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Learning to Read (Gender): Children's Animation and the New Heterosexism

Kaelyn Flowerday

This paper examines and compares two American animated productions targeting elementary and middle school children, and in doing so aims to elucidate the handling of gender in similar television programs and feature films of the past three decades. These animated works are treated here as a Foucauldian apparatus, one predicated on the force of systematically structured observation, which functions to manipulate power relations in the favor of hetero- and cis-male order. The Disney feature *Beauty and the Beast* supplies a case for investigating the heterosexist discourses of these contemporary animated media. However, as will be shown, comparatively feminist animated works have proven equally deft in their subversion of patriarchal patterns; for an example of such indirect but radical rereading and rewriting of gender codes we will turn to the television cartoon program *Adventure Time*.

I will advance the argument that American animated children's media is a crucial force in children's acquisition of a symbolic vocabulary of gender—linguistic and otherwise—and the associated application of these symbols in the act of gendered observation of their environment and themselves. This is due not only to these media constituting a significant portion of children's lived experience, but also children's (rightful) understanding of these story-worlds as legitimate and powerful sites of discourse, adjacent and analogous to real-world discourses. Far from innocent, children's media in the United States have responded to the pressures of the post second-wave feminist era, reassembling the rhetorical, stylistic and

ideological materials from heterosexist children's media traditions into new and sophisticated forms that act to re-inscribe oppressive systems. Unlike earlier uncamouflaged characterizations of binary genders, the wake of second-wave feminism has seen an adoption of subsurface, but still potent, signaling which tacitly directs observations of gender, which will be referred to here as 'new heterosexism.' With animation in particular, the text may play its role in heterosexist sense-making by way of dynamic image, sound (including speech, musical score, and production elements), and language. Buttressing this multimodal signaling stand other apparatuses, circumambient to children, that recreate heterosexism in the young.

Technical Preliminaries

Before moving to the texts, several technical preliminary issues bear consideration. Firstly, this paper discusses the core issues of gender and sexuality, but only touches briefly upon intersectionality, the interrelation of different axes of privilege and oppression. While this gives the appearance of an easy decoupling, it should be emphasized that because of the integral part which intersectionality plays in the matters at hand, the account of gender and sexuality put forward here is fundamentally incomplete. Next, speaking to methodology, the main criteria for selecting texts were analytic richness, exemplification of the children's animation genre, and audience reach. Thus, along with a survey of the genre to ascertain which works are emblematic, sales have served as a crude measure of reach, with some attention also paid to the awards the works have received. Accordingly, Disney Animation Studios' 1991 *Beauty and the Beast* (hereafter referred to as *B&B*) proves a rich source due to its admixture of progressivism, traditional sexism, and new heterosexism; it is a work from an entity known for its problematic depictions of gender, particularly in the princess tale sub-genre that *B&B* inhabits, but marketed as a feminist (or "girl friendly") film. Furthermore, it was both very high-grossing (*Box Office Mojo*) and

nominated for the Oscar for best picture (*oscars.org*). On the other hand, *Adventure Time* (hereafter *AT*), created by Pendleton Ward through Frederator Studios and running 2010-present, is a suitable text both for its wide viewership (Feeney) and laurels (*emmys.com*) (*annies.org*), as well as its multiple instances of destabilizing gender.

Finally, some clarifications of terminology will be useful. ‘Gender’ is used here to refer to (crudely put) an identity consisting of various social and personal characteristics, determined by each individual for themselves and constructed from a repertoire provided by that individual’s society. While not a complete account of gender, this provisional definition has several features of note. First is that gender is not biologically determined, that is, biological sex and gender are not equivalent. Furthermore, gender is neither static nor binary, but instead may be fluid across time and may fall outside the binary genders of male and female. Next, the term ‘transgendered’ denotes the state of identifying as a gender other than that which was assigned at birth, *e.g.* an individual designated at birth by a doctor as male but who identifies as female would be transgendered; a transgendered person may be referred to as a ‘transperson.’ On the other hand, the corresponding terms ‘cisgendered’ and ‘cisperson’ refer, respectively, to identifying as the gender assigned at birth, and to such an individual. Lastly, the terms ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ used frequently throughout this paper do not imply any intrinsic features possessed by men and women but rather characteristics which the dominant, heteronormative ideology *assumes* to be essential to maleness and femaleness.

