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**Questions of Sexual Identity and Female Empowerment  
in Fan Fiction**

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For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately. And I must also consider her – this unknown woman – as the descendant of all those other women whose circumstances I have been glancing at and see what she inherits of their characteristics and restrictions (Woolf, [1928] 2004: 93).

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# **Introduction**

## **0.1 Introduction**

This thesis marks the coronation of an academic career spent pursuing an increasingly extensive knowledge of literature. Not many esteemed scholars would regard the subject matter of this work as proper literature though. Fan fiction is a literary genre whose authors are mostly amateur writers. The content of fan fiction also does not lend itself to be immediately identified as proper literature, as it is a derivative genre. Fan fiction authors utilize pre-existing high and popular culture artifacts, most commonly characters, as the basic elements for their narratives.

In other words, fan fiction is a genre composed of stories of already-narrated cultural products. Any cultural product can inspire fan fiction: books, movies, television series, theatre plays, musicals, videogames, recordings, etcetera. Even real individuals can be the protagonists of fan fiction. Amongst the most popular individuals to be re-written by their fans are musicians, artists, performers, sports players, and all great historical figures (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 3).

Since fan fiction authors utilize copyrighted material as the characters, settings, and plot development for their stories, fan fiction is most often unsanctioned by the copyright owners. Because of this derivative nature, fan fiction as is discussed in this thesis is also non-profit. Fan readers of hardcopy and digital fan fiction communities need only to pay for the shipping fee and the Internet connection respectively.

### **0.1.1 A thesis about fan fiction**

Recent scholarship on popular culture has attempted to take into account the ever-growing creativity and diversity of fans. In fact, legitimizing the literary production of fans as an object of study in its own right, rather than the curious outcome of a chaotic subculture, has been a crucial milestone in popular culture and in the newborn field of fan studies (Busse, 2009: 105). Because of this ideological shift of principles, common when discussing subcultures, the tone of this thesis may at times acquire an apologetic tone regarding fan fiction. However, it is not the purpose of this thesis to become an arena for a contest between different cultural forms. While it is true that the dignity of fan fiction communities as creative, thriving, humane communities will be regularly defended, there is no point in denying nor in hiding their downsides, and fan fiction communities do possess less than preferable characteristics that are worth pointing out.

It is also not the purpose of this thesis to list all the possible factors in a comparison of the ‘goodness’ and the ‘badness’ of fan fiction. The main goal is merely to present fan fiction and pointing out the evident or deducible positive and negative aspects, according to the main two focal topics of this work: queerness and feminism. Following popular culture scholars Matthew Hills’ (2002) ‘suspensionist’ position, this paper shall strive to avoid portraying fan fiction communities as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ literary communities, revealing instead the inescapable contradictions: the ‘ugly.’ However, contradictions are to be accounted for and accepted as “essential cultural negotiations.” These negotiations can be forcibly resolved only at the cost of ignoring the unique cultural dynamics of fan culture (Hills, 2002: x-xi).

Fan fiction is a massive topic to explore, even with the generous extension of a Master’s degree final paper. As mentioned, in this thesis, only certain themes within fan fiction will be highlighted. The first major theme involves sexual identity and in particular queerness. In terms of gender identity, fan fiction is densely populated with characters who are not rooted in an essentialist view of the female and male gender. The fluid gender identity of many fan fiction characters is even more pronounced in their sexual identity. In terms of sexual identity, fan fiction offers an astoundingly high number of queer characters, from the protagonists to the background characters, across the whole spectrum of sexuality as is known today. From this point of view, fan fiction may become involved in discourses about camp literature, but it must be remembered that the vast majority of its authors identify themselves as heterosexuals.

Queerness in fan fiction is a major theme of this thesis because so many fan-authored queer fan stories are enjoyable to read, easy to comprehend, and thus informative and educational. Some stories discuss queer matters at such length, that their authors can be said to perform a social service in educating their peers and youngsters about sensitive topics that are not commonly discussed in mainstream media, such as non-hegemonic gender identities and sexualities.

The second major theme of this thesis is female empowerment in fan fiction. Female empowerment and feminist elements can be extremely subtle and thus difficult to point out and examine. Moreover, in many cases, feminism is closely intertwined with queer elements in fan fiction, so much so that the two topics are often impossible to analyze distinctly. There is a certain polarity in fan fiction regarding women characters and gender equality. Women characters are portrayed either very negatively or very positively, there is little middle ground. Most fan authors are young girls and women, so a certain proclivity in favor of women characters is a given. However this is not the case, and the focus on female empowerment and feminism in this paper is meant to demonstrate how contradicting fan fiction communities can be in terms of the author’s treatment of gendered social norms.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to show why fan fiction is a literary genre worthy of academic interest and how it can benefit the academic world. Studying the wide array of themes related to gender identity, sexuality and feminism in fan fiction will lead to uncovering the conscious and unconscious opinions of a significant portion of the consumers of high and low culture. This is possible because fan fiction is a literary product born from the interpretation of critically aware individuals of all ages and beliefs. As it is, fan fiction is the perfect opportunity to delve into the collective mind of modern readerships and audiences, exploring the conundrums of such a large collective of individuals. This shall prove the significance of fan fiction as a meaningful cultural product.

