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**Queerness in Graphic Novels, TV Series, and
Adaptations**

Queer reprezentace v komiksech, TV seriálech a adaptacích

Bakalářská práce

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LGBT reprezentace v různých médiích jako například TV seriálech je rozsáhle studované téma. Autoři odborných publikací se ovšem z velké části zabývají zkoumáním queer-codingu ve starších dílech, kdy kódovaná reprezentace byla jedna z mála možností jak zahrnout LGBT postavy v daných dílech z důvodu cenzury. Tato práce má za cíl analýzu současného využití queer-codingu v animovaném seriálu *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* z roku 2018, který také obsahuje explicitní LGBT reprezentaci. K analýze je využita nejen queer teorie, ale také teorie komiksu vzhledem ke sdíleným atributům s animací. Tato práce se také zabývá tématem sebeidentifikace s fiktivními postavami a tím jakou roli hraje sebeidentifikace LGBT diváků při interpretaci postav také jako členů LGBT komunity.

Anotation

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Queer representation in various media such as TV series is a widely studied topic. However, many scholars in this field focus on the utilization of queer-coding in older works when queer-coding was one of the very few options of including any queer representation in said works due to censorship. This thesis aims to analyze a recent use of queer-coding in the 2018 animated series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, which includes both explicit and coded queer representation. This thesis used not only Queer theory but also Comics theory for the analysis due to its shared attributes with animation. This thesis also explores the topic of self-identification with fictional characters and the role it plays when interpreting characters as queer.

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Introduction

For many years the representation of queerness and queer individuals in media was scarce and when there was any, it was usually included only in the form of queer-coding, and portrayed in stereotypical ways, either serving as a comic relief or a deviance in the shape of villains. These portrayals have been utilized for a long time to the point the queer-coded characteristics became almost synonymous with the role of the characters, such as Disney's queer-coded villains.

However, in recent years queer representation has started growing and become more diverse despite the obstacles the creators of such media like movies, TV programs, or comics have to face if they want to include explicit queer representation. In this thesis, I look at the 2018 Netflix show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* through a queer lens, focusing on its explicit queer representation and examining the way queer-coding is utilized in a work with explicit queer representation. I also use Comics Theory, mostly the work of Scott McCloud, to analyze how the cartoon and iconization influence the viewer's perception of different, possibly queer-coded scenes, as well as what role self-identification plays in interpreting such scenes as queer-coded.

Literature Review

Primary Sources

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (SPOP)

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power, which is an adaptation of Filmation's 1985 series *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, is an animated show that was released on Netflix between November 2018 and May 2020. I chose this show because of its utilization of both explicitly queer and queer-coded characters. Also, ND Stevenson was the art director of the show which ties to some of my other primary sources of which he is the author. Another reason is that as an animated show, it is possible to apply comics theory to it to some extent, especially because of the use of cartoons in both media.¹ The show

¹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (William Morrow, 1993), 21.

was also nominated for multiple awards and won two of them: the Daytime Emmy Awards (2020)² and the GLAAD Media Awards (2021)³.

I did not choose other TV series such as *The Legend of Korra* or *Steven Universe* because I wanted to mainly focus on ND Stevenson’s work and how his other works influence or add context to *SPOP*. However, I acknowledge the importance of these shows and their place in children’s media due to their development of explicit queer representation. *Steven Universe* will be mentioned later as a supportive example when needed.

Nimona

Nimona is a graphic novel by ND Stevenson that was first published in printed format in 2015 by HarperCollins. The graphic novel was nominated for multiple awards, including the Eisner Award for the “Best Digital/Webcomic” in 2015⁴ and won the award in the category “Best Graphic Album—Reprint” in 2016⁵. It tells a story of otherness and of being a social outcast which are for the most part due to who these characters are and the prejudice other people hold against them.

I chose this graphic novel because it contextualizes *SPOP* as Stevenson’s following work. Both works share the themes of otherness with the queerness in *Nimona* being mainly coded since there are no explicitly queer characters. Still, the two works share some similarities, such as the childhood friends to enemies to lovers trope, or the fact that in both works the main couple used to be orphans in an institution and the person responsible for their upbringing is evil and against their relationship. There are also morally gray shapeshifters in both works. In *Nimona* it is Nimona who is the main

²“The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences announces the winners of the 47th annual Daytime Emmy® Awards,” The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, accessed October 23, 2024, <https://theemmys.tv/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/daytime-47th-winners-telecast-2020-06-27-1600.pdf>.

³“32nd annual Glaad Media Awards recipients include: Disclosure, Schitt’s Creek, Sam Smith, Chika, Happiest Season, I May Destroy You, Star Trek: Discovery, The Boys In The Band, Veneno, We’re Here, and the Not-Too-Late Show With Elmo,” GLAAD, accessed October 23, 2024, <https://glaad.org/releases/32nd-annual-glaad-media-awards-recipients-include-disclosure-schitts-creek-sam-smith-chika>.

⁴“2015 Eisner Award Nominations” Comic-Con International: San Diego, archived June 13, 2015, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150613194937/http://www.comic-con.org/awards/2015-eisner-award-nominations>.

⁵“2010-Present” Comic-Con International: San Diego, archived July 23, 2020, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20200723131721/https://comic-con.org/awards/eisner-award-recipients-2010-present>.

character and in *SPOP* it is Double Trouble who only appears in the last two seasons of the show.

The Fire Never Goes Out: A Memoir in Pictures

The Fire Never Goes Out is a graphic memoir by ND Stevenson. It was originally posted as separate posts on Stevenson's Tumblr blog. Eventually those posts were collected and published in a printed format as a graphic memoir in 2020. The memoir is a collection of doodles and thoughts about his daily life, often exploring his identity journey from being a child of faith to a happy queer adult. However, that's not the only topic explored in the memoir, as there is quite a lot of it dedicated to his mental health and his struggles with ADHD.

Gender Queer: A Memoir

Gender Queer is a graphic memoir by Maia Kobabe published by the Lion Forge, LLC. in 2019. Kobabe is a non-binary author who uses the Spivak pronouns (e/em/eir/emself). The memoir tells eir journey of self-discovery from eir childhood till eir adulthood. It focuses on eir gender and sexual identity, putting together the "signs" but especially highlighting the sense of otherness that comes with being queer. I included this work because it specifically addresses the experience of coming to terms with one's gender and sexual identity unlike Stevenson's memoir that also heavily focuses on his mental health and struggles with his ADHD.

The memoir begins in eir childhood but does not follow a chronological order throughout the whole work. Instead, it follows a more thematic order, giving the impression of following the author's memories as e recalls them based on associations. Since this order replicates the process of recalling memories, I argue that it offers a greater level of immersion and self-identification for the reader-viewer. I suggest that it is easier to achieve in comics rather than solely in either words or pictures since their combination provides the viewer-reader with a larger mental library of different pieces of information that help the reader-viewer to understand the whole idea. It gives the reader-viewers a chance to better picture the events and topics discussed since they might not be familiar with such issues, or they might be difficult for them to imagine such as the change between the short hairstyle the hairdresser gave the author and the one e got after eir mother fixed it to eir preference.

There are a number of instances in the memoir that depict the author's experience with gender dysphoria. A major one is eir experience with periods that were highly disturbing for em. Despite knowing what they were, Kobabe never thought e, a person assigned female at birth (further shortened as "AFAB") would get them too.⁶ That suggests the idea that e never thought about emself as a girl and, therefore, did not consider periods to be something e should have been concerned about. However, e eventually started having periods, which turned out to be something e dreaded every month since eir first period. Kobabe admits e had still suffered from period-related nightmares by the time e was working on the memoir.⁷

Dreams and nightmares usually tend to be quite confusing and difficult to translate into words when attempting to be described. The combination of words and images that comics as a medium offers leaves more freedom to the artist to express themself and choose which idea is easier to express in words and which one in pictures. However, the artist also has to keep in mind in which form the idea would be easier to grasp for the reader-viewer.

Sometimes, using both systems can add to the emotional impact. For example, in the part of *Gender Queer* where Kobabe talks about eir period nightmares, e uses words to explicitly tell the reader what those nightmares were about while accompanying the text with their pictorial depictions.⁸ Humans rely a lot on their sense of vision. It is to the point when it might be hard for us to believe or imagine certain things until we, as the saying goes, "see them with our own eyes." Vision is an important part of most people's perception of reality; therefore, depicting certain concepts or ideas in pictures may make them feel more real.

As McCloud says in *Understanding Comics*, language and art are humans' desperate attempts to convey their individual ideas and experiences in order to be understood by others.⁹ I suggest the easiest way to make others understand is by making them relate to at least part of the idea. McCloud argues that the ability to relate, i.e., to see (parts of) oneself in someone else, is a specialty of cartoons.¹⁰ That is why the media

⁶ Maia Kobabe, *Gender Queer* (Lion Forge, 2019), 32.

⁷ Maia Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 30–38.

⁸ Maia Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 36–38.

⁹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 139.

¹⁰ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 42.

that employ it are highly suitable for difficult topics such as identity or experiences of minorities and marginalized groups.

A considerable part of *Gender Queer* is about Kobabe's experience with gender dysphoria and euphoria. Such a topic is not close to the majority of people, and specific experiences might be difficult to imagine or be understood even by other people with gender dysphoria since the experiences are highly individual. That is why the combination of both words and pictures is an apt way to introduce and explain these experiences. For example, the author's daydreaming about having a penis and using grass straws¹¹ might almost seem metaphorical. However, when accompanied by pictures, the idea becomes much more tangible.

Comics artists are often masters in the cartoonization of their characters, whether they are fictional or not. The simplification of the characters is what makes them easier to project onto and to relate to because they still look human enough for the reader-viewer to see themselves in them, but they are not realistic-looking enough for the reader-viewer to recognize them as someone else.¹² Therefore, I argue that simplification is yet another factor that makes comics suitable for exploring marginalized themes because through the simplified characters the reader-viewer is more likely to be able to imagine what it is like to be in the character's shoes.

Moreover, simplification offers the freedom of the authors' self-expression by allowing them to create a version of themselves that would resonate with them. I argue that it is an important aspect especially for gender queer authors because it could be considered a form of shape shifting in a way. Through the process of simplification/iconization they can possibly strip themselves of features that make them feel insecure about their gender, and the more stylized and simplified the style, the greater the gender ambiguity is.

The artists thus have to decide which parts of the characters to keep for them to be viewed in the way they intended. That often means they need to rely on stereotypical signs associated with the gender binary. For example, long hair is often associated with women and girls. Therefore, giving a character long hair is more likely to lead to them being perceived as a female unless given other, more masculine traits that would

¹¹Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 61.

¹²Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 35–36.

balance or outbalance that perception, like a beard. However, this is also tricky, especially in queer media since it reinforces the idea that there is a “correct” way a woman or a man should look like.

Kobabe’s memoir actually touches on this topic when e introduces eir parents and how they never tried to fit the gender norms despite not being queer themselves. In their case, it is not just their looks that do not entirely conform, but also their interests.¹³ However, due to the stylization and simplification of the art style, the stereotypical visual signs western society perceives as either feminine or masculine are often what allow readers to quickly recognize the character’s gender. That is until queerness comes into the picture. The fact that the ambiguity of the cartoon can make it difficult to recognize what is a character’s gender can also be used to the artist’s advantage.

On the one hand, when looking at the characters in *Gender Queer*, the viewer-reader has to constantly question and confront their biases since the style often does not offer many clues such as prominent gendered features unless important for making a point, and those that would usually be safe indicators are challenged. On the other hand, it offers the queer artist an opportunity to express emself more closely to how e sees emself. E can remove or downplay the features e is not satisfied with or that make em insecure, yet the simplification still allows em to feel like e are looking at emself because of the same reason why the viewer-reader may relate more to the stylized character.