Beauty and the Beast

Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* adapts the 18th century fairy tale of the same name, written by Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont (Beaumont) and is situated in the Disney Renaissance, which witnessed the revival of the company’s history of feature-length animated films. In fact, Walt Disney first attempted the animated adaptation of this fairytale in the first half of the 20th century, but was

unsuccessful (*Tale as Old as Time*); the concept was picked up in the Renaissance, first storyboarded as a dark non-musical telling, but then completely rewritten as a musical in the style of the recent success *The Little Mermaid* (*Waking Sleeping Beauty*).

B&B is set in a fairytale quasi-historical France. In the opening scene, it is explained that Beast is a prince cursed by an enchantress to live in a half-animal form until he finds true love, which he must accomplish within ten years or remain a beast forever. Along with Beast, the entire household of servants find themselves changed into animate objects. Next we are introduced to Belle, a young woman and an outsider in her town due to the townspeople's dislike of her bibliophilia and adventurous disposition. Prominent among the townspeople is Gaston, Belle's piggish sexist suitor, whom many regard as the town's hero. After her father accidentally trespasses on Beast's castle and is captured, Belle offers herself to Beast in exchange and is imprisoned. Despite initial enmity, Belle and Beast begin to fall in love. However, Gaston plots to coerce Belle into marriage and leads the townsmen in an attack on Beast's castle, but is defeated. Belle finds the moribund Beast, fatally wounded by Gaston, and with her love she saves Beast's life and transforms him back into a prince.

On the whole, read from a feminist perspective *B&B* is interesting because of its mixed stance on gender, containing progressive moves as well as the strategies of new heterosexism. The performances of Belle, while presenting a relatively progressive female lead, nevertheless encode heterosexist structure. One facet of this construction of the "strong woman" derives from the way in which the audience attaches value to her character because of her traditionally masculine virtues: intellectualism and adventurousness. In a story-world where the princess no longer directly bears the

burdens of domestic labor, as her Walt-era antecedents had¹, one of Belle's performance styles (and the one first pictured) is essentially that of a male-in-drag. The subtle play off of the valuation of her public-sphere characteristics reinforces the way in which these values make meaning—articulating *différance*² by way of the implicit (gendered) devaluation of domestic-sphere qualities. Nonetheless, to assuage any remaining discomfort, Team Disney contains Belle's threat to its traditional family-value image (and to her feminine image as a fetishized spectacle) by ensuring that the audience virtually never sees Belle actually reading or adventuring, instead establishing these qualities through dialogue. Belle's semi-masculine character also reinforces the normalized archetypes for women by emphasizing her singularity. That is to say, she is the black sheep of her town due to being unlike the ambient "regular" women, best represented by the precocious Bimbettes who do nothing but fawn over Gaston, and the maternal, de-sexualized Mrs. Potts.

The character-based moves put forward through Belle differ markedly from the ideas transmitted by the plot's contour, with its heterosexual teleology and Belle's motherly sacrifices. Belle's active contributions to plot advancement are limited to her self-sacrifice for her father and her re-stabilization of social order in the castle in the denouement. In the final analysis, Belle serves as an instrument in the reconstruction of the patriarchy under fire from feminism. We see this in the choice of opening the film with the explication of Beast's curse. Noting the scene's fairytale trappings and mythologizing medium of the stained-glass imagery, we know Belle is destined to lift the curse—a story beginning with "once upon a time" must by the story-world's logic end in "happily ever after." And so it does, Belle's heterosexual union with the Beast transforming him and the castle's

¹ For an examination of the Disney Renaissance's transition to female protagonists who are not shown performing housework, see Whitley 44-57.

