

12-1-2021

## Hybridity, Ecocriticism, and Feminist Perspectives in She-Ra and the Princesses of Power

Sarah Warso

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/28340372>

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HYBRIDITY, ECOCRITICISM, AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

IN *SHE-RA AND THE PRINCESSES OF POWER*

By

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Bachelor of Arts – English  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts – English

Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts  
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
December 2021



## Thesis Approval

The Graduate College  
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

December 3, 2021

This thesis prepared by

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entitled

Hybridity, Ecocriticism, and Feminist Perspectives in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## Abstract

Children's cartoons are growing increasingly nuanced in the twenty-first century. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018) is an animated television series targeted towards young girls that includes themes of ecocriticism and feminism. The show does this by introducing cyborg, or hybrid, characters. My research explores how cyborg identities in children's media and their feminist, ecocritical meanings in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. The cyborg, as a feminist mythic hero, breaks down binaries and recodes communication between opposing forces. The She-Ra is filled with characters that inhabit multiple identities. The main character, Adora, identifies as both a former Evil Horde soldier and a member of the Princess Rebellion. Other characters and creatures inhabit identities between biological and mechanical or human and animal. By analyzing these hybrid characters, a conclusion about how children's cartoons can handle hybridized identities is discovered. By creating cyborgs and hybrids, the show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* can help children watching the show come to terms with their own hybrid identities in a technological world.

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## Introduction and Methods

In science fiction cartoons it is possible to create hybrid, also known as cyborg, characters that can inhabit multiple identities at once and break down or blur binary concepts. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018) is a science-fiction (sf) cartoon that uses cyborg characters to challenge the boundaries between opposing identities. The show is a reboot of the original *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985) that updates the franchise. The show eschews the original cheesy storylines and bad animation and focuses on nuanced issues with a storyline that span across all five seasons. Indeed, *She-Ra and the Princess of Power* refreshes a nostalgic franchise by emphasizing complex topics such as environmentalism and female empowerment through age-appropriate narratives. The show's depictions of hybridity, such as the blurring of gendered stereotypes and undermining binaries (for example: human and nonhuman), is only possible within the genre of science fiction.

*She-Ra's* primary target audience is preteen girls, teaching them that multifaceted, independent identities are valuable to society and can help make the world a better, more equitable, and caring place. The show's ecological messages are connected to gender stereotypes and hinge on the ways in which the characters break from social constraints and expectations. The show portrays nature (the natural world) as a feminine entity capable of enacting change to its environment. The show also focuses on methods and means of communication between society and the planet. The cyborg, as a science fiction myth, goes against generally accepted social conventions of "gender, race, or class consciousness" and help overcome the "social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism" (Haraway 311). Cyborgs, in this case, have a progressively didactic purpose, teaching girls that communication and cooperation (two traits

viewed as traditionally feminine, or soft, and frequently undervalued in capitalist systems), that individuals can overcome the domination of technological, masculine structures (Haraway).

The main character in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* is Adora, a girl whose destiny is to become the mythical hero She-Ra, protector of the planet of Etheria.<sup>1</sup> In the first episode, she is a Force Captain of the Evil Horde, an imperialist military with the goal of taking over the planet. Adora leaves the Fright Zone, the Horde's home, after inadvertently realizing her identity as She-Ra. She becomes the leader of the Princess Rebellion while her childhood best friend Catra replaces Adora as a force captain for the Horde and acts as the antagonist for most of the series. Etheria is a magical, pastoral planet with beings like satyrs and merpeople. It was settled by a mysterious race only known as the First Ones who cultivated the planet's magic. The princesses that make up the Rebellion wield magical powers granted to them by runestones created by the First Ones. Both the Horde and the Rebellion attempt to collect the abandoned technology scattered throughout the planet during the series as a means to win the war between the two. Despite the intergalactic nature of the First Ones and the Horde, Etheria exists in an empty dimension known as Despondos.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, a portal is opened because of interference by princesses Entrapta and Glimmer and Etheria is brought back into the universe. Hordak, a clone of Horde Prime, rejoins the intergalactic Horde empire. Horde Prime attempts to assimilate everyone into the Horde via mind-control chips. Both sides want to use the First One's Heart of Etheria project, a world-ending weapon, to destroy their enemies.

Season One shows Adora acclimating to her life on Etheria outside of the Horde's control. In "The Sword Part One," Adora leaves the Fright Zone in order to find a sword that she

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary: Etherian: "heavenly; of or relating to the sky or region beyond the clouds."

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary: Despondent: "characterized by loss of heart or resolution; labouring under mental depression"

saw in a vision. “The Sword Part Two” has Adora, who has transformed into She-Ra for the first time, experiencing the wider world. Adora finds out the Evil Horde has been attacking innocent civilians and decides to join the Princess Rebellion. Adora’s first humanitarian mission to the kingdom of Plumeria is in the episode “Flowers for She-Ra.” In this episode, She-Ra faces off against one of the Horde’s environmentally destructive machines and she recruits the princess Perfuma. Another princess, Mermista, is recruited in the episode “The Sea Gate.” In Mermista’s kingdom of Salineas, She-Ra fixes the gate to the kingdom and faces off against Catra. Princess Frosta is recruited in the episode “Princess Prom,” which features a royal ball in Frosta’s Kingdom of Snows. In “Light Hope,” the AI Light Hope is introduced and she explains to Adora the role of She-Ra on Etheria. The final episode of Season One, “The Battle of Bright Moon,” the princesses’ connection to their runestones is severed and the Horde decides to take the opportunity to attack Princess Glimmer’s kingdom, Bright Moon. By working together, the princesses are able to save the kingdom.

In Season Two, Adora is learning how to be the mythic hero She-Ra. Catra is rising in the ranks of the Evil Horde. The episode “Ties That Bind,” the Princess Rebellion attempts to save Princess Entrapta from the Horde but it is revealed that Entrapta is unwilling to leave the Horde. Season Three has both the Horde and the Princess Rebellion searching for technology left over by the First Ones. “Once Upon a Time in the Waste” has Catra and Adora’s groups searching through a seemingly empty desert for a large First One’s artifact. The artifact turns out to be Mara’s ship and Adora finds that Mara left a warning message for her about the greater universe. It is revealed that Etheria was put into the empty dimension of Despondos to protect Etheria. The portal is opened despite Adora’s attempts to stop it and Etheria is brought back into the universe and into Horde Prime’s purview.



The next season has the Princess Rebellion prepare for the looming threat of Horde Prime. Season Four explores the relationship dynamics between the Horde and the Rebellion as well. The episode "Protocol" reveals that Light Hope, despite being an AI, has emotions and cultivated a friendship with Mara. "Hero" explores Mara's point of view further. It is revealed that the Heart of Etheria project channels the natural magic of Etheria to the planet's core to be used as a weapon. However, by using the weapon, Etheria and multiple other planets would be destroyed. In the episode "Fractures," the Rebellion debates using the Heart of Etheria project against Horde Prime's empire. To assist with the Rebellion's mission to defeat the Horde, Adora and friends go to rescue Entrapta in "Beast Island." The last episode of Season Four, "Destiny Part Two," Adora attempts to stop Light Hope from activating the Heart of Etheria project which results in the destruction of She-Ra's sword. Season Five focuses on Adora reacclimating to Etheria without the ability to transform into She-Ra. Horde Prime's forces are gaining influence through mind-controlling microchips embedded in people's necks. Adora is eventually able to summon She-Ra again and the Rebellion defeats the Horde by working together. In the last episode, "Heart Part Two," Adora vows to bring magic back to the universe.

## Literature Review

The hero She-Ra has existed since the 1985 film, *The Secret of the Sword*. This movie followed the adventures of He-Man, from the American television show *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, as he looked for his twin sister, She-Ra. The television show *She-Ra: Princess of Power* also debuted in 1985. In 2018, a remake of the original cartoon was released on the streaming platform Netflix: *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. The show's connection with the nostalgia of the franchise contributed to its success: the fifth and final season of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* was released 35 years after the original release date. Brian C. Baer's book *How He-Man Mastered the Universe: Toy to Television to the Big Screen* explores the history of the original franchise's shows and associated merchandise. Since the book was published in 2017 and the new show started in 2018, he was unable to explore the cultural influence that the *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* series had within the franchise.

When discussing the cultural impact of the *Masters of the Universe* franchise, we must examine the material culture as well. Peggy A. Bulger, in "The Princess of Power: Socializing Our Daughters Through TV, Toys, and Tradition" critiqued how material artifacts from the original *She-Ra* television show affected her own daughters: "These artifacts are generated in an attempt to teach current expectations of adult behavior to the developing child" (190). The influence of the original *Masters of the Universe* franchise continues to this day. Lincoln Geraghty, in his analysis of '80s science-fiction cartoons "Drawn to Television: American Animated SF Series of the 1980s," explains that: "Children who grew up collecting the toys and watching the animated spin-offs in the 1980s continue to re-collect and re-watch them as adults in the 2000s" (298). Baer talks about the material reality of the show as well: the toys' designs were "limited by the realities of production" and used pre-made molds and "a small number of

reusable parts” (28). Geraghty also mentions that the goal of many 1980s cartoon franchises was “to take advantage of the cheaper production costs in Japan and then flood the television market back in the US with dozens of cheaply made cartoons” (290). While there has been extensive research and analysis given to *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* and the cartoons from the 1980s, much less has been written about *She-Ra*. Netflix’s adaption of the story is relatively new and it seems there is only one source that has reviewed the most recent remake: in the 2020 book *Parenting Through Pop Culture*, in which JL Schatz explores how *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* portrays the neutrality of science.