The author talks about eir desire to shapeshift multiple times across the comic. In a way, even changing a hairstyle can be considered shapeshifting if we define it as simply the change of one’s appearance. E expressed the desire to remove eir breasts and to have a penis instead of a vagina; e also got eir hair cut short to accommodate eir gender. However, even changing clothes can count as a form of shape-shifting since it can change one’s appearance and especially their perception by others drastically. In *Gender Queer*, the author mentions a conversation e had with one of eir friends: when said friend asked if e wanted to be a man, e said e didn’t want more gendered traits, e wanted less.

¹³Maia Kobabe, *Gender Queer* (Lion Forge, 2019), 24–27.

This memoir shows how complex gender identity and the experience of a non-binary gender are. The work showcases personal struggles that are unique to the author but, to some extent, also apply to non-binary individuals in general. Each individual thus has the chance to find an experience that they possibly share with the author.

Secondary Sources

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art

It is a book by Scott McCloud that, as its title suggests, is supposed to familiarize the reader-viewer with the medium that is comics. From defining the medium and giving a brief history review to explaining the basic principles of the format and mechanics of comics and the impact on the reader-viewer, McCloud guides the reader-viewer through the highly cited title that delivers the information about the medium through the medium itself. In other words, this book is a comic about comics. This book is useful for my research because of its discussion on cartoons, and to them related self-identification with the cartoon characters, as well as the iconization of various expressionistic effects that are utilized to convey the characters' emotions.

Queer/Fear: Disability, Sexuality, and The Other

This article uses disability, feminist, and queer theory to offer an insight on the relationship of disability and queerness and why ableism is the root of queerphobia. It is useful for my research because, in my thesis, I examine how this intersection manifests in the treatment and behavior of the characters. The author, N.J. Hirschmann, is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Penn Arts & Sciences and works in the Political Science Department. Her field of expertise is the history of political thought, analytical philosophy, feminist theory, and the intersection of political theory and public policy.

Introduction: Queer(Ing) Fairy Tales

This article is useful for my research because it focuses on analyzing queer-coding in classical fairytales, which are, just like the work I am mostly focusing on, pieces of literature whose target audience is mostly children. Additionally, it defines the terms queerness and queer-coding, which are crucial to understanding this thesis. The author

is Lewis C. Seifert who is a professor of French and Francophone studies at Brown University whose current fields of scientific interest are seventeenth-century French literature and culture, folk- and fairy-tale studies, gender and sexuality studies, and environmental humanities. His other works related to fairytales and queerness include titles such as: "Queer Time in Charles Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty,"" "Hidden Agendas: Cross-Dressing in 17th-Century France," and "Humans and Non-Humans: Ambiguities of Agency and Personhood in Fairy Tales, 1650- 1800."

Methods

I chose my topic because I am queer, and so I am interested in exploring queerness in literature. I talked to my thesis advisor, and she suggested the graphic novel *Nimona* and the animated series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (SPOP)*. I have always liked comics and animated media, so I took it as a chance to learn more about comics theory.

I started by reading *Nimona* to get familiar with the story and the layout. I had already seen *SPOP* before I even chose the topic of my thesis, but I rewatched it later to refresh my memory and truly study it. Then, I read the literature my supervisor recommended, knowing I needed to learn more about the history and technicalities of the medium before I would be able to apply it and analyze my primary sources. I would take notes, which I would later use as points of reference when analyzing my primary sources. While I did not use all of them in the thesis, they provided a broader context I needed for understanding the medium.

I then read the graphic memoirs *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe and *The Fire Never Goes Out: A Memoir in Pictures* by ND Stevenson, again, to form an idea about what the contents were, but also to note down ideas I wanted to explore and that provided a direction and key words for finding my secondary sources related to queerness. They also provide a larger context. They act as windows through which one can look at what it is like to be a queer individual. And while such experiences are highly individual, there are some shared aspects to the queer experience.

After that, I created my outline and looked for scientific articles. I mostly used Queer Theory and Comics Theory to analyze my primary sources because of their direct relation to my topic. However, I also used some articles that look at the intersection

between Queer, Disability, and Feminist Theory as well as others from the fields of post-humanism and media psychology. The main criteria for choosing my theories were those that focus on minorities that also experience discrimination, especially ones that result in a sense of otherness and loneliness, but also those that explore the medium (comics, TV series, etc.) and how the audience and creators interact with it. Even though *SPOP* is an adaptation of an earlier show from the 80s' I did not choose adaptation theory because examining the differences between the original show and the adaptation is not the focus of my thesis.

While searching for my secondary sources I was also creating my arguments that I put at the end of each section in the outline to assure that I was focusing on the specific issue of each argument. I followed this by creating an annotated bibliography of my secondary sources, so the citing process would be easier later. Among these secondary sources were also some that helped me define the terminology I use in my analysis. For understanding this thesis, the most important was the definition of what even is *queer*.

According to González and Nordgren, it is a reclaimed term that was originally used pejoratively but now shields a broad variety of sexual and gender identities under an umbrella of non-conformity and anti-normativity.¹⁴ Annamarie Jagose defines queer as “Those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire,”¹⁵ on which Lewis C. Seifert elaborates by saying that “*queer* designates the practices and concepts showing that gender and sexuality do not derive in any straight-forward way from a “natural” essence but necessarily involve social and cultural factors, which in turn create normative constructions.”¹⁶ In this thesis I work with these definitions to examine queer-coding and explicit queer representation in my primary sources. According to Seifert, queer-coding itself is a combination of “signs and meanings neglected or obscured by heteronormative interpretations.”¹⁷

¹⁴González, Octavio, and Todd G. Nordgren, "Queer," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 29 May, 2020; Accessed 16 Oct. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1130>.

¹⁵ Jagose, Annamarie, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. (New York UP, 1996), 3.

¹⁶Seifert, Lewis C, “Introduction: Queer(Ing) Fairy Tales.” *Marvels & Tales* 29, no. 1 (2015): 16, <https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.29.1.0015>.

¹⁷Seifert, Lewis C, “Introduction: Queer(Ing) Fairy Tales,” *Marvels & Tales* 29, no. 1 (2015): 16. <https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.29.1.0015>.

I then also researched additional terminology like “drag.” Edgar defines it as “an illusion, a character the performers create for the show while not interested in being the gender they perform as,”¹⁸ while Butler says, “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality.” I used these definitions to contextualize my analysis and to provide the reader with a reference to the interpretation of these terms in a way I used them within the main text.

Self-projection and self-identification in comics

According to Hatfield in the chapter “Comic Books” of *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, comics have been the tool of self-expression since comic books as a medium got redefined during the underground period (post-1967).¹⁹ I argue that this does not apply only to reader-viewers but also to the authors. McCloud focuses on how comics are perceived by the audience and that the simplification of style allows the reader-viewers to see themselves in the cartoons, which makes the media more relatable.²⁰ What he does not cover is that the simplification into cartoons is what makes it easier for the creators to convey their experience. He does explain the powers of paneling, lines, colors, etc., that allow the artists to convey their ideas in a very curated way, but he does not speak about how the simplification of style makes it easier for the artists to express themselves. Based on his explanation of iconization and the definition of fully realistic and fully iconized style, I suggest that the same barriers that come with these two extremes for the reader-viewer are also applicable to the creators, though with an opposite or clashing effect.

That is the case for the realistic style in particular. If it is less likely to be relatable for the reader-viewer because they see the author rather than themselves in the character, then a highly realistic art of the artist themselves would serve like a mirror. On one hand, it could be too painful to create a mirror reflection of emotionally difficult situations; on the other hand, it would not provide as much room for self-expression of emotions as cartoons do. That would be a particular issue for queer creators in memoirs, especially

¹⁸Edgar, Eir-Anne. “‘Xtravaganza!’: Drag Representation and Articulation in ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race.’” *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2011): 133–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416354>.

¹⁹ Charles Hatfield, “Comic Books,” in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 31.

²⁰Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 36.

trans and non-binary ones, who may experience gender dysphoria, which could make drawing realistic versions of themselves uncomfortable. However, comics allow them to adopt the cartoonish style to better reflect themselves in their works and help them to express how they see themselves rather than what they look like to the outside world.

I argue it could be considered a form of shapeshifting, since according to Leder in *Embodying Otherness: Shape-Shifting and the Natural World*, even changing clothes can be considered shape shifting because clothes can serve as a tool with which a person can change their appearance but also identity.²¹ So do comics and cartoons as it is demonstrated in *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe. In their work they draw themselves with a barely noticeable chest, and their style is so simplified that it erases most gendered physical features like a more feminine bone structure.

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power

The show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* is an animated show about princesses with magical powers fighting the evil Horde that is trying to conquer the planet. There are a number of both explicitly queer and queer-coded characters. Looking at the development of the queer representation in the show throughout its five seasons provides an insight into the problematics of queer representation in children-targeted media. To better understand the development of the representation and the nuance needed when the creative team tries to include it, I will be focusing on the examination of two groups of characters – explicitly queer characters and queer-coded characters – and how they are portrayed in the series.

Explicitly Queer Characters and Their Depiction

Adora/She-Ra

Adora is the main character of the series. She is a former Horde soldier who finds a magical sword that allows her to transform into She-Ra, a mythical protector of the planet. After witnessing the atrocities the Horde is responsible for outside the Fright Zone, she decides to join the Rebellion.

²¹Leder, Drew. "Embodying Otherness: Shape-Shifting and the Natural World." *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2012): 123–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26169760>.

During her growing up in the Fright Zone, the kids were taught that princesses were bad. In the episode “Signals” Adora keeps mentioning the stories they were told as kids.²² The princesses in them were painted as scary villains, which considering that the actual princesses in the series are representatives of queerness and positivity, it begs the question if those princess fairytales could be a reference to the phenomena of queer-coded villains in media but also within the show. Her friend Bow even makes a remark about the Horde having a theme with those tales, pointing out the stereotype, which could be done with the media within the real world as well. After all, some of the most well-known examples of queer-coded villains can be found in Disney’s feature films which portrayed villains as queer-coded for a long time, tying queerness to evil and predatory behavior.²³

For the majority of the show Adora’s queerness is only implied. It is never too straightforward and the “Signals” episode with the fairytales only confirms that because it offers a sort of multi-level queer-coding, since for understanding the scene as queer, specific knowledge about queer-coding villains in the real world is needed. However, there are more direct signs such as Adora’s sparkling eyes in episode 2 season 3 where she becomes excited around Huntara,²⁴ a tall and muscular warrior lady, whom she tries to get on her side and become their guide through the Crimson Waste. As Huntara leads them through the desert, Adora tries to impress her with her ability to learn fast.²⁵ She also blushes in episode “Flutterina” when a tall and muscular moth lady squeezes her in her strong arms.²⁶

One more example of Adora being attracted to big muscular women is in “White Out” where she seems quite smitten with Scorpia when she holds Adora while Adora is delirious from getting infected by a virus.²⁷ In that same scene Scorpia exclaims “*I can’t believe I’m stuck in a closet here with you,*” which is a queer joke that everyone who is

²²*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 2, episode 3, “Signals,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired April 26, 2019, on Netflix, 12:07.

²³Brown, Adelia (2021) "Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 43.

²⁴*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 3, episode 2, “Huntara,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired August 2, 2019, on Netflix, 06:52.

²⁵“Huntara,” at 10 min., 3 sec.

²⁶*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 3, “Flutterina,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired November 5, 2019, on Netflix, 07:03.

