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Gender and Sexuality Constructions in *Adventure Time*

The Cartoon Network show *Adventure Time* is a fan favorite for viewers of all ages. The goofy dialog, fantasy stories, and bright animation style of the show allows for lighthearted viewing, but deeper analysis is almost always required to get at the crux of the story. Covering topics like mental health, interpersonal relationships, overcoming adversity, and finding adventure, this show teaches kids and adults how to navigate the craziness that can be our lives. Characters of different species are introduced to the story, and in these characters we see that gender is emphatically *not* a binary construction. By creating a genderfluid world, *Adventure Time* challenges some and reinforces other gender stereotypes and roles.

The show follows two protagonists - Jake the Dog and Finn the Human - as they navigate their post-apocalyptic world, the Land of Ooo. Along the way, viewers learn more about the Great Mushroom War, a nuclear holocaust that took place over a thousand years ago. The main teachers are a handful of recurring non-human characters, including Princess Bonnibel Bubblegum, Lumpy Space Princess, BMO, and Marceline the Vampire Queen. The show approaches the genders of these characters in two distinct ways.

The first applies to the mostly humanoid figures - Finn, Princess Bubblegum, and Marceline, for example. While these characters have explicitly (cis)gendered bodies and voices, their personalities often challenge stereotypical gender roles. Most obvious is that the female characters are leaders and holders of power, which challenges the patriarchal norm of women

being inferior and powerless. These feminine characters also add to representations of nontypical careers; Princess Bubblegum is often shown in a lab coat doing science experiments (see fig. 1), and Marceline plays an electric bass as her band's frontwoman (see fig. 2).

It is also interesting to note that while their bodies do indicate masculine and feminine gender portrayals, they are not always stereotypical in doing so. For example, although Princess Bubblegum has pink skin, long hair, and usually wears dresses, Marceline has blue-ish grey skin, voluminous black hair, and typically dresses in "punk" or "alternative" outfits of t-shirts and denim. Finn, by comparison, is always seen in his iconic blue t-shirt, blue shorts, green backpack, and white hat. Although this outfit seems pretty androgynous, several episodes of *Adventure Time* reveal that the hair underneath Finn's hat is body length and shiny blonde (see fig. 3). Of course, by the beauty standards of the Global North, it is borderline unacceptable for a male to have hair of this length. By placing these characters outside of expected gender norms, *Adventure Time* challenges the operations of patriarchy and reconstructs portrayals of 'feminine' and 'masculine.'

The second method of gender construction applies to the non-humanoid characters; these include Jake, Lumpy Space Princess, and BMO, as well as many non-recurring characters who are often the antagonists or background characters of each episode. These portrayals vary from character to character. Jake is a shape-shifting dog with a male voice and masculine pronouns, but given his ability to shapeshift, his portrayal of gender is never really concrete (see fig. 4). Also inconclusive is BMO's gender. BMO is a sentient computer in the shape of a walking handheld video game console (see fig. 5). Canonically, BMO has no gender and is referred to throughout the show by both masculine and feminine pronouns. They take on hyper-masculine and -feminine traits during different storylines, but for the most part could be considered agender.

Lumpy Space Princess (also called LSP) is perhaps the most interesting portrayal of gender in the whole show (see fig. 6). Voiced by the creator of *Adventure Time*, Pendleton Ward, she has a feminized masculine voice, just like all Lumpy Space People. Her personality is moody and dramatic, and her campy, drama-oriented persona plays into a stereotypical representation of women, especially teen girls. In the episode “Trouble in Lumpy Space,” Jake and Finn start to become lumpy, taking on the voice, personality, and appearance of Lumpy Space People. During their transformation, they become more dramatic, emotional, and take on feminine voice traits; that is, until they find the antidote, a smooth ball given to them by three stoner-type characters who hang out at “Make Out Point.” This episode shows an interesting dichotomy between being lumpy and smooth, drawn as a parallel between stereotypical feminine and masculine identities and implying the ability to move between the two using a ‘drug.’ In that way, an analysis using a trans* lens could argue that the show normalizes transitioning and thus challenges the gender binary yet again. However, it also paints a rather poor picture of femininity and places transforming away from “normal” (i.e. masculine for Jake and Finn) in a negative light.

It’s difficult to capture the completely unique way *Adventure Time* creates gender in its characters. Three main aspects discussed here are human portrayals meant to steer the viewer away from the patriarchal standards of gender expression, non-human characters meant to demonstrate that gender can be fluid or transitory, and the inclusion of several completely agender species. Additionally, through plotlines which include moments of romantic expression, especially between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum, the show also challenges compulsive heterosexuality. By incorporating these and many other aspects of gender and sexuality, the show’s creators challenge sexism, heterosexism, the patriarchy, and the gender binary.

Figures (Works Cited)



Fig. 1. Princess Bubblegum doing a science experiment from “Slumber Party Panic.” *Adventure Time*, written by Adam Muto and Elizabeth Ito, directed by Larry Leichliterd and Patrick McHale, Cartoon Network, 2010.

Fig. 2. Marceline with her bass from “Evicted.” *Adventure Time*, written by Bert Youn and Sean Jimenez, directed by Larry Leichliterd and Patrick McHale, Cartoon Network, 2010.



Fig. 3. Finn’s hair from “To Cut A Woman’s Hair.” *Adventure Time*, written by Kent Osborne and Somvilay Xayaphone, directed by Larry Leichliterd, Patrick McHale, and Cole Sanchez, Cartoon Network, 2011.



Figure 4. Jake transformed into a female mermaid from “Beautopia.” *Adventure Time*, written by Adam Muto and Rebecca Sugar, directed by Larry Leichliter and Cole Sanchez, Cartoon Network, 2011.

Figure 5. BMO’s body and face from “Rainy Day Daydream.” *Adventure Time*, written by Pendleton Ward, directed by Larry Leichliter and Patrick McHale, Cartoon Network, 2010.



Figure 6. Lumpy Space Princess from “Princess Potluck.” *Adventure Time*, written by Kent Osborne and Cole Sanchez, directed by Adam Mutos, Cartoon Network, 2013.