² This term is a neologism which Jacques Derrida coined. See Derrida 5-28.

oikos into human form, and with a quick object wipe transition we find the protagonists in the ballroom, surrounded by the contented now-human servants. Belle's widower father now enjoys the company of Mrs. Potts and her son Chip. Belle has exorcised the specters haunting the castle—and crucially her own haunting by the revenant of her unmentioned, absent mother—by reproducing the wifely ideal in herself³. We are prodded to take pleasure in the resultant repairing of her father to a nuclear family, as well as the resuming of harmonious hierarchy between the prince and his servants. This hierarchy, presented as entirely natural and unproblematic, discreetly implies that the natural organization of human relations corresponds to that of masters and servants; this subtext quietly reinforces the gender hierarchy being constructed by *B&B*. The apotheosis of this return to an imagined nostalgic patriarchy is reached as the crowd reprises, in unison, the title song. This quasi-wedding finds validation in the observations of the witnesses, and their collective labeling of the resolution as being

Certain as the sun
Rising in the east
Tale as old as time
Song as old as rhyme...
(*Beauty and the Beast*)

Given the role of musical numbers in *B&B* as discoveries of hidden truth, here the text assures us that natural law has prevailed, and directs our gaze away from the possibility that Belle could have chosen to not return Beast's love. Thus, by intertextual reliance on the logic of the princess fairytale sub-genre, and a good measure of artful redirection, under the audience's gaze (and the diegetic gaze) the

³ The themes of maternal and capitalist haunting in *B&B* are explicated in Byrne, McQuillan 67-72.

admirably masculine Belle reconfigures into wife and domesticator. We have forgotten her desire to be out in the world; she truly wanted to be in the alternate world of the castle, one in which the crowd's surveillance raises her to a position of value rather than the provincial town in which she was configured into the deviant. Juxtaposing these two observational regimes, the fundamental instability of values placed on femininities within the structures of new heterosexism becomes apparent, as will be explored later.



Figure 1. Gaston (*Beauty and the Beast*).

Turning to the male leads, Beast and Gaston, more nuances of this apparatus's construction of gender and sexuality show through. Looking first at Gaston, the vilification of an overtly chauvinistic and hyper-masculine character lends a veneer of feminism to *B&B*. However, teasing apart Gaston's characterization, we find as the source of his evilness the inverse of Belle's characterization; Gaston, while outwardly vested with the markers of masculinity, becomes the villain by dint of his feminine vices, namely bodiliness, vanity and deceit (see fig. 1 for a visual example of Gaston's vanity). Furthermore, his gender expression is also policed *because of* its hyper-masculinity. This paradoxical lowering of the hyper-masculine

results, firstly, because the crude obviousness of his sexist ideology leaves the workings of patriarchy too exposed, vulnerable to the discursive frameworks disseminated by the feminism of recent years. In addition, placing these gendered markers in historical context, a parallel can be drawn between Gaston's aesthetics and those of the so-called Castro clone, the stereotyped figure of the hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual gay man. In these ways, by observation of his stylistic and narrative features, Gaston is revealed as not a "real" man, and his manly posturing can then be construed as overcompensation, among other things. The penultimate scene confirms suspicions about Gaston's status as truly male, with his fall to death and Beast's survival settling the matter.

The Beast, on the other hand, literally emerges as the real man, his bestial appearance resolving into the perfect prince. His masculinity is signaled less by traditional visual markers than by his personality traits. Most notable is his inability to express his emotions; in the song "Something There," Belle articulates how her attraction to him stems from his shut-off demeanor,

There's something sweet
And almost kind
But he was mean
And he was coarse and unrefined.

But now he's dear
And so unsure,
I wonder why I didn't see it there before.
(*Beauty and the Beast*)

It is Belle's responsibility (and her natural desire) to assume the role of a care-taking woman for this taciturn man. This promises to be worth her effort though, since by his actions Belle and the audience have observed his firm sense of honor, another traditional male virtue.