²⁷*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 2, episode 5, “White Out,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired April 26, 2019, on Netflix, 14:08.

familiar with the expression “being in a closet” would recognize. It is also used in the part of the series where Scorpia is still trying to be Catra’s new “best friend.” She complains about Adora ruining her plan of spending some alone time with Catra²⁸ and calls Adora Catra’s “ex-best friend,”²⁹ which is true; Adora is Catra’s ex-best friend, but Scorpia using that term after the previous line makes it sound like she’s forced to spend time with Catra’s ex-girlfriend. She also gets annoyed over Adora knowing Catra’s favorite number when she does not know it, accusing Adora of “rubbing it in her face.”³⁰

Another instance is Adora getting more confident, almost cocky, when she turns into She-Ra in the episode “Flowers for She-Ra.”³¹ It is interesting to see that her attraction to other big strong women seems to translate into self-confidence in her She-Ra form because she becomes the type of person she finds attractive and admirable. In that scene it is obvious she is confident only about her looks and superhuman strength since she shows it off by lifting a cart full of supplies up and down with only one hand. She also acknowledges that other people like her more as She-Ra,³² and she is right about that because when Perfuma sees her, she gets an awed sparkly effect applied to her.³³ In her eyes, She-Ra is their hero who is supposed to save their land.

The introduction of Perfuma is rather ambiguous about whether she is only excited to see She-Ra or if she is attracted to her because the sparkle effect has been used in both ways across different shows, movies, and comics. For example, in the episode “Giant Woman” of *Steven Universe*, Steven’s eyes have stars in them and there are a couple of sparkles by his head after he sees Opal, a giant woman, take down a flock of bird-like creatures with a single arrow.³⁴ A few seconds later he gasps and whispers “A giant woman” in a fanboy-like manner. It is hard to determine how big a part attraction plays in fan behavior, but for this instance I argue that Steven’s reaction is platonic because Opal is a fusion of his two friends.

²⁸ “White Out,” at 12 min., 18 sec.

²⁹ “White Out,” at 12 min., 22 sec.

³⁰ “White Out,” at 13 min., 16 sec.

³¹ *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 1, episode 4, “Flowers for She-Ra,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired November 13, 2018, on Netflix, 06:44.

³² “Flowers for She-Ra,” at 6 min., 57 sec.

³³ “Flowers for She-Ra,” at 7 min., 15 sec.

³⁴ *Steven Universe*, season 1, episode 12, “Giant Woman,” developed by Rebecca Sugar, aired February 24, 2014, on Cartoon Network, 09:44.

Another, this time clearly romantically coded, example is from the Japanese anime *Sailor Moon*. In the episode “Wish Upon a Star: Naru’s First Love” the character Naru is accompanied by a sparkly background similar to Perfuma’s when she thinks about the boy she likes while she confesses her crush to Usagi. But unlike Perfuma, Naru is also blushing.³⁵ So, even without the explicit confession the scene would read as romantic.

In the anime *SPY x FAMILY* there are multiple examples of using these effects in various contexts. In the episode “The Counter-Secret Police Cover Operation” blushing is used to convey feelings of embarrassment and fluster at the sight of items that are supposed to show Yor and Loid are in love so Yor’s brother would not find out their marriage is fake. Some of these items are kitschy bed covers that leave both characters blushing and flustered.³⁶ Yor is the one who expresses her feelings more and who shows signs of falling in love with Loid. In the same episode she blushes at Loid saying he loves her and that his daughter does too, which leads to Yor having to remind herself that what he is saying is not real but just an act to deceive her brother.³⁷

However, even blushing is not universally romantic, and it depends on context and so do the sparkly eyes and, as McCloud calls them, expressionistic backgrounds.³⁸ He specifically mentions that they are widely used in the romance genre, especially in Japanese manga, to express all sorts of emotions,³⁹ and since many anime are adaptations of previously existing manga, it is only natural that these effects were adapted into animation as well. Returning to *SPY x FAMILY*, all these symbols and effects are used in a non-romantic context when it comes to Anya, the child. In the episode “The Fearsome Luxury Cruise Ship” in season 2 of the anime, Anya’s eyes sparkle and her cheeks are red when she sees a keychain she likes in the souvenir store.⁴⁰ Later in the same episode, Loid, her father, is shown with the idolizing, glowing background when he tells Anya he is going to buy her the keychain despite originally

³⁵*Sailor Moon*, season 1, episode 23, “Wish Upon a Star: Naru’s First Love,” written by Shigeru Yanagawa, directed by Harume Kosaka, aired August 22, 1992, on TV Asahi, 09:44.

³⁶*SPY x FAMILY*, season 1, episode 8, “The Counter-Secret Police Cover Operation,” directed by Kazuhiro Furuhashi, aired May 28, 2022, on TV Tokyo, 09:31.

³⁷“The Counter-Secret Police Cover Operation,” at 20 min., 23 sec.

³⁸ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 132.

³⁹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 133.

⁴⁰*SPY x FAMILY*, season 2, episode 6, “The Fearsome Luxury Cruise Ship,” written by Daishirō Tanimura, directed by Tsuyoshi Tobita, aired November 11, 2023, on TV Tokyo, 15:39.

telling her she did not need it;⁴¹ this shows how important the context is for interpreting these effects.

Just like in the previous example, there are some more instances of these effects in *SPOP* itself that are not limited to the one with Perfuma. One of the earliest ones includes Adora herself in the episode “The Sword Part 2” in which Bow and Glimmer take her to a nearby village where a festival takes place. When Bow finds out Adora does not know what a party is, he decides to show her around. Her eyes go wide and sparkle when she tries food that does not taste terrible like the food she was used to in the Fright zone.⁴² She also has that same look in her eyes when she watches from afar an older villager telling a story to a group of children.⁴³

The main example of the effect being used in this episode is when she sees a horse for the first time. She lets out a gasp and a blush appears on her cheeks, then she theatrically asks Bow what it is. When the focus shifts on the horse dramatic music starts playing and the horse majestically shakes its head in slow motion and gracefully tosses its mane with the background turning into the sparkly expressionistic one in the final moment.⁴⁴ It appears again when Bow makes her go closer and pat the horse, and Adora calls it “the best day of [her] life.”⁴⁵ While this is not a romantically-coded scene, it definitely is a representation of love at first sight and the creation of a deep bond because later Adora ends up accidentally forming a special bond with the horse, now called Horsey, using a magical light beam.

As stated earlier, these effects are not necessarily a manifestation of romantic feelings but rather excitement or simply love for certain things. That is the case in the episode “Shot in the Dark” where the sparkle effect appears next to Bow’s head when they are taking off their space-suit helmets: Catra is hesitant to take hers off and Bow gushes about how he too would leave his on if it was that cute, which makes Catra blush with embarrassment.⁴⁶ There are no romantic feelings between the two; it is more likely

⁴¹“The Fearsome Luxury Cruise Ship,” at 18 min., 02 sec.

⁴² *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 1, episode 2, “The Sword Part 2,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired November 13, 2018, on Netflix, 11:45.

⁴³“The Sword Part 2,” at 12 min., 19 sec.

⁴⁴“The Sword Part 2,” at 12 min., 44 sec.

⁴⁵“The Sword Part 2,” at 13 min., 06 sec.

⁴⁶*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 5, episode 8, “Shot in the Dark,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 04:25.

that Catra gets embarrassed because she has always been the edgy character or because she is getting cooed at in front of Adora whom she likes. Later in that episode there is another moment when Bow's eyes sparkle because Catra sneezes and he thinks it is cute, which makes Catra defensive again and he keeps teasing her about it.⁴⁷ These scenes serve as both a demonstration of a slowly developing friendship between the two and a way to show Bow's love for cute things, so in a way the effect is related to love, just not romantic love or love for a person.

All these examples show that Perfuma's reaction to She-Ra was not necessarily romantic, but as mentioned earlier, these effects and backgrounds are mostly used in the romance genre in Japanese manga and anime. Since the show is heavily influenced by Japanese works in the magical girl genre, like the previously mentioned *Sailor Moon*, and the scene where Perfuma first meets She-Ra is also most similar to the one earlier presented as an example from the anime, it is possible to interpret Perfuma's reaction as at least partially romantic. The similarities between the two scenes are not only in the expressionist backgrounds and sparkles, but also the body language of the two characters and the fact that She-Ra is then shown in a somewhat similar manner as Naru's love interest Nephrite in her imagination. Both She-Ra and Nephrite are highlighted by a background glow and their long hair is flowing in the wind, followed by a close-up on their faces as they each crack a charming smile. This presentation of Adora shows how confident she feels in her She-Ra form because it amplifies her already great fighting skills and her strength, which she seems to take pride in.

An example of this pride could be taken from the scene in the previously mentioned episode "The Sword Part 2" where she tries to break a piñata and is successful, which earns her a cheer from the village's children as she stands there with a proud posture and a smirk on her face.⁴⁸ She strikes a heroic pose in the scene from episode 4, and her cocky smile is more reminiscent of attractive men who have ladies swooning. Some examples of that are Prince Naveen from *The Princess and the Frog* and the human version of Shrek from *Shrek 2*. In Naveen's case, his confidence is bordering on arrogance as he is aware of his good looks and the effect his title of a prince has on young women who see him as a fairytale prince, but his attitude also has a more

⁴⁷"Shot in the Dark," at 10 min., 15 sec.

⁴⁸ "The Sword Part 2," at 12 min., 04 sec.

grounded and less superficial foundation due to his skills as a musician and a dancer.⁴⁹ That is why he does not lose his confidence even after he gets turned into a frog.⁵⁰

As for Shrek, his case is different: he is confident in being an ogre, he is good at being an ogre, but that also means he is aware of how people perceive him. After he drinks the “Happily Ever After” potion he turns into an attractive human man (his transformation is thus the opposite of Naveen’s) and he has to learn confidence in his transformed self. When he goes back to the city, it is clear from his body language that he still expects people to react to him negatively, but it only takes a few waves followed by positive responses for him to become more confident. The first interaction is of him giving a wave and a smile to a group of peasants with pitchforks who smile and wave back at him. They stand by a shopping window, so when Shrek passes it, he sees his reflection and flashes himself a confident smile similar to She-Ra’s before passing by a group of ladies who he greets and they giggle, confirming their attraction to him.⁵¹

By combining all these signs, the romantically coded interpretation of the Perfuma introductory scene is undeniable, especially since there is no context that would dismantle it before the scene takes place. It is only after that the viewer learns that Perfuma is probably only happy to see the legendary hero who should help save her kingdom, but without that context the scene is likely to be read as romantic. Because this scene is at the beginning of the show, there is not much explicitly queer context that would support the queer interpretation of the scene, but in hindsight, it is possible that the scene was meant to be romantically coded.

As already mentioned, these examples become more obviously queer-coded in the context of the show. The context is the existence of other explicitly queer characters in the show such as Spinnerella and Netossa, Bow’s dads, or Huntara, who is seen to be flirting with the female bartender in the tavern when Adora and her friends meet her for the first time there.⁵² It opens the possibility for the viewer that there could be more queer characters or that Adora herself could be queer. It allows the viewer to read between the lines or look at the interactions from a different, queer, angle. It takes the

⁴⁹*The Princess and the Frog*, directed by John Musker and Ron Clements (Walt Disney Pictures, 2009), 16:18.

⁵⁰*The Princess and the Frog*, 0:26:59 to 0:30:06.

⁵¹*Shrek 2*, directed by Andrew Adamson, Conrad Vernon, and Kelly Asbury (DreamWorks Pictures, 2004), 56:32.

⁵²“Huntara,” at 7 min., 8 sec.

viewer out of the territory of ignorance or wistful wishes and puts them into the territory of actual possibility, allowing them to look at Adora and Catra's relationship and question if they could be more than friends.