The two main disciplines utilized in this thesis are the theory of literature and sociology. Theory of literature is utilized to portray as complete a picture of fan fiction as possible, presenting it as a significant literary genre and outlining its thriving production. In this way, this thesis shall demonstrate that fan fiction is a valuable genre to acknowledge and study. To accompany theory of literature and sociology as the main fields of study to present fan fiction, theorists of reader-response criticism, popular culture scholars, communication studies researchers, media scholars, and ethnographers are also consulted in this work. When the subject matter of these theorists is not fan production, their research is adapted to fan fiction to compensate for the lack of extensive studies about this literary genre. This lack is mainly due to the impenetrable scope of digital fan communities, which platforms render internal research very complex.

### **0.1.2 Roadmap**

This thesis is articulated into this introduction, five chapters, a brief conclusion and an appendix. This introduction provides an overview of fan fiction and fandom, indicating them as the subject matter of this work, later expanding on the academic disciplines utilized to navigate and analyze fan fiction. Furthermore, this introduction lists which specific themes are to be analyzed more closely in the following chapters, and why they are worthy of deeper inspection. For a thesis, this introduction is very unconventional, in so far as the first personal pronoun is sometimes utilized. This rare liberty is necessary to explain why a Master's degree thesis pivots on such a peculiar subject matter.

The first chapter introduces the methodology of theory of literature, focusing on the figure of the reader. Reader-response criticism is relevant since fan authors are none other than active, transformative readers-turned-writers. This chapter is also meant to provide a series of useful

definitions of fan fiction terminology for a smooth reading of the following chapters. The glossary section draws an almost complete picture of fandom and fan fiction, and it includes definitions of major fan fiction sub-genres, including several definitions of fandom terms commonly found in digital archives that will recur in this thesis.

The second chapter summarizes the history of media fandoms. More precisely, it begins at the turn of the twentieth century, with the rise of the *Sherlock Holmes* (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1887) fandom, whose founders made history by establishing the very first formal fan club about a popular culture character. The chapter then highlights the importance of the *Star Trek* (Roddenberry, 1966-1969) fandom in the 1970s and 1980s, whose pioneering female members count amongst the very first fan members who shifted from a paper-bound form of fan production to digital platforms. The *Star Trek* fandom is of paramount importance also because its fan fiction communities were almost entirely composed of women, who organized the first women-only fannish digital spaces. The second chapter's second half is entirely dedicated to fandoms in the digital format, since the move to the Internet radically changed the way fans interacted amongst themselves, as well as the venue of distribution of fan works.

The third chapter of this thesis discusses one of the two main themes which this work focuses on to show why fan fiction is a topic worthy of academic interest: gender and sexuality. The chapter begins by introducing the topic of gender in fan fiction, first from the point of view of theory of literature, with an ancillary discussion on the division of girls and boys books. Afterwards, the chapter focuses on the topic of gender in fan production, presenting the archetypal female character called 'Mary Sue.' It also expands on the sociological studies conducted on female-authored fan fiction, specifically on the relation between the female identity of the authors and the overwhelming presence of male characters. The chapter finally considers the connections between the romance novel and fan fiction, which have fascinated a plethora of researchers in the past.

Chapter number four discusses the other main theme within the macro-topic of fan fiction: feminism and female empowerment. Feminism in fan fiction is a delicate topic because it does not benefit from an abundant amount of scholarly attention in comparison to, for instance, sexual identity in fan fiction. Therefore, many arguments in this chapter have been adapted from studies conducted on different topics and later adapted to fan production. This section is important to shed light on several psychological paradoxes present in fan fiction, since even though the majority of fan stories is penned by women, not many stories display feminist ideals.

The fifth and last chapter discusses gloomy themes in fan fiction such as heteronormativity, homophobia, and physical and psychological violence, which are to stand in direct contrast with the themes presented previously. The purpose of this chapter is to show how even though fan fiction

includes a number of harrowing themes, these are used as external threats that the protagonists are supposed to defeat or circumnavigate to reach their happy ending. When these themes involve political issues, fan stories are highly educational, as they help raising social awareness about such issues.

### **0.1.3 Expected results**

The main purpose of studying fan fiction from a literary, sociological, and anthropological point of view is to show how fan fiction simultaneously reflects congruent and contradictory attitudes of the reading and viewing public about a broad range of topics.

More precisely, the literary point of view aims to show how fan fiction authors revisit popular and high culture narratives and rework them to suit their needs and tastes, and to an extent those of their fellow community members. The literary viewpoint is also meant to highlight subversive tendencies in the practices of reading and viewing audiences, who enjoy destabilizing the almighty figure of the Author and re-appropriating what they regard as shared, free content or, in media scholar John Fiske's (1992) words, their cultural capital (Fiske, 1992).

The sociological point of view from which fan fiction is analyzed in this thesis is mostly supported by anthropology, and aims to unveil the many congruous and incongruous themes in fan fiction as reflections of the human nature. Romance and sexual violence, straight and queer, domestic bliss and post-apocalyptic scenarios, fan fiction provides a valuable kaleidoscope of the deepest fