversight is "perhaps partly informed by a vestigial sense of popular culture as somehow inauthentic - as lacking in cultural or ideological value, or as merely a further imposition of 'adult' culture on children" (Buckingham 2000, 49).

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<sup>1</sup> As stated by her tweets, Stevenson makes use of all gender pronouns, so I will use she/he/they pronouns interchangeably throughout this research project whenever I need to refer to them. (Stevenson 2020)

Furthermore, in terms of children's viewing habits, Buckingham also noted that "[children] frequently inverted cultural hierarchies and resisted adults notions of 'good taste'" (2008, 232). Nevertheless, the study of children's entertainment should be of equal if not higher importance, given that children's cartoons, literature, and toys act as "socializers". The representations of gender and sexuality that children are exposed to play a pivotal role in their development, because the "communication of gender or sexuality stereotypes shapes how people see themselves and others, and thus how people interact with one another" (Reinhard, Olson, and Kahlenberg 2017, 3). A child that has been exposed to diverse representations on screen and in real life will be more likely to accept children and adults who express their gender and their sexuality outside of societal norms. Regardless, the intransigence to include diverse and adequate LGBTIQ+ representation in children's media has always used the argument that children should not be exposed to queer themes as they are deemed "too adult", and so, "the denial of childhood homosexuality or queerness is in line with the wish that gay people not exist" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1991, 23).

This denial of queerness as part of mainstream culture is partly what led to the creation of Queer Studies, and subsequently Queer Theory in the 1990s. Some of the earliest scholars in this field include Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Warner, all of whom were inspired by Foucault's work, who viewed sexuality as a social construct, stating that

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network (...) linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (Foucault 1978, 105)

Within this field, further discussions about the construction of sexuality are not limited exclusively to lesbian and gay identities, but rather they try to understand how other aspects of sexual identity are constructed, such as heteronormativity, which "has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world" (Warner 1993, 8). Though Queer Theory has tried to rid itself of the binary oppositions that made lesbian and gay identities the antithesis of heterosexuality, some authors have pointed out that "a palpable marginalization at best, and erasure at worst, surrounds the theoretical question of bisexuality [which] cannot be represented through (...) binary formulations, blurring as it does any easy distinction of their terms" (Angelides 2001, 172). This exposes the

internalized heteronormativity that still plagues Queer Theory; however, it has proved to be a great point of departure for the creation of new and more fluid spaces of inquiry within the academic field, and one that can be seen more evidently on social media platforms. Now more than ever, teenagers are identifying as part of the LGBTIQ+ community, often adopting different terms to be more inclusive such as the “Alphabet Mafia” or simply using the term queer to “set themselves outside both the heterosexual as well as the gay communities, which, many claim, function as coercively, and as judgmentally as each other” (Grosz 1995, 216). However, queerness is not a term that needs concrete definition, standing as it does for a multitude of meanings and ways of being, moving beyond the reductive “not heterosexual” meaning and instead becoming “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1994, 7).

Queerness is not experienced in the same way or to the same degree by all queer subjects, and often when “faced by the ‘comforts’ of heterosexuality [they] may feel uncomfortable (...). Discomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one’s body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled” (Ahmed 2004, 148), and at times, even the creation of safe queer spaces does not completely eliminate that feeling of discomfort that most LGBTIQ+ individuals experience throughout their life. There is a process of cultural renegotiation that is always already taking place within the subjectivity of a queer person, one that is born out of the “the ongoing subordination of homosexuality to heterosexuality [which] allows for heterosexuality to be institutionalized as ‘the normal relations of the sexes’” (McRuer 2006, 6). Insofar as this subordination remains, the queernormative world that Fielding advocates for can never be achieved. Hence why Esteban Muñoz has declared that “we have never been queer”, and that true queerness “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 2019, 1).

This extends not only to the way in which sexuality is experienced and regulated by society, but also encompasses our understanding of the construction of gender identities. Discussions on gender have taken many forms throughout the history of feminism, but one of the most important arguments resides in the recognition that patriarchal and heteronormative discourses not only shape the construction of female gender, but male and non-binary genders as well. Deriving from the same arguments that Foucault set out in his *History of Sexuality*, gender, much like sexuality, is a process that has been deliberately constructed as “a tool of social control” and that “women have been encouraged to recognize only one area of human

difference as legitimate, those differences which exist between women and men.” (Lorde 2007, 146). However, as Butler points out, the “practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining” (1993, 231), which raises the question of how gender is really constructed and mediated. She later discussed this very issue by saying that there is “no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1993, 232), which was heavily criticized at the time because Butler had used drag as an example of gender performativity, which is a practice that does not perform gender identity, in as much as it is a performance of gender expressions, namely femininity and masculinity.

As was mentioned earlier, *She-Ra*’s aesthetics are queernormative in the sense that there is no subordination to heterosexuality or heteronormativity, and gender identities are explored and celebrated outside of binary codes. Both DreamWorks Animation Studios and Noelle Stevenson wanted to make a show that would appeal to all audiences, while also bringing to life a series that many queer adults nowadays would have loved to have during their childhood. Both critically and commercially, *She-Ra* has been received very positively, at times being hailed as a new paradigm for LGBTIQ+ representation (Knight 2020; Chappell 2020), and this has been achieved mainly by the work done by its writers and visual artists, who have pushed the boundaries of traditional children’s media and opted for a complete rejection of stereotypes related to gender and sexuality. I will expand more on this point in the following sections, paying close attention to how exactly these stereotypes are abandoned and queernormative modes of representation take their place. Returning to the subject, one of the defining features of *She-Ra*’s characterization is the fact that it does not “focus on LGBTIQ+ identity as the defining feature” (McInroy and Craig 2017, 47), but instead it is naturalized and treated as something trivial, just as other aspects of a character, such as hair or eye color. Furthermore, the cast and crew are predominantly made up of women, there being only one recurrent male character and voice actor in the series production, with the inclusion of a non-binary actor at the beginning of season 4. The queer characters are also placed at the center of the plot in such a way that their removal would ultimately dismantle the whole series, seeing as the main narrative conflict revolves around two lesbian characters, and many of the subplots are driven by the other queer characters. That being said, *She-Ra* not only passes both the Bechdel–Wallace test and the Vito Russo test (Ferraro 2013), but it goes beyond the very basic

standards set by them by introducing multidimensional characters who evolve over the course of the series, further cementing the ground-breaking work this cartoon represents in the history of children's entertainment media.