Regarding Adora's She-Ra form, it is probably one of the more obvious signs, or at least could be considered one if we rely on stereotypes. When she transforms, she becomes taller and more muscular, which are usually traits associated with masculinity rather than a princess. That is especially the case when the princess is the main character and her non-transformed self is much different in body type and closer to the feminine idea of a princess. While her appearance is not actually an indicator of her sexuality, it definitely defies the gender norms of what a woman should look like, which would earn her a suspicion of being queer even if she was not attracted to women because as defined in the Methods section, queer is label that includes gender non-conformity,⁵³ and She-Ra's expression of gender is rather non-conforming. There is seemingly no reason why she could not keep her Adora appearance, especially since the other princesses, except Scorpia, are more neutral in their body types and overall appearances, so Adora's drastic change in appearance once she transforms must be an intentional design choice.

While She-Ra's muscular and taller body type is more suitable for a legendary warrior, I argue it is not only a question of strength because, as already mentioned, the other princesses keep their appearance and are still strong and great fighters. The only other princess that goes through a partial transformation is Mermista who can change her legs into a mermaid tail, which is reasonable considering her powers and the kingdom she comes from. However, this transformation does not change her height nor muscle mass. Unlike She-Ra, Mearmista and the other princesses do not possess supernatural strength, but since the series is an animated show that combines the Japanese magical girl genre with the American superhero genre, it was not necessary to change Adora's body type in her She-Ra form. The genres and the medium would allow Adora to keep her original body type and She-Ra's supernatural strength.

It also does not seem to be a concern of age and a desire not to depict teenagers and children fighting by attempting to make Adora look older because most of the other

⁵³González, Octavio, and Todd G. Nordgren. "Queer." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. 29 May. 2020; Accessed 16 Oct. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1130>.

princesses seem to be around the same age as Adora, and they do not receive a similar transformation (with the exception of Frosta who is still a child). It is also interesting to compare Adora's design with Mara's, the previous She-Ra who is introduced in the episode "Light Hope" as a hologram.⁵⁴ Later in the episode "Hero" her She-Ra transformation is shown,⁵⁵ and she does not seem to change much when she transforms into She-Ra: she is presumably an adult, surely older than Adora is, and in her transformation sequence, it is shown that she does become bigger; however, the difference between her She-Ra and non-She-Ra form is not that stark. Both Adora and Mara are also trained fighters, so they must be fit and have some already good muscle strength before transforming into She-Ra. So, making Adora grow so much taller and more muscular seems to serve mostly one purpose, and that is simply making her look cooler and more heroic, not only in the viewer's eyes, but also in the eyes of the other characters in the show.

Her She-Ra form earns her a lot of compliments and positive attention from gushing fans and grateful villagers alike as is shown in the already mentioned episodes "Flowers for She-Ra" after the discussed Perfuma scene⁵⁶ and "Flutterina," where the villagers of Elberon host a party for She-Ra and the others. There they meet Flutterina who is extremely excited to meet She-Ra, even fainting when Adora winks at her.⁵⁷ In that scene Adora is not in her She-Ra form, but people already perceive her as She-Ra anyway, unlike in the "Flowers for She-Ra" episode. Through her journey, Adora gained the confidence in her skills as She-Ra and recognition for her deeds that extend past her transformed self though she still transforms into She-Ra for the entertainment of others.

The episode "Flutterina" is a parallel to the "Flowers for She-Ra" episode, where Adora as She-Ra lifts heavy things to show off, but loses all her confidence once she meets the villagers, but in the "Flutterina" episode she does the same and more for the villagers, being much more confident in her transformed self.⁵⁸ At the party in Elberon she realizes that people have stories about her, about her heroic acts, not the ones of

⁵⁴"Lighthope," at 11 min., 26 sec.

⁵⁵*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 9, "Hero," developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 09:52.

⁵⁶"Flowers for She-Ra," at 7 min., 51 sec.

⁵⁷"Flutterina," at 7 min., 25 sec.

⁵⁸"Flutterina," at 8 min., 50 sec.

Mara or any other She-Ra before her.⁵⁹ Her interactions with Flutterina serve as a comic relief, but they also show the level of adoration the villagers have for her as their hero and the influence the rebellion has on their children who see the members as their role models. For Adora, that is shown through Flutterina, but there are also scenes where the children are impressed with Bow and his technological and archery skills.⁶⁰

However, these displays of adoration not only establish how the characters are perceived within the show, but they also impact the opinions of the viewers. The characters are portrayed as the heroes, someone the people within the universe look up to. Considering that the show is mainly targeted at children, I argue that these scenes also serve as a guide for how the children are supposed to perceive the characters who are actually good. These celebrations are a reward for the characters' good deeds: they show them as the sort of people the children, both within and outside of the show, should strive to be. According to Hoffner and Buchanan's study of 208 young adults the respondents mostly identified with characters of their respective gender, and the common attributes they identified with were success and intelligence⁶¹, which are at the center of the "Flutterina" episode with Adora, Bow, and Swift Wind being celebrated for their victories and Bow being appreciated for his intelligence.

As for the diverging attributes, Hoffner and Buchanan found that men often also identified with violence, and women with attractiveness and admiration.⁶² Adora meets both these attributes. As a hero she is admired, which is established by the reactions of the villagers when they see her as previously mentioned. She is also portrayed as attractive but in a masculine, gender non-conforming way, reminiscent of the attractiveness of male characters as established by previously provided examples.

Adora is also not oversexualized like many female superheroes were, like She-Ra's version from the 80s, and some still are, for example, Wonder Woman in her very revealing outfit. Adora's attire is age-appropriate and practical in both her original and evolved She-Ra forms. The original She-Ra outfit is a blend of practicality and femininity that contrasts her more masculine build: she wears a top that does not

⁵⁹ "Flutterina," at 9 min., 40 sec.

⁶⁰ "Flutterina," at 7 min., 7 sec.

⁶¹ Hoffner, Cynthia, and Martha Buchanan. 2005. "Young Adults' Wishful Identification With Television Characters: The Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes," *Media Psychology* 7 (4): 325, doi:10.1207/S1532785XMEP0704_2.

⁶² Hoffner and Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification," 325.

emphasize her chest and its collar reaches her neck, decently long shorts with a skirt-like layer over them, and knee-high boots without heels. Her hair is long and flowy and she wears a winged tiara.

The team could have put her in the costume from the 80s' series because they did include it in the episode "Roll with It," paying it a tribute. In that scene it is clear that no one besides Bow and Perfuma are enjoying the idea. The creators could have chosen to dress the characters in these costumes and not to change their bodies, but they decided to enlarge Adora and Perfuma's breasts. Mermista seems to keep the size of hers, they are just enhanced by the outfit. Adora's case is the most striking, with her chest being ridiculously big and her skirt extremely short.⁶³

However, the creators decided against such costuming apart from this homage scene, showing that there is no single right way to be a girl. As Hoffner and Buchanan state in their study, people tend to identify with characters who are similar to them in some ways, leading them to adopting other attributes of a character or strive to be like said character in other ways.⁶⁴ While I acknowledge that this study is quite dated and it would be suitable to revisit it to examine how and if people's notions of which characteristics they would identify with nowadays would change or not, I still consider the study valuable for its findings and argue that diversifying the pool of respondents to queer, disabled, etc. individuals would be a worthy addition to the research. I suggest that it is very likely that such attributes would play an equally important role in identifying with characters just as age, race, gender, personality, lived experiences, etc.⁶⁵ would.

Catra

Catra is another explicitly queer character in the show. She is a human-cat hybrid of unknown species and Adora's childhood best friend and her love interest. They grew up together in the Fright Zone, but unlike Adora, Catra has never been treated kindly by their caretaker and supervisor Shadow Weaver. This resulted in her feeling like she did

⁶³*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 2, episode 4, "Roll with It," developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 10:22.

⁶⁴ Hoffner and Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification," 328.

⁶⁵ Hoffner and Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification," 328.

not matter to anyone except for Adora, and not even to her after Adora left to join the Rebellion.

Catra's view of herself is expressed explicitly in the episode "Save the Cat" in season 5 where she says "Why did you come back? We both know I don't matter," to Adora, just for Adora to reply that she mattered to her while caressing Catra's cheek,⁶⁶ which brings tears to Catra's eyes because her place as just a merely tolerated inconvenience has been established since the beginning of the first episode, showing Shadow Weaver's hostility towards her.⁶⁷ This is why when Adora finds the Sword and decides to join the Rebellion in the first two episodes, Catra feels betrayed and refuses to go with her despite Adora asking her to.⁶⁸ She is then tasked to bring Adora back, which she tries to do mostly by force or through her cunning plans. This is apparent from how she deals with Adora's refusal to come back to the Fright Zone in the same episode — she uses a stun gun to immobilize Adora.⁶⁹

Catra's first appearance on the screen at the beginning of the first episode foreshadows her villain arc and her questionable methods with the line "You know nothing's too low for me,"⁷⁰ but it also shows her affection for Adora. Her first line is her saying "Hey, Adora," in a flirty, teasing voice. She uses this line in the span of the whole show, and it changes the tone based on which part of her journey Catra is in. At first as in the already provided example, her tone is playful, but after she parts ways with Adora it becomes more sharp and sinister,⁷¹ just for it to turn soft and loving after her redemption in season 5.⁷² It shows how important Adora is for her because Catra is at her worst when she is not with Adora.

Regarding her bond with Adora, throughout the series it is obvious how emotionally attached Catra is to her, which is an understandable reaction considering the mental abuse they went through in the Fright Zone which Catra acknowledges in the

⁶⁶*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 5, episode 5, "Save the Cat," developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 16:42.

⁶⁷*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 1, episode 1, "The Sword Part 1," developed by ND Stevenson, aired November 13, 2018, on Netflix, 04:15.

⁶⁸"The Sword Part 2," at 16 min., 5 sec.

⁶⁹"The Sword Part 2," at 16 min., 34 sec.

⁷⁰"The Sword Part 1," at 3 min., 30 sec.

⁷¹*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 3, episode 3, "Once Upon a Time in the Waste," developed by ND Stevenson, aired August 2, 2019, on Netflix, 18:07.

⁷²"Save the Cat," at 22 min., 10 sec.

second episode.⁷³ While Adora is shocked to learn that they have been lied to and manipulated, Catra is not because she had always known, but she was willing to endure it as long as Adora was there with her.⁷⁴ Since Adora was always the reason why Catra was tolerated or not treated worse than she already was, it makes sense that after Adora left Catra is having a difficult time: with Adora leaving, Catra lost the only support system she had. This behavior could be interpreted simply as a very unhealthy and co-dependent friendship and would be enough of an explanation for Catra's future actions. However, just like in Adora's case, in the context of the show (the presence of explicitly queer characters), some of Catra's behavior and reactions are hard to dismiss as friendship.

Unlike Adora, who is too busy building new, genuine relationships and saving the world, Catra is laser-focused on Adora most of the time. Of course, she has her own ambitions, but her end goal always revolves around Adora. It does not matter if it is bringing Adora back or actually trying to destroy her in desperate hope of finding peace. For Catra, as long as Adora is out there, Catra's world will keep revolving around her.

Catra's feelings for Adora are more obvious in the last season when she joins the Rebellion and her relationship with Adora starts improving, causing her to get nervous and flustered around Adora, but they also slowly get back to their original dynamic that is based on constant teasing and bickering. In the episode "The Perils of Peekablue" Catra climbs into Adora's lap just to annoy her by slowly wiggling her tail in front of Adora's face.⁷⁵ When comfortable, Catra is quite flirtatious in a teasing way, and that interaction is a prime example of that. This has always been their dynamic before their fallout. The difference is that what was originally easy to dismiss as friendship in the earlier seasons because of the lack of explicit queer representation in the form of other characters came to be quite obviously romantically-coded actions once it was established that there were explicitly queer characters on the show.

ND Stevenson in an interview with GLAAD⁷⁶ admitted that the story was crafted in a way that by the last season, Catradora (a pair name for Catra and Adora) was

⁷³"The Sword Part 2," at 15 min., 47 sec.

⁷⁴"The Sword Part 2," at 15 min., 47 sec.

⁷⁵*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 5, episode 7, "The Perils of Peekablue," developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 0:39.

⁷⁶ND Stevenson, "EXCLUSIVE: 'She-Ra' creator Noelle Stevenson talks to GLAAD about the final season, queer representation in animation, and watching 'Killing Eve,'" interview by Raina Deerwater,

inevitable. However, that required the team to slowly introduce the explicitly queer characters and themes, and they needed to handle this aspect of the show with a lot of care. Stevenson also mentioned that while they did not experience any push-backs from the executives in regards to the queer representation on the show, the inherent fear of including it was there and was the reason the team chose to slowly increase the representation as the show unfolded.⁷⁷

Double Trouble

In the episode “The Valley of the Lost” in season 4, the character Double Trouble is introduced. They are a humanoid lizard-like shapeshifter, or at least that is what they choose to use as their “default” form; however, they state that it is only “more or less” their “true” form when Catra asks them about it.⁷⁸ They are a mercenary from the Crimson Waste, but they are not much of a fighter. As a shapeshifter, their biggest weapon is their acting and mimicking skills that allow them to use psychological tactics to weaken and defeat their enemies. As they stress to Catra, they do not just change, they transform.⁷⁹

For them, these transformations are an art, a performance. Their approach to this form of art is reminiscent of drag, which Yuval Avrami defines as “a form of exaggerated gender performance.” He notes that to create their persona, drag queens and kings (as are the performers called) use different accessories, wigs and padding to achieve their striking visual transformations.⁸⁰ Similarly, Eir-Anne Edgar suggests that drag is “an illusion, a character the performers create for the show while not interested in being the gender they perform as.”⁸¹

As Double Trouble puts it in the show, all people wear costumes, which could be interpreted as everyone taking on different social roles, however, they wear other people as costumes.⁸² This overlap between their role in the show as a shapeshifter and the

⁷⁷GLAAD, GLAAD, May 15, 2020, <https://glaad.org/exclusive-she-ra-creator-noelle-stevenson-talks-glaad-about-final-season-queer-representation/>.

⁷⁸*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 2, “The Valley of the Lost,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 13:52.

⁷⁹“The Valley of the Lost,” at 14 min., 24 sec.

⁸⁰Avrami, Yuval, “Mermaids and Drag Queens: A Queer Look at Mermaiding,” *Journal of Posthumanism* 3, no. 3 (2023): 210, <https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v3i3.1972>.

⁸¹Edgar, Eir-Anne, “‘Xtravaganza!’: Drag Representation and Articulation in ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race,’” *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2011): 133–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416354>.

⁸²“The Valley of the Lost,” at 13 min., 55 sec.

shapeshifting nature of drag does not seem to be accidental. Another similarity between the two is the performing part: neither Double trouble nor drag performers desire to become their persona in their daily life outside of their performances. That also applies to gender specifically; Double Trouble does not show any signs of wanting to adopt the gender of anyone they impersonate.

As already stated, they wear other people as costumes and they enjoy studying and perfecting their behavioral and emotional responses, but these aspects are all just parts of a believable illusion, just as drag is an illusion and a performance of exaggerated gender. According to Judith Butler, drag is “subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality.”⁸³ Following this argument, Double Trouble’s imitating skills enable them to not only compromise the enemies of their employer, but to also observe and understand their employer’s psychology to undermine them just like drag undermines the socially constructed ideas about gender. An example of this from the show is in the episode “Destiny Part 2” when they find Catra in the Fright Zone in a wrecked state after her fight with Hordak and take the appearance of Adora to approach her, laying out all her insecurities and ways she was hurt by others just to ask her if she ever thought she was the problem, telling her it was for her own good that she heard that.⁸⁴ The link between such behavior and drag is that both challenge their audience’s ideas and biases.

However, Double Trouble’s transformations and performance are not their only similarity to drag performers because as an actor, they have a quite extravagant and flamboyant personality when they are being themselves and are not “in character” pretending to be someone else. That also translates into the way they speak and into their body language, which could be considered quite flirtatious as it is apparent from as early as their introductory episode in which they first try to pretend they are Scorpia. They wink and flirt with Catra, which she immediately finds suspicious.⁸⁵ Later when Catra cuffs their hands and demands to know who they are, they transform back into their default form. Catra keeps interrogating them while they keep their nonchalant

⁸³Butler, Judith. “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion” In *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

⁸⁴*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 13, “Destiny Part 2,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 06:33.

⁸⁵“The Valley of the Lost,” at 9 min., 31 sec.

attitude, sitting down with their legs crossed and calling Catra “darling” when she asks if it is money they are after.⁸⁶

This sort of behavior, speech, and affinity for the theatrics are highly reminiscent of Disney’s queer-coded villains such as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* or Scar from *The Lion King*. Double Trouble’s resemblance of these Disney villains is a question of body language and vocal intonation. For Ursula, this display of characteristics is best visible in the scene before singing the song “Poor Unfortunate Souls,”⁸⁷ which Avrami suggests to be her getting ready for her performance.⁸⁸ He also addresses the fact that Ursula was modeled after the drag queen Divine⁸⁹ and was voiced by Pat Carroll, who is according to Sells known for her cross-dressing roles.⁹⁰

Similarly, Double Trouble’s queerness extends beyond the one of a drag queen. They use “they/them” pronouns and are voiced by Jacob Tobia who is a non-binary actor and also uses “they/them” pronouns. In their introductory post on the show’s official Instagram account they say Double Trouble is non-binary and so are they.⁹¹ As for Scar both him and Double Trouble share the sassy and sarcastic personality and exaggerate their acting to enhance it. Scar does it when Mufasa comes to his cave to reprimand him for not attending Simba’s ceremony,⁹² and Double Trouble in the episode “Pulse” where they lie dramatically on a tank while talking to Catra.⁹³

Considering these examples, it is, on the one hand, possible to argue that Double Trouble is another character that uses these kinds of rather feminine traits to portray a villain, which could result in further villainization of queerness and these traits. This is a concern especially because Double Trouble is not only queer-coded, they are canonically queer; therefore, the link between such traits, queerness, and villainy is stronger. On the other hand, I argue that Double Trouble’s character requires more

⁸⁶“The Valley of the Lost,” at 13 min., 52 sec.

⁸⁷*The Little Mermaid*, 0:39:17 to 0:44:28.

⁸⁸Avrami, “Mermaids and Drag Queens,” 210.

⁸⁹Avrami, “Mermaids and Drag Queens,” 210.

⁹⁰Laura Sells. “Where do the mermaids stand? Voice and body in *The Little Mermaid*.” In *Mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Indiana University Press. 1995).

⁹¹DreamWorks She-Ra (@dreamworksshera), “Just announced on @prism! Meet @jacobtobia - the voice of Double Trouble!” Instagram, October 21, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B35EHi3hPWT>.

⁹²*The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1994), 05:51.

⁹³*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 4, “Pulse,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 04:50.

nuance in their interpretation. Unlike said Disney villains, Double Trouble is not a clear-cut villain; they are a mercenary who makes it very clear that they serve whoever for a price or as long as the situation is beneficial for them.⁹⁴

When they betray Catra, they remind her that she has always known about the nature of their partnership. This kind of betrayal does not come from their villainous ambition, nor are they attached to the affairs between the two sides, which is not true for Ursula and Scar who are the main villains of their respective movies and are the center of the conflict. Scar's betrayal of Mufasa and tricking Simba comes from the hatred he harbors for his brother, and both he and Ursula operate based on their goal of becoming the ruler. Double Trouble has no such vile ambition; their only concern is essentially to survive by always joining the winning side.⁹⁵ So rather than a villain, I argue they are a morally gray character, especially since they also eventually become a true ally to the Rebellion and help to defeat Horde Prime who is the main villain of the show.⁹⁶

Spinnerella and Netossa

Spinnerella and Netossa are two of the princesses and the first members of the Princess Alliance. They are voiced by N.D. Stevenson and Molly Ostertag respectively. Since the very beginning, they have always been seen together, first when they were introduced as members of the Princess Alliance⁹⁷ and then when they appear dancing together at the Princess Prom.⁹⁸ While they don't get many scenes in the earlier seasons, they get slowly developed, turning from background characters to equally important characters in the last season.

As one of the established and explicitly queer couples, them being only background characters at first could perhaps be tied to the creative team's fear of disapproval from the executives, as Stevenson admitted in an already mentioned interview for GLAAD.⁹⁹ Their development and growing exposure go from barely any scenes in season one to them being part of a major plot point in season five. That also is reflected in the way

⁹⁴“Pulse,” at 22 min., 3 sec.

⁹⁵“Destiny Part 2,” at 8 min., 8 sec.

⁹⁶“Heart Part 2,” at 9 min. 44 sec.

⁹⁷“Flowers for She-Ra,” at 3 min., 53 sec.

⁹⁸*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 1, episode 8, “Princess Prom,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired November 13, 2018, on Netflix, 18:05.

⁹⁹Stevenson, interview.

their relationship is presented because a growing exposure offers more time for them to showcase their relationship.

At the end of season 1 they come together to Brightmoon, their arms interlocked, to help despite the Princess Alliance being broken. When Netossa gets upset over Bow still not knowing what their powers are, Spinnerella consoles her and compliments her powers, calling her “darling” and cuddling her.¹⁰⁰ In the episode “Mer-Mysteries” in season 4 they appear for a brief moment dressed in their formal outfits and with Netossa holding a bouquet, and Spinnerella has her arm around Netossa’s waist. This whole image undoubtedly reads like they were interrupted in the middle of a romantic dinner.¹⁰¹ In season 5 they are supposed to celebrate their anniversary and in the episode “An Ill Wind” Netossa calls Spinnerella her wife,¹⁰² making it clear that they are married.

They also partake in long-term-partner bickering and competitiveness in the episode “Pulse,” where Spinnerella gets hurt by an evil Horde bot Netossa gets worried about her and kisses Spinnerella’s forehead when she opens her eyes.¹⁰³ Each of them also wears a necklace in the other’s color since their first appearance on the show. Knowing they are married, these necklaces are most likely their wedding jewelry. They are also the only other couple besides Adora and Catra who kiss on screen in the episodes “Taking Control” in season 5¹⁰⁴ after they play with Frosta, and at the end of the final episode.¹⁰⁵ These mundane moments showcase that queer couples may lead ordinary married lives just like any heterosexual couple and the scene where they play with Frosta and let her win in a game to cheer her up introduces them as possible future parents. *(limit the number of examples so that this paragraph is only 5 sentences long)*

Additionally, I suggest that the development of their relationship and increase of screen time is not only important for the inclusion of explicitly queer characters and

¹⁰⁰*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 1, episode 13, “The Battle of Brightmoon,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired November 13, 2018, on Netflix, 04:21.

¹⁰¹*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 7, “Mer-Mysteries,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 12:55.

¹⁰²*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 5, episode 9, “An Ill Wind,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 13:03.

¹⁰³“Pulse,” at 15 min., 27 sec.

¹⁰⁴*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 5, episode 6, “Taking Control,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 05:36.

¹⁰⁵“Heart Part 2,” at 20 min., 45 sec.

relationships in media, but also for the context of the show itself. I argue that their relationship served as a continuous test for the creative team to see how far they could push the explicit representation. They were the only explicitly queer characters who have appeared on the show since season 1 and whose explicit queerness kept growing and developing alongside the main characters. Coming back to the GLAAD¹⁰⁶ interview with Stevenson, the team was worried Catra and Adora's relationship would not be approved by the executives until there was no other choice. However, I suggest that it was partially because of the supporting, explicitly queer characters that showed that it was possible to have explicitly queer characters in the show.

Lance and George

Lance and George are Bow's dads, appearing for the first time in episode 7 of season 2.¹⁰⁷ That episode is dedicated to showing their relationship with Bow, one of their many sons. Apart from that, they are mentioned in later episodes and make a brief reappearance in one of the last episodes.

Lance and George bring an intriguing concept to the show: they represent the overall loving parents who cause unintentional harm to their child. They love their son, but their expectations still make Bow afraid of showing them who he truly is because of their love for history and negative experience with the Rebellion.¹⁰⁸ They expect Bow to follow in their footsteps and study history so he can take over their library one day.¹⁰⁹ However, that's not who Bow wants to be, but he is so afraid of telling his parents about it that he lies to them about attending a boarding school while he is actually fighting as a member of the Rebellion.¹¹⁰

While this situation can be taken at face value as parental expectations when it comes to their child's education, it could also be taken as a metaphor for queerness, especially for being transgender, considering the scene where Lance showed Adora and Glimmer Bow's "secret" pretend spot, which has a very feminine decor and some stick vaguely reminiscent of a sword. However, when Glimmer asks if Bow was pretending

¹⁰⁶Stevenson, interview.

¹⁰⁷*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 2, episode 7, "Reunion," developed by ND Stevenson, aired April 26, 2019, on Netflix.

¹⁰⁸"Reunion," at 6 min., 13 sec.

¹⁰⁹"Reunion," at 5 min., 27 sec.

¹¹⁰"Reunion," at 18 min., 4 sec.

to be a pirate in his games, which she assumes based on her knowledge of Bow's character, Lance dismisses it and instead tells her Bow was of course pretending to be a historian.¹¹¹ Even when Bow is introducing Glimmer and Adora to his dads, he asks the girls to pretend to be his school friends and not princesses and part of the Rebellion¹¹² which is the representation of the queer community in the way it provides an accepting environment and a home to multiple characters across the show like Adora, Bow, and Scorpia to name a few.

Additionally, this sense of secrecy and hiding of someone's true self is a common part of the queer experience. Queer people often hide who they are from their family out of fear which would be heightened if said family members expressed a negative stance against queer individuals, even if it was not an aggressive one but rather one of shame or distrust. According to Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull, many transgender individuals face ridicule, hostility and abuse for their identity and therefore have to carefully decide to whom they will be open about it.¹¹³ Considering these factors, it is highly possible that the queer person would be reluctant to come out to their family even if they have an otherwise good relationship. That is the case for Bow and his dads: they are shown to be very sweet and caring people who are happy to meet Bow's friends,¹¹⁴ give them a tour around their library,¹¹⁵ and bring snacks and tea for them,¹¹⁶ but they are also entirely out of touch with who their son is as a person.

However, they also portray a positive reaction to a child's coming out. When Bow "comes out" to them as a member of the Rebellion and confesses that he has been lying to them about attending a boarding school, they are surprised but they acknowledge that it was their mistake that Bow felt like he could not tell them and in the end they support his decision to be a fighter of the Rebellion.¹¹⁷ I argue that giving one of the few canonically queer couples in the show an arc that deals with prejudice and parental expectations was a clever way to utilize the self-identification properties of the medium

¹¹¹"Reunion," at 10 min., 26 sec.

¹¹²"Reunion," at 7 min., 56 sec.

¹¹³Brumbaugh-Johnson, Stacey M., and Kathleen E. Hull, "Coming Out as Transgender: Navigating the Social Implications of a Transgender Identity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 8 (2018): 1148. doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1493253.

¹¹⁴"Reunion," at 3 min., 40 sec.

¹¹⁵"Reunion," at 5 min., 55 sec.

¹¹⁶"Reunion," at 4 min., 52 sec.

¹¹⁷"Reunion," at 19 min., 3 sec.

and the characters' roles as parents because it presents them as regular parents in a setting where queerness is not an issue, and therefore queer parents are just as likely to encounter the same concerns as non-queer parents are. The couple is just a set of parents who have certain beliefs based on their past experiences and who are worried for their child, which are qualities many parents possess, resulting in a higher chance of self-identification. I suggest Lance and George also serve as a positive representation of parental acceptance and unconditional love for their child, which may help parents who watch the show to understand how to deal with such a vulnerable situation in case their child comes out to them as queer.

Queer-Coded Characters and Their Depiction

Apart from explicitly queer characters discussed in the previous section, there are many queer-coded characters in *SPOP*, some more than others. This section will focus on a selection of some of these characters and how queer-coding is utilized and what role it plays in a show that is no stranger to explicit representation. To better understand the place queer-coding has in this show, it is crucial to remember the slow evolution of the aforementioned explicit representation and the related concerns of the creative team Stevenson shared in his interview for GLAAD.¹¹⁸ In addition to the last part of the previous section, the first queer-coded character is Bow.

Bow

Bow is a teen boy and a part of the “Best Friend Squad”, in other words the main trio. He is portrayed as warm-hearted and cheerful but not reckless. He is considered the “heart” of the group since he is usually the one resolving any conflicts between characters and who is always there for his friends to offer emotional support, for example in the episode “Razz” when he assures Adora that people of Brightmoon will like her when they get to know her.¹¹⁹ He is very emotionally intelligent which, although is not an inherently female quality, is usually seen as a feminine trait. These traits match his design which includes a big red heart at the front of his shirt and other smaller ones on the soles of his shoes.

¹¹⁸Stevenson, interview.

¹¹⁹“Razz,” at 3 min., 11 sec.

In contrast to those qualities, he also has a particularly strong admiration for Sea Hawk despite its irrationality. It is exactly the irrational part that makes this “admiration” seem more like a crush: since Bow is usually the responsible one within the group, always thinking of consequences and making sure they have a solid plan, watching him admiring a person who is reckless and literally sets his own ships on fire seems like there must be something else at play rather than pure admiration. This claim is supported by his behavior around Sea Hawk in his introductory episode in which Bow’s eyes sparkle whenever Sea Hawk does anything Bow considers impressive.¹²⁰ He also blushes when Sea Hawk compliments his skill at tying knots, calling it “the best day of [his] life.”¹²¹ As it was already established in the section about Adora, these effects and signs do not have to be necessarily romantic, but based on context they will often appear as romantically coded.

Additionally, there is the aspect of his character that was discussed in the previous chapter and that is his relationship with his dads and the lengths he goes to to keep his true self and passion hidden from them.¹²² This is a similar reaction Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* has as Avrami notes.¹²³ She collects human artifacts that she keeps hidden in an underwater cavern and dreams about becoming a human,¹²⁴ despite being expected to obey the rules of her father and not go to the surface where a human could see her.¹²⁵ This is similar to Bow’s case because he had to secretly teach himself archery.¹²⁶ They both have a piece of their identity that they have to hide from their parents because if they knew, it would upset them.

However, Bow’s dads are not the only ones from whom he keeps the whole truth as he also kept his dads and his pretended for-home identity a secret even from his best friend Glimmer.¹²⁷ It is clear that he was doing his best to separate those two worlds and his two lives by creating an elaborate lie for his parents¹²⁸ and never speaking to Glimmer about his past.¹²⁹ With Glimmer and later Adora and the rest of the Rebellion,

¹²⁰“The Sea Gate,” at 6 min., 56 sec.

¹²¹“The Sea Gate,” at 7 min., 29 sec.

¹²²“Reunion,” at 7 min., 9 sec.

¹²³Avrami, “Mermaids and Drag Queens,” 4.

¹²⁴Avrami, “Mermaids and Drag Queens,” 4.

¹²⁵*The Little Mermaid*, 0:12:04 to 0:13:30.

¹²⁶“Reunion,” at 7 min., 41 sec.

¹²⁷“Reunion,” at 13 min., 47 sec.

¹²⁸“Reunion,” at 7 min., 45 sec.

¹²⁹“Reunion,” at 7 min., 16 sec.

he could be his authentic self.¹³⁰ It provided him with the freedom he so desperately wanted since he was pretty much living his dream life there, traveling and fighting, so it only makes sense that he would try to keep the reality of his family life away as much as he could. For him, being part of the Rebellion was a certain escape from his reality at home.

I argue that his management of his identity fits Orne's concept of strategic outness according to which sexual minorities constantly manage to whom and on what level they are "out" or not.¹³¹ Bow was scared of his family situation crashing the ideal life he had built for himself, but it was bound to happen sooner or later unless he completely abandoned his family. Luckily for Bow, he was met with understanding and acceptance from his parents.

In regards to the fear of being "found out", it is something a lot of queer people and especially queer children face, and they may develop the same sense of separation mindset as Bow did. They may find themselves building their "secret life" in the form of an on-line identity and finding their community on social media such as Tumblr, a platform that is, according to Robards et al., popular among young queer people. They suggest that "Tumblr operates as a distinct platform where users are motivated to connect with a difficult--to--define, amorphous sense of "community," based on shared experiences and interests."¹³²

So, I argue that watching a character share that fear and later be accepted, even if it is in a metaphoric way, is important, as I already mentioned in the previous section, because not only does such representation serve as a lesson for adults who may watch the show and offer them a guide for how to handle such situation, but it also provides queer people with a character they may relate to and through which they can receive the love and understanding they never got or think they may never get. This argument is based on Cohen's suggestion that the vicarious experience that is part of identification is

¹³⁰ "Reunion," at 13 min., 47 sec.

¹³¹ Orne, J., "You will always have to 'out' yourself: Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness," *Sexualities* 14, no. 6 (2011): 698, doi:10.1177/1363460711420462.

¹³² Brady Robards, Paul Byron, Brendan Churchill, Benjamin Hanckel, and Son Vivienne, "Tumblr as a Space of Learning, Connecting, and Identity Formation for LGBTIQ+Young People," in *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 284. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11537055.35>.

what allows people to “extend our emotional horizons and social perspectives.”¹³³ Additionally, it can serve as a source of hope for those who have a generally good relationship with their relatives, and who could potentially receive the same outcome as Bow did if they decide to face the inherent fear that comes with being queer.

Sea Hawk

Sea Hawk is a sea captain the Best Friend Squad approaches in the episode “The Sea Gate” to take them to Salineas so they can recruit another princess for the Princess Alliance.¹³⁴ At the end of the episode he becomes an ally to the Rebellion together with Princess Mermista. He is very extroverted and spontaneous but often quite egotistical. He also loves to sing, which others often do not appreciate, with Bow being usually the only exception, which might be related to Bow’s previously mentioned attraction to Sea Hawk.

Sea Hawk mostly serves as a comic relief because of his constant seeking of adventure, his history of setting ships on fire, and unyielding efforts to impress and win the heart of Mermista, the Princess of Salineas. He is loud, carefree, and at most times easily excitable, which may lead to him not being taken seriously or he is not given enough credit for how smart and capable he is. During a vulnerable conversation, he even confesses to Glimmer that he feels lonely and like no one takes him seriously.¹³⁵

It is this set of character traits and the feelings of otherness and dismissal that make him into a *somewhat* subverted version of the ‘dumb blonde’ stereotype. The emphasis is on the word “somewhat” because as a dark-haired man, Sea Hawk is the opposite of the stereotype. However, I argue that there are similarities between how Sea Hawk and the stereotypical dumb blond are portrayed. More specifically, I choose to demonstrate this by comparing his character to the famous character Elle Woods from the movie *Legally Blonde* and her subversion of the stereotype.

According to Andi Schwartz who looks at the character through the lens of the queer ‘femme’ identity, Elle faced discrimination based on her highly feminine gender

¹³³Cohen, Jonathan, “Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters,” *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 3 (2001): 245–64.
doi:10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_01.

¹³⁴“The Sea Gate,” at 3 min., 2 sec.

¹³⁵“The Sea Gate,” at 16 min., 20 sec.

presentation.¹³⁶ Similarly to Sea Hawk, she was not taken seriously by her peers and professors at Harvard because of her cheerful and flirty personality, her interest in fashion and beauty, and her inclination to frivolous past-time activities.¹³⁷ The movie subverts the stereotype of the dumb blonde by presenting Elle as a brilliant lawyer who uses her femininity as her strength.

However, Sea Hawk subverts by the mere fact that he is a man: he still suffers from prejudice because of his rather effeminate nature, so it is not only his personality that causes him such hardships but also his body language. For example, in the episode “The Sea Gate” he sits at the armrest of Princess Mermista’s throne with his legs crossed in a “feminine” way;¹³⁸ he also sits in Mermista’s lap while she sits on the throne with her legs spread and her typical annoyed attitude before she throws him off on the ground.¹³⁹ It is mostly because of the dynamic between Sea Hawk and Mermista that I argue that Sea Hawk seems like a subversion of the dumb blonde stereotype. As previously established the show is often challenging traditional views on gender by assigning opposite gender traits to its characters like Adora and Bow. Sea Hawk is yet another such character, and so is Mermista on which I will elaborate in her respective section.

However, Sea Hawk’s femininity is not the only way in which he is queer-coded. It is no secret that he is in love with Mermista, but in episode 7 of Season 5, he spots his male ex-mate, and the Enchanted Grotto’s underwater soiree. When that happens, he startles and hides behind Mermista, and his voice becomes high-pitched. Considering the setting, this scene could be interpreted as Sea Hawk accidentally meeting his ex-boyfriend in a club, which must be an uncomfortable situation to be in, especially since it is later revealed Sea Hawk set his boat on fire in the past.¹⁴⁰

Mermista

Mermista is the princess of Salineas. She meets the Best Friend Squad in the episode “The Sea Gate” in season 1. She is the edgy and sarcastic type who’s also

¹³⁶Schwartz, A, “Any cosmo girl would’ve known”: Collaboration, feminine knowledge, and Femme theory in *Legally Blonde*,” *Sexualities* 27, no. 8 (2024): 1432. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231160060>.

¹³⁷Schwartz, “Any cosmo girl would have known,” 1430–1431.

¹³⁸“The Sea Gate,” at 12 min., 37 sec.

¹³⁹“The Sea Gate,” at 13 min., 44 sec.

¹⁴⁰ “The Perils of Peekablue,” at 6 min., 9 sec.

athletic, her day-to-day outfit strongly resembling sportswear. She is stubborn with strong opinions, and she is not afraid to let them be known, which can cause trouble when getting along with other equally stubborn people.

While the show is not short on women with different yet strong personalities, Mermista still stands out between them, seeming more masculine than the rest. That might be because her aloof and quite bossy traits are qualities society usually associates with men in leadership positions. She is by far the least expressive one among the Princesses, so despite not being the biggest in build like Adora in her She-Ra form or Scorpia, Mermista's personality is enough for her to create a strong impression. While one's mannerisms and dressing style are not indicators of one's sexuality or gender identity, gender non-conformity has close ties to queerness and the queer community as previously mentioned in Adora's section, referencing González and Nordgren's definition of queerness.¹⁴¹

However, Mermista's personality or appearance is not the main reason why she seems queer-coded. Instead, it is the fact that she does seem to be attracted to women based on how her first encounter with Adora goes. Mermista does not seem interested in Adora or anyone from the Best Friends Squad when she first meets them, but she does blush for a brief moment after Adora, still in her She-Ra form, thanks her for her and Bow's help.¹⁴² For such an aloof character who does not blush often except with Sea Hawk, her romantic interest, it is possible that Adora's genuine gratitude led to Mermista's disinterested mask to crack, and show that her earlier impressed reaction to She-Ra was more than just awe.¹⁴³

Scorpia

Scorpia is a Force Captain in the Fright Zone and a princess of her family's kingdom who joined the Horde and gave them their crystal – the Black Garnet. She is probably one of the most obviously queer-coded characters in the show, to the point when it can barely be called “coding.” Yet, since her sexuality is never explicitly stated and she does not get the same “confirmation” as Adora and Catra did with their

¹⁴¹González, Octavio, and Todd G. Nordgren. "Queer." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. 29 May. 2020; Accessed 16 Oct. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1130>.

¹⁴²“The Sea Gate,” at 20 min., 25 sec.

¹⁴³“The Sea Gate,” at 14 min., 59 sec.

exchange of “I love you’s” and a kiss, I decided to keep Scorpia in the queer-coded category.

She is a tall, muscular lady with short hair and pincers instead of hands. However, she is very feminine in the way she dresses. She has a soft, caring personality and is extremely loyal to her friends, but she is also quite naive. In the episode “Princess Prom,” Scorpia tells Catra she did not want to go to the Princess Prom because the other princesses had never liked her and her family because they were different.¹⁴⁴ She does not specify what she means by “different,” but it only further proves that the princesses are not immune to prejudice.

It is also not only an issue for Scorpia as an individual but, as she mentions in the same scene, for her whole family. Since the Last Scorpioni King, Scorpia’s grandfather, made a deal with the Horde, it is possible that Scorpia’s whole kind was truly not well-liked by the other princesses and that it was a generational issue. That would explain why when Scorpia leaves the Fright Zone and goes to the princesses, most of them are distrustful of her not because of who she is, it seems, but because she used to be the Horde’s Force Captain and Catra’s ally if we can judge on the fact that the first reaction to her comes from Frosta who just screams “Horde soldier!”¹⁴⁵ Perfuma specifically is very friendly and kind to her, being the first one to suggest that Scorpia did not come to hurt them,¹⁴⁶ and Frosta learns to like her as well. Later, when Scorpia becomes a part of the Rebellion, no one sees her as different.¹⁴⁷

Additionally, it is also possible that it was actually the Horde that made her believe that the princesses did not like her since most of the information Scorpia had about her family’s history was given to her by the Horde. In the episode “Princess Scorpia,” it is shown that she has a picture of her two mothers displayed on her nightstand, but that is all the viewer knows about them.¹⁴⁸ However, it is another form of explicit queer representation.

¹⁴⁴“Princess Prom,” at 3 min., 32 sec.

¹⁴⁵*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 10, “Fractures,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 6:45.

¹⁴⁶“Fractures,” at 7 min., 33 sec.

¹⁴⁷ “Fractures,” at 14 min., 50 sec.

¹⁴⁸*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 4, episode 6, “Princess Scorpia,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired November 5, 2019, on Netflix, 00:17.

What is interesting aspect about Scorpia's character is that she seems to be walking the line between explicit representation and queer coding. A substantial part of her character is her friendliness and loyalty, and so is her arc that shows her relationship with Catra. Scorpia displays clear signs of having a crush on Catra, like constantly trying to spend time with her,¹⁴⁹ being protective of her, blushing in her presence,¹⁵⁰ and trying to please her.¹⁵¹ While many of these aspects are true to her personality traits, they are more intense when it comes to Catra. But she seems to be utterly oblivious to her own feelings, which leads to her constantly explaining her attachment to Catra as if they were best friends.¹⁵²

However, Stevenson, in the previously mentioned interview with GLAAD,¹⁵³ confessed that the team opted for such an approach out of fear that the executives would not allow it to be a proper crush. Therefore, Scorpia drifts in this gray area, a line between queer coding and explicit queer representation. This shows that queer coding is still done because the fear of the executives not approving the creatives' vision is deeply rooted within the industry.

Perfuma

Last of the selected queer-coded characters is Perfuma, the princess of Plumeria. It is a very peaceful kingdom focused on nature, which also reflects in Perfuma's power as she can make plants grow bigger and faster and bend them to her will. She is sweet, gentle, and doesn't like the idea of hurting others, especially the people she cares about. It is to the point that in the episode "Return to the Fright Zone," Netossa lists it as her weakness.¹⁵⁴ However, later, she realizes that sometimes a rougher approach is needed and that she actually enjoys fighting.

She is very feminine, with long blonde hair and a long pink dress. With her powers, she makes everything blooming and beautiful. She is by far the most feminine of the princesses. She tries to stay peaceful even when she is mad, not really allowing herself

¹⁴⁹ "White Out," at 3 min., 12 sec.

¹⁵⁰ "Once Upon a Time in the Waste," at 19 min., 4 sec.

¹⁵¹ "Roll with It," at 3 min., 38 sec.

¹⁵² "White Out," at 13 min., 20 sec.

¹⁵³ Stevenson, interview.

¹⁵⁴ *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 5, episode 10, "Return to the Fright Zone," developed by ND Stevenson, aired May 15, 2020, on Netflix, 11:38.

to be angry. That might be interpreted as her trying to be the leader the peaceful Plumerians expect her to be, which is similar to the trans-coded parental expectations Bow had to overcome.

Therefore I argue that together with her design, which is traditionally feminine, her character may be read as trans-coded. While I acknowledge that her physical attributes, such as her height or flat chest, are traits cis women can have too, they are also a reality for many trans women and often points of insecurity due to gender dysphoria, even though Perfuma does not struggle with this specific issue. Her appearance is never discussed in that way, but her conviction that she has to remain the bigger person in conflicts and not be argumentative may be relatable to trans women because they have to face the societal expectations of what a woman should be like.

Additionally, while it is not to be considered canon, her character designer Rae Geiger shared on Tumblr that they designed Perfuma and thought of her as a trans woman. However, due to their fear of how that would be received, they never brought it up to anyone. Therefore, Perfuma is not canonically trans, but apparently many trans women saw themselves in her, as the designer states in their reply to the fan who asked them about Perfuma's identity.¹⁵⁵ Apart from the transcoding, she is also coded to be sapphic, as her relationship with Scorpia shows, and which will be further explored in a later chapter.

Characters and Their Relationships

Adora & Catra

As mentioned in the characters' individual sections, Adora and Catra were both orphans the Hord took in. They became extremely close due to the environment they were growing up in. As each other's only support system, they developed a high dependency on each other, as well as romantic feelings. While it might not be clear at the very beginning, their feelings come closer to the surface as the show continues.

¹⁵⁵“zukkallura asked: ‘heya! I was just curious, and feel free to ignore this, if there are any canonical transgender/non-cisgender characters in She-Ra, besides Double Trouble?’,” Raegeii, archived June 12, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200612013713/https://raegeii.tumblr.com/post/618934327237099521/heya-i-was-just-curious-and-feel-free-to-ignore>.

According to an interview with the creative director ND Stevenson for GLAAD,¹⁵⁶ that approach was fully intentional from the very beginning. In the interview, he mentions that the team opted for this approach out of fear that the executives would reject the idea. Therefore, they decided to slowly build the story in a way that by the time they worked on the last episodes, it was impossible to avoid the confession and the kiss¹⁵⁷ between the two main characters because otherwise, it would feel unsatisfactory to the viewer.

This showcases how complicated it still is for creatives to tell a queer story. It seems that it became fairly acceptable to include queer characters in the background, which would explain why the first explicit representation in the show is a married lesbian side couple. But even that one started as only a hint of what it became in later seasons. However, it is still a significant risk for creators to try to make the main characters explicitly queer, and Stevenson's answer in the interview brings awareness to the obstacles creative teams have to face when trying to execute their queer vision of a show.

