

**“What time is it? It’s gender time!”**

**Gender representation in the animated cartoon *Adventure  
Time***

**Bachelor’s Thesis**

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<b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b> <p>Median vaikutusta sukupuolistereotyyppien muodostajana ja vahvistajana on tutkittu paljon. Lapset viettävät suuren osan lapsuudestaan altistuen eri medioille, joiden vaikutusta heidän sosialisointoonsa ei pidä aliarvioida. Erityisesti lasten lempihahmot ja niiden käyttäytymismallit heijastuvat heidän kehitykseensä sekä siihen, miten he näkevät itsensä ja muut ympärillään. Fiktioiset hahmot osaltaan luovat lapsille käsityksen siitä, mikä on hyväksyttävää ja toivottavaa käyttäytymistä.</p> <p>Tämä tutkimus keskittyy selvittämään, millaisia esimerkkejä sukupuolirooleista lapsille suunnattu amerikkalainen piirretty <i>Adventure Time</i> välittää. Tutkimusta varten valittiin viisi jaksoa sarjan viidenneltä tuotantokaudelta. Analyysin ensimmäisessä osassa tarkastellaan hahmojen ulkonäöllään välittämiä multimodaalisia viestejä heidän sukupuoli-identiteetistään, minkä jälkeen syvennyttään esimerkkien avulla tarkastelemaan hahmojen ilmaisua ja käyttäytymistä vuorovaikutuksessa muiden kanssa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa todettiin, että <i>Adventure Timen</i> hahmojen esiin tuomat sukupuoliroolit pääsääntöisesti poikkeavat perinteisistä sukupuoliroolistreotyyppioista erityisesti naishahmojen kohdalla. Yksittäiset esimerkit ja erityisesti mieshahmojen käytös kuitenkin myös vahvistivat perinteisiä sukupuoliin liitettyjä stereotyyppioita ja käsityksiä.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Children in the Western countries spend a large portion of their childhood having access to a variety of media. Through media children mirror themselves and construct their own views of the world. One important factor in children's gender socialisation are the examples they see in the media. Animated cartoons are a medium often directed to children and many find their idols and role models in fictional characters. These characters have the power to determine what children regard as acceptable and desired behaviour.

According to Rossi (2010: 26), the term *gender role* describes the idea of adjustability and changeability of gender identity and it emphasises the aspect of doing and learning gender in different ways. In addition, Liljeström (1966, cited in Rossi, 2010: 26) argues that the discussion of gender roles is not only about the biological differences but about the "social consequences" of labelling people according to their biological characteristics. The distinction between the terms 'sex' and 'gender' originated in the 1960s and the 1970s and it allows the separate analytical examination of biological differences between males and females and the socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity (Rossi 2010: 22). In this study I will use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' according to this categorisation.

Researchers such as Mitra and Lewin-Jones (2007), Lemish (2007, 2014) and Dubow et al. (2006), among others, have studied the media's role in the socialisation process of children. They have found that the mass media is a major contributor in the construction of children's identities, and the examples it sets are reflected in the mind-set and behaviour of children. Gender is one aspect through which children view themselves from early on and even very young children are able to identify how they are represented in the media. Since previous research has shown that children can and do learn gender roles through media, it raises the question of what kinds of gender role portrayals children are exposed to in their everyday lives.

Although several studies have been done on the topic of gender representation in the media (see for example Mitra and Lewin-Jones, 2007; Rossi, 2003; Beasley and Collins Standley, 2002), cartoons have been an underrepresented aspect in the discussion in recent years. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how gender roles are represented in the modern children's animated cartoon *Adventure Time* and by determining what kinds of examples those representations set for children.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Critical and Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Representation**

My analysis combines the basic principles and concepts of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MmDA) in order to best examine the multiple ways of communication a cartoon conveys. A key aspect of CDA is to investigate language's relation to power, which makes it a suitable method of analysing representations of gender identity. Gill (2007: 58-59) states that CDA views language as both a constructive and constructed system and emphasises discourse as a form of action. Critical Discourse Analysis is helpful in analysing television programmes, because it understands language as a wide social system with a variety of semiotic meanings. According to CDA, language is a social system which also includes non-verbal elements of communication, such as gestures, which contribute to the individual's identity. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) emphasise this multimodality of discourse and stress its importance in conveying meaning through multi-layered practices. While traditional discourse analysis tends to focus solely on language, MmDA focuses on these non-verbal elements in addition to language. Since a cartoon is a multimodal discourse, combining CDA with MmDA offers a more comprehensive tool for analysing the interplay of visual and verbal messages it sends.

Language can never be totally objective, because people use it to further their own goals. It always carries subtle messages and meanings, which tell about the agendas of the language user. Representations are created through language. Fairclough (1995) argues that with representations a decision is always made between what is included in the representation and what is excluded. Representations are an important object of analysis because they always reflect the society from a certain point of view. They always carry an agenda and hence they can never be completely neutral. Moreover, what is not included in a representation is often as important as the visible side of the representation. Fairclough also points out that through representations the mass media have the ability to control knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations and identities. Our way of behaving towards different groups of people can be influenced by the way they are represented to us and vice versa (Paasonen, 2010: 45).

Gender identity is one of the representations that can be created through discourse. Gender identity comprises of a variety of meanings and non-verbal elements besides language use. By

analysing the gender roles and identities represented by *Adventure Time* I am hoping to discover a positive example of gender role representation in the contemporary media.

## **2.2 Gender Identity and the Media**

According to Tuchman (1978/2012: 42) gender role stereotypes are “set portrayals of sex-appropriate appearance, interests, skills, behaviours and self-perceptions”. Since the world has in recent decades changed quite drastically in the Western countries, particularly for women, these stereotypes can harmfully prepare children, girls in particular, for social constructions which no longer exist (Tuchman, 1978/2012: 42). Tuchman moves on to explaining how the mass media indicate currently prevailing societal values (p. 43). Through media people form ideas on valued and approved behaviour and reproduce these attitudes to social relationships.