### 3. Redefining heteronormative notions of gender

One of the main aspects that the series advocates for is the exploration of gender identities beyond the traditional binaries that have plagued audiovisual media for most of its history. The aim of its producer, a non-binary person themselves, was to provide as many variations of gender identity as possible so as not to create a norm within the show. This of course is a direct reaction to the eponym series, which employed toy molds to model their characters, therefore creating very uniformed and sexualized female and male characters (Annex 1). However, the importance of promoting realistic gender representations goes a long way to disrupt the heteronormative discourses that surround the creation and reproduction of gender identity. Our views of gender, distinct from biological sex, stem from Rubin's distinction, in which she posits the "sex/gender" system to explain the "set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (1975, 159). This distinction was critiqued and expanded upon by later feminist critics, who tried to fight the biological determinism argument by advocating for an understanding of gender as socially constructed, and therefore a result of "culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender" (Millet 1971, 26), leading to what could be identified as femininity and masculinity. These two terms of course have been further discussed by other scholars, such as Judith Butler or even Kimberle Crenshaw (Butler 1999; 2004; 1993; Crenshaw 1989; 1991), who incorporated intersectionality into their discussions of gender in order to better understand the identity politics of women.

In the case of *She-Ra*, femininity and masculinity are explored in a multitude of ways, and all characters are allowed to express both masculine and feminine traits without judgement. Though there are some signs that could lead us and viewers to identify characters with a certain gender, the reality is that the show does not advocate for exclusive gender identity, which, as Rubin explains "is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of 'feminine' traits; in women, of the local definition of 'masculine' traits." (1975, 180). This affects how characterization is developed in the series, especially when we analyze each character from an intersectional point of view, taking into consideration their social class, sexuality, moral allegiance, body image, and age. The latter plays an important role in the series when compared to the original one, mainly because the characters in the original series were all adults with adult bodies, whereas in the 2018 series they are all teenagers and we see their growth throughout the five seasons, at the end of which

most of them have reached adulthood. In order to carry out this part of the analysis, this section will be divided into three subsections, each one focusing on three different characters. We will begin by analyzing characters that could be identified as cisgender females, followed by characters who could be identified as cisgender males, to finally center on non-binary and transgender characters.

### **3.1.Characters that identify themselves as women**

We will begin by looking at the character of Glimmer, introduced in the very first episode, and who is one of the three protagonists of the series alongside Bow and Adora, both of which will be discussed later. Glimmer begins as Princess of Bright Moon, sharing her magical power with her mother Queen Angella. Besides being a royal Princess, Glimmer is a commander of the military forces of Bright Moon, who lead the rebellion against the Evil Horde. Though Glimmer is a teenager, roughly fifteen to sixteen years old at the beginning of the series, she is forced to become part of the fighting forces against the invasion, both as a commander and as a soldier, having experienced the loss of her father at the hands of the Horde. Glimmer struggles with her identity throughout the series, as she must navigate her responsibilities as a leader, but also become someone worthy of respect from her friends and peers. Her gender identity is also a space for queering, given that though she is a princess, she does not follow the traditional and normative ideals of how a princess should act and look. When we look at her character design (annex 2) we can see that her body size is not normatively thin, and she is wearing clothes that allow her the freedom of movement she needs as a soldier unlike other “young female characters [which] have extremely unrealistic figures with entirely unnatural small, wasp-like waists and long legs” (Lemish 2014, 181). Like other female characters of the series, Glimmer’s design breaks the “ideal feminine form” by its desexualization, when compared to the original series. Her character also breaks normative ideals of princesshood by being actively involved in decisions regarding military strategy, such as the reincorporation of the Princess Alliance (Warfield 2018) or interkingdom negotiations. Her femininity is not restricted to the suppression of masculine traits (Rubin 1975, 180), if anything she is encouraged by her peers and her circumstances to take up traditionally masculine roles, such as being the military commander of her kingdom, or actively fighting hand in hand with other soldiers against the advances of the Evil Horde.

Another character worthy of analysis is Frosta, the youngest Princess in the Princess Alliance and leader of one of the strongest and largest kingdoms in Etheria. Much like Glimmer, Frosta also has a very strong body type that indicates her strength and her involvement in warfare (Annex 3). In terms of ethnicity, she is one of the many characters who is not portrayed as white, if anything her ethnic coding could be that of Inuit or belonging to a northern indigenous tribe. Due to her age, roughly eleven years old at the start of the series, Frosta is reluctant to show herself as weak in front of other princesses, often refusing their help or refusing their invitation to join the Princess Alliance to strengthen their defenses against the Horde (Campbell 2018b). She has one of the most interesting developments among the female characters of the show, given that her age puts her at an interesting intersection between childhood and young adulthood. It would appear that her reluctance to join the other princesses and show any emotions, is ingrained in the believe that there is an “inherent weakness of feminine emotional nature” (Shields 2007, 98). Because of this reluctance to open up and be seen as vulnerable, she puts her kingdom and her peers at risk, essentially teaching her the lesson that femininity and emotional intelligence are not a sign of weakness but a source of strength. Her growth from that point onward is centered around her ability to open up and become vulnerable towards her friends, which in turn makes her relationships stronger, as she becomes a beacon for empathy and solidarity among them

Finally, we will look at Perfuma, the most feminine character of the ones discussed here, as her characterization is built around more traditional notions of femininity. As we can see (Annex 4), Perfuma has a more delicate body frame, wearing a long pink dress, sandals, and flowers in her hair. She moves and relates to her space and people in a much softer and delicate manner, she embodies the spirit of nature because her elemental magic allows her to manipulate the flora around her. She seems to embody what has been described as the “mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity” (De Beauvoir 1959, 13), even though she was initially designed as a transwoman. Though the latter was never canonically confirmed, both the series creator and Perfuma’s character designer have both stated that the character was designed as a transwoman, even though she was never confirmed as such. In any case, like any other text, they encourage the reader’s interpretation of the character. Despite the signs that point towards a more traditional understanding of femininity, Perfuma is also a leader of her own kingdom who joins the Rebellion and the Princess Alliance in order to defend and fight for her people. (Campbell 2018a). She is a fierce warrior much like her other companions, but her connection

to nature makes her much more empathetic towards others, including her enemies. The final subversion comes at the end of the series, when Perfuma shows clear attraction and romantic love towards Scopia, another female character. Their relationship will be further discussed.

### **3.2. Characters that identify themselves as men**

I will now turn my attention to Bow, one of our three protagonists and one of the few characters who does not possess magic nor is a Princess of one of the kingdoms of Etheria. Bow is presented as Glimmer's best friend, usually following her on her missions to intercept Horde soldiers and stop attacks on innocent villages. Despite being a strong warrior, Bow prefers to use his intelligence and wit to win instead of using brute force, and as an inventor, he usually adapts his different arrows for the situation at hand, be them a magnifying glass arrow, an explosive arrow, or a net arrow. Furthermore, he discards the traditional notions of masculinity, by placing the emphasis on his emotional intelligence, rather than his physical force. As Connell mentions, "true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body" (2005, 45), however, in Bow's case, his body does not uphold these traditional notions. If we look at Annex 5 and Annex 6, we can see that he usually wears chest armor embellished with a heart, which exposes his midriff, and that he is not afraid to wear traditionally feminine colors, such as pink, or to have flowers in his hair or his clothes (Campbell 2018b). Apart from his physical attributes, Bow is also the enforcer of conflict resolution in his group, often advocating for empathetic discussions between Adora and Glimmer, both of which have issues with communication because of their respective upbringings. Many fans have pointed out that Bow's gender is ambiguous because in many scenes he is seen wearing crop tops, and in the episode where they go to the hot baths, he is not bear chested, but rather wears a binder across his chest which many fans have interpreted as a binder that a trans person would wear.