Scorpia & Catra

Scorpia and Catra's relationship is a rather complicated one. As mentioned in the section about Scorpia, she is romantically interested in Catra even if her sexuality is never explicitly acknowledged in the show – a decision made out of fear that it would not be allowed by the executives.¹⁵⁸ That resulted in Scorpia seeming highly oblivious to her own feelings about Catra, always calling her her best friend despite showing signs of romantic interest in Catra as mentioned in her respective section. However, Catra was not usually comfortable with the situation and affection most of the time like, for example, in the the episode “Light Spinner.”¹⁵⁹

Catra is a character with a lot of insecurities and trauma who tends to push people away because she is used to people not liking her and being constantly treated like dirt by her mother figure, which has already been discussed. That results in her reacting

¹⁵⁶Stevenson, interview.

¹⁵⁷“Heart Part 2,” at 16 min., 41 sec.

¹⁵⁸Stevenson, interview.

¹⁵⁹*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, season 2, episode 6, “Light Spinner,” developed by ND Stevenson, aired April 26, 2019, on Netflix, 09:04.

rather aggressively to Scorpia's displays of affection. She is also so focused on her goals that she often does not even realize that Scorpia was trying to get closer to her or she simply disregards it as something not important. A prime example of that would be Scorpia asking Catra to hang out with her and Catra barely paying any attention to her in the episode "White Out."¹⁶⁰ At that point in the story, Catra's sexuality has not been explicitly stated either, which adds to the frustration that comes with this particular character relationship: to a viewer who is aware of the queer coded nature of this relationship, the fact that these characters are stuck in this gray area of obvious yet not explicit representation might become frustrating.

Scorpia & Perfuma (ft. Frosta)

After Scorpia leaves the Fright Zone, she comes to Bright Moon in episode 10 of season 4, where she is imprisoned. However, she still feels comfortable there because Bright Moon does not actually have a proper prison, only guest rooms. So, to ensure Scorpia does not try to do anything evil, she is tied by Perfuma's vines, and the princesses are supposed to guard her one at a time. While Perfuma is tying Scorpia up, Scorpia apologizes for stinging her and Perfuma smiles and makes a tiny noise that sounds like she found the apology endearing. Before she leaves, she makes the vines bloom to show Scorpia she appreciates the apology.¹⁶¹

Then it is Frosta's time to take Scorpia to her "cell," and since she's a child who always had a great responsibility as a ruler of her kingdom, she is acting cold and tough in front of Scorpia, not wanting to show any weakness to their new prisoner, just for Perfuma to dance into the room and treat Scorpia as a guest. She brings Scorpia a salad bowl because she thought Scorpia would be hungry.¹⁶² However, Scorpia is not used to regular food from the Fright Zone, so she is distrustful and confused. Frosta is trying to tell Perfuma not to act so friendly, but Perfuma does not listen to her and is excited about their new "friend" and them having a "sleepover" (guarding Scorpia). She leaves to get some pillows for said "sleepover" and leaves Scorpia and Frosta alone.

Surprisingly, or maybe not, since Frosta is still a child, she becomes excited about Scorpia's pincers, asks multiple questions, and even makes some for herself from ice.

¹⁶⁰ "White Out," at 3 min., 12 sec.

¹⁶¹ "Fractures," at 9 min., 29 sec.

¹⁶² "Fractures," at 13 min., 53 sec.

That makes Scorpia cry because the Horde always told her she would not fit in with the other princesses, but even as a prisoner, the princesses have treated her so well and made her feel like she belonged there, unlike the Horde where she was often depicted as clumsy due to her pincers, for which Catra often snapped at her.¹⁶³ Her insecurity that is tied to her Scorpioni nature and her pincers could be interpreted as both a feeling of being different either due queerness or disability, which are, according to Hirschmann, closely related for various reasons.¹⁶⁴

Looking at Scorpia's situation through a queer lens, I argue this is a well utilized queer-coded representation of a queer person leaving their old environment where they were unhappy because they felt lonely due to their different life experiences. Instead, they find a new home for themselves among people who accept them, just like Avrami mentions Ariel's successful transition from a mermaid to human, which gives her the opportunity to live a happy life on land instead of a miserable one in the ocean.¹⁶⁵ Scorpia's realization that the Horde lied to her about the princesses, who as mentioned earlier represent the queer community, aligns with Adora's experience, who also mentioned that as children they were always told that the princesses were evil.

Returning to Sorpia, Perfuma, and Frosta's relationship, Perfuma and Scorpia's love can quite easily be dismissed as a close female friendship, which fits Seifert's definition of queer-coding as "signs and meanings neglected or obscured by heteronormative interpretations."¹⁶⁶ However, the story of Scorpia's otherness and the queer coding of her as an individual is quite blatant. It is never explicitly stated what exactly about her is so different, but based on her reaction to Frosta imitating her pincers, it is safe to assume that it was because of her Scorpioni nature and her ability to sting people and paralyze them, and the Black Garnet gives her the power over electricity, which might be rather frightening. Nevertheless, when she talks to Frosta, she is met with understanding and acceptance as Frosta tells her she used to feel the same way before she met the others and learned that they are all different, and that it is

¹⁶³“Princess Scorpia,” at 19 min., 33 sec.

¹⁶⁴Hirschmann, N.J, “Queer/Fear: Disability, Sexuality, and The Other,” *J Med Humanit* 34 (2013): 141. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-013-9208-x>.

¹⁶⁵Avrami, “Mermaids and Drag Queens,” 209.

¹⁶⁶Seifert, “Introduction: Queer(Ing) Fairy Tales,” 16.

okay. That brings the two closer and Frosta mentioned that if Scorpia wanted to talk more, she would be the one holding the first watch.¹⁶⁷

Despite this, queer people need to have explicit representation on screen, for queerness to be shown and seen because of self-identification, which according to various scholars is important through adolescence when individuals shape their identity,¹⁶⁸ which I argue would be crucial for self-acceptance of queer adolescents. However, in cases of *SPOP*, where there is enough queer coding and also some explicit queer representation in the form of multiple queer characters, I argue that opting for a more generalized theme of otherness is sufficient. It teaches that otherness in general, be it queerness, race, disability, etc., is not to be feared. That way, it reaches a wider audience while it does not take away from the already explicit representation. It also allows the story's plot to progress without seeming out of place.

I suggest that the issue with generalized otherness themes happens when there is otherwise no explicit representation because then there is no straightforward evidence to easily prove the queer interpretation, which often leads to disputes between the viewers with different interpretations of said media. In the age of social media being a common part of people's lives, this often leads to queer people encountering comments from queerphobic viewers, exposing them to hateful speech and causing them distress. This distress sources from not only being verbally attacked but also from having their interpretation of various media challenged and invalidated, extending to the feeling of their queer experiences being invalidated. The reason for that might be the general audience's lack of media literacy which the EU Media Literacy Expert Group (MLEG) defines as "all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it."¹⁶⁹ So, if the individual lacks the knowledge of queer experiences, they might not understand the queer interpretation of said media.

However, many of those who choose to verbally attack queer people for their queer interpretation of certain media stems from blatant ignorance and their bigoted beliefs.

¹⁶⁷ "Fractures," at 14 min. 53 sec.

¹⁶⁸ Cohen, "Defining Identification," 248–249.

¹⁶⁹ "Media literacy expert group (E02541)," European Commission, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&groupID=2541>.

Therefore, when such a person looks at the relationship between Scorpia and Perfuma, they may interpret it as purely platonic and stick to that interpretation even later when their relationship becomes more romantic coded. The most straightforward example would be the scene at the underwater party in season 5 episode 7, where the two characters get to slow dance together. It continues with Scorpia performing a song at said party while repeatedly finding Perfuma in the crowd, and at the end of the performance, Perfuma throws Scorpia a red rose.¹⁷⁰ While roses are often gifted for various occasions, and it is not unusual to throw them on stage for a performing artist, it cannot be ignored that in the context of their previous interactions, a rose is likely to be perceived as a romantic gesture, especially since red roses are primarily associated with romance and romantic love.

In this instance, it is the context of the show that supports the queer interpretation of Scorpia and Perfuma's relationship. If it were not for the explicitly queer characters in the show, it would be much easier to dismiss Scorpia and Perfuma's relationship and interactions as platonic despite the end of the last episode where Scorpia, Perfuma, and Frosta are depicted in an undoubtedly family-like way, with Perfuma touching Scorpia's forearm and Frosta sitting high on Scorpia's shoulders, a position that is often seen in pictures of fathers and their children but also in daily life.¹⁷¹ Such a picture is easily recognizable to heterosexual people, and while it is not suitable to try to find who is "the dad" in a relationship between two women, it is undoubtedly a pose choice that will get quickly recognized as familial, which is essential in a scene that lasts for only a few seconds. An easily recognizable scene like that leaves little room for misinterpretation, though it still counts as queer-coding rather than explicit representation. While other scholars like Cohen or Seifert focus on separate disciplines such as identification¹⁷² and queerness,¹⁷³ I aim to look at the intersection between these two fields and suggest that self-identification plays a crucial role in interpreting queer-coding in media.

¹⁷⁰ "The Perils of Peekablue," at 0 min., 39 sec.

¹⁷¹ "Heart Part 2," at 20 min., 50 sec.

¹⁷² Cohen, "Defining Identification,"

¹⁷³ Seifert, "Introduction: Queer(Ing) Fairy Tales,"

Conclusion

Looking at the show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* through a queer lens and by employing various theories such as Queer and Comics Theory, but also works by Hoffman and Buchanan, as well as Cohen who focus on identification with media characters, I argue that while explicit queer representation is crucial for queer viewers for various reasons, such as the development of queer adolescents and children into self-accepting queer adults, or the possible rise in awareness and acceptance of queer individuals for someone who is not part of the queer community, queer-coding still has its place within narratives. That is mostly because media is a form of communication between the creators and the viewers and therefore is dependent on how the viewer interprets the idea the creator tried to convey. In this case I focused on how certain types of iconization and expressionistic backgrounds, as McCloud calls them, are used in a cartoon animated show to convey various emotions, and how they could be interpreted as romantic attraction depending on the context of their respective scenes or the show as a whole.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá LGBT reprezentací a využitím queer-codingu v animovaném seriálu *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* z roku 2018. K jeho analýze je využita queer teorie a teorie komiksu. Hlavním zaměřením této práce je prozkoumání queer-codingu v díle, které již obsahuje explicitní queer reprezentaci. Pozornost je soustředěna na to, jak se queer-coding a explicitní reprezentace ovlivňují a jaká je mezi nimi závislost. V rámci queer-codingu, tato práce využívá teorii komiksu představenou Scottem McCloudem v knize *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, přesněji jak jsou komiksové efekty a expresionistická pozadí využita ke ztvárnění emocí postav, a tedy také romantické či sexuální přitažlivosti mezi postavami. Tato práce se také zabývá tím, jak jsou tyto efekty interpretovány jako queer-coding na základě divákovy sebeidentifikace s danými postavami.

Tato práce je tvořena ze tří hlavních kapitol. První se zabývá postavami, které jsou explicitně queer, tím, jak jsou v rámci seriálu zobrazovány a také obavami, kterým museli tvůrci čelit, protože chtěli zahrnout explicitní queer reprezentaci. Druhá kapitola se zabývá postavami, které nejsou explicitně queer, ale jsou jako queer kódovány. Na postavy v této kapitole je nahlíženo z úhlu queer teorie a jejich chování a životní zkušenosti jsou zkoumány s cílem poukázat na jejich queer interpretaci. V poslední, třetí, části se práce zaměřuje na vztahy mezi vybranými postavami a jak queer-coding může být použit při kódování postavy skrze její vztah s dalšími postavami než pouze individuálně. Práce se také celkově věnuje aspektu sebeidentifikace s fiktivními postavami a jak může ovlivnit interpretaci jednotlivých postav, ale také jak queer reprezentace může ovlivnit diváka právě díky sebeidentifikaci s danými postavami.

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