Gender is a structure so deeply embedded in the society that it is almost unquestioned. Lemish (2007, cited in Mitra and Lewin-Jones, 2007: 384) states that it is possible that the mass media increase gender role stereotypes, but they do not create those stereotypes on their own. When individuals have differing self-perceptions from the society’s dominant values, personal conflicts can occur. Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes are also an issue of equality. When people believe they are bound to follow certain behavioural patterns and life choices just because they are male or female, problems can follow. It is important that the media provide a wide and truthful depiction of society and show that people can accomplish anything no matter what their sex and gender identity is.

The media play an important role in shaping children’s opinions and images of the world. A popular topic for research has been gendered advertisement for children, but not much attention has been in recent years directed at researching what kinds of examples of gender roles cartoons offer children. After all, children adapt behavioural patterns from everything they see, particularly from characters they idolise, whether they be their parents or characters from their favourite television programme.

### **2.3 Children's Gender Socialisation through Media**

As Dubow et al. (2006) state, the mass media is a major contributor in children's socialisation process. By the time average Americans reach the age of eighteen, they have spent approximately 15,000 hours in front of the television. That is around 4,000 hours more than they have spent being educated and a great deal more time than they have spent on their relationships with their families and peers (Minnow & LaMay, 1995, cited in Dubow et al., 2006: 404). There is no denying that the environment which children in the Western countries grow up in is flooded with media exposure. Dubow et al. (2006: 409) also point out that frequent exposure to certain content in the media is often capable of affecting individuals' thoughts, feelings and behaviour towards that specific content. Stereotyped sex-appropriate behaviour is a good example of this kind of manipulation by the media. Being exposed to stereotypes of sex-appropriate behaviour can change the way individuals see themselves and, according to Dubow et al. (ibid.), even have an effect on one's physical and mental performance.

According to previous research (Kosut, 2012: 33; Mitra & Lewin-Jones, 2012: 389) children are aware of the gender-polarisation they are exposed to and they themselves gender-stereotype the media content they see. According to Mitra and Lewin-Jones (2012: 389), an important factor for children when determining sex-appropriate behaviour is the example they see, since they pay attention to the sex of active characters around them. For example, when children were shown an advertisement with boys playing with a pirate ship, they ignored the toy itself and identified the advertisement as being directed at boys, since there were only boys in it.

Kosut (2012: 34) states that children find it important to be able to identify with the characters they see in the media. Cartoons play an important role in providing children with a variety of examples to identify with. Non-traditional characters, such as female heroines, can have a positive effect on children because they challenge traditional stereotypical sex-appropriate behaviour and gender norms. Dubow et al. (2006: 411) argue that lasting effects on children's socialisation through the mass media requires three continuing processes: "(1) observational learning of behavioural scripts, world schemas, and normative beliefs; (2) activation and desensitization of emotional processes; and (3) didactic learning processes". In other words, in order to absorb new behavioural patterns, children need an emotional link between the information they get from the media and themselves.

## 2.4 Gender Roles in Fairy Tales

As a basis for comparing gender roles in *Adventure Time* I will use traditional fairy tales (for example Rapunzel, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella) because *Adventure Time* relies on a setting familiar from them. Traditional fairy tales often include beautiful women who are passive and handsome men, all of them princes, who come to their rescue. They represent stereotyped ideals of femininity and masculinity and enforce polarised roles between men and women. Women are often depicted as weak and submissive and in need of rescuing whereas men are the ones performing the rescue. Heroes of the stories are almost without exception handsome young princes, and women characters rarely have more variety; they are portrayed as either young, beautiful and virtuous or ugly and evil. For example, in the Grimm Brothers' *Rapunzel* (1812), this juxtaposition is present: Rapunzel is depicted as the most beautiful child in the world and she is locked away in a tower by an evil witch. Rapunzel has no other choice but to passively wait in her prison, until one day a prince comes by and saves her.

The Walt Disney Company (Disney) has turned the above mentioned stories into animated films in their popular Disney Princess franchise. Disney's versions of the traditional fairy tale characters, particularly in the early films released between 1937 and 1959, also follow traditional gender role stereotypes exhibited by the original stories' characters. According to England et al. (2011: 555-567), the male characters in Disney films are more androgynous, whereas the female characters exhibit more traditionally feminine characteristics (for example nurturing, sensitive, physically weak). In my analysis, I will examine the representation of these kinds of gender role stereotypes in *Adventure Time*.



### 3 THE PRESENT STUDY

#### 3.1 Research Questions and Aim

The aim of this study is to determine how gender roles are represented in the American cartoon *Adventure time*. In my study I will focus on answering the following questions:

- Do gender roles in the cartoon *Adventure Time* differ from traditional gender roles? If they do, how?
- What kind of an example does *Adventure Time* set for children regarding gender roles?

According to Gerbner (cited in Tuchman, 1978/2012: 43), representations by mass media determine socially acceptable and valued behaviour and symbolise our existence in a social context. In addition, particularly children are strongly influenced by the media, since their process of socialisation and gender socialisation are in progress. Their views on gender and society are shaped by the images they absorb on a daily basis. *Adventure Time* has received critical acclaim for its fresh views on gender roles. By answering the research questions I am hoping to establish the extent to which *Adventure Time* reinforces stereotypical gender representations and, on the other hand, how it works against them. Additionally, I will determine what kind of an example of gender appropriate behaviour *Adventure Time* sets for its young viewers.

#### 3.2 Data

The data of my study consists of five 11-minute long episodes of the show *Adventure Time*. These episodes, 5.06 *Jake the Dad*, 5.11 *Bad Little Boy*, 5.19 *James Baxter the Horse*, 5.21 *The Suitor* and 5.29 *The Sky Witch* contain relevant material and offer an insight into the gender role representations in the show. They also include a variety of different characters, so the data is versatile. Illustrations of the characters would support my analysis, but due to copyright laws only a link to the illustrations is provided in the Bibliography.