Continuing with the male characters we have Sea Hawk who is introduced in season one and part of the ensemble throughout the whole series. At first glance, he shows signs of hegemonic and toxic masculinity, exemplified by the way he boasts about his physical strength and his superiority to Glimmer and other women. With this in mind, one could argue that he upholds "hegemonic masculinity (...) understood as the pattern of practice (...) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). However, despite this initial impression, Sea Hawk is characterized as a very sensitive person who often

looks for reassurance from his love interest, Mermista, and his friend Bow. In spite of wanting to show off his strength and masculinity, Sea Hawk repeatedly loses at arm wrestling against Adora, responding with “Truth be told, I let you win so as to boost your confidence” (Warfield 2018, 5:10). His character is quickly faced with the realization that his antics are distancing him from his friends and love interest, at which point he has a heart-to-heart conversation with Glimmer, who encourages him to change, and to embrace his fragility and insecurities. As the season progresses, we see him enter a relationship with Mermista, again, a seemingly heterosexual relationship, only to be revealed in the last season that he had a previous relationship with Falcon, a man, with whom he still has some unresolved issues (Willis 2020b). Since the series does not have its characters “come out”, it is up to the viewer to decide what sexuality to assign Sea Hawk, but most fans have decided that he is a bisexual man, the same way Mermista is a bisexual woman. The way in which their relationship appears to be “straight passing” despite the aforementioned information, will be further discussed in another section of this master thesis.

Finally, we have Kyle, a tertiary character of whom very little information is revealed, but who plays an interesting role within the show in terms of sexual and gender identity. From the beginning, Kyle is seen as an awkward boy, not very agile despite years of training as a Horde soldier, often being ridiculed or criticized by his peers for not meeting the standard of training set by the Horde (Stevenson 2020a). Hegemonic masculinity is usually viewed as the “most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832), but despite his shortcoming, Kyle’s masculinity is never questioned nor denied. In fact, he simply represents one of the many possible expressions of masculinity. Much like Bow, with whom he establishes a friendship later in the series, Kyle prefers conflict resolution through communication rather than a physical altercation. This of course generates problems for him because as a Horde soldier he is expected to fight and uphold the ideals of violence that Hordak expects from them. As for his sexuality, much like Sea Hawk it is a little ambiguous until Scorpia accidentally reveals that Kyle once told her he had a crush on Rogelio (Willis 2020a), which was later confirmed by Noelle Stevenson (Twitter). Like many characters in the series, Kyle begins his journey as part of the Horde, only to later defect, alongside Lonnie and Rogelio, and join the Rebellion. As we can see, all characters are allowed to grow and move along the spectrums of gender and morality.

### 3.3. Non-binary characters

The inclusion of non-binary characters blurs the lines of gender identity even further. In season four we see the introduction of Double-Trouble, a shapeshifting thespian who works as a double agent for Hordak and the Rebellion. Double-Trouble is not the first non-binary character to appear in children's media, as other examples would include the Gem personas in *Steven Universe* or B-MO in *Adventure Time* (Dunn 2016; Jane 2015). However, they signalize a new mode of representation not commonly found in traditional media since they break away from the common stereotype of being a deviant or a villain by shifting their alliance between Hordak and the Rebellion. In fact, Double-Trouble's motivation for joining either side goes beyond the divide of good and evil, since they are only interested in perfecting their acting abilities and would choose any side that would allow them to carry out the roles they wish to have. As a shapeshifter, Double-Trouble does not only appear on screen as themselves, i.e., of non-binary gender, but also as women and men. This method acting is in direct dialogue with Butler's view of gender identity as a performative act (Butler 1988). By having Double-Trouble embody different genders, the show aims to deconstruct the audience's views of heteronormative gender binaries. Considering the latter, the intricacy of this character directly denounces the belief that sees "queers as less-than-human because they lack complexity and depth" (Fielding 2020, 9), especially when represented in traditional media. More importantly, it has been remarked that Double-Trouble's personal pronouns are respected by heroes and villains alike (Brown 2019), which enhances the queernormativity in the world of *She-Ra*, where respecting everyone's gender identity is perceived as a basic right throughout their universe (Willis 2019). Moreover, Double-Trouble is voiced by a non-binary actor as well, Jacob Tobia, who, alongside Stevenson, is one of the many queer-identifying people that have worked on the set of this new adaptation.

Another character worth mentioning is Jewelstar, introduced in season five as part of the Star Siblings, a group of refugees escaping from Horde Prime's destruction. In the original series, Jewelstar was a woman, and her group was referred to as the Star Sisters. In this version, however, Jewelstar is presented as a man, referred to as "my brother" by his sisters Tallstar and Starla (Willis 2020a) and as such, he marks an important point in transgender representation because "representation of queer characters in children's cartoons has been mostly confined to lesbian or gay characters". (Dunn 2016, 44). Although we only see them in this episode, they are mentioned in the first season as being allies of Princess Mermista, already referred to then

as the Star Siblings. Moreover, extratextual clues help us determine that this character is indeed transgender, mainly by the fact that he is voiced by transgender actor Alex Blue Davies. Despite this, assuming his gender identity as a transgender man could be misleading, considering that queerness is an essential part of this universe and therefore “the categories of transsexual, transgender, and butch are constantly under construction” (Halberstam 1998, 162–63). Nevertheless, despite this, viewers of the original series could infer that the character no longer identifies herself as a woman, and therefore must reconsider their own notions of gender. What this naturalization of the portrayal of non-binary and transgender identities does is create a more inclusive and empathetic way to discuss the spectrum that gender identity constitutes.

Finally, I will discuss Peekablue, a gender non-conforming character who continues to blur the lines of gender identity. Unlike other characters whose gender identity is quite clear by their use of personal pronouns or self-identification, Peekablue’s gender identity is indeterminate for most of the series. He is referred to as Princess Peekablue in the first season, only to be later referred to as Prince Peekablue (Campbell 2018a; Willis 2020b). In the original series Peekablue was a non-elemental princess with long colorful peacock feathers who has the power of farsight, however, in this iteration he presents himself as a man. The original character design makes more sense for a man since it is the male peacock who has colorful feathers, whereas the female peacocks are grey colored. The issue that this character posits has to do, not only with transgender identity, but also with performativity. If we take a look at Annex 7 we can see that the character is neither predominantly feminine, nor predominantly masculine; instead he adopts gender expression from both traditional female and male gender (Butler 1999). Furthermore, the character we see on screen is the shapeshifter Double Trouble, who impersonates Peekablue to make some money, leading the audience to wonder whether Peekablue’s gender is truly masculine, or if it is simply an interpretation made by Double Trouble, a non-binary character. This all leads us and the viewers to conclude that gender identity is more complex than traditionally explained by heteronormative discourses. All the characters in this series embody complex notions of gender and play with the expectations of viewers, subverting and queering many of their normative notions of gender identity.

#### 4. Breaking the “straight hero” mold

As we can see, this diversification of gender identities prepares the viewer for a queernormative story, one that fights dominant ideology from within. As the story progresses, other queer aspects of identity come into the foreground of the narrative, producing what Muñoz calls “disidentification”, a strategy that “works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999, 11). This approach “tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (11-12). This transformation is achieved by allowing queer characters to be included in a story without their sexual identity being the pillar of their characterization. Additionally, by providing them with in-depth character development, *She-Ra* breaks away from the tendency in traditional media of characterizing queer individuals as “invisible, marginalized, demonized, or portrayed as unrealistic stereotypes” (Davies 2008, 338). What *She-Ra* achieves is a multi-faceted narrative that not only allows queer viewers to identify themselves with the characters on screen, but also allows the public to have a natural and realistic portrayal of queer people. Given that the target audience is children of ages seven and up, this also provides them the ability to see queer individuals and relationships free of the stereotypes and prejudices that are often displayed in traditional media.

In order to achieve this, *She-Ra* tries to reject as many stereotypes as possible within its narrative, doing away with literary and visual tropes associated with LGBTIQ+ characters, such as the “coming out”, “bury your gays” or the “sissy villain” tropes. In this section I will argue that by having complex and diverse characters, the viewers cannot identify a certain sexuality or gender identity with either the heroes or the villains. In fact, much like gender is presented as fluid, sexuality and morality are also shown to be fluid and part of a spectrum, not presented in binary terms. Our main hero, Adora, starts off as a villain, much like Catra and Scorpia, all of whom begin by fighting for the Horde and eventually joining the Rebellion and the Princess Alliance. Our antagonists, Shadow Weaver and Hordark seem to embody a much more fixed idea of villainy, but they are nonetheless confronted with a grey morality that allows room for growth and redemption. In fact, the main driving force of this change, in all of our characters, is love. Love is what make these characters grow, be it by finally learning to love themselves, or by finding themselves worthy of the love others have for them. In fact, love and the pleasure derived from giving and accepting love is what helps the characters defeat the Evil

force of Horde Prime, a being who not only rejects love, but also magic, which in the *She-Ra* universe has come to mean love. As such, queer love, and queer pleasure in this case “involves not only the capacity to enter into, or inhabit with ease, social space, but also functions as a form of entitlement and belonging” (Ahmed 2004, 164–65).

#### **4.1. Queer heroes**

One of the characters that best exemplifies the idea of a queer hero is Scorpia, given that she rejects the stereotypes of heteronormative femininity, while also subverting traits of heteronormative masculinity. She is introduced in season one (Warfield 2018) as part of Hordak’s army, serving as a Force Captain alongside Catra. Her introduction serves as an immediate vindication of a fluid gender identity, given that when she appears on screen, she presents herself as strong, muscular and of great stature, signs associated with heteronormative masculinity. However, the moment she starts talking, her voice is delicate, and her mannerisms are those of a caring individual, highly emotional and interested in “cute” things, signs which are commonly attributed to heteronormative femininity. This fluid display immediately clashes with the construction of characters “in traditional media as one-dimensional stereotypes” (McInroy and Craig 2017, 43) and challenges the audience to think beyond the gender binaries that have been used in television and film industries. More importantly, it makes the audience question the body as a cultural sign that is constructed around “normative ideal[s] of a gender-specific body” (Butler 1999, 90), an ideal that is clearly transgressed by Scorpia’s characterization. It is revealed that Scorpia is a princess (Campbell 2018b) and as an already well-established character in the show, she has some apprehension towards attending the Princess Prom. By stating that she “never really fit in with the princesses”, the viewer is inclined to believe that it is because of her appearance, since at that point in the season, she is the most “masculine” princess within the show. However, breaking from the “butch” stereotype that would place her within the accepted heteronormative ideals of a masculine woman, she chooses a very feminine dress, wears high heels and jewelry, and it is her companion, Catra, who dresses in a masculine manner, wearing a tuxedo and bow tie. These seemingly trivial elements at the level of representation make the encoding of normative ideology a difficult task, since the complex combination of signs and symbols do not create clear cut lines between the traditional elements of good/evil, masculine/feminine, right/wrong.

Much like Scorpia, Catra is coded in very queer ways, as she does not follow traditional signs of normative femininity. Being a woman who has been the object of abuse from her adoptive mother, Shadow Weaver, Catra displays very clear indications of PTSD and hypervigilance, symptoms that usually follow domestic abuse (Warshaw 2008, 191). Having grown up with Adora under the same abusive caretaker, they learn to lean on each other for support, and they provide each other with the love they did not receive from her. As Adora's best friend, Catra enjoys the privilege that her love and protection offer against Shadow Weaver, who displays clear favoritism towards Adora. Their mutual love is introduced in the first episode of the series, in which we can see Catra sleeping at the bottom of Adora's bed (Stevenson 2020a), or the way in which they show their affection with their physical touch and proximity. The conflict of the series spawns from these two characters, and their separation at a crucial point in their relationship. Adora's decision to leave the Horde clashes with Catra's own vision of what's right and wrong, when she states that she knew Shadow Weaver and Hordak had been manipulating them since they were children, but that "it doesn't matter as long as we have each other" (Stevenson 2020b). Catra's abandonment puts her in danger of further abuse at the hands of Shadow Weaver, who blames her for Adora's disappearance, and her other Horde soldier companions, who see in her a weak target now that she does not have Adora's protection. Catra, then, channels her love and her abandonment into a single cause: to destroy the Princesses and the Rebellion, all in the name of getting Adora back, all of this because "the pull of love towards an other [Adora], who becomes an object of love, can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object" (Ahmed 2004, 124). The ensuing conflict between them does not get resolved until Catra is able to let her resentment towards Adora go and is finally able to admit her love for her.

Likewise, Adora follows a similar journey to Catra, one that is mirrored in many aspects. Being the receptor of abuse, Adora grows up trying to always live up to the expectations of Shadow Weaver, who hopes to use her to further expand her dark power. She is taught that love and affection can only be gained through the achievement of certain conditions, and only ever given as a reward for her good behavior. Though she is the Golden Child of her group, she is also a receptor of abuse, and she is conditioned to believe that no one can love her unless she proves herself worthy of that love. In fact, Shadow Weaver uses Adora's love for Catra as an instrument of her ongoing obedience and allegiance, making sure to always abuse and torture Catra in front of Adora (Stevenson 2020c). Adora is then conditioned that the safety of

those around her depends on her ability to be useful towards others, so she puts aside her own needs and wishes because “pleasures can distract you, and turn you away from obligations, duties and responsibilities” (Ahmed 2004, 163). This is why, when she becomes She-Ra, she thinks of herself in terms of what she can contribute to others, first by offering her alliance to the Rebellion, and later by accepting the burden of carrying the Failsafe, which will allow her to use the Heart of Etheria, the weapon that will keep the planet and everyone she knows safe from Horde Prime (Nolfi 2020b). Her character’s growth revolves around the resolution of her identity crisis, one that begins the moment she becomes She-Ra and concludes when she is finally able to admit to herself that her personhood must be put before anything else, and this involves admitting her weaknesses and her desires. As it was mentioned before, magic in this series stands for love, and it is through her love for her friends and especially for Catra, that Adora is able to reforge her magical connection to She-Ra having broken the Sword of Protection at the end of season 4. In the end, it is love and magic which helps her understand her worth, helping her defeat Horde Prime.

## **4.2. Straight? Villains**

In this section I will discuss the construction of the villains and morally grey characters. Although I speak of straight villains, the term queer will be used in order to understand the treatment that certain identity elements have for these characters, because as Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests, queer “spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways in which race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constructing, identity-fracturing discourses” (1994, 8). Since the series has such a strong advocacy for queernormativity, it is very difficult to assume or infer anyone’s sexuality or morality. This is also in part due to the viewers ratings, in which certain practices are not allowed in television shows with a PG rating. In any case, this is not necessary for the producers to be able to create a world in which the different expressions of gender and sexuality are naturalized to the extent that certain tropes such as the “coming out” or the “bury your gays” are not only rejected, but at times they are subverted for comedic purpose. Nevertheless, queer and non-queer characters coinhabit the world without any of them being subject to discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexuality. Usually in mainstream media the question LGBTIQA+ viewers ask themselves is “who is queer?”, but when watching *She-Ra*, the question one asks is “who in this series *isn't* queer?”. The series is so unapologetically queer that oftentimes we forget there are characters who might not identify

under the queer umbrella, which grows bigger every day. I will be discussing some of the characters that might fall under assumed heterosexuality, theorizing that although they display heterosexual attraction or characteristics, they by no means uphold heteronormative practices.

I will begin first with the character of Shadow Weaver, who has been previously mentioned in relationship to Adora and Catra. She is one of the main antagonists of the series and the mother figure to Adora and Catra. Shadow Weaver is a disgraced sorcerer from the city of Mystacor, who became permanently disfigured after she tried to use a spell to obtain more power. Being expelled from the sorcerer's guild, she joins Hordak in his endeavors to subdue Etheria, thus becoming his second in command. In Annex 8 we can see her wearing her usual attire, which like the other villains, comes in the dark shades of red and black. Her coding as a villain is much clearer not only because of her visual representations, but also because of her cruelty towards others. Her actions are motivated not only by her self-interest, but by her desire to inflict pain and suffering upon others, namely those who disgraced her. Nevertheless, she is awarded the same possibility for change as the other characters and like many others, she re-examines her alliances, defecting at some point to the Rebellion and fledging her fealty to the Princess Alliance (Lynch 2019). Once there, she continues to exert her power over Adora, manipulating her and her friends so she could have a chance at regaining the power she lost when she left the Horde. Unlike other characters, Shadow Weaver does not demonstrate regret for the actions and harm she caused others, so when she chooses to sacrifice herself to give Adora and Catra a fighting chance against Horde Prime, her death is met with shock, but it does not redeem her in front of the viewer or her abusers.

Other characters that also share this grey morality are Double-Trouble and Entrapta, both of which collaborate with the Princess Alliance and the Horde. Double-Trouble has been discussed previously in terms of gender identity,<sup>2</sup> but their character is also very closely related to the idea of a queering morality because of the ways in which they navigate both sides of the conflict. Introduced in season 4, they join Catra and Scorpia in an attempt to widen their acting range, not out of pure belief in their cause. As the series progresses, they become a double agent of chaos, oftentimes working for both the Horde and the Princess Alliance (Nelfi and Sreebny 2019). This, however, does not necessarily make them villains, given that they partake

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<sup>2</sup> As a non-binary character, Double-Trouble is referred to with they/them pronouns, which have been respected in the body of this dissertation.

in the conflict, not out of malice or a sense of justice, but rather because of their own self-interest and desire for improvement. Likewise, Princess Entrapta is placed in a similar situation. She begins her arc as a member of the Princess Alliance, only to later become part of the Horde, partly because of a misunderstanding, partly because it suited her interests staying with Hordak, who allowed and encouraged her work on First One's technology. Furthermore, her character is coded as being part of the autistic spectrum, as evidenced by her inability to pick up on social cues, pickiness with food textures and flavors, and her hyperfixation on robots and technology, which was later confirmed by Noelle Stevenson in a tweet. Both characters portray what could be read as heterosexual desire, but the truth is that neither of them truly uphold the values of heteronormativity, which, as McRuer argues (2006), excludes both disabled, neurodivergent, and queer people from its practices.

## 5. Creating a queernormative world

As I have discussed in the previous sections of this analysis, *She-Ra* presents a very healthy view of queer sexuality and gender identities, fully cementing the queernormativity of the show. As it was previously mentioned, gender identity is presented as fluid in the *She-Ra* universe, where characters are allowed, without prejudice, to explore different facets of their identity, as is the case of Scorpia, Bow, Double-Trouble, among others. However, a much more important element of the show is the naturalization of queer desire as exemplified by the numerous queer couples that appear and develop throughout the series. Established queer couples coexist alongside seemingly heterosexual ones, and as the characters grow and develop, new relationships are formed and confirmed throughout the series. As Doty states, television shows typically include characters who are “sexually indeterminate” in order to attract both straight and queer audiences, but this inclusion is usually problematic as it ultimately denies the representation of queer politics that are quintessential to a truly equal representation in visual media (Doty 1993, 43–44). Conversely, most characters in *She-Ra* demonstrate homosocial behaviors, yet their queerness is not denied, but rather embraced by the story. Characters with a presumed heterosexual identity, such as Bow or Mermista, show clear indications of attraction to characters of the same gender, the former towards Sea Hawk and the latter towards She-Ra. Other characters such as Perfuma or the protagonist Adora, show indication of queer attraction since the show’s inception, but their relationships to other queer characters develop throughout the whole series.

All these factors are fundamental to the acceptance of the series as a truly queer product of audiovisual media. *She-Ra* has been created by queers, it is concerned with queer issues, and has been widely accepted by queer people (Benshoff and Griffin 2004), which is why so many critics and viewers have hailed it as a new paradigm in terms of queer representation (Knight 2020; Chappell 2020). What previous shows such as *Adventure Time*, *The Legend of Korra* and *Steven Universe* have proved is that there can be positive representations of queer individuals in children’s television, shedding the one-dimensional, highly stereotyped representations that can be commonly found in American television sitcoms. Children’s television has not had until now a show that has pushed for such positive queer representation and whose main narrative arc revolves around the queer relationship of two of its main characters. The naturalness with which *She-Ra* foregrounds queerness allows it to discuss more important issues such as colonialism, illustrated by Hordak

in season one to four, and the invasion of Horde Prime in season five; or the abuse suffered by Catra at the hands of Shadow Weaver, which damages her self-esteem and her ability to maintain healthy relationships.

### **5.1. Always-already queer relationships**

Very little is disclosed about Scorpia's past, besides what has already been discussed in previous sections of this analysis. In season 4 episode 6 (Sreebny 2019) we get a glimpse at Scorpia's daily morning routine as force Captain of the Horde. In this montage we are shown a photograph of Scorpia as a baby, being held in the arms of two women, presumably her mothers. Like her, they both have claws for arms, and share some of her physical traits. One of them is of bigger body build and stature, resembling Scorpia's own body build, whereas the other mom is of more delicate frame and white hair, again, like Scorpia. In Annex 9 we can see a screen capture of the episode and in annex 10 a photograph of Scorpia for comparison. What is most interesting about this very small detail and addition to a character backstory, is the way that motherhood and queerness are related in their universe. Much like the relationship between Bow and his dads, Scorpia's resemblance to her mothers is very clearly indicated, both in the way that she reacts to the robot Emily almost breaking the portrait, but also in the physical characteristics that she shares with them. There is no denying that these are her mothers, and in a world where queerness is natural and prevalent, it is no surprise that two women were able to have a daughter that physically resembles them both. These elements all go in direct opposition to monomaternality, which "like the ideology of monogamy, promotes practices that uphold the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family" (Park 2013, 6). Since we are not discussing speculative fiction, I leave it up to the imagination of fans and other theorists to try and explain how and why in this world, children born out of a same-sex couples can and do resemble both of their parents. The importance here resides in the natural treatment of motherhood and fatherhood within a queer context, providing once again, positive, and diverse representation for viewers of diverse backgrounds, including those which come from LGBTIQ+ families.

Another queer relationship that was confirmed by the show was that of gay couple George and Lance, best known in the series as Bow's dads. Not much is disclosed to the viewer regarding Bow's past, unlike Glimmer and Adora, whose history is being constantly retold either through flashbacks or conversations. Bow's story outside of the "best friend squad" remained quite a mystery, even to his own friends. So, when in the final episode of the second

season we finally get to meet his family, it comes as a welcomed surprise. The decision to include another queer couple and provide it with such plot relevance, advocates for what Fielding has defined as “queernormativity”, understood as “the production of queer norms and values which can be expressed even by cisgender and straight-identified people” (Fielding 2020, 1141). In this episode, (Campbell 2019) the traditional “coming-out” narrative is subverted by placing Bow’s alliance to the Rebellion as the queer element that needs to be disclosed, not his parents’ sexuality. This reversal serves as a comedic element, since Bow, Glimmer and Adora have to constantly lie about their identities, their relationship to one another, and their involvement with the Rebellion. On the other hand, it also furthers the naturalization of queer relationships in the show by displacing the expectations of the viewer. In fact, both Glimmer and Adora are shocked that Bow has decided to lie to his parents about who he is, but not about the fact that he has two dads. None of the characters question why or how Lance and George are Bow’s dads, or how it has come to pass that Bow has twelve brothers. Much like the case of Scopia’s parents, the family depicted here is treated as naturally as those which in our eyes have straight-passing privilege, further cementing the naturalization of queerness in the series.

This naturalization of queer relationships is achieved by first acknowledging that there is no such thing as a normal i.e., normative relationship. Heteronormative discourse allows for “the ongoing subordination of homosexuality to heterosexuality [which] allows for heterosexuality to be institutionalized as ‘the normal relations of the sexes’” (McRuer 2006, 6) However, in the case of *She-Ra*, this subordination is never presented to the viewer, since the first relationship confirmed by the narrative is that of princesses Netossa and Spinnerella (Campbell 2018a; Stevenson 2018d). While there is no dialogue that references their romantic relationship, overt contextual cues such as them holding hands, hugging each other, or using terms of endearment such as “baby” or “dearest” establish their queerness without the traditionally employed “coming-out” sequence. This narrative strategy works here because “children’s shows, and children themselves, are willing to suspend disbelief and open themselves to possibilities that are not fully culturally accepted and they are less socially conditioned to be biased against experiences or people that are new to them” (Dunn 2016, 55–56). As this is not a show aimed for adults, no explicit sexual cues are necessary, nor used, to establish these characters as being part of a romantic relationship. In fact, their representation is in line with the desire of many young queer viewers to

see character development “which do[es] not focus on LGBTIQA+ identity as the defining feature” (McInroy and Craig 2017, 43), which is almost exclusively afforded to heteronormative characters in traditional narratives. Though many fans have argued that Netossa and Spinerella’s relationship could have been given more screen time, the reality is that this would only have been necessary if they had been the only queer couple in the series. However, as we have seen, queerness is not bestowed upon a limited number of characters, and as such, much like in heteronormative narratives, certain characters or couples do not carry the protagonism of the series, this is the case also of this lesbian pairing while others, as we will discuss in the next section, will be front and center of the narrative arc.