This honor is communicated when he rescues the helpless Belle from wolves (never mind that she was attempting escape) and the scene where he allows her to go save her father despite his desire for her love and concomitant salvation (*Beauty and the Beast*). Contrasting this, Beast exhibits flaws holding him back from coming into his male potential, primarily his inability to control his anger. Anger, while acceptable in men when judiciously applied (e.g. when Beast battles Gaston), must like other emotions always be safely bounded by masculine stoicism. Again, it falls to Belle to deal with this anger, enduring it for the sake of the prince hidden within the beast.

Finally, as mentioned above, ultimately his transformation into the form of man designates him in contrast to Gaston as a real man; the change itself with its animated spectacle mirrors the surveillance of manhood. Though confident that the curse will be lifted, throughout the film the audience is persistently guided to scrutinize and question Beast's implied status as the ideal masculine prince. In the happy ending, of course, Beast succeeds in sexual and martial conquest, and the power of heterosexuality redeems him.

The battle between Beast and Gaston originally contained Gaston's line "time to die," but to draw Belle back into the story that had eluded her importance, this became "Belle is mine" (Shaffer 41). Here we can see an internal conflict, frequently encountered in children's media in the past century, between compulsory heterosexuality and children's innocence. The conception of children as innocent, which became commonplace owing in part to Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, is a relatively recent one; prior to that work, the prevailing Euro-american concept of children's moral status derived from St. Augustine's writings and conceptualized children as innately sinful (Griswold). The construction of children as innocent beings, paired with the Christian designation of sexuality as sinful, caused children to be seen as asexual. At the same time, patriarchy relies on assuming that heterosexuality is the natural state and thus that children are heterosexual, or at least will grow up into

heterosexuals. Thus, the depiction of children's sexuality becomes caught between the demands of the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality and that of the innocent asexual child—saddled with the paradoxical task of establishing children as automatically hetero without suggesting that they are tainted by sexual desire⁴. In this rewriting of “time to die” into “Belle is mine,” the imbrication of sexuality and mortality follows from the tension between compulsory heterosexuality and the discourse of children's innocence; the necessary but unspeakable implication of (hetero) sex becomes coextensive with death: exactly that which represents the inarticulable and yet endows its dialectical antipode, life, with meaning.

The New Heterosexism

With this reading of the text in hand, some more general conclusions about the heterosexist apparatus of children's animation may be drawn. The structure of femininity traced by Belle, in line with Team Disney's conception of her as a new woman, eschews a clearly demarcated gender role for women. Instead, a multiplicity of values regarding women are put forward, and the classic dichotomy of virgin/mother and whore/sexual-spectacle explodes onto new axes—woman is observationally reconfigurable. Thus, gendered observation may be deployed to judge the social and moral value of a woman in an *ad hoc* fashion, *e.g.* in one case a woman is labeled too labile and in another situation deemed a ‘cold bitch’. While offering more flexibility of gender expression, the surveillance and valuation of these expressions still enforces a gender hierarchy. To avoid assuming a configuration that risks derision, those assigned as girls are from childhood directed to turn this surveillance inwards, preemptively policing their own gender performance. So while one can read textual females as having more possibilities than before, at the same time

⁴ For an excellent in-depth analysis of this tension in children's literature which incorporates multiple case studies, see Pugh.

those possibilities are (unstably) assigned value, and so possibility for uncoerced performance of identity is barred. In other words, the oppression now resides in the (valued) possibilities, rather than in the earlier explicit narrowing of possible femininities. By making any assessment of womanhood fraught with moral evaluations, patriarchy can force women to recreate its patterns, despite the fact that this harms them.

The mechanism for policing masculinities functions in a different manner. Unlike the fluidity of femininities, there exist imagined ideal qualities circumscribing masculinity, and these qualities are fixed (or framed as such, though in actuality are as temporally and spatially unstable as any discourse). These are of course the imagined virtues of the straight, white, middle-class cis-man. However, an individual's status as a "real" man is always under surveillance, and those found to not conform to these values can be discovered as impostors of masculinity, as is the case with Gaston. In short, man is observationally usurpable. This functions to preserve the patriarchy within 'post-sexist' culture in two main ways. First, it allows for a hierarchy of masculinity; some men can subjugate others in this scheme (white men dominate men of color, straight men dominate queer men). Second, it is both a manifestation of and response to the crisis faced by masculinity: in coping with the weakening of hegemonic masculinity in recent years, by constant questioning of particular males' "true manhood" the larger issues of the existence of male superiority and a gender binary need not be examined. If a certain man isn't the true man, it's because of his own failure, not the fundamental ephemerality and impossibility of ideal masculinity.