*Adventure Time* is an American animated television show, which first premiered in 2010. After the show became a viral hit on the Internet, it has been broadcasted by Cartoon Network around the world. *Adventure Time* has gathered a strong and ever-growing fan base among all age groups and it is not exaggeration to speak of a cult-following, particularly among teen-agers

and adults. The show centres around Finn, a human boy, and his adoptive brother and best friend Jake, a dog with magical shapeshifting powers. Together they live and adventure in the post-apocalyptic Land of Ooo. Other central characters in the show are Princess Bubblegum, Ice King, Marceline the Vampire Queen, and BMO, Finn and Jake's game console roommate.

*Adventure Time* is not directly aimed at either boys or girls. The show contains strong female and male characters who are also not afraid to show their feelings. Consequently, the show has received critical acclaim for its fresh views on gender roles. Although *Adventure Time* strongly relies on the traditional "heroes helping princesses" –setting, there are more layers behind the story. Heroes suffer from heartache, princesses work hard to rule their kingdoms and families are formed over species boundaries. *Adventure Time* breaks many traditional fairy tale stereotypes and provides refreshing role models for children.

### **3.3 Methods**

I analysed my data using Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Combining these two methods allowed the analysis of all the important semiotic features of *Adventure Time*, such as the appearance of the characters and their behaviour. These features play an important role in the characters' gender identity.

The process of analysing my data included a couple of phases. Firstly, I watched the episodes in order to get familiar with the themes and content of the episodes and to determine which characters are in the focus. This made it easier to refer to the language the characters use and allowed me to focus on the textual side of the show on its own. Secondly, I watched the episodes again without sound. It, in turn, allowed me to concentrate on the visual and multimodal side of the show.

In my research, I focused on the show's main characters Finn, Jake the Dog, BMO, Princess Bubblegum, Ice King and Marceline. Additionally, I examined some of their gender swapped versions: Fionna, Prince Gumball and Marshall Lee.

## 4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

I will present my analysis of the main characters in *Adventure Time* in two stages and divide the discussion into female characters and male characters. First, I will discuss the appearance of the characters in the episodes and examine the multimodal messages they convey. I will also assess the characters' appearance in terms of traditional expectations regarding gender appropriate appearance. After that, I will move on to analysing the characters' behaviour through examples of discourse.

### 4.1 Multimodality in Gender Representation: Female Characters

The majority of the female characters in *Adventure Time* are princesses of different kingdoms. Each princess represents some element typical to her kingdom. Despite there being many princesses, only a couple of them recur in the show. Princess Bubblegum (PB) is one of the main characters and the most often seen princess in the show. She is pink from head to toe apart from her golden tiara, a colour generally associated with femininity and princesses. PB usually wears a long gown but sometimes she is also seen wearing clothes more suitable to the situation at hand, for example a pullover and a lab coat when she is working in her laboratory in episode 5.21. Although she is physically around 18 years old, her actual age is unknown. It is, however, implied that she is thousands of years old. PB has long, pink bubble gum hair which almost reaches the floor.

Despite her physical appearance, PB is not a traditional fairy tale princess. She rules the Candy Kingdom and is a scientist. Women in fairy tales, let alone princesses, do not usually have an occupation besides their title. When PB works in her laboratory, she often gets fully absorbed in her work. In episode 5.21 she looks more like a scientist and less like her princess-self when she is wearing a purple sweater, a laboratory coat, large glasses and has her hair tied up. This emphasises the difference between her princess and scientist sides. PB is a good example of an ambitious woman who is both feminine and intelligent. The well-being of Candy Kingdom's citizens is always in her best interest. PB often asks the heroes of the show, Finn and Jake, to help her, but not in the way heroes usually help princesses by rescuing them from danger. Instead, she sends them on various errands. This reverses the power setting between the characters.

Princess Bubblegum is not a traditional fairy tale princess also because it is implied that she has been romantically involved with another woman, Marceline the Vampire Queen. Throughout the show the two of them are shown expressing dislike towards one another but no specific reason for this is given. Their behaviour is not unlike the behaviour of teenage girls. However, in episode 5.29 Princess Bubblegum inhales deep into a T-Shirt given to her by Marceline. She also has a picture of them smiling together inside her cupboard door. These examples combined with the tense relationship the two of them have can be interpreted as signs of sentimentality due to a past romance. The creators of the show have confirmed the two of them having been romantically involved with each other.

Marceline the Vampire Queen is a tomboy who usually wears jeans, a grey tank top and red boots. Sometimes she wears varying clothes to protect her from sunlight. She has long black hair and she enjoys playing her axe shaped guitar. Marceline looks like a teenager but she is a thousand years old. Due to her vampire heritage she possesses the ability to fly and turn invisible. Although Marceline usually looks like a teenage girl, she can change into a gigantic vampire bat when she is angry or threatened. The contrast between her two forms is distinctive and unorthodox. Although Marceline cannot be considered truly wicked, it is rare that a young beautiful woman represents evil and has the ability to transform into a powerful creature of the darkness. Usually that role is reserved for old and ugly women whereas young, beautiful women symbolise virtue and goodness.

Her title, Vampire Queen, creates connotations of a noble woman. However, Marceline is the opposite of a traditional royal both in looks and behaviour. On the other hand, one must not forget that perhaps traditional elegance cannot be expected from a vampire and a daughter of a demon. Marceline's behaviour is sometimes slightly aggressive but that is her way of hiding her true feelings and maintaining a certain image of herself. Despite this, Marceline also has a soft side; she cares deeply for her teddy bear, Hambo.

## 4.2 Gender Representation through Discourse

### 4.2.1 Princess Bubblegum

Although Princess Bubblegum as a scientist is a refreshing representation of a woman, episode 5.21 re-enforces the stereotype of a career woman who has no time to take care of herself or to see other people. In the episode PB has been working in her laboratory for nine weeks straight and is starting to look rather exhausted. Her subjects are beginning to worry about her and think she should find a suitor. There is a line of suitors, most of whom have been waiting so long that they are now old men, waiting outside her door. Before the conversation in Example 1, Peppermint Butler and a suitor, Braco, have entered PB's laboratory and discovered her sleeping at her desk under a pizza box with a slice of pizza on her face. Braco has just expressed his wish to take PB on a date.