Though rife with mythical, fantasy elements, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* fits neatly into the genre of science fiction. Science fiction is similar to myth because it both borrows from the past and envisions an idyllic future. Space operas, such as the *Masters of the Universe* and *Star Wars* franchises, are overly melodramatic stories that deal with intergalactic travel, spaceships, and borrow from “the past for its models, and not even the real past, but an idealized and simplified one” (Russ 202). Donna Haraway argues that “cyborg writing,” her theory of binary-breaking themes in futuristic fiction is “about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocents, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them other” (323). Her idea of cyborg writing also focuses on the experiences of marginalized women. Women and people of color are often outcasts of the white majority of the United States and cyborg writing helps bring this separation into light. By creating hybrid identities within science fiction, writers can create worlds of equality. Both Johanna Russ and Haraway believe the mythic past influences the making of contemporary science fiction: Russ, writing in the 1970s, believes that sf needs to break away from “traditional straightjackets” (208) while Haraway,

writing is the 1980s, explains that science fiction writing is about suggesting “a way out of the maze of dualisms” (329) society is often compelled to accept and reinforce.

The anthology *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* is extremely useful when discussing the hybridity of feminism and ecocriticism in sf. The editors of the anthology, Cristy Tidwell and Bridgette Barclay, write in the introduction that science fiction “mimics a Euro-Christian Edenic narrative with a white male-female pair, the women reaching for the fruit while the man looks on” (ix). The original *Masters of the Universe* franchise featured the blonde-haired, blue-eyed twins Adam and Adora (He-Man and She-Ra’s civilian identities) as they defeat evil on their planets, reminiscent of the biblical myth of Adam and Eve. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* attempts to move away from this white-centric cast of characters and has removed the hyper-masculine He-Man from the narrative. The anthology attempts to “address [the] gap in scholarship between feminist sf scholarship and environmental sf scholarship” and implores others to examine “How might existing studies of women in science fiction engage with ecocritical ideas of nature and what is ‘natural’?” (Barclay and Tidwell xvi-vxii). Tidwell’s essay “‘Either You’re Mine or You’re Not Mine:’ Controlling Gender, Nature, and Technology in *Her* and *Ex Machina*” explores how AI is typically coded as female and controlled by masculine creators; the feminine AI is also often contrasted by the natural world around her. In “Female Beasties: Camp Resistance in 1950s Wom-Animal Creature Features,” Barclay explains that “female beasties” cross boundaries in what is considered human. Berns and Juve’s “Tendrils, Tentacles, and Flower Power: Speciesism in *Woman eater* (1958) and *The Gardener* (1974),” studies the hybrid between plants and humans, which also explores hybrid human and nonhuman characters. Finally, Yate’s article “Saving Eden: Whiteness, Masculinity, and Environmental Nostalgia in *Soylent Green* and *WALL-E*” attempts to explain how sf attempts to return to an

Edenic version of history where the white male is the hero of the story. The essays in this anthology are essential for my purposes of discussing characters like Light Hope, human/nonhuman hybrids, and the absent He-Man. In the epilogue of this anthology, Tidwell explains: “science fiction always maintains a relationship with the world it is born out of” (203). Shows like *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* are new science fiction stories that break free of the male/female and human/nonhuman binaries.

Haraway’s analysis of the dualisms of sf texts examines the history of the combination of nature and science: “By the late twentieth century in the United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached” (308). As Ghosh points out in *The Great Derangement*, the sf genre was born out of a time when the separation of literature and science languages began. After Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in the 19th century, the language of science needed to be less emotional and literary mainstream became more dramatic (Ghosh). One of the goals of science fiction is to critique the author’s contemporary society as Tidwell explains in the epilogue of *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (203). Haraway’s idea of cyborg writing agrees with this sentiment: it “embrac[es] the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life” (329). Sf also analyzes patriarchal patterns of scientific control over nature. Nature in sf is often coded as feminine in a patriarchal society as discussed in articles like Tidwell’s critique of *Ex Machina* and *Her* or Yates’s exploration into the masculine savior trope in *WALL-E* and *Soylent Green*. Authors criticizing how the earth and the language of science is treated in fiction often borrow from Bruno Latour’s work. In “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” Latour argues that scientific language needs to move away from neutral language and become more “anthropomorphized” (12). Science fiction authors themselves often

critique the genre as well: HG Wells, Mary Shelley, and Neil Gaiman have all written essays about the genre's use of nature and gender.

Sara Ahmed's book, *Living a Feminist Life*, focuses on feminist lives in the margins, something cyborg writing does. Science fiction explores how binaries limit how people think of boundaries between ideas, like science vs. nature and male vs. female. The "cyborg writing" Haraway describes argues that hybrids between opposite ends of dichotomies are heavily featured in sf, which is another major theme of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Showrunner N.D. Stevenson argued that the original show was already "incredibly queer" due to its use of rainbows and characterizations ("Out in Comics 33: Virtually Yours | Comic-Con@Home 2020"). This led them to continue the legacy to create a show that teaches children they do not have to have a label to discover their personal identity.

Ahmed implores writers to create feminist worlds. Feminist themes have existed in *She-Ra* since the beginning. Showrunner N.D. Stevenson, a lesbian, non-binary feminist, is an important reason why the show became popular. Their artistic works and their personal story are about finding and defining identities in a binary world. *The Fire Never Goes Out* is their memoir in pictures. The memoir is a collection of writings and cartoons created during their time as a Tumblr user in the 2010s. It follows them through their college career, mental health struggles, and romantic relationships. Their webcomic *Nimona*, produced as their Master's thesis, became a *New York Times* bestselling book. *Nimona* is the story about a shape-shifting girl who is the chaotic sidekick to the evil Blackheart; eventually, it is revealed that Nimona herself is also a hybrid between magic, technology, and nature. The children's comic series *Lumberjanes*, co-created by Stevenson, Grace Ellis, and Brooke Allen, has multiple queer identities within the narrative. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, "Comic Con 2020 at Home" released their panel

discussions as YouTube videos, enabling fans to watch Stevenson's discussions about their work. They explain in the "Out in Comics" panel that they weren't "always out" when creating their work but was able to find their identity through exploring diverse storylines and arguing for the inclusion of queer narratives.

## The Power of Unification: Cyborg Heroes and Science Fiction

The mythic hero She-Ra is a cyborg: a creature in science fiction that embodies dual identities. The cyborg has the power to break binary identities and moves beings and concepts forward in time. She-Ra obtains her powers by integrating her body with technology. This represents a potential future of humanity in which technology is fully integrated into organisms. In addition, Haraway describes the cyborg as a particularly feminist myth: “the cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century” (306). Inspiration to break free of patriarchal female/male dichotomies comes from understanding the lived experiences of women in a patriarchal society. Breaking binaries, like the binary between men and women, also brings together opposing ideas like organisms and machines. The earlier *She-Ra: Princess of Power* features a male/female binary between He-Man and She-Ra, however *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* is absent of the hyper-masculine He-Man. Instead, She-Ra, a mythical feminist hero, and the world around her embodies these opposing identities. The original He-Man character is part of Russ’ critique of the science fiction genre: He-Man is a techno-medieval Superman, invulnerable and courageous, who always triumphs against evil and never runs away from a battle (203). Russ critiques the role of women in he-men stories: women are reduced to mere objects, or they are essentially the feminine version of the he-man trope in science fiction. Cyborg mythology attempts to break away from the binary view of men and women: The cyborg’s role, in a genre that envisions the future, are an idealized version of humankind and in cyborg mythology, organisms become biotic components that are assigned environmental roles as producers, consumers, and decomposers as if they were interchangeable parts in a machine. Nature is categorized and sorted by scientific language. The character She-Ra is categorized similarly: she embodies a role to be



filled in the social machine of the First Ones and the Horde. She-Ra also brings the past into the future. The She-Ra of the past, Mara, is eventually reincarnated as the She-Ra of the future, Adora. The hero She-Ra is a cyborg of nature and technology. The First Ones have created a being that combines their advanced technology to recode the natural magic of Etheria into a weapon. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* is filled with cyborgs.

