

FEATURES

The Resplendent Queerness of Sailor Moon

We take a look at Sailor Moon's glorious history of LGBTQ+ visibility and the mark it left on a generation.

By **Michael Mammano**

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At last we've come to it. The final volume of the classic **Sailor Moon** anime from the '90s has been released by VIZ Media on DVD and Blu-ray, and while we'll cover **Sailor Moon Sailor Stars Vol. 2** in a minute, there is a discussion at hand that this final season of the show in particular makes especially relevant: the inherent and indomitable queerness of **Sailor Moon**.

Never a show that shied away from LGBTQ+ representation, even if some of it may be slightly problematic by today's standards, at the time **Sailor Moon** busted the door open in the area of sexuality and gender for a lot of fans. Many hadn't seen characters in the media, especially in animation, that represented them. Even cis-het fans were impacted by being exposed to people unlike them that they grew to care about and empathize with. There is little doubt that among the geek community **Sailor Moon** played a large part in the normalization of LGBTQ+ folks, holding them up as real people with their own feelings and struggles, even if they did have cosmic elemental powers.

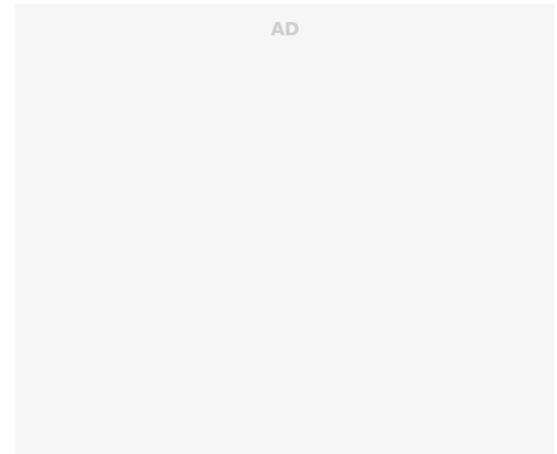
In addition to queer representation, **Sailor Moon** also featured a heterosexual protagonist (well, I'd say a Kinsey 0.5) whose views on homosexuality changed, however subtly. In the early episodes of **Sailor Moon S**, Usagi is still very inexperienced with queer people and views Mako-chan's sudden fascination with Haruka to be vaguely threatening, cautioning her against giving up on men. By the end of the season, however, Haruka and Michiru are dear friends of Usagi's, and she recognizes their love as something just as powerful and true as what she has with Mamoru. This series not only gave visibility to queer teens, but showed both them and their straight peers that people just need to be exposed and educated to become the most steadfast of allies.

Even more revolutionary than this, however, was how **Sailor Moon** tackled gender. Be it as simple as debunking stereotypes (girls can be action heroes) and dismissing binary gender roles (you can be a gearhead or an athlete and still enjoy cooking and flower arrangement) or as avant garde as affirming non-traditional gender expression—Fisheye, we're looking at you—the conversation around gender was always present if not often directly addressed. And now that gender issues have really become a prominent element of the mainstream cultural conversation, **Sailor Moon** is proving more relevant than ever and in some interesting new ways. After all, some aspects of the series are due to be revisited

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Take, for instance, Haruka Tenou AKA Sailor Uranus. When she debuted in the mid-90s, Haruka's sexuality was unmistakable; she was all about the ladies. Her gender identity, though, was a bit of a moving target. Series creator Naoko Takeuchi herself said that Haruka was "both male and female," which led to all kind of interpretations from Haruka being intersex to the possibility that her Silver Millennium past life had been a prince among the princesses. Takeuchi eventually clarified her position, stating "Haruka has always been a girl, always will be." This seemed to settle the issue of her gender with the understanding that she was a lesbian with some masculine tendencies, and in fact in the manga she does seem to fluctate far more between masculine and feminine attire, whereas in the anime she's pretty much in men's attire except in her Sailor outfit. The thing is, the general public has a much more comprehensive understanding of gender identity now and it begs the question...



In today's parlance, should we still consider Haruka a soft butch lesbian or would she more accurately be categorized as genderfluid or non-binary? How would she define herself? And would taking her out of the category of binary woman undercut the series' feminist objectives? Many could argue both sides, and it's certainly an interesting debate. And what of pronouns? While there are certain first person identifiers in Japanese that are more or less gendered—a girl or woman using "boku" to identify herself is a classic trope marker for a tomboy, while a boy or man using "atashi" marks him as effeminate—third person pronouns are completely gender neutral. It's what allowed for so much confusion about Haruka in her debut episode. None of the girls knew they were talking about a girl because there was no linguistic way for them to know. But in English-speaking countries like the United States and Canada, would they/them be more appropriate for Haruka were the character created now? For that matter... let's talk Fisheye.

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Fisheye is, if not a transwoman, certainly nonbinary. All their disguises are female presenting, and even in their true form they wear their hair in a very feminine style, and their outfit completely conceals the fact that they don't have breasts. Fisheye is referred to as "he" in all translations, but this again could just be the bias of an English speaker when encountering Japanese pronouns. Takeuchi's notes in her Materials Collection imply some level of transgenderism in all three of the Amazon Trio, with Tigerseye appearing the most masculine of the three and even then it's only in comparison to the other two, but what exactly was her intent here? We know the sexuality of these characters as per the anime—Tigerseye and Hawkseye are into women, and Fisheye is into men—but their gender identity isn't quite as clear. How would we classify it in today's terms and does it even matter?



Then, of course, we come to perhaps the most controversial character in this discussion, not so much for their canonical gender as what's been done to it behind the scenes. Let's talk about my favorite of Queen Beryl's generals... the cunning, the treacherous, the unapologetically catty Zoisite. Many of us who came to **Sailor Moon** in the '90s did so through DiC's dub, where Zoisite was an arrogant, ruthless woman breaking up the boys' club of Beryl's trusted inner circle. She added this wonderful energy to the group dynamic and was a villain we fell in love with and loved to hate. And then inevitably, be it weeks or even months later, we found out that Zoisite was actually an effeminate gay man whose gender was altered in the name of homophobic censorship. As a gay teenager at the time I personally felt very divided about this and I still do even now, decades later.

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On the one hand, I was ecstatic to know that there was this loving, committed relationship between two men (villains, but who cares?) that was not only explicit but proved essential to the plot of the final act of Season 1. On the other, while I certainly didn't approve of the *reasons* DiC changed Zoisite's gender, namely the deliberate erasure of queer visibility, I loved Kirsten Bishop's performance as Zoisite and found her interpretation of the character such a unique color in the dynamic between the generals and between Zoisite and Beryl herself. If I'm being completely honest, while I find Zoisite's maleness important in principle, DiC Zoisite is still my favorite version of the character. All that, and here's another wrench to throw into the gears.

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What if, in an inevitable future interpretation of **Sailor Moon**, Zoisite were nonbinary? The character has a lot of feminine signifiers, an androgynous appearance, and he's been completely comfortable disguising himself as a woman in both the anime and the manga. In a way, a nonbinary Zoisite would be the perfect compromise for those who crave that queerness but also like a feminine energy amongst the generals. And if we're talking about keeping **Sailor Moon** on the cutting edge of the LGBTQ+ conversation, a nonbinary character in a

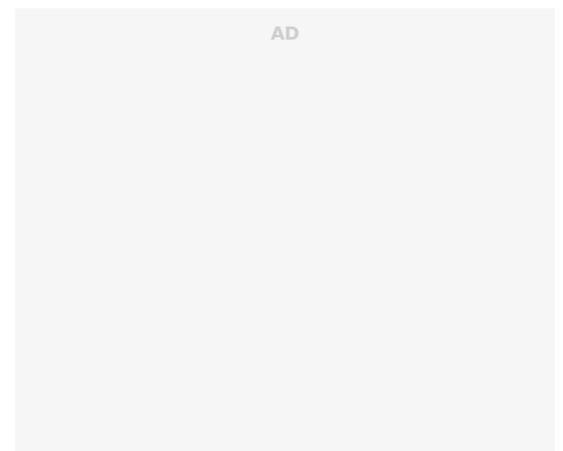
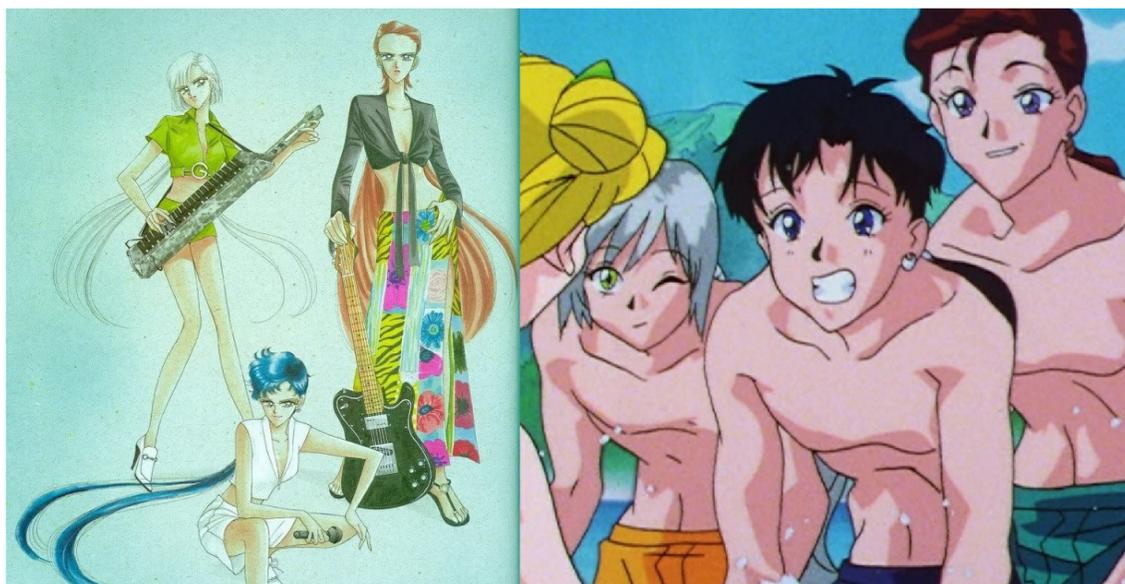
relationship with Kunzite, whom many fans head canon as bisexual to reconcile his manga connection to Sailor Venus and his anime relationship with Zoisite, would be inspired. But in gaining representation in one area, would we lose it in another? If Zoisite were no longer a binary male, the romance with Kunzite would still be queer but would no longer be squarely gay, as it would no longer be a relationship between two men, but rather a man and an enby. And that wouldn't necessarily be a bad change, but it would be an either/or, the loss of one kind of representation in the gaining of another. Similarly, having a romance between the soft butch Haruka and the femme Michiru did play into a heteronormative gender role binary, but it also allowed for the visibility of a teen lesbian couple and showed that being a lesbian didn't look like just one thing. These relationships and dynamics, while perhaps a little outdated or problematic now, were revolutionary at the time and enormously important to the audience they were reaching.

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So, at last we come to the only logical and chronological conclusion this conversation could reach: the Sailor Starlights.

Debuting in the final arc/season of the franchise, the Sailor Starlights are a trio of Sailor Senshi from a distant planet who disguise themselves as a boy band for a plot-related reason that no one really questions the flimsiness of because these characters are just that cool and we all really like the idea of them. The main difference between the Starlights in Takeuchi's manga and the anime adaptation is that in the manga their male disguises are nothing more than drag, while in the anime their bodies physically become male when assuming their civilian disguises and revert to female when they activate their powers.

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Most fans embrace the anime versions of the Starlights, especially queer fans, for while they're not transgender in the everyday, real world sense (don't @ me; no actual person can fully transition magically, reversibly, and in a matter of seconds) they are incontrovertibly coded that way and allow for discussion of gender identity and expression. After all, their personalities are pretty much the same regardless of which form they're in, so what really does gender even mean to them? Many would argue that the Starlights are as popular as they are BECAUSE of the anime's deviation from the manga, but one person most certainly isn't a fan: Naoko Takeuchi herself.

One of Takeuchi's essential rules, perhaps her cardinal rule, was that only women could be Sailor Senshi, and she felt that the Starlights having male forms broke that rule. One could argue that since the Starlights' true forms are female, and they need to revert to those forms to access their powers, that rule isn't really being broken; the male forms are merely artifice. However, it's twenty years later and Naoko still ain't happy about it, so here we are.