## **5.2. Visible development of queer relationships**

The inclusion of queer characters at all stages of their exploration of identity is crucial for the creation of a truly queernormative world. Queer characters which have already gone through their stages of self-identity and development, such as Netossa and Spinerella, or Lance and George, serve as an excellent starting point for the younger characters in the series which are still trying to understand their place in the world and their sexual identities. Sara Ahmed very cleverly explains how a queer individual navigates and feels in a world where heteronormativity is prevalent:

Queer subjects feel the tiredness of making corrections and departures; the pressure of this insistence, this presumption, this demand that asks either for a ‘passing over’ (a moment of passing, which is not always available) or for direct or indirect forms of self-revelation (‘but actually, he’s a she’ or ‘she’s a he’, or just saying ‘she’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘he’ instead of ‘she’ at the ‘obvious’ moment). No matter how ‘out’ you may be, how (un)comfortably queer you may feel, those moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can be experienced as a bodily injury. (2004, 147)

This failure to live up to the standards of heteronormativity is not something that the creators of *She-Ra* wanted to include in their series, opting instead for a world in which the characters had the freedom and encouragement to explore their queer identities. Such is the case of the first She-Ra to arrive on Etheria, Mara, and her A.I. companion, Light Hope. They are both sent to the planet to serve as instruments of their masters, the First Ones, who wanted to drain the planet of its magic to use it against their enemies with a weapon called The Heart of Etheria. Light Hope’s mission was to guide and instruct Mara in her role as She-Ra, but soon they both became emotionally attached to one another, arousing feelings of love between them. This

closeness that they develop is best understood as their becoming-posthuman,<sup>3</sup> “a process of redefining one’s sense of attachment and connection to a shared world” (Braidotti 2013, 193). These feelings compromised Light Hope’s ability to use Mara as a weapon and as such, she purges herself of the memories to better carry out her orders (Nelfi 2019).

The fight for love and acceptance is something that all characters must strive to, in one way or another, but it is seen more prominently in Scorpia’s own personal journey. As was mentioned previously, she begins her journey in the Fight Zone as a Force Captain working under Hordak and Shadow Weaver. Here she starts a very one-sided friendship with Catra, trying to convince her that she could be a better friend to her than Adora ever was. Is it heavily implied that Scorpia feels some sort of attraction towards Catra beyond her feelings of friendship, but her public displays of affection are often met with mistreatment and rejection (Warfield 2018; Sreebny 2019). However, once she defects from the Horde and joins the Rebellion, she creates a strong bond with Perfuma, as they both have similar ways of relating to other people. Perfuma then proceeds to teach Scorpia that she must first learn to love herself before she can hope to accept the love others can give her, thus creating a proper object of desire (Ahmed 2004). Much like Adora and Catra’s relationship, the main driving force of Perfuma’s and Scorpia’s relationship is the strength that queer love awards them when faced with the hatred and colonizing power of Horde Prime.

Queer love then is portrayed as a force capable of overwriting norms and values imposed by others. In the case of Catra and Adora, their queer love helps them navigate the abuse suffered at the hands of Shadow Weaver and it constitutes the first expression of personhood for both, allowing them to be something other than Shadow Weaver’s objects of manipulation. As Grosz states, “gay and lesbian sexualities and lifestyles can be seen as innovative, inventive, productive, and thus active insofar as they aim at their own pleasures, their own distributions, their own free expansion” (Grosz 1995, 215), and that is exactly what this couple represents. The driving force of *She-Ra*’s narrative rests on the relationship of these two characters, their inability to express their love and how their frustration and unresolved childhood issues shape the way they relate to themselves and others. Adora becomes a people pleaser, always looking

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<sup>3</sup> Braidotti’s Critical Posthumanism stems from her feminist writings, and as such could be another tool of analysis of this series. However, because this dissertation focuses on Queer Theory, Posthumanism will not be further discussed, although it could be a potential source for future research into children’s media.

to serve others in a desperate attempt to become worthy of their affective, whereas Catra is abusive and cruel towards others, mirroring the way Shadow Weaver treated her all her life. However, in the love they have for each other they find their redemption. On the one hand, Catra sacrifices herself in order to save Adora from Horde Prime and apologize for all the damage she has done to her and her friends throughout the course of their conflict (Nolfi 2020a); and on the other hand, Adora rediscovers her ability to transform into She-Ra when she acknowledges her love and concern for Catra's safety and wellbeing (Stevenson 2020a). Her return as She-Ra also comes with a change in her outfit, which as we can see in Annex 11, incorporates elements from her friend's attires: Glimmer's winged shoes, Bows's heart, and Catra's diadem. It also becomes a symbol for her own identity, shedding the more "feminine" parts of her original outfit in favor of her personal style, such as the ponytail and the trousers. In the end, their mutual confession of love is what helps Adora gather the strength she needs to channel Etheria's magic through the Heart of Etheria and defeat Horde Prime, eradicating him from the universe and restoring magic to the universe.

### **5.3. Straight relationships don't undermine queer ones**

Having talked about the wide representation of queer characters and relationships, I will now turn my attention to the couples that are coded as heterosexual in this series. Though this classification is problematic and will be challenged within this same section, for the purpose of classification I choose to include the following three couples as heterosexual passing. In the first place we find Glimmer's parents, Queen Angella and King Micah, both of which play a pivotal role in Glimmer's character development and the series' narrative arc. It is revealed that prior to the start of the series, King Micah perished during one of the earlier conflicts between the Horde and the original Princess Alliance, which prompted its dissolution and the separation of the kingdoms. King Micah was one of the most powerful sorcerers on Etheria, having been a pupil of Shadow Weaver, during her time as head Sorceress of Mystacor (Burns 2018). Their relationship serves to provide more detailed information about Glimmer's past, not to serve as a model relationship that she, or other characters in the series, must uphold. In fact, just because they engage in what appears as a heterosexual relationship, does not deny their queerness, in so far as "the existence of queernormative values exists outside the identities of the individual social actors" (Fielding 2020, 14). We see through these two characters that relationships of any kind are valued and respected in Etheria, and that heterosexual love and desire is by no means any more valuable or dominant than queer desire. Of the confirmed

couples in the series, this is possible the only one in which neither of its members can be identified as belonging to the LGBTIQ+ collective.

Secondly, we have Bow and Glimmer, both of whom develop their friendship into a romantic relationship which becomes official in the season five finale. Both characters have been discussed already to a greater extent, but here the focus is on the development of their romantic relationship. As I mentioned earlier, it is problematic to assume that these characters are involved in a heterosexual relationship, given that both of them display attraction to other characters of the same gender, Bow towards Sea Hawk and Glimmer towards Adora. Canonically, they both have been identified as bisexual, making their relationship a queer one, though it enjoys in the eyes of certain viewers heterosexual-passing privilege. We must return then to the issue of bisexuality and its erasure from canonical texts of Queer Theory and cultural media representations. Angelides claims that bisexuality “might potentially disrupt, indeed queer, theories of spectatorship that reproduce these viewing/reading positions by reifying gender in the theorization of spectator identifications” (Angelides 2001), similarly to how Fielding’s notion of queernormativity blurs the traditional discourses of hetero/homosexuality. Though many characters show attraction to only one gender, it is seen as completely natural to be attracted to more than one gender identity, Bow and Glimmer being perfect examples. Furthermore, their sexual identity helps to bring up the discussions around bisexuality that are present in the queer community. Traditionally bisexuals have been depicted in media as promiscuous, as not being able to maintain one stable partner, or as “choosing” a side once they enter a relationship with someone. As a bisexual woman myself, it is extremely damaging and hurtful to have my own sexual identity denied because the person I have chosen to love happens to be of the opposite gender.