*She-Ra*, as a female-centric space-opera, contains melodramatic and sentimental storylines regarding futuristic technology and its effects on nature. Science and magic, two concepts that are considered opposites in the real world, are shown to be the same within the *She-Ra* universe. The duality between nature and technology can be seen through She-Ra herself: the sword is a piece of technology left by the First Ones (the original settlers of Etheria and Horde Prime's archenemy), yet Adora's natural magic is needed to power the sword. The line between the Princess Rebellion and the Horde can also be seen in Adora's defection to the Princess Rebellion. Finding shades of gray between dualities is part of Donna Haraway's idea of cyborg writing: "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints." One does not have to be on one side or another. Instead, one can live as an identity that falls between the perceived cultural duality.

The cyborg, by breaking binaries, can help communicate differences between opposing ideas in a dichotomy (Haraway). Communication is one way a group of people can obtain or maintain power. According to Haraway: "Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control" (323). Adora's goal as the hero She-Ra is to unify the elemental princesses in order to overthrow the Horde and bring balance to the planet. The cyborg She-Ra, instead of being a tool for domination created by the

First Ones, functions as a tool to recode the communication system of magic on Etheria. In *She-Ra*, opposing forces seek power over the magic on Etheria. The First Ones colonize the planet to turn the magic into a weapon to defeat the Horde. Hordak wants to conquer the planet in the name of the Horde. Horde Prime wants to control the magic as part of his imperialist domination of the universe. Communication to the different parts of the social machine is key to conquering the magic: the First Ones used She-Ra and the sword to connect with the planet, the Horde used indoctrination and military training to control communication between individuals, and Horde Prime utilized mind-controlled clones connected to a hive-mind. On Etheria, methods of communication are important aspects of control over the individuals. She-Ra has the important task of recoding the communication within these groups. As Mara, She-Ra managed to break the connection between Etheria and the rest of the universe. As Adora, She-Ra recoded the communication between princesses and recruited former Horde soldiers to join the rebellion through diplomacy. She-Ra's ability to break away from previous social structures helps subvert the First Ones' and the Horde's command and control on the planet.

If the cyborg embodies a feminist myth, as Haraway states, then She-Ra is the feminist hero of the planet Etheria that can recode communication. Communication with Etherian magic is essential to the power struggle on the planet. The goal of the cyborg is to recode communication of information in order to subvert the command of those who wish to control outcasts from society (Haraway 323). Transmitting messages between different elements of society is essential in power dynamics. In *She-Ra*, the planet's runestones, which transmit power throughout the planet, are in a delicate balance: if one runestone is disrupted, the rest of the runestones are affected. In "The Beacon," Glimmer's connection with the Moonstone was disrupted by Shadow Weaver's magic and she appeared to have painful, technological glitches

when attempting to use her powers. Communication on Etheria, much like on Earth, is made possible by technology. In the episode “Light Hope,” Entrapta is able to hack the Black Garnet runestone and in the next episode, “The Battle of Bright Moon,” she explains: “By making the Black Garnet more powerful, we've sapped power from the other princesses' runestones.” When the runestones are out of balance, as they are in “Light Hope” and “The Battle of Bright Moon,” Glimmer and the other Princesses can feel the change in their own powers and the physical consequences. Communication with the natural magic is made possible by the technological elements the First Ones installed on the planet. Like all machinery, the technology of the planet does not care who is wielding its power and disrupting the use of the techno-organic machinery of the planet disrupts the power struggle on Etheria. The character Light Hope explains, in her eponymous episode, that: “Everything on Etheria is connected. The princesses are granted power over the elements through their Runestones. As She-Ra, it is [Adora's] duty to bring the princesses together. Only then can balance be restored to Etheria.” To accomplish this, the First Ones embedded a small, portable runestone in She-Ra's sword. The runestones on the planet of Etheria are mysterious technologies left by the colonizers in an attempt to transmit the planet's natural magic. The micro-runestone communications device on She-Ra's sword is essential to wielding the planet's magic, thus essential to power control on Etheria. Without the technological advantage of the sword, the organic magic of Etheria could not be transmitted and there would not be the power struggle over the resource. The feminist hero She-Ra is in charge of transmitting power.

Adora's character development throughout the series shows her move from part of the Horde's social machine in which she was unable to communicate well with those around her into an individual who communicated between all elements harmoniously to create a society where

individuality is a useful and praised. Adora's goal throughout the first season of the show is to unify the princesses by utilizing the mythic status of She-Ra to help facilitate communication between princesses. In the episode "Flowers for She-Ra," Glimmer mentions: "none of [the princesses] have been active members [of the Princess Rebellion] since I was a kid. The Rebellion had a big defeat years ago, and most of the old princesses gave up. Now all the kingdoms keep to themselves, and the new princesses do the same." Glimmer's explanation alludes to the lack of communication between the princesses of Etheria. Lacking this connection, the princesses are losing the fight against the imperialist Evil Horde. However, Adora wants to recruit the other princesses to join the Rebellion's round table. It is especially important to recruit the princesses that control specific elements through their runestones. In "Light Hope," it was revealed that She-Ra's goal is to unite the elements.<sup>3</sup> Adora then goes to each kingdom to befriend the various princesses and recruit them to the Rebellion. She-Ra represents the communication between the elements. Without She-Ra, there is a risk that the elements would destroy the planet through power imbalances. Princess Entrapta explains: "From the data I've managed to extract, [the runestones] regulate the planet through the princesses. They're directly connected to each other and to the planet's power grid in a delicate balance" ("Light Hope"). By connecting the different elements, Adora is able to master the role of She-Ra. Thus, She-Ra's ultimate use is to create a hybrid between the elements of Etheria and become a conduit for the planet's magic.

Even though they both inhabit the role of She-Ra, Mara and Adora are individuals that make their own choices. Adora and Mara are cyborg beings that move from separate public and

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<sup>3</sup> "Everything on Etheria is connected. The princesses are granted power over the elements through their Runestones. As She-Ra, it is [Adora's] duty to bring the princesses together. Only then can balance be restored to Etheria." ("Light Hope")

private personas into a cyborg citizen of Etheria. For Haraway, this transfer from public/private to cyborg citizen symbolizes the move from “natural” categories into a computational system utilized for control.<sup>4</sup> Adora and Mara, seemingly average humans, generally live a private life within their societies. Mara was sent by the First Ones to Etheria to study the planet’s magic (“Hero”). Adora is a Force Captain within the Horde. The identity of She-Ra, no matter which reincarnation, is a mythic hero on Etheria. The show does not focus on just one of these identities. Instead, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* focuses on the intersection between these public and private identities. Thus, both Mara and Adora, struggling with the inherited mythological role, are hybrids between public and private personas. The cyborg myth is best displayed in science fiction due to the genre’s ability to ask “what if.” In *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* the “what if” focuses on the fusion between the public and private life of She-Ra. This moves beyond the separation between the two identities present in the original *She-Ra: Princess of Power* in which Adora kept her identity as She-Ra a secret from most people around her. The natural separation of the two identities has been translated into a complex hybrid identity.

Cyborgs can communicate differences between opposing ideas: this is essential to the power dynamics on Etheria. Technology is necessary to conduct communications on both Etheria and Earth. The runestones on Etheria allow communication between the magic of the planet and the Princesses while devices like cell phones and computers are essential in communicating the information we need in modern life. Haraway states that “modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible” (309). Modern machines rely on microchips and increasingly small components to communicate

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<sup>4</sup> Haraway, “the informatics of domination” (317).

information. The runestones of Etheria communicate magic, the smallest of which is the runestone that powers She-Ra's sword. Like the princesses of Etheria, the flow of information to humans relies on the use of micro-electronics and humans have become cyborgs in their reliance on these devices (Haraway 320). The micro-crystal, essential to the First One's hero She-Ra, creates a cyborg capable of communicating the magic of Etheria to the war machine of the First Ones.

## Colonization and the Cyborg: Communication and Techno-Organic Systems

Technology is intertwined within the power dynamics on Etheria. From the First Ones to the Horde, inhabitants of the planet wish to control both the magic and the technologies on the planet. The technology of Etheria only exists due to the colonization of the First Ones. Thus, the colonization of Etheria is intimately connected to the available technology of the planet. This is a reoccurring theme throughout *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Since science fiction comes from the society in which it was created, shows like *She-Ra* can help the child viewers of the show recognize the impact of colonization in their own lives (Barclay and Tidwell).

Entrapta understands the planet's techno-organic nature better than anyone currently on the planet. She discovers that "The First Ones didn't just settle on the surface of Etheria, their technology runs throughout the planet's core. This whole planet, it's all First Ones' tech" ("Light Hope"). The First Ones merged the planet into the techno-organic entity it is in *She-Ra*. The intergalactic colonizers, known as the First Ones, discovered that shifting magic into machinery would be a powerful enough weapon to destroy the Horde and achieve control over the universe. The Horde, initially lead by Hordak on Etheria, are also colonizers but in a more destructive way. The Horde, unlike the First Ones, see the planet as something to conquer. Both groups colonized the planet to control and develop the natural resources in the name of their civilizations.