Example 1. (Episode 5.21 "The Suitor")

*Princess Bubblegum:* [Shocked] Thank you, Braco. That's very sweet, but no.

*Peppermint Butler:* Princess, this lab reeks like brown mist; it's unhealthy. You've got to get outside and do some research on boys [Points Braco].

*Princess Bubblegum:* That is way out of line, Peps, and you guys are donking up my research! [Begins knocking stuff off her table] Hello! Donk, donk!

*Braco:* Princess, I love you! I-I love you so much it hurts. [PB stands and goes near him] The pain it—Huh?.

*Princess Bubblegum:* [Points some kind of laser pointer on Braco's eye] Hmmm, what you're feeling is called "infatuation." The pain is the product of you overvaluing a projected, imaginary relationship with me.

Princess Bubblegum is clearly annoyed with Peppermint Butler and thinks he is "way out of line" when he suggests she should go "outside and do some research on boys", because that would interfere with her research. Another reason for her anger is the fact that with this statement, Peppermint Butler takes a power position over PB as he indicates that her behaviour is not suitable for a princess or a woman. He also suggests that she should do what princesses traditionally are expected to do and find a boyfriend, which in fairy tales traditionally is the main goal of a princess. After initial shock, PB's reaction to Braco's feelings is typical for a scientist, but unexpected for a princess. She calmly analyses Braco's feelings and the reason for them but does not directly respond to them. Eventually PB agrees to go on a date with Braco but "just for research".

Being a clever woman, PB handles the society's expectations for her social life by creating a robot, Princess Bubblegum Bot (P-Bot). She shows that she does not need a suitor just because

she is a princess and a woman. In Example 2, PB is doing some final touches to P-Bot and testing her:

Example 2 (Episode 5.21 “The Suitor”)

*Princess Bubblegum:* And what's your number-one priority? [Hands the laser pointer to P-bot]

*P-Bot:* To find someone to share my life with.

*Princess Bubblegum:* Awesome, he he he. [Takes some notes] You ready to go on some dates?

P-Bot’s goal of finding “someone to share my life with” indicates that she is a more traditional version of PB and more suited to meet the stereotypical expectations of the world. PB claims that she created P-Bot, because she “couldn't permit one of my citizens to suffer the way I saw you suffering over me.” This again re-enforces PB’s image as a strong and independent woman but at the same time strengthens the stereotype of women having to choose between a career and a relationship.

PB is usually very diplomatic and polite, which is socially expected behaviour for a woman and particularly for a princess. In episode 5.21, however, PB breaks out of character and talks distastefully of a fellow princess when she implies that Raggedy Princess has “like, zero self-respect”. Forbidding Marceline to repeat her words to Raggedy Princess further emphasises the fact that she is being out of line:

Example 3 (Episode 5.29 “The Sky Witch”)

*Princess Bubblegum:* That's seriously what this is about? Rescuing your old teddy bear?

*Marceline:* Yeah. Sorry I didn't tell you. You might not have come otherwise.

*Princess Bubblegum:* Um, yeah. Raggedy Princess can make you a new Hambo in, like, three seconds... or Raggedy Princess can be your new Hambo. She'd do it, too. That girl's got, like, zero self-respect. [chuckles] That's mean—don't tell her I said that.

Talking ill of other women and gossiping is typically an activity associated with women. Here Princess Bubblegum is possibly making a reference to Raggedy Princess’ sexual behaviour and implying that she has loose morals. The phenomenon is known as slut shaming and it describes the social stigma often applied to people who do not conform to traditional expectations of sexual behaviour. Often particularly girls and women are victims of such social judgement. Implying that someone has “zero self-respect” is a good example of slut shaming, and it sends an unfortunate message for the show’s young viewers about judging people based on their sexual behaviour.

### 4.2.1 Marceline the Vampire Queen

Although she is a vampire and half demon and that might have an effect on her behaviour, I will examine Marceline as a representation of a young female. Her aggressiveness is not a stereotypical trait for a girl. Traditionally, girls are expected to be polite and calm, whereas boys are allowed a more lively style of behaviour. Example 4 describes Marceline's lack of patience and masculine behaviour as she, before considering any other measures, wants to "blow up" and "kill" the vines that are blocking her way. The contrast between her impulsivity and PB's analytical calmness show two very different sets of behaviour.

Example 4 (Episode 5.29 "The Sky Witch")

[Scene cuts to Princess Bubblegum and Marceline walking towards the enchanted forest. Marceline tries to go through some vines but is stopped.]

*Marceline:* Gah! Something's wrong. Huh? Hey! [pulls at the vines] This stuff—it's like a brick wall! [bites a vine] Let's just blow the whole thing up.

*Princess Bubblegum:* [rubs a high-tech thimble on the vines] Hmm. [inspects thimble] It's a Sleeping Gate Bramble.

*Marceline:* How do we kill it?

*Princess Bubblegum:* All we have to do is take the path of least resistance.

*Marceline:* [looks around] Alright, so where is it—the path?

*Princess Bubblegum:* It's in here [points at her head] and in here [places her hand over her heart]. Now [inhales] take a deep breath [exhales and falls backwards into the vines] and be passive. [falls through to the other side]

*Marceline:* [lies on the Sleeping Gate Bramble, which does not yield] [inhales] Grrrr! [bangs her head on the bramble]

Although Marceline is tough and does not often show her feelings, she has a soft side as well. This is best portrayed by her relationship with her teddy bear, Hambo. Because Hambo is her most prized possession, she is willing to do anything for him; she breaks up with her boyfriend and goes on a dangerous rescue mission for him. In Example 5, Marceline's soft side meets her aggressive side when she threatens to strike PB, whom she has dragged on the rescue mission with her, when she belittles Hambo:

Example 5 (Episode 5.29 "The Sky Witch")

*Princess Bubblegum:* It's just a doll.

*Marceline:* [raises her fist] See this? [extends her arm towards Princess Bubblegum and starts moving it in a circle] [imitates a plane's engine] Vooooooooo...

*Princess Bubblegum:* What's that? You gonna bop me one?

*Marceline:* It's comin' in for a landing. What'cha gonna do, PB? Wanna keep dissing Hambo?

*Princess Bubblegum:* [sighs] [monotone] I'm sorry, Marceline. Let's go get Hambo.

*Marceline:* [retracts arm] Disengage.

Marceline masks her threat as a joke by pretending her fist is plane coming in for a landing. Playful violence with less aggression than in an actual fight is typically associated with men and seen as a way to connect with friends (Archer 1994: 27). Example 6 provides further

evidence for Marceline's playful way of showing affection for her friends, as she pranks Ice King by teasing him while being invisible:

Example 6 (Episode 5.11 "Bad Little Boy")

[Suddenly, Ice King's gown goes up over his face, he flips around in the air, and the Princesses' cages are opened.]

*Ice King:* What the...? Whoa oh... I'm sorry I didn't think you were real, Gob... but now I've seen your power, and I've got some things that I did that I have to say sorry for.

[Marceline makes herself visible.]

*Marceline:* Boo.

*Ice King:* [shocked] Marceline, how long have you been in here?

*Marceline:* Mmm... couple hours. [sits down on Ice King's throne]

The way Marceline sits down on Ice King's throne implies not only a close relationship with Ice King but also a certain arrogance. Marceline also chooses a very masculine way of slouching and spreading her legs while sitting on the throne.

### **4.3 Multimodality in Gender Representation: Male Characters**

The male characters in *Adventure Time* portray a variety of different identities. Finn, or Finn the Human, is the main protagonist of *Adventure Time*. He is one of the only humans in the show because the rest are extinct. In the beginning of the show he is twelve years old but gradually ages. In the episodes from the show's fifth series he is approximately 15 years old. Finn wears blue shorts, a blue T-shirt, a green backpack and a white hat which covers almost his whole head and has bear ears. He has quite long blonde hair which is usually hidden under his hat. Finn looks like an ordinary boy but as a hero he does not follow the masculine stereotype, because he is a child. He is quite small and thin, not a muscular man nor a prince, as heroes in fairy tales often are. Finn's behaviour is quite typical for a young boy in his teens. He is starting to develop romantic feelings for girls but he still also enjoys playing. In his case he just actually slays monsters instead of pretending to. Finn is not afraid to show his feelings and he is sometimes seen crying over girl problems. He is a good example that boys can cry too.

Jake is Finn's adoptive brother and roommate. He is around 30 years old and hence acts as a type of mentor to Finn. Jake does not portray visible gender specific traits but his voice is very masculine and harsh. Jake is a magical dog and has the ability to shift his shape.



In episode 5.06 Jake becomes a father when his girlfriend Lady Rainicorn gives birth to five pups. Initially Jake has difficulty adapting to his new role as a father and he is very worried that something bad will happen to his children. When Jake realises that the children will be fine because of their magical powers and fast aging, he moves back in with Finn. Although Jake's children do not depend on their father, leaving his family gives a curious example of the stereotype of an uninterested father often applied to men.

Ice King was originally human but his crown gave him magical powers and turned him eventually into an evil wizard. Ice King looks like a stereotypical wizard: he has a long pointy nose and a massive white beard. He wears a long blue wizard's robe. He also has blue skin. In addition to representing his element, ice, blue is a colour generally associated with males. Hence, the blue colour emphasises the fact that Ice King is a male in a similar fashion it does with Finn and his blue clothes. Ice King's usual crime is to kidnap princesses and try to force them to marry him, which Finn and Jake time after time prevent from happening. A similar situation can be seen in episode 5.11. Ice King is a stereotype of a lonely old man, who has a perverted relationship with women. This kind of behaviour shows that he is socially very incompetent. Although he is lonely, he struggles with creating relationships because he does not know how to be a friend himself.

## 4.4 Gender Representation through Discourse

### 4.4.1 Finn the Human

Although Finn usually expresses his emotions openly, he cannot do it in front of Princess Bubblegum. Finn has had feelings for PB for a long time but PB has not responded to those feelings because Finn is too young for her. In Example 7 Finn learns about PB's suitor, Braco, and becomes startled and speechless. He is only capable of uttering the word "cool" all over again although he seems everything but "cool" with the news.

Example 7 (Episode 5.21 "The Suitor")

*Princess Bubblegum:* Oh, that's Braco, a suitor of mine.

*Finn:* Oh, cool. That's cool—you're dating, that's cool. See ya, Princess.

[The scene goes to Finn and Jake who are now walking away from the Candy Kingdom.]

*Finn:* What'd ya think of that Braco guy? I mean, he seems kinda weird [Faces Jake] and passive and baby lambish [Jake panics and is trying to tell Finn that Braco is behind them] and too unheroic for Peebs. [Looks behind him and is shocked] And then I smashed that peach!

*Braco:* [On his knees] Jake and Finn, I seek your aid. I need to ask you for that map, therewith I can bring the soul stone to Bubblegum. Then she'll love me!

*Finn*: That road you're on leads to nowhere. [Hands the map to Braco]

Because Finn feels threatened by Braco, he turns to Jake for support and starts belittling his competition by saying “he seems kinda weird and passive and baby lambish and too unheroic” for PB. This kind of behaviour is typical for a male who feels his territory has been intruded. Finn finds Braco’s weaknesses and compares them to his own characteristics in order to enhance his self-confidence. He uses the words “baby lambish and too unheroic for Peebs” to build a contrast between his own masculinity and Braco’s lack of it. Finn’s statement represents appreciation for the traditional view of masculinity and reinforces the stereotype that princesses need strong men by their side. However, in contrast to what one might expect of a jealous person, Finn agrees to help Braco by giving him the map and even offers him a piece of advice by implying that based on his own experience, Braco has no future with PB: “That road you’re on leads to nowhere”. Helpfulness is a traditionally feminine characteristic, but here it makes Finn seem mature.

Since Finn is the main character of the show, based on Mitra and Lewin-Jones’ findings (2012: 389) children may assume that the programme is directed at boys. Finn is not, however, a stereotypical example for children. On the one hand, he is not traditionally masculine but more androgynous: helpful, sensitive but at the same time adventurous and brave. On the other hand, his character reinforces traditional gender role stereotypes, because most heroes of children’s television programmes are males (Lemish, 2014: 180).

#### **4.4.2 Jake the Dog**

In episode 5.06 Jake adapts to a new role as a father after living with Finn in their treehouse. He has just moved in with his girlfriend Lady Rainicorn, who has given birth to the couple’s five pups. Fatherhood brings Jake’s emotions to the surface and he is so moved by his pups that he cries of happiness:

Example 8 (Episode 5.06 “Jake the Dad”)

*Finn*: [Jake is tearing up and Finn goes to pull the blanket back from Jake Jr.'s face] Aww! Oh! That's a butt. [Jake Jr. begins to bark and Finn laughs] Preeeeetty cute!

*Jake*: [sniffles] Yeah, Finn. I love all my little babies so much. [Dabs eyes with Jake Jr.'s body] I'm not gonna let anything happen to them!

Stereotypically, it is not considered masculine behaviour to show one’s emotions or to cry. However, this is contrasted by Jake stating he is “not gonna let anything happen to them!”, which reclaims his status as a masculine protector of his family. However, Jake does not live

up to his own expectations. Instead, he ends up being rescued by his pups when he falls asleep due to exhaustion from worrying so much, and foxes drag him away. This convinces Jake that he does not need to watch every move the pups make. Interestingly, because of this he moves back in with Finn. Jake moving in with Lady Rainicorn only when the pups are born and moving back out again when the pups physically do not need him gives an example of a distant father. Jake's lack of commitment to his family is further emphasised in Example 9 by his words "Plus all my stuff is here." Him not having bothered to move his things indicates that he was not serious about living with Lady Rainicorn and the pups. Moreover, BMO's question "Did you ruin it?" implies that it was expected that Jake would not be able to assume the role of a father.

Example 9 (Episode 5.06 "Jake the Dad")

Jake: Hey guys. I'm back. [walks up the stairs]

Finn: [BMO and Finn look over concernedly] Is everything okay?

BMO: Did you ruin it?

Jake: Nah, nah, it's cool. It turns out the pups can pretty much take care of themselves. They don't really need me around.

Finn: Oh.

Jake: Yeah. I guess rainicorns age really fast. They're basically like older than me already. Kil Whan has a beard now!

Finn: Oh!

Jake: Ah, it's okay! I got a slammin' family right here too! [hugs them] Plus all my stuff is here.

On the other hand, Jake expresses his feelings to Finn and Jake by hugging them and telling them that they are his "slammin' family", which again shows that it is acceptable for men to express emotion to their friends without it threatening their masculinity.

#### 4.4.3 Ice King

Ice King does not offer a very positive example of older men. Although he is slightly insane due to the magical powers of his crown, his behaviour towards women sets a worrying example for children. Ice King desperately wants to marry a princess to keep him company and praise his greatness. He does not, however, realise that relationships should be based on mutual will and interest. In episode 5.11 Ice King is holding four princesses hostage and forces them to listen to a story about Fionna and Cake, the female versions of Finn and Jake, whom he is obsessed about. Example 10 shows how he harasses Wildberry Princess, who is clearly upset about it:

Example 10 (Episode 5.11 "Bad Little Boy")

*Wildberry Princess*: Maybe this story is a new form of torture!

*Ice King*: Oh, come on! It's a first draft... don't hate! And besides, that story had everything. Action, adventure, a hotter, older guy... Wildberry, don't pretend; I know you liked the silver foxes.

[Wildberry Princess looks stressed and disgusted as Ice King's eyebrows go up and down.]

Ice King refers to himself as “a hotter, older guy”, which describes his self-perception. He believes that the princesses want him and refuses to accept any indications the situation could be otherwise. This type of behavior is typical to sex-offenders. Although it is not clear what Ice King means by “silver foxes”, his line “Wildberry, don’t pretend; I know you liked the silver foxes” can be interpreted as a sexual innuendo, because he moves his eyebrows up and down insinuatingly.

#### 4.5 Ambiguity in Representation of Gender

The characters in *Adventure Time* have versatile looks due to the fact that they are not human. In most cases, the appearance of a character is determined by the characters place of origin, for example the kingdom they come from. For example, people from the Flame Kingdom are made of fire and the citizens of the Candy Kingdom are different kinds of treats such as candy and pastries. Hence, the sex of the characters cannot always be deduced by their appearance. Their behaviour, however, represents their gender identity.

An ambiguous main character in the show is BMO, Finn and Jake’s roommate and video game console. His<sup>1</sup> appearance does not offer any clues regarding his sex and his behaviour gives mixed signals about his gender identity. BMO speaks with a high-pitched feminine voice, but when he is briefly shown in the gender swapped episode 5.11 nothing in his appearance besides his controller has changed. This could, however, be interpreted as a reference to his sex. BMO sometimes adapts specific gender roles when he is playing. In 5.19 BMO is seen carrying an egg in a plastic cup taped to his front side and singing a song about being pregnant:

Example 11 (Episode 5.19, “James Baxter the Horse”)

“Oh, oh, BMO, how'd you get so pregnant?  
Who's the mother?  
Oh, who's the father?  
Shh, I'll tell you if you keep it a secret.  
We will, we will, we will!  
All right, last night, an electric presence came into my room and said,  
"BMO, I need your perfect body to host the human incarnation of a baby!"”

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<sup>1</sup> In order to make the text easier to read, I will use the masculine pronoun *he* to refer to BMO.