The above structures necessitate a certain conceptual backdrop: essentialism, the framing of gender as fundamental, fixed and binary. Without such a concept, prescriptions and proscriptions regarding gender have nothing to attach to; if there is no essence specific to each gender then there is no way to place manhood above womanhood. Though the particular demarcation of male/female might be

debatable, the existence of this divide is not, and so it occludes the work of gendering observation. This concept requires little work within the text, since circumambient discourses in children's worlds constantly reiterate it by increments. Essentialism, in turn, finds its most powerful tool in erasure, the elision of nonconforming genders and sexual orientations from the story-world. These textual lacunae attempt to prevent the intrusion of subaltern experiences into the fragile discourses of heterosexism (and in so doing visit silent violence on those whose identities they excise).

In a patriarchal culture cloaked in the myth of post-sexist culture, gender-hierarchical and heteronormative codes have adapted to new sociopolitical contingencies. Alongside other adult-driven systems of socializing children, namely familial relations (Maccoby 135-52) and the education system (Thorne), these productions work to re-inscribe structures of gender and sexuality. The social structures external to children's media form a relationship with the media which is reciprocally defining. Just as animated works need the cultural materials of their society to effectively build meaningful story-worlds, at the same time the workings of the story-worlds comment back upon their social context and reaffirm parts of it. While to adult eyes children's media seems insubstantial, to children they are an integral part of making sense of social reality, and so these media are a site of discourse in mutual interrelation with other discourses children encounter, just as a work of so-called serious literature might play this role for an adult.

Adventure Time

In contrast to the oppressive gendered and gendering forces at work in *B&B*, *Adventure Time* intimates new possibilities for gender and sexual identity. The show, despite its traffic in many heavier themes, garners an avid child viewership. This innovative program centers on Finn (the last human) and his adoptive brother, Jake the Dog, as they adventure in Ooo, a colorful post-apocalyptic land

consisting of an amalgamation of sci-fi, fantasy and other influences. Of interest to this paper is *Fionna and Cake*, one of the two “gender-swap” episodes (“Adventure Time with Fionna and Cake”). In the gender-swap episodes, all of the binary-gendered characters have their gender flipped: Finn becomes Fionna, Jake becomes Cake, Princess Bubblegum becomes Prince Gumball, and so on. In *Fionna and Cake*, Prince Gumball is rescued from the Ice Queen (counterpart to the recurring villain Ice King) by Fionna. He then asks her on a date, but it is later discovered that this is in fact the Ice Queen in disguise, whom Fionna then defeats. The real Gumball asks Fionna on a date, but she refuses. At the very end of the narrative, it is revealed that this was all a story-within-the-story, and in a moment of metatextual anagnorisis the viewers discover that Fionna and Cake are the fan-fiction of the Ice King.

A comparison of the gender-swap characters and their originating counterparts yields insights into *AT*'s deconstruction of dominant gender discourses (see fig. 2, fig. 3). The characters' personalities are preserved, and initially the audience is offered no explanation for the reassignment of characters' genders.