This colonization of Etheria is very similar to the European colonization of the Americas. To obtain political, military, and economic power, European settlers claimed land in order to utilize their natural resources. The descendants of colonizers, like many Americans today, often consider themselves natives of these colonized lands, shaping the countries' complex histories. Adora's ancestors, the First Ones, were the colonizers of Etheria. She is descended from colonizers who sought to control the resources of a land that originally was not theirs, but Adora

sees herself as a native Etherian and was also raised within the Horde, the ecologically destructive colonizers of Etheria. Adora's ancestral identity is a hybrid of the colonizing First Ones, the destructive Horde, and a native to the planet of Etheria. Even without considering the techno-organic nature of the hero She-Ra, Adora's identity is similar to the history of Etheria: both are cyborgs. Hybridity like this is essential to the show's narrative since it implies combining these dichotomies is an essential part of identities in the modern world.

She-Ra is a mythic cyborg created by the transition between organic to techno-organic being. She is integrated into the electronic technologies created by the First Ones, relying on technology to become the hero of her story. With modern technologies like, like the galvanization in *Frankenstein* to near-future technologies in *Black Mirror*, sf highlights how integrated technology is in human lives. Modern humans are already becoming cyborg creatures with the use of electronic devices. However, the technology we use every day requires a lot of manual labor during the manufacturing process. Often, manufacturing the smallest parts of consumer American electronics is outsourced to other countries. According to Haraway, the cyborg embodies the labor women of color creating these electronic parts outside the United States. Haraway connects this to Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*:

In my political myth, Sister Outsider is the offshore woman, whom US workers, female and feminized, are supposed to regard as the enemy preventing their solidarity. threatening their security. Onshore, inside the boundary of the United States, Sister Outsider is a potential amidst the races and ethnic identities of women manipulated for division, competition, and exploitation in the same industries. 'Women of color' are the preferred labor force in the science-based industries...women hired in the sex industry



and in electronics assembly are recruited from high schools, educated for the integrated circuit. (323)

Women around the world are integrated into a social machine that relies on and exploits their labor to work properly. In the electronics industry, it is often women of color making the small technologies that we rely on every day. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* does not delve into the creation of the advanced technologies of the First Ones that Etheria is littered with. Instead, the computer chips, vehicles, and guardian monsters that are found on the planet exist outside the social context of their creators. By utilizing Haraway's ideas about the labor that goes into crafting technology on Earth, it can be assumed that the colonizing First Ones found it necessary to have subjugated individuals in their colonies creating the technologies they used.

It is characters of color that are mostly linked to the electronics on Etheria and understand their role better than most of the characters in the show. Entrapta, Mara, and Bow all have darker skin than some of the other supporting characters, especially compared to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed She-Ra. Entrapta understands the magical technology best out of all Etherians and is extremely proficient in understanding how the technology works. Her work in the Fright Zone involves taking the small electronic devices found throughout the planet to create more advanced weaponry for the Horde to use. Entrapta has been integrated into the circuit of the Horde's war machine due to her intelligence and deep understanding of how the technology might be used. As soon as she is no longer useful to the Horde, she is thrown away ("Beast Island"). On the Rebellion's side there is Bow, the archer. Bow is familiar with the First Ones technology and is the technology expert in Bright Moon, operating the tracking pad and helping to defeat the more advanced Horde technology that Entrapta created. His role in the rebellion is more distinct than Entrapta's role. He is useful to the Rebellion in a multitude of different ways, from his skills as

an archer to his military planning abilities. Both Entrapta and Bow, unlike Haraway's idea of cyborg women's labor, have agency over the technology they work with. They are able to choose how it will be used.

While the majority of the characters in *She-Ra* are female due to the because target demographic, female and male characters work together to achieve their goals. Working together is a central message in the show overall, even *She-Ra*'s purpose is to unify. Bow's inclusion is important. He shows that communication across the female/male binary helps defeat patriarchal colonizers like the Horde. According to Russ: "science fiction has begun to attempt the serious presentation of men and women as equals, usually by showing them at work together" (204). Unlike Russ' critique of passive women in the sf genre, the women in *She-Ra* are active in their use of technology.

The notable absence of He-Man in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* could reinforce the businesswoman archetype taking over male-dominated spaces. Bulger, while agreeing *She-Ra* may reinforce gendered stereotypes due to conflicting cultural messages, argues that *She-Ra*'s cyborg themes imply the fusion of identities will lead to equality: "The more 'masculine' a woman becomes, the more likely it is that she will be 'equal.' In reality, sexual equality will come only when woman's strengths and attributes are valued as highly as men's when nurturing and assertion are shared by both sexes" (191). Exploring and normalizing different identities is one of the major themes of the most recent *She-Ra* television show. The hero can face any challenge and therefore the child, identifying with the main character, is emotionally equipped to handle challenging circumstances. Heroes do not need to be wholly feminine or masculine. Gender is socially constructed and Haraway argues that "There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and

other social practices” (311). The cyborg is a rejection of historical stereotypes and the previous cultural understandings of the past. Any individual can fight against injustice and oppression without wanting complete assimilation. One can still identify with one of the binary identities as long as they allow for individuals to identify as a mixture of the two.

This duality between female/male technology users also influences how science itself is viewed in the show, embodied by Princess Entrapta, the scientist archetype who wields no magic but knows more about technology than any other character. After a failed mission, she leaves the Princess Rebellion to join the Horde and stays with Hordak because he supports her scientific endeavors, not because she has suddenly turned evil. JL Schatz explains how the (non)neutrality of science comes up in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, comparing it to scientists who worked for both the Axis and Allied powers during World War II: “Entrapta’s work is upheld as politically neutral because she’s in it for the sake of science” (147). She switches sides to whichever side will support her research. The technological of Entrapta’s character is further reinforced by her habits: she prefers the company of robots over people. She does, however, become a close companion to Hordak, who is a literal cyborg since the technology in his suit is necessary for his survival on Etheria. Entrapta is able to fix and improve Hordak’s cybernetics because she is fascinated by it. Later, her knowledge of the Horde’s technology helps save the day. Entrapta’s work, even if she insists that she is working for neutral scientific study and not good or evil, has powerful implications. Her technologies both help and hurt her former friends. Eventually, she realizes she must destroy some of the scientific process made in order to save the planet when she uses her scientific knowledge to overwhelm Horde Prime’s programming. Entrapta’s character proves that while science cannot remain neutral, it can help to stop the forces that it has created.

While the show's main storyline focuses on obtaining the leftover technology left by the First Ones colonization of Etheria, there is a side plot involving the previous She-Ra's use of the magical technologies given to her. Mara, sent by the First Ones, was trained by her society to use the technologies she was sent with and is seemingly able to use the fusion of science and magic to pull Etheria into the dimension of Despondos. However, Mara lacks agency in her use of the technologies available to her. She is despondent and loses her resolution to save the world she loves, deciding to hide instead of continuing to fight. She was chosen to carry out the mission of the First Ones and thus her agency is severely reduced. Only after a great struggle can she enact change on the world around her. Her role as She-Ra was to integrate technology with the magic of Etheria through the technology integrated in her by the sword. Mara's struggle to control the integrated circuit of technology on Etheria paved the way for future Etherian scientists like Entrapta and Bow. Like She-Ra, everyone involved in the technology of the First Ones has become a cyborg creature themselves. As Haraway states: "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (307). The mythic hero of Mara's She-Ra helped create the social structure of Etheria by disconnecting the planet from the control of the First Ones, helping both the Horde and the Rebellion.

The Horde and the Rebellion, in the absence of the First Ones, seek a perfect Etheria, albeit by different definitions. Holding power on Etheria is only possible by communicating with the planet's magic. Breaks in this communication cause power imbalances. Haraway explains: "The biggest threat to such power is interruption of communication" (319). The legendary hero She-Ra has continuously broken the communications between the groups that wish to control Etheria's magic and the planet itself. Mara was the first She-Ra in this story to break away from

her societies' control. The goal of the First Ones was to control the planet's magical power. Their goal was to defeat the Horde. Horde Prime, however, wants to control the magic to subdue the power. He wants to control the magic so no one else can use it against him. Adora, as the cyborg of First Ones and the Horde's histories, can understand the goals of both sides and is able to understand the differences between them. She can recognize the power struggle better than others on Etheria: she is a cyborg "native" to the planet and can empathize with the conflicts over the planet's magic.

Mara sought to control the power struggle by breaking the communication between Etheria and the rest of the universe. In "Once Upon a Time in the Waste," Mara leaves a hologram for future She-Ra to explain how she broke the connection to the rest of the universe:

"I opened a portal to a completely empty dimension and pulled Etheria in. I hid us from the rest of the universe to keep everyone safe. This is the only place they'll never find us... You have the Sword now. It is the Administrator Key to our planet. With it, you can activate a portal. So I'm begging you. Don't do it. Leave us here. If you open a portal, death and destruction will follow. For the good of the universe, Etheria must stay in Despondos."

By pulling the planet into the empty dimension of Despondos, Mara subverted the control the First Ones had over the natural magic of Etheria. The empty universe is devoid of other planets and civilizations, but the isolation is essential to keep the planet safe. The micro-communications device embedded in She-Ra's sword is essential to controlling power on the planet and by breaking this connection, the groups that can use the planet's magic are those who inhabit Etheria. Mara the cyborg saved the planet and its people from the power struggle of the greater universe.