The lyrics of BMO's song reveal that he is not familiar with the human biology and reproduction, because he asks who the father and the mother are and mentions "an electric presence", which impregnated him. Although it is possible that he just does not associate pregnancy as something only females can physically do, his example possibly indicates that parenthood is not a matter of the sexes and anyone can participate, although taking care of children is traditionally considered a woman's job. BMO's play is relatable to children, since they also play house. Playing house is usually associated with little girls playing with dolls, but BMO's example shows that play does not have to replicate gender roles from the surrounding world.

BMO's ambiguous gender identity is further emphasised by the fact, that throughout the show characters refer to him with different gender pronouns. It depends on the person addressing him which pronoun they use. When BMO holds the egg, a butterfly flies by and knocks the egg down breaking it. When Finn and Jake see BMO crying, Jake refers to BMO with the pronoun "he" when he says: "I think he broke his egg." Characters in children's programmes generally follow a strict division into girls and boys. Lemish (2014) states that even non-gendered characters such as animals and creatures are practically always labelled a gender, usually automatically male. Although BMO is a machine and hence less relatable to children, he is a refreshing example of a character reaching beyond the gender binary.

## **4.6 Gender Swaps**

*Adventure Time* includes a couple of episodes, where all the characters are gender swapped and other switches between two opposites also occur. The events and characters in the gender swapped episodes are not part of the main story line and they are always happening in a story told by one of the show's characters. Originally the gender swapped characters are a figment of Ice King's imagination. Here I will analyse the gender swapped versions of Finn, Princess Bubblegum and Marceline from episode 5.11.

### **4.6.1 Fionna**

Fionna, the female version of Finn is also a heroine and an adventurer. Her looks, however, differ slightly from Finn's. The basic elements are all there: Fionna has a white hat with bunny ears, a blue shirt and a green backpack. In contrast to Finn, Fionna is slightly older, in her mid

or late teens. This is implied by her curvy figure and visible bosom. Fiona has a more realistic figure than women in fairy tales usually have; she is more round. Whereas Finn's hair is hidden under his hat, Fiona's blonde hair flows out from underneath her hat. This is a style choice that emphasises Fiona's femininity. It is rare for female characters to have short hair in fairy tales and that is how it could seem if her hair was completely hidden under her hat. In episode 5.11 Fiona lets her hair completely free and poses seductively when she sings a duet with Marshall Lee the Vampire King. This is a very feminine action and emphasises the difference between Finn and Fiona. Instead of shorts, Fiona wears a short blue skirt and white over-the-knee socks, which seems an impractical choice of outfit for a heroine. Although it is not nearly as revealing as heroines' outfits traditionally in for example comics, Fiona's outfit gives rise to the question of its purpose. Perhaps it was chosen to emphasise the age difference with Finn but one cannot help but wonder that perhaps it is important for Fiona as a female character to look good even when fighting monsters and saving princes. However, the blue colour of her outfit makes it seem less feminine and supports the traditional hero status. As mentioned above in Chapter 4.3, blue is a gendered colour typically associated with masculinity. Despite this, it is clear that Fiona is not a neutral opposite of Finn. Instead, she is a more sexualised version of him.

Even though Fiona does not represent a traditional passive female character, she is still led by her feelings. Fiona's relationship with Marshall Lee the Vampire King carries features of a stereotypical relationship between a good girl and a bad boy who plays with her feelings. When Marshall Lee pushes Cake the Cat aside and she hurts herself, Fiona gets angry and says: "Look, I don't care if you're being a jerk to me... but nobody messes with Cake." The statement contains an invitation for Marshall Lee to keep treating her badly, but at the same time shows how Fiona does not accept disrespectful behaviour towards her friend. It indicates Fiona does not place the same value on herself as she does on others.

#### **4.6.2 Prince Gumball**

Like Princess Bubblegum, Prince Gumball wears pink and purple from head to toe. However, unlike PB, he wears trousers. His crown is significantly smaller than PB's. In contrast to traditional fairy tale princes, Prince Gumball is rather feminine. In addition to his appearance, he enjoys baking. The kitchen has traditionally been a woman's place, but since his female counterpart is into science, a field usually considered masculine, baking seems a fitting hobby for Prince Gumball. Although Prince Gumball is very polite, he also has a divaesque side to

him. In 5.11 he is visiting Fionna and Cake, when they hear strange noises coming from the roof. Initially, he and Cake refuse to go outside because it is raining. In the next scene Fionna carries Prince Gumball on top of the tree house where the strange noises are coming from. Prince Gumball sits on Fionna's shoulder holding an umbrella. When he sees that the source of the noise is Marshall Lee playing his bass, he wants to go back inside.

Example 12 (Episode 5.11 "Bad Little Boy")

*Prince Gumball:* Oh... it's just him.

*Marshall Lee:* Oh, hey Fionna.

*Fionna:* Marshall Lee!

*Prince Gumball:* Ahem!

*Marshall Lee:* [sarcastically] Oh, forgive me! Hello, your majesty!

[Marshall Lee bows for Prince Gumball. He sucks the red out of one of the cream puffs.]

*Prince Gumball:* Fionna, take me back inside.

*Marshall Lee:* What? Is he kidding?

[Marshall throws a cream puff at Gumball.]

*Prince Gumball:* Oh, honestly! I'm going in. Come and join me when you want more *polite* company. [He gets the umbrella and goes back down.]

The situation reverses traditional gender roles completely. Fionna is much stronger than Prince Gumball and she does the dangerous climbing to the roof while he sits passively and hides from the rain. In comparison to traditional fairy tales, Prince Gumball does not represent a heroic prince but exhibits more feminine characteristics instead. However, telling Fionna to take him back inside indicates that he has a power position over her. This command can still be considered a neutral gender role representation, since it is linked to his royal status rather than him being a male.