Finally, we have Mermista and Sea Hawk, another couple whose romantic involvement was hinted at throughout the whole series and whose declaration of love also came at the end of the season five. Of the two, Sea Hawk is the only one which has been confirmed as a bisexual man, but Mermista’s attraction to Adora in her She-Ra form (Warfield 2018), also clues us in to her potentially queer identity. In this case it is not clear to what extent she is attracted to She-Ra, but she usually blushes and stutters whenever Adora transforms into the legendary warrior. The characters themselves also represent ethnic diversity, since Mermista’s ethnic identity is coded as south Asian and Sea Hawk’s as mixed white and Asian. The inclusion of yet another couple who upholds queernormative values provides the series with even more diverse

representation, in a world “where mainstream children’s media appears to prioritize a heterosexual identity” (Reinhard, Olson, and Kahlenberg 2017, 10). There is no doubt that queer representation has not yet reached the same quality or quantity as heterosexual representation, but the fact that from the “early part of the twenty-first century [there was] an increase in nontraditional representations in children’s media” (Reinhard, Olson, and Kahlenberg 2017, 11) demonstrates that there is an ongoing trend of creating more queer media that positively reflects the lives and experiences of those who identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community.

## 6. Conclusions

Throughout this MA thesis I have discussed the turn that children's entertainment media took at the beginning of the 21st century towards an altogether more inclusive model of representation of gender, sexuality, ethnic identity, and body image. This shift can be seen in the complex storytelling and characterization that shows such as *The Legend of Korra*, *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* present, each of them setting a precedent for other children's cartoons to continue breaking the barriers of traditional audiovisual media. Because these shows are all aimed at a young audience, elements of fantasy and fiction blend together with realistic themes, in order to create a queer viewing experience for adults and children alike. The overwhelmingly positive reception these series have had in both critics and audiences has prompted other studios and creators to include queer stories in their products, moving closer every day to an equal treatment of queer individuals. What all these shows have in common is their exploration of a wide array of formulations of gender and sexuality, ranging from the transgender/non-binary Gem Personas of *Steven Universe*, a genderfluid robot in *Adventure Time*, or the queer couple in *The Legend of Korra*. Taking inspiration from these shows and many others, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* takes queer representation to the next level by creating a truly queernormative world, placing queerness at the front and center of the narrative, a decision that has forever changed the way in which queer representation is handled in children's television.

To proceed through my analysis, I focused first on the academic field of children's media studies and its relationship with the wider field of cultural studies. The results of this inquiry revealed that children's media is often overlooked as being unworthy of critical and academic scrutiny, being deemed a lesser version of adult media, on which most media studies are focused. This disdain for children's media is often related to the lingering idea that popular culture is somehow less valuable or unworthy of study, as opposed of course to what some academics consider "highbrow" culture. Despite this, many scholars have made incredible strides bringing the necessary attention to the study of children's media, arguing that it is not only as thematically complex as adult audio-visual media, but plays a pivotal role in the development of children, as it often functions as socializers, much in the same way as school or family do. As such, the intersection of children's media studies and queer theory becomes fundamental, in as much that the representations, or lack thereof, of queer subjects will directly

affect how children will face other queer children, whether with empathy and understanding, or apathy and othering.

My second objective was to explore the academic fields of Feminism, Queer Theory and Gender Studies and how they all would converge to provide a theoretical framework for my own intersectional and semiotic analysis of *She-Ra*. An overview of these topics was very fruitful to see all the different trends that are currently being discussed, and how despite the best efforts of certain theorists to move beyond binary formulations, even Queer Theory can fall prey to the normalizing force of binary thought, as illustrated in the marginalization and erasure of fluid queer identities, like bisexuals or non-binary individuals. The aim then for these disciplines is to renounce binary thought and break the traditional shackles that heteronormativity and the patriarchy have imposed on everyone's gender identity and sexuality. Likewise, other intersecting fields such as Affect Theory, provide a very productive point of departure to understand the affective implications of queerness, and how our bodies must either resist or conform to the discourse forces that act upon them, trying to normalize us and assimilate us into their normativity.

Taking all of this into consideration, my objective for this dissertation was to analyze the ways in which *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* took a ground-breaking approach to Queer Theory and incorporated a queernormative stance when creating the series and its characters. Despite being an adaptation, *She-Ra* takes a lot of creative freedom in order to reinvent its storylines and characters along more diverse paths. For one, the whitewashing of the eponym series was completely discarded, and an ethnically diverse cast was designed, allowing for more freedom of expression, not only in terms of skin color, but also in body types, styles, gender, and sexuality. The result is a diverse cast that reflects the multiplicity of identities that are present in our world, despite this being set in a fantasy and magical universe. The viewers can then identify with any of its characters, there being different ages groups, genders, sexualities, professions, moralities, etc.

Gender expression is studied both in terms of the feminine ideals and hegemonic masculinity. The result of this analysis demonstrates that the series advocates for non-normative notions of gender expressions, given that most of its characters engage in many different practices that do not necessarily fit within one established normative ideal of gender. Likewise, gender itself is blurred by the inclusion of non-binary and transgender identities, all of which are respected and valued within their universe. This prepares the viewers for the

queernormative world that will slowly unfold throughout the five seasons of the series. Queer sexuality is also seen as natural, with the incorporation positive representation of queer couples, established or developing throughout the course of the show.

Finally, I have defended that *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* stands as the epitome of queernormativity in the realm of children's television. No other show until now has such a diverse cast and crew, as well as characters. It treats queerness in a manner that is natural and devoid of any of the stereotypes which have been used in audiovisual and literary media to discuss queer subjects. There is no "coming out" montage, the same way that there is no "promiscuous bisexual" or "sissy villain" or any of the other tropes that have been employed to signal queerness in film and television. Instead, the characters are simply queer, they are not questioned nor are their identities explained, because this would defeat the purpose of naturalization and queernormativity.

All in all, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* has set a new standard for queer representation, influencing the way that queer identities are created and narrated on screen. Despite being a relatively recent show, its effects can already be seen in the panorama of children's television. Disney aired the series *The Owl House* only a few months before the final season of *She-Ra*, and it is the first ever product of the Disney powerhouse to include characters which are unambiguously queer. *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* also released further mini-episodes and films that portray more clearly the queerness of characters that had only been queer in subtext. It is thanks to *She-Ra* that queer identities can come out of the subtext and be viewed as natural and worthy of narrating, in a world where children and young adults depend deeply on the representations they see on screen in order to better understand their own identities.

## 7. Annexe



*Annex 1*



*Annex 2*



*Annex 3*



*Annex 4*



*Annex 5*



*Annex 6*



*Annex 7*



*Annex 8*



*Annex 9*



*Annex 10*



*Annex 11*

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