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While I, as many writers, are strongly averse to the Death of the Author theory,

this is one extremely rare exception where I personally believe that the creator's view on her own work is inferior to alternative interpretation. Having the Starlights be binary women dressing in men's clothing is just a retread of Haruka. Sure, Haruka is merely expressing her true sense of style while the Starlights are effecting a disguise, but we're still talking about cisgender women. However, with the anime Starlights being what I can only really describe as genderfluid, able to transition back and forth from male to female, it adds something fresh and different to the ensemble that opens the door to so many more conversations about gender and sexuality. It made **Sailor Moon** so much queerer than it already was, and that's a good thing as far as I'm concerned. So, hopefully Naoko can forgive us as we indulge in the resplendent queerness of **Sailor Moon Sailor Stars**.

If you're interested in doing just that, look no further than [Sailor Moon: Sailor Stars Vol. 2](#), which hit the shelves just a couple weeks ago. **Vol. 1**'s scarcity of bonus content is, as predicted, more than made up for in **Vol. 2**. The image galleries aren't bad, better than **Vol. 1** but still a little sparse for those who didn't get the Collector's Edition and the stunningly gorgeous full-color booklet that comes with it. Where this set gains purchase is on its final disc with interviews, and holy shit are there tons of them!

The actresses for all three Sailor Starlights—Melissa Hutchison, Erika Harlacher, and Sarah Williams—each get their own interviews, as do Katie Leigh (Sailor Iron Mouse), Faye Mata (Sailor Aluminum Siren), and Corina Boettger (Sailor Tin Nyanko). Carrie Keranen (Galaxia) also gets a turn, and there's one final interview with Tuxedo Mask himself, Robbie Daymond. All of these are a lot of fun, with the right mix of repeated questions, which allow the viewer to see how different members of the ensemble feel about certain common elements of their experience on **Sailor Moon**, as well as questions uniquely tailored to the interviewees, to keep the experience from feeling formulaic and stale.

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The jewel in the crown here, however, is an interview with series voice director, Suzy Goldish, which clocks in at around 45 minutes! This comprehensive piece really digs deep into not only her five years directing every episode of the VIZ dub and working with the cast to find the characters and craft their performances, but her entire career and what led her from the music industry to dubbing anime. This interview is anything but fluff and was far more interesting than even someone like me, who is all about the men and women behind the curtain, expected it to be.

So, go ahead and treat yourselves. Between the final batch of emotionally charged episodes and the plethora of interviews on that final disc, **Sailor Stars Vol. 2** is totally worth it. Make a weekend of it!

While sometimes flawed in its tone and approach, an unfortunate byproduct of its time, **Sailor Moon**'s queer representation made a lasting impact not just on anime fans and geek culture, but society as a whole. When we saw that queer characters could be our friends, our heroes (and, yes, sometimes but NOT ONLY villains), it showed an entire generation that being LGBTQ+ isn't something strange and "other," but just another version of the human experience. It was many people's first step toward realizing that queer culture brings with it freedom and color, humor and beauty, that it's something to be admired and celebrated. **Sailor Moon** wasn't the first manga or anime to have queer characters, but was certainly one of if not THE first where they were heroes and role models, and that impact of that legacy cannot be overstated. Shows like [Steven Universe](#) and [She-Ra and the Princesses of Power](#) continue the work of pushing the boundaries of queer representation by way of colorful characters and engaging storytelling, and their respective creators have not been shy about how **Sailor Moon** has inspired and affected them.

Sailor Moon's impact on both pop-culture and those who consume it is as strong today, if not stronger, than it was 20 years ago, and if part of that impact is

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creating a safer, more welcoming world for queer people—even by inches—then it’s one all should aspire to emulate.

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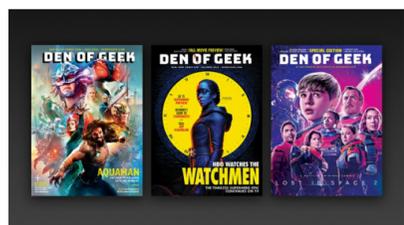
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