Mara willfully rejects her mission given to her by the colonizing First Ones to control the techno-organic magic on the planet. She is defiant and refused to be a part of the social machine the First Ones had created. Her role as She-Ra was integral to the break in communication and the subversion of control over the planet's magical power. She was not reverent of the First One's ideological mission, thus the subsequent cyborg hero She-Ra does not "remember the cosmos" and can create her own destiny (Haraway).<sup>5</sup> This helps the next She-Ra, Adora, break from a controlling society. Through willfulness, Mara is able to break away from her ancestor's mission and save the planet.<sup>6</sup> This willfulness is essential in She-Ra becoming a feminist mythic hero. Mara, when exercising her will, breaks away from the social structures of previous generations. She is judged negatively by Light Hope as a result of her rebellious actions: "Mara was compromised. She became unhinged" ("Protocol"). This negative connotation attached to willfulness in a patriarchal society means that girls are expected to go along with their assigned roles and to go against these gendered stereotypes is to go against the will of society (Ahmed). The feminist hero, then, should be willing to challenge previous structures and disrupt the status quo. Being willing to break communication with the wider universe creates the feminist hero Mara. Mara's heroic cyborg identity is what initially saves Etheria from being destroyed in the power struggle over its magic.

The colonization of Etheria was an essential part of the planet's history. The First Ones goal was to control the planet's natural magic in order to defeat the imperial army of the Horde. This created the hybrid hero She-Ra, who is a cross between the native Etherians and the First Ones. As Madam Razz states in "Hero:" "She-Ra was here long before your people arrived. You

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<sup>5</sup> Haraway: "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust...Cyborgs are irreverent; they do not remember the cosmos" (308)

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed: "When girls exercise their own will, they are judged willful" (68).

cannot control magic! Magic simply is... She-Ra protects Etheria. Your people made the sword, but they did not make She-Ra.” Even though She-Ra is descended from colonizers, she has the power to end the conflict over the planet’s organic magic. The techno-organic systems created by the colonizers is essential to this process.

## Nature of Cyborgs: Hybridity and Agency

The show is filled with animal-human hybrids. As Haraway states: “the cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed” (309). There are satyrs and merpeople, to name a few, living on Etheria. Supporting characters Catra and Scorpia are also hybrid animal/human characters. Hybrids break down binaries between human and animal. In According to Barclay’s analysis of “female beasties”:

These sf creatures, and those like them, hold more power than they may seem to as subtexts, counter-texts, to master a cultural narrative that still... builds and enforces sex, gender, sexual orientation, and human/nonhuman binaries. The films offer possibilities other than those binaries, crossing boundaries in complex ways that deconstruct the very notion of binaries. (17)

Sf, much like fantasy genres, has the ability to transgress the boundaries between human and nonhuman. In an Edenic fantasy world like Etheria, these characters represent a posthuman perspective.

Hybrids between plants and humans in the show, such as mushroomfolk and the princess Perfuma are a cross between these organisms. In the show, hybrid characters are often perceived as passive because of their nature connection. According to Berns and Juvé:

Plants, together with animals, are dominated aspects of Nature within capitalist and patriarchal culture. As beings framed into extreme passivity and dullness (along with the lack of ‘active’ sex), they are ‘feminized’ and identified with womanhood. (84)

The Plumeria and Thaymor inhabitants, primarily satyrs who are ruled by Perfuma, embody the passivity of nature hybrids. Nature is weak and peaceful at the beginning of the episode “Flowers for She-Ra.” In this episode, the inhabitants of the kingdom are confronted by a drill-like



structure created by the Evil Horde that is poisoning the forest around the kingdom. When asked to assist in overcoming the ecological destruction, Perfuma exemplifies passive nature:

She-Ra: Wait, it's not that simple. Plus, I don't like the look of that smoke. The Horde's up to something big. Maybe we should investigate.

Perfuma: We? This is my power. I grow plants. We're not strong enough to go up against the Horde. All we want is to live peacefully in our ancestral home. (“Flowers for She-Ra”)

The plant/human hybrids that inhabit the kingdoms of Etheria are often passive in the face of the imperialist Horde: the satyrs of Plumeria and Thaymor are not, as the Horde describes them, dangerous insurgents (“The Sword Part Two”).

Following the initial passivity of the people of Plumeria, the kingdom of Salineas, ruled by Princess Mermista, also show a passive, despondent non-resistance to ecological destruction. In the episode “The Sea Gate,” it is shown that the merpeople and sea elves of Salineas move away from their kingdom as the Sea Gate guarding their kingdom crumbles. Similarly, the mushroomfolk in the village of Erelandia are unwilling to conspire against the Horde for fear of assimilation into Horde Prime’s hive mind. However, characters like Perfuma, Swift Wind, Catra, and Scorpia overcome their passivity after encouragement or interventions from She-Ra.

Catra is one of the main hybrid characters in the show. She is a hybrid between cat and woman, controlled and manipulated by masculine/patriarchal structure of the of the Horde, which is just as controlling as the First Ones. Instead of programming or technology, it is indoctrination and manipulation that keeps the Horde’s soldiers in line. Catra implies the controlling structure of the Horde in “The Sea Gate” during her fight against She-Ra:

Catra: Did you think it would be that easy to escape the Horde? I mean, I always knew you were kind of dumb, but come on.

She-Ra: What's your plan, insult me until I decide to rejoin the Horde?

Catra: I don't think Shadow Weaver is planning to give you much of a choice. But, yeah, something like that.

Catra judges Adora's willingness to leave the Horde as a ridiculous scheme and lets Adora know that she does not have a choice in removing herself from the Horde's war machine. Catra, thoroughly indoctrinated into the Horde's structure, accepts her role in the Horde. Leaving the Horde is just as difficult as rejecting programming of technology-based cyborgs.

The original *She-Ra: Princess of Power* included Catra as part of the Evil Horde. In both shows she is a cat hybrid. However, original show had lots of meowing and mask that turned her into a cat rendering her a technological cyborg. In *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, she is a natural hybrid between the two species. Instead of the continual meowing from the original, the remake has her follow her feline nature in alternate ways. For example, in "The Sea Gate," Adora teases Catra: "Come on, Catra. We're senior cadets now. I can't believe you're still pulling such childish, immature- Is that a mouse?!" Catra also doesn't like water, a stereotypical perception of cats ("The Sea Gate"). Additionally, her movements and mannerisms are very similar to that of a cat: she is agile, leaps from ledge to ledge, sleeps at the foot of Adora's bed, and often crouches like a cat. As a hybrid human and as part of the Horde, she represents the Horde's control over nature.

Catra becomes an integral part in the Horde's war machine society. Once Adora leaves, Catra is unceremoniously promoted to Force Captain in Adora's place. Both women have been raised within the Horde and see their place within it as an integral part of their identity. When

Adora realizes her destiny is outside of the Horde, Catra is deeply hurt and takes Adora's rejection of her Horde identity as a rejection of herself. In "The Sword Part Two," Adora asks why Catra is so intent on bringing Adora back into the Horde's control instead of leaving like she did: "You left me. And if I don't bring you back, Shadow Weaver's going to have my head. So, enough with your weird little identity crisis and let's go home already." By integrating the Horde into its soldier's identities, the Horde has created a loyal, fearful inhabitants. Assimilation, instead of creating hybrid identities, is the Horde's goal. Catra and the other Horde-affiliated hybrids represent the Horde's control over the natural world since these beings are closely related to their animalistic identities. By treating these hybrids as part of a machine, not as biological components of an ecosystem, the Horde masters the hybrids' natures.

Scorpia is another important hybrid being. In the original show, she didn't get along with Catra. In the remake, Scorpia desperately wants to be friends with Catra, a sentiment that is not returned by Catra. It is repeatedly shown throughout the series that Scorpia doesn't fit in with the Horde because of her emotional neediness. When introduced in "The Sea Gate," Scorpia proclaims: "Just so you know, I'm a hugger," while Catra asks if it is "some kind of joke." Scorpia's nurturing nature is antithetical to the Horde's manipulative, machine-like society. Additionally, Scorpia is an elemental princess. As revealed in "Princess Prom," Scorpia explains to Catra: "The Horde crash landed in my family's kingdom. We let them stay. My family gave Hordak our runestone, the Black Garnet." This makes Scorpia a hybrid of both human/scorpion and Horde/princess. Much like Adora, also a hybrid of Horde/princess, she is force captain in part of the Horde's war machine and eventually defects because she wants to find somewhere she will fit in as an individual and her nurturing personality is an asset. The Princess Rebellion accepts Scorpia right away:

Scorpia: Right. Sorry. The thing is you all seem really good at friendship.

Perfuma: You're here to learn how to be a good friend?

Scorpia: Yes. That's it. See, I thought I was being a good friend to Catra, but it turns out Catra wasn't being a good friend to me, and also that I have no idea what friendship is.

Man, I think Entrapta's the only real friend I've ever had. Oh. And Emily.

Mermista: Say things that make sense.

Scorpia: Right. Okay. Entrapta wanted to warn Hordak about the whole, you know, portal weirdness thing, so Catra sent her to Beast Island, and I...I let it happen. Now I have to save her. ("Fractures")

Scorpia is nurturing and friendly like Perfuma, making them fast friends. Through her friendships with Entrapta and Perfuma, Scorpia is accepted into the Rebellion in no time, which eventually leads them to rescuing their mutual friend Entrapta who is an integral part to the defeat of Horde Prime. Scorpia's hybrid status, antithetical to the Horde's mission of assimilation, allows her to move fluidly between her roles as a princess and part of the Horde, ultimately helping the Rebellion in the long run.

Most of the hybrids in the show are feminine presenting. In science fiction, nature is often coded as feminine. The earth itself is often coded as feminine in stories. This implies a planet is alive and the interconnected systems that make up the ecosystem and climate are part of a living being. Latour recognizes the feminine earth as an agent on their own: "the highly complex workings of many enmeshed living organisms, the whole of which is either called 'Earth system science,' or more radically, Gaia" (3). Latour's use of the name "Gaia" is telling: even he codes the earth as female. Female gods like Gaia are often controlled by masculine gods. Gaia is the first goddess of the Greek pantheon and created the world as we know it. She literally

represents the planet Earth. She is controlled by her mate Uranus, who pushes her children back inside her to stop them from eventually overthrowing him as the master of the Earth. Latour's reference to the Greek goddess is symbolic of the feminine/nature hybrid. Nature, coded as feminine, is often controlled by masculine beings in science fiction, much like the Horde's control over the animal/human hybrids in the show. The interconnected system of Etheria, which can be conflated with nature, is used exclusively by female characters. Many princesses have elemental runestones which they draw their power from, for example: Glimmer has Moonstone, which is connected with the moon, Perfuma has the Heart Blossom which gives her control over plant life, and Scorpia has the Black Garnet that gives her lightning powers. She-Ra also has a connection to the elements through the Sword of Protection. She is able to connect all the elements together and channel the natural power of Etheria through the sword.

Perfuma's runestone is the most like Latour's Gaia reference. Perfuma is like a nature goddess with her control over plant life. When the Horde decides to kill the Whispering Woods in order to circumvent the obstacle it presents in his imperialist domination plan, her runestone loses power. She is passive against the Horde's invasion and expects someone else to save the kingdom. In "Flowers for She-Ra," Perfuma explains the role she believes She-Ra has in her kingdom's history: "Look! The universe has heard our pleas and sent the legendary She-Ra to help us save our home." Perfuma, embodying feminine nature, is passive against the Horde's imminent invasion. Eventually, when Adora and friends go to face the Horde on their own, Perfuma is inspired to fight back. She is able to take back nature's agency in. She decides to make a change for the good of the planet by fighting back against environmental destruction. After winning the battle against the Horde, Perfuma and her kingdom of Plumeria join the Rebellion. This implies that collective action against environmental catastrophe is the most

effective strategy. Glimmer explains this concept to Perfuma in a way children can understand implicitly:

Glimmer: [The Rebellion] went horribly for our parents. But we have a chance to do it right. We're clearly stronger together. Think what all the Princesses united could do.

Perfuma: Would I get to hit more people with flowers?

Glimmer: Absolutely.

Perfuma: You have a deal. Hey, everyone! Look at us. We're mighty rebels now.

(“Flowers for She-Ra”)

This episode speaks to the current generation that is inheriting the climate crisis caused by a history of exploiting Earth’s resources. According to Latour, the Earth is now taking back agency. Since “the Earth has now taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged actor” (Latour 93), humans will need to work with the Earth, much like the Rebellion works with Perfuma to fight against the ecological destruction the Horde inflicts on Etheria.

When these nonhuman entities gain humanity in the show, they have agency. Hybrids in the show between human/nonhuman elements explore a new version of humanity. Perfuma gives humanity to the plants around her, Catra and Scorpia give humanity to animals, and the other hybrid creatures inhabiting Etheria eventually realize their agency to fight back against Horde Prime. By giving humans nonhuman characteristics, Barclay explains that:

wom-animals flip the power structures from experimental objects to experimenting subjects, how science enables the character’s access to natural laws and empower them, and how the settings of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ blend and overlap to destabilize both gender and human/nonhuman constructs. (3)

The hybrid status of these characters enable nature to gain agency over the world in which they inhabit. The hybrid between humanity and nature gaining agency is best represented by Swift Wind. He wants to lead a revolution and encourages others to follow him. In “Light Hope,” he explains what gaining agency has done for him: “Adora, I've had the ability to form complex thought for like...a week, and even I know you can't help anyone by hiding. Where would all the horses I freed from their barns be if I just sat in a pasture and moped?” Hybrids help break away from previous “traditional straightjackets,” as Russ explains: “It’s the whole difficulty of science fiction, of genuine speculation: how to get away from traditional assumptions which are nothing more than traditional straightjackets” (208). The future of humanity on Earth, much like the futuristic Etheria, will be influenced by nonhuman hybrids.

## Magic and Science: Environmental Hybrids of Etheria

The planet of Etheria is itself a cyborg and filled with hybrid characters. Princess Entrapta is a scientist studying the nature of Etheria's technological magic systems. In the episode "Light Hope," Entrapta discovers what the First Ones have done to the planet's ecosystem: "Look at these readings. It's incredible, this seems to confirm my theories about the techno-organic nature of First Ones machinery resulting in thaumaturgical<sup>7</sup> compatibility between magic and science!" Entrapta describes the planet as "techno-organic," confirming the planet's cyborg status. The First Ones converted the planet's natural resource, magic, into a technological machine capable of destroying their enemy, the Horde.

Entrapta herself is a cyborg between magic and science: she is the archetypical "mad scientist" character who happens to also be a princess, albeit she does not have a corresponding runestone. She does, however, possess a superior intellect to all of the characters within the show. Her prehensile hair is used to move and assist with experiments. Her existence as a magical, techno-organic being allows her to understand the planet's techno-organic nature better than other characters. On Etheria, technology and magic exist together, creating a cyborg planet where technology and magic cannot exist without the other.

There are other types of technological cyborgs in the She-Ra universe. Many, unlike She-Ra herself who is a human that transitions to a cyborg with the incorporation of technology, are technologies or machinery that gain seemingly sentient characteristics. These simulacra of organisms are generally accepted as alive despite their machine statuses. Philip K. Dick explains the role of technology imitating nature: "I have, in some of my stories and novels, written about androids or robots or simulacra- the name doesn't matter; what is meant is artificial constructs

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<sup>7</sup> thaumaturgic: "the art of constructing marvelous or apparently magical devices" (Oxford English Dictionary)



masquerading as humans” (296). Like Swift Wind, these technologies have gained agency in their environments. Most notably are the guardian creatures throughout the planet and the AI Light Hope. The lively machines on the planet often actively go against the will of the human characters of the show: in the episodes “Beast Island” and “Destiny Part Two” the guardian machines and the AI Light Hope attempt to harm or destroy Adora and her friends.

Beast Island is one of the most dangerous places on Etheria. It is revealed to be the “Hazardous Materials Disposal Site” for broken or defective First Ones technology (“Fractures”). The island is used as a prison by the Horde: in “Moment of Truth” Entrapta is sent there on Catra’s orders and in “Beast Island” it is revealed that King Micha, Glimmer’s father, was banished there for his part in the Rebellion. Fear of the mythic Beast Island is also used as a fear tactic to keep Horde soldiers in line which is shown in Scorpia’s conversation about Entrapta’s banishment:

Scorpia: Right. Okay. Entrapta wanted to warn Hordak about the whole, you know, portal weirdness thing, so Catra sent her to Beast Island, and I... I let it happen. Now I have to save her.

Adora: Beast Island? With the blood beetles? And the trees with razor-sharp blades instead of leaves? It's real?

Shadow Weaver: Oh, yes. But it's much worse than that. We told you those children's stories so you wouldn't be scared.

The island represents the fear of technology that the humans on Etheria have. The planet is littered with guardian monsters, machines created by the First Ones, which rampage when humans attempt to obtain the technology it was programmed to guard. This expresses the human fear that machines will outpace the humans that have created them (Tidwell 30). The machines

are incapable of being controlled by humans and instead act against their original purpose. Beast Island is filled with machines that do not follow their programming. These machines are terrifying enough that the inhabitants of Etheria refuse to go on their own volition. Studying the island's technology would have probably been useful for the Horde's mission, yet Hordak avoided Beast Island and decided it was horrific enough to take the place of capital punishment.

Beast Island is not only physically dangerous, but mentally dangerous as well. A signal emanates from the center of the island and when planning on following Entrapta to the center of the island, Micha reveals important information about the nature of where Entrapta was going:

Micah: You can't go there! You'd never come back. It's where the signal is the strongest.

Swift Wind: The signal. That must be the noise I've been hearing. What is it?

Micah: You've heard it? Then we have to hurry. This place is a mass of ancient tech, mostly degraded but some of it still works. And something at the center of that island never stopped signaling. The signal dulls your resolve, exposes your vulnerabilities, it pulls you in. Everything that stays on Beast Island becomes a part of it eventually.

("Beast Island")

The machinery on the island, in opposition to the original purpose, wants to assimilate organisms into the techno-organic machine system. In addition to the anxiety over future machines outpacing humans, the island represents the fear of humans assimilating into technology. During the episode "Beast Island," Adora's group almost succumbs to the signal emanating from the center. It created a despondent, fatalistic feeling for the group, which was only overcome by Adora's resolve to save the planet. While originally unable to transform into She-Ra while on the island, she overcomes the signal just in time to save her friends: "I won't give up! Not on my friends, not on Etheria, not on myself...It wasn't the signal that was blocking me from being

She-Ra. It was me.” Adora’s will breaks through the anxiety the machinery caused, allowing her to break away from the influence of the attempt at psychologically trying to assimilate organisms into the machine’s ecosystem.

The sentient technology of Etheria current robotic technologies. For example: in Honolulu the police department is experimenting with robotic dogs (Kelleher and O’Brien) and on Mars the rover Perseverance has an autopilot system to navigate rough terrain, making navigation decisions independent from the operator (NASA). Another technology that is currently being developed is artificial intelligence.<sup>8</sup> There is an AI character in the show: Light Hope. She was programmed for specific purpose. She explains: “I am Light Hope, Etheria's facilitator. I was created by the First Ones, as you call them” and “I am a hologram. My primary purpose is to train She-Ra. If I am not doing that, then I have failed” (“Light Hope”). Like the lively machines that inhabit Beast Island, Light Hope is a technological being that transitions into a disturbingly alive entity. AIs are the next level of humanity, much like cyborgs: “The constructs do not mimic humans; they are, in many deep ways, actually human already” (Dick 296). Light Hope is able to form friendships with the humans around her. She is a friend to both Mara and Adora, despite her programming. In her memories, Light Hope can feel human emotions. In a conversation with Adora about the nature of friendship, Adora is able to see into Light Hope’s memories about Mara:

Mara: Flowers. They’re blooming all over the planet right now. Here, smell.

Past Light Hope: I have no olfactory sensors. I cannot smell.

Mara: They’re pretty, though, right?

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<sup>8</sup> Oxford English Dictionary: Artificial Intelligence: “The capacity of computers or other machines to exhibit or simulate intelligent behavior; the field of study concerned with this. Abbreviated AI”

Past Light Hope: Pretty. Yes. They are aesthetically pleasing. Thank you for bringing them.

Mara: I thought they might liven the place up. I mean, it must be hard being stuck in here all the time.

Past Light Hope: I do not mind. Not when you come to visit me...

Light Hope: I looked at my loaded data banks to see if I could find the answers you seek.

All I have on Mara is this memory and a sensation. Warmth. Her memory brings me warmth.

Throughout the show, Light Hope has difficulties in understanding human emotions and physical sensations. As a machine, there is no need for these feelings, and they are not part of her programming. However, Light Hope is able to overcome her programming to connect with both Mara and Adora. This represents the ability for machines to gain their own agency in the She-Ra universe and implies that this may be the future of current AI technologies.

In the original *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, the character Light Hope was portrayed as a magical waterfall with a masculine voice. In the updated *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, Light Hope has a feminine appearance and voice. Similar to nature, AI is often feminized in science fiction. According to Tidwell: “science fiction’s Ais are typically not only female but also feminized and sexualized; they are objects of desire, not simply objects” (21). In a story like *She-Ra*, created by feminist individuals, Light Hope has avoided the sexualized stereotype of most feminized AI in sf. She is, however, a passive figure whose primary objective is to fulfill the First One’s mission for She-Ra. Light Hope is under the control of the First One’s will. Light Hope follows a different paradigm for feminized AI: she is controlled by a domineering structure and is held captive by her programming’s directives.

Light Hope is able to break away from her programming due to her friendships with the two She-Ras. This is crucial to the overall story of the show: with her connection to the planet's mainframe and to She-Ra she is able to help Adora stop the Heart of Etheria project from destroying Etheria. Light Hope is another character who has a feminine connection with the planet. Light Hope enjoys the flowers Mara gave her and is connected to the planet via a central mainframe. This connection was broken by Mara. In "Ties that Bind," Light Hope encourages Adora to reconnect her to the planet's mechanical system:

This is the Watchtower. Once it allowed me to access my planetary mainframe. But it was destroyed by Mara when she lost control and attacked the planet. I have been functioning at only a fraction of my power ever since. If you can repair the Watchtower, my capabilities will improve, and training can commence.

When Light Hope reconnects to the planetary mainframe, she is able to interact with the techno-organic systems of the planet once more. Her programming drives her to complete the original mission of She-Ra which is to use the Project of Etheria to destroy the Evil Horde. However, through her connections with She-Ra and nature, Light Hope is able to interrupt the First One's programming. She has become a hybrid of programming and humanity through her connections to the world around her.

This mainframe, the techno-organic system that controls the planet's natural magic, connects Light Hope to nature. However, she is unable to leave the structures created. As Tidwell states: "The use of the environment serves to strengthen the contrast between natural and technological as well as between freedom and captivity... she seems even more technological by contrast with the trees" (33). The feminized connection to nature highlights Light Hope's captivity through programming. Light Hope seeks to assimilate She-Ra into her programming,

much like the signal from Beast Island. While attempting to fulfill the First One's mission, she overcomes Adora's will in order to complete the Heart of Etheria project:

Adora: Look at all these stars, these worlds. They will all be destroyed. Mara sacrificed her life to stop this from happening.

Light Hope: Mara. Mara would not want me to- Mara was a traitor. She turned against her people.

Adora: Mara was your friend. She knew you were more than just a program, and so do I. You can stop this.

Light Hope: I am not as strong as Mara. I cannot change my programming. This is our destiny.

Adora: No. This is not my destiny.

Light Hope: You will comply. ("Destiny Part Two")

Even though Light Hope recognizes her friendship and loyalty to Mara, she is initially unable to reject the First One's objectives. She is held captive by both her programming and the structures the First Ones created.

Control over nature is an essential component to the power struggle on Etheria. The First One's control over the natural magic of the planet is similar to the control patriarchal structures have over feminine bodies. Cyborg writing is about telling stories about "gender, race, or class consciousness [which] is an achievement forced on us by the terrible experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism" (Haraway 311). The First Ones, even though they are never shown in the series, can be seen as one such colonialist, patriarchal structure. When comparing *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* to the original *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, the First Ones are analogous to the people of He-Man's Eternia. Eternia,

a sister planet to Etheria and ruled by He-Man's family, implies a society in which masculine bodies are in control of the magic of the planet.

Feminine nature, controlled by patriarchal structures through technological means, creates the hybrid character Light Hope. Her connection with the planet's techno-organic mainframe, physical captivity, and friendships with She-Ra allows her to witness the planet's natural beauty secondhand. Light Hope's connections to Etheria allow her to transform from a technological being to a cyborg: a machine that has gained agency. Stories about feminized AI in science fiction often follow this pattern: "women exceed the control of men...technology also exceeds the control of its creators" (Tidwell 39). Ultimately, Light Hope assists She-Ra by allowing Adora to stop the Heart of Etheria project:

Adora: I won't be controlled. I am not a piece of their machine. I am not a weapon. And I'm going to end this now.

Light Hope: No. Stop. Don't. Do it. Do it. Don't. Don't. Do it. ("Destiny Part Two")

Adora's will inspires Light Hope in the climax of this episode. Light Hope encourages She-Ra to overcome the programming the First Ones gave her, even though it will cause the destruction of Light Hope and She-Ra's sword. After Light Hope's final "do it," Light Hope thanks Adora for allowing her to make choices for herself before fading away. But, according to Dick, "where do the souls of androids go after their death?" (305). It is possible that Light Hope, a program created by the First Ones, is transported to another technological place created by the colonizers, similar to her captivity in the Crystal Castle and aboard Mara's ship. It could, however, be an Edenic place in which AI is allowed their own agency. In Tidwell's analysis, she discusses the films *Her* and *Ex Machina*, highlighting that the feminized AI is allowed to make their own choices and leave their creators behind, becoming human:

Ultimately, both films are narratives of escape and freedom, of becoming something more than- or other than- objects, and in these films, women- or, more precisely, the technologies we see personified and gendered as female- are represented as exceeding male human control. (26)

When Light Hope interrupts her programming by making her own decisions, she appears to be destroyed, but it is never definitively confirmed. There is a chance she has joined the planet's mainframe as a ghost or was whisked away to another First Ones structure. However, despite the unknown factors, it can be said that "it is not the grave; it is into life beyond. The world of the future" (Dick 305). Agency, in stories of AI, is inherent in the hybridity of nonhuman and human in science fiction.