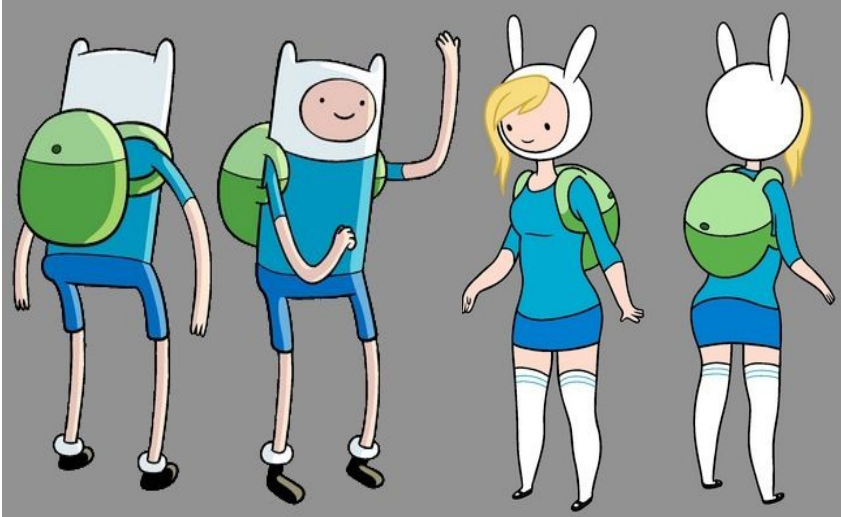


Figure 1. Finn and Fionna.

The Adventure Time Blog. Frederator Studios. JPG file. 3 Mar. 2014.

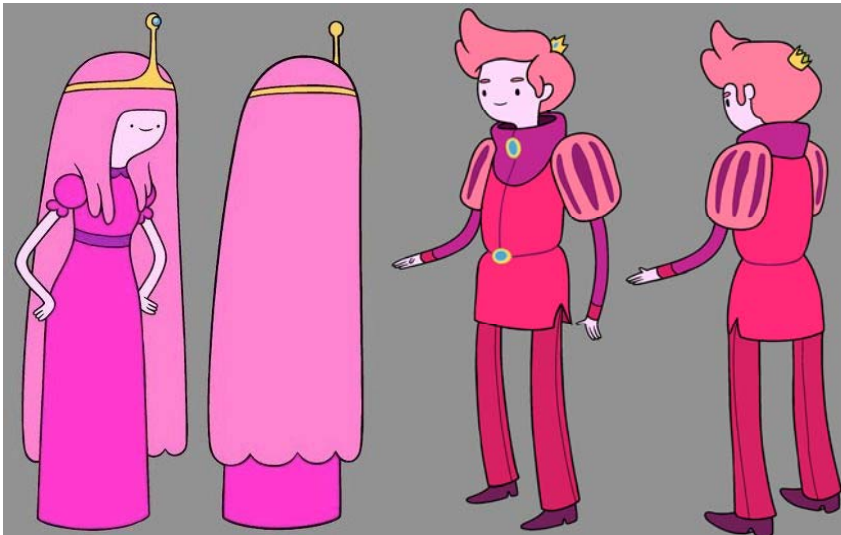


Figure 2. Princess Bubblegum and Prince Gumball.

The Adventure Time Blog. Frederator Studios. JPG file. 3 Mar. 2014.

Furthermore, the swap does not overlay the changes, instead approaching them in a much more understated and casual way. In imagining almost any other cartoon executing this device, it is hard to conceive of this nonchalance; in those discourses the temptation of comedy predicated on gender difference would inevitably prevail. *AT*, in signifying these gender dynamics tacitly, directs observation to the constructedness of binary gender and allows for critical questioning. At the same time, some other changes in characterization take place, accenting the gender-bend maneuver. For example, while Princess Bubblegum continually demonstrates her competence as a scientist, her gender-swap counterpart Prince Gumball instead excels in the art of baking. Similarly, Jake the Dog transitions to the gender-swap universe's Cake the Cat. These changes, orthogonal rather than diametric, subversively destabilize the construction of gender in binary oppositional terms. Furthermore, they manifest some of the multiple ways in which gender can be remapped, and raise some of the problems faced by equality feminism versus difference feminism, without imposing answers.

Complicating this feminist reading of *AT* is the episode's focus on romantic intrigue. At first blush, this seems to suggest that the female lead necessitates a romantic narrative. Within the larger body of the show, however, we recognize that Fionna and Finn share the same uneasy but pining feelings about romance. More importantly, in response to Gumball's solicitation near the episode's close, Fionna declares

No way, man. Not interested. [Thoughtful sigh] I think the reason I got all these guy-friends and no boyfriend is because I don't really want to date any of 'em. I don't need to feel like I'm waiting to be noticed. I know who I am. And I'll know what I want when and if it ever comes along. ("Adventure Time with Fionna and Cake")

This sequence's animation features a close shot of Fionna's face as she speaks, cutting back and forth to a medium shot including Cake, who looks on in approval. The seriousness evinced here, unusual in the whimsical style of *AT*, endows with gravity her claim to the independent expression of her identity, an expression not needing to be constructed relationally by romance with a man. Finally, the fan-fiction reveal at the close of the episode operates on multiple planes to undermine this romantic preoccupation. On a metatextual level, the Ice King's authorship explains the romance, given his pathological obsession with partnership. This focalization also accounts for the fact that in this episode Fionna is much more romantically successful than Finn generally is; in the Ice King's imagination Finn's attractiveness is "totally ice-blocking [his] game." Simultaneously, an intertextually playful celebration and criticism of the fandom tradition of shipping⁵ takes place.

As a last note, the character BMO is a strikingly unique example of a character of non-binary gender, a robot/gaming-system referred to variously by itself and others by both male and female pronouns and gendered vocabulary.⁶ Once again, no explicit comment is made on this gender expression (though astute watchers may note BMO's lack of change in the gender-swap), and BMO is portrayed as one of the most likable characters on the show. In contrast to the invisible erasures of cismale-order narratives, this little robot commits a silent violation of systematic silence, staying true to the inspiration of its creator, who built BMO so that it could Be MOre.

⁵ This truncation of 'relationshiping' denotes the practice in fan-fiction of imagining two characters in a romantic relationship.

⁶ For example, in Season 3 Episode 1 of *AT*, BMO is addressed by Finn as "m'lady" ("Conquest of Cuteness"), while in Season 1 Episode 23 Finn refers to him as "he" ("Rainy Day Daydream").

Gender Subversion

The reason for the success of *Adventure Time*, both in subverting heterosexism and attracting viewership while staying off of heterosexist gatekeepers' radar, lies in its appropriation and repurposing of the dominant discourse's tactics. The invisible but effective deployment of this gender discourse, by not highlighting its transgressions, normalizes what has been labeled abnormal by the dominant ideological streams. Further, it prevents reactionary responses from both adult authorities and children. Children will more readily accept and integrate the account of gender embedded in the narrative than if it had been overt, and thus also allows for *their* reconstitution of its materials in their own discourses. Gatekeeping forces, including bigoted parents, corporate censors and rating certification boards, will (due to *AT*'s polysemic handling of gender) miss most cases of feminist subversion⁷. Even more fascinating, the intertextual nature of *AT* as well as that of other children's media suggests that the destabilizing effect of *AT* may inject itself into the heterosexist narratives, preying on their own covertness to call their premises into question.

Concluding Remarks

In closing, the practical consequences of the apparatus of children's animation deserve restatement. Though this paper has employed abstract academic methods in treating these matters, the tangible impact on children of this new heterosexism is, like any system of oppression, deeply violent. Fortunately, the same symbolic languages that constitute these heterosexist meanings may be diverted to subversive ends, opening for children the door to alternate possibilities. Counter-hegemonic works offer sites and materials for

⁷ For example, while an episode exploring an implied lesbian relationship failed to arouse suspicion in itself, a behind-the-scenes recapitulation released by Frederator Studios via Youtube enraged some parents by explicitly mentioning this relationship; see Johnson.

queer and transgendered children to build their own stories, and to have the opportunity to transmit them to their peers.⁸ And let us not pretend that, as is imagined by discourses of innocence, binary gender, and automatic heterosexuality, that such nonconforming children do not exist in large numbers. They do, and with enough work deconstructing such harmful apparatuses along with the collective development of new language, they will at last tell their stories aloud.

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⁸ For a phenomenal analytic narrative about the process of children retooling media for their own socially transformative storytelling, see Dyson.

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