#### **4.6.3 Marshall Lee the Vampire King**

Marshall Lee is the male version of Marceline and like her, he is a vampire. His looks are not uncommon for a teenage boy; he wears blue jeans, red sneakers and a red checkered shirt. His hair is short and black and skin very pale. Marshall Lee is a stereotypical bad boy: arrogant, confident, handsome and attractive to girls. A good example of his typical behaviour is when he tries to tempt Fionna to go to a party with him. When she hesitates, he claims: "I know you're gonna say yes to me, so... Let's just go." Marshall Lee constantly flirts with Fionna and keeps teasing her about having a crush on him. Example 13 captures this well and also shows how confident Marshall Lee is when he talks about Fionna's feelings:

## Example 13 (Episode 5.11 “Bad Little Boy”)

*Marshall Lee:* [singing] Good little girl. Always picking a fight with me, you know that I'm bad... But you're spending the night with me... What do you want from my world? You're a good little girl.

*Fionna:* [singing] Bad little boy. That's what you're acting like, I really don't buy... that you're that kind of guy... and if you are, why do you want to hang out with me?

*Marshall Lee:* [Talk-singing] Don't you know I'm a villain? Every night I'm out killin', sending everyone runnin' like children. I know why you're mad at me. I've got demon eyes, and they're looking right through your anatomy... into your deepest fears. Baby, I'm not from here. I'm from the Nightosphere... To me, you're clear. Transparent. You got a thing for me, girl; it's apparent.

Phrases such as “You know that I’m bad... But you’re spending the night with me...” and “To me, you’re clear. Transparent. You got a thing for me, girl; it's apparent” indicate that Marshall has power over Fionna because he knows how she feels about him, and he chooses to use this power to tease her seductively.

Marshall Lee has few feminine characteristics and his behaviour is very masculine. Unlike Prince Gumball, whose interests are the gendered opposite of PB interests, Marshall Lee and Marceline are similar to each other, although Marshall Lee is more masculine and more aggressive of the two. He is a so called womanizer, which in certain social spheres is considered desired behaviour and the ultimate culmination of masculinity. The way he treats Fionna, however, does not exhibit a good example for children.

Playing with gender and reversing gender roles are a common form of comedy, but gender swaps similar to *Adventure Time* are a rather uncommon occurrence in television programmes. Since the gender swapped characters in *Adventure Time* are not just the original characters playing the opposite gender but different characters altogether, a straightforward comparison between the original and gender swapped version offers valuable information about the characters’ gender identities, because they highlight the differences between each other. On the one hand, too much emphasis should not be placed on the gender swapped characters since they only appear in a couple episodes and are clearly presented as fictional characters within the show. On the other hand, portraying characters as their opposite sex offers a good example of women doing things considered masculine and vice versa. As discussed in Chapter 2.3 by Mitra and Lewin-Jones (2012: 389), children tend to determine the target audience based on the sex of the characters they see. Gender swapped characters may alleviate the impression they get from the show based on, for example, the fact that its protagonist is a boy.



## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine how gender roles are represented in the cartoon *Adventure Time* and what kinds of examples these representations set for children. The analysis shows that while *Adventure Time* offers untraditional roles both for men, women and beyond gender, it sometimes portrays behaviour questionable for a children's show. For example, as pointed out in the analysis, the show contains examples that can be interpreted as sexual innuendos. Children might not understand these implications but nevertheless, they are directed at a more mature audience.

Female characters in traditional fairy tales often only have one function, for example a wife, a mother, a daughter or a princess. Moreover, they seldom act as active agents in the stories. The women in *Adventure Time* have more dimensions and they are also more androgynous than traditional fairy tale women. They show that a princess can have other career pursuits and be successful in a stereotypically masculine field and, moreover, they break the stereotype of women, whose main goal in life is to get married. Homosexuality is a theme seldom handled in children's cartoons and although *Adventure Time* merely implies this, it is a fresh contrast to the heteronormativity of traditional fairy tales. Princess Bubblegum and Marceline are good examples of different forms of femininity. Although they at times give negative examples with their behaviour towards others, on the whole they present a positive example of different ways of being active female agents.

The male characters in *Adventure Time* portray a variety of different gender identities and offer more diversity compared to traditional fairy tales. Even though the characters are exaggerated to some extent, they offer several role models from a counter-stereotypical hero to a father and from a charismatic teenager to an old man for children to identify themselves with. Although the male characters represent a number of different male identities and different ways of being men, the examples in my data show them in a rather negative light in terms of behaviour. In their discourses with females the male characters often assumed a power position, which reinforces the traditional setting between genders. In terms of multimodal signs, the characters and particularly their colour schemes also mostly represent traditional masculinity with neutral and androgynous features.

Gender swaps are a rare phenomenon in children's shows but they are a good example that gender is not only one way of being and that there are multiple ways of being a girl or a boy or something outside this division. Swapping gender shows that gender is not a strict division into two categories but rather a continuum which stretches in many directions. Seeing their favourite characters suddenly transformed can encourage children to see gender more openly and realise that there are no right or wrong ways to express one's gender.

*Adventure Time* offers its viewers a variety of different characters with versatile gender identities. As the critical analysis of their discourse with others showed, their behaviour sets questionable examples at times, but they can still mostly be considered as good examples in regards of their portrayal of gender roles. In comparison to traditional fairy tales, the gender role representation in *Adventure Time* is more appropriate in the modern day Western society. The show does not separate certain actions for either girls or boys, and children regardless of their gender can relate to its characters. However, although the female characters are active, intelligent and powerful, the male characters attitudes towards them is at times rather patriarchal. Additionally, the smaller number of female characters in proportion to the male characters gives an example of gender inequality in the show. The fact that the characters not only portray immaculate behavioural patterns but also make mistakes makes them seem humane and perhaps more relatable. However, it can be problematic, since children can have difficulty understanding what acceptable behaviour is. On the whole, *Adventure Time* offers more androgynous characters than traditional fairy tales but it does not reverse or contradict gender role stereotypes completely.

As the scope of this study was limited to only five episodes, the results offer a mere glance at the gender roles represented in *Adventure Time*. Due to plot lines, some of the characters were given more screen time than others, which made it challenging to compare the characters' representations objectively. More comprehensive research with a more extensive data should be conducted in order to form a more detailed image of the gender representation of the characters in the show. Overall, the present study has provided a footing for further research in gender representation in children's animated cartoons, particularly in *Adventure Time*.

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