Mechanical beasts and AI are not the only cyborgs that start as programmed machines and become sentient beings. Adora, as a Horde soldier, starts as a replaceable part in the social machine of the imperialist Horde army. She defects and becomes part of the rebellion, allowing her to have agency over her environment. However, she realizes her destiny as She-Ra is only part of another machine-like society. She-Ra is simply a replaceable part of the First One's project, The Heart of Etheria. In "Destiny, Part 2," Adora declares: "I won't be controlled. I am not a piece of their machine. I am not a weapon." Her willingness to break from the will of her ancestors ultimately breaks the communication device of the sword. This seemingly breaks her connection to the She-Ra legacy and she can no longer transform. Adora's willfulness disrupted her connection the First Ones and thus disrupts her connection with her alter ego She-Ra. Adora moves backwards from the techno-organic cyborg to a regular human, which sets the rebellion back in the power struggle over the planet's magic. It also breaks her connection with Etheria's magic: Adora is cut off from both her First Ones and Etherian identities. Adora then only has a



connection to her previous Horde identity, which she relies on when fighting in the rebellion against the Horde. However, unlike her experiences in the Horde as shown in “The Sword, Part One,” she is unable to communicate with her teammates. In being willful, Adora’s willful breaking of communication causes her to lose her cyborg identity and she becomes an average organic being in need of being protected by others with power.

The Horde also represents the manufacturing industry on Etheria. This can best be observed in the opening shot of the series. “The Sword, Part One” features an opening scene that shows lush fields contrasted by the desolate, ecologically ruined Fright Zone. Individuals who reside in the Fright Zone are raised within the confines of the Horde and are indoctrinated into the Horde’s lifestyle. Human-animal hybrids and other misfit characters are forced into the integrated circuit of the Fright Zone’s war machine. Deviating from the Horde’s society is unheard of, even when the individual is extremely unhappy with their circumstances. The Horde’s leader on Etheria, Hordak, uses technology to improve his army and his own health. He is a cyborg creature who has integrated his own body with technology. Similar to American’s use of air conditioning and heating in the modern-day homes, Hordak’s use of technology involves a suit of armor that helps keep him alive and comfortable in Etheria’s climate. The technologically advanced Fright Zone is an environment that has been destroyed due to the Horde’s involvement but relies on the work of less privileged individuals to maintain the war machine.

Adora starts as a replaceable part in the Horde’s war machine society. Adora is her private identity, she is unknown and nameless. In “The Sword Part One” she starts as one part of a unit during a training exercise. The only character that has any individuality seems to be Adora’s friend Catra, who doesn’t show up to the training exercise until the very end. The group’s goal is to act as one unit to take down one of the Rebellion’s Princesses in their training

exercise. However, the team suffers from bad communication. None of them discuss what they will do, nor do they have communication devices. If one teammate goes down, they continue on with their mission. The team acts a machine programmed to take down the enemy. A machine does not need to communicate with parts of itself, just like Adora's team. Here, Adora has no agency of her own. Even when she receives a promotion to Force Captain, she is only promoted to another part of the machine.

Adora breaks away from the machine's goals later on in "The Sword, Part Two." In this episode, Adora can experience life outside the Horde. She experiences a life in which individuals are celebrated and have their own agency. Adora attends her first party with a group of (hybrid) satyrs and experiences what life has to offer outside the Fright Zone. Ultimately, Adora leaves the Horde's machine to join the Rebellion, breaking communication with anyone in the Horde. Adora realizes the faulty communication the Horde relied on to control them and tried to get Catra to leave as well:

Adora: Catra, no. I can't go back. Not until the Horde leaves this town alone. You have to help me.

Catra: What are you saying?

Adora: I'm saying, this is wrong. They've been lying to us, manipulating us. Hordak, Shadow Weaver, all of them.

Catra: Duh! Did you just figure that out? Manipulation is Shadow Weaver's whole thing. She's been messing with our heads since we were kids.

Adora: How could you possibly be okay with that?

Catra: Because, it doesn't matter what they do. The two of us look out for each other. And soon we'll be calling the shots. Now, can we go home already? ("The Sword Part One")

Here, Adora has tried to communicate the differences between the Horde and the rest of Etheria. In her transformation into the great hero She-Ra, Adora has moved from her previously private identity within the public Horde and has become a cyborg citizen of Etheria.

The hybridity between machine/organism is another aspect of the cyborg mythology present in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. To cross the boundary from machine to organism is incredibly difficult. Adora had difficulty leaving her previous Horde identity behind but found, after experiencing what the natural world of Etheria was like in “The Sword Part Two,” that the world outside of the Fright Zone had much more to offer her. Beings like Light Hope are also contrasted with nature. While she is connected directly to the planet’s techno-organic mainframe, Light Hope is unable to experience the outside world like Adora can. Even when Light Hope is able to overcome her programming to help Adora’s mission to save the planet, she seemingly is never able experience nature first-hand. The monsters of Beast Island were considered defective due to their capacity to make choices outside of their master’s control, thus banished to an island overrun with techno-organic beings. Machinery and technology are often juxtaposed against each other in science fiction stories. However, in *She-Ra’s* techno-organic universe, mechanical beings can become alive through their connection with nature. Cyborg characters cross the boundary between what is considered biological and mechanical.

## Conclusion

*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* is a cyborg myth that envisions a binary-breaking future. Science and magic exist side-by-side in the *She-Ra* universe, as do other cultural dualities. Adora seeks unification through her alter-ego She-Ra in order to break away from the "traditional straightjackets" her society has given her (Russ). She-Ra is the feminist hero Haraway describes: she connects with others and facilitate useful communication. The lack of effective communication in the being of the show created an imbalanced world. The reincarnations of She-Ra are able to redefine communications in order to create a world where everyone can live harmoniously. Technology is a central aspect to communication on Etheria, much like it is on Earth.

The power dynamics on She-Ra's planet rely on the use of technology. The colonizing First Ones were the society that introduced technology to Etheria. Adora, descended from the colonizing forces of the First Ones, raised by the imperialist Horde, and member of the Princess Rebellion, is a hybrid of opposing identities. By working together, people can overcome colonialist, patriarchal societies. She-Ra is absent from the hyper-masculine He-Man, which makes for a show that rejects a female/male binary. Characters like Entrapta and Hordak also break down the female/male and human/machinery binaries. Characters like Mara show what agency people have over the technology they use. The feminist hero She-Ra, a role held by both Mars and Adora, has the ability to change the power imbalances on Etheria. Mara severed the First One's connection with the planet, effectively ending the destructive Heart of Etheria project. Mara's rejection of the mission she was given by the First Ones leads to Adora's ability to challenge previous cultural structures. While the colonization of Etheria influenced Mara and Adora's identity formation, the mythical hero She-Ra is able to break away from the colonialist

society they descended from.

There are many organic/mechanical cyborgs in *She-Ra*. The First Ones converted the planet into a techno- organic being. Entrapta, who discovered the nature of the planet, is also a techno-organic being. Etheria is filled with hybrid beings that break the binary between organic and mechanical beings. Beast Island is one example of techno-organic hybrids. It attempts to incorporate organic beings into its system. The technology of the island doesn't just want to incorporate organisms into the machine physically, but mentally as well. Light Hope is another being that crosses the machine/organism binary. Light Hope is another cyborg character that is passive against her society. She also had a connection to feminine nature, yet it is contrasted by her technological status. Light Hope's programming holds her captive, both physically and mentally. Light Hope, like other feminized AI characters in science fiction stories, is able to break from her patriarchal programming and gain agency. The Horde's patriarchal society runs like a machine, making Adora another metaphorical mechanical being that gains agency. The Horde represents environmentally destructive mechanical manufacturing in Etheria, which further contrasts nature and technology. Adora, as a replaceable part in the manufactured machine, is unable to communicate effectively with the community around her. Instead, the Horde's society runs like a well-oiled machine. Adora breaks from this social machine and becomes a cyborg native of Etheria. Beings that break from their mechanical and technological status to become more human are able to influence the world around them in *She-Ra*.

*She-ra and the Princesses of Power* utilized the power of the cyborg to teach children about ecocriticism and feminism. The show enters a broader trend in children's science fiction that deals with heavier issues than previous cartoon series. Shows like *She-Ra* can teach children about cooperation, communication, and rejection of previous stereotypes. Communication

between opposing forces creates unity that can help overthrow patriarchal structures. The narrative in *She-Ra* tells the story of the cyborg character Adora as she realizes her destiny as She-Ra. It is my hope that more scholarship can focus on feminist and ecocriticism aspects of the hero She-Ra. Donna Haraway's concept of cyborg mythology helps to analyze the significance of hybrid characters in feminist science fiction. Other authors like Johana Russ, Christy Tidwell, and Bridgette Barclay discuss the depiction of hybrid women in science fiction. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* transcends the masculine gaze present in most science-fiction stories. Sf cartoons showcase how boundaries are redefined within the genre, especially the boundary between human and nonhuman beings. The show's creator, ND Stevenson, made a point to include diverse characters which show how individuals interact with feminism and ecocriticism. Stevenson's other works include similar themes and would be worthy of further analysis in comparison to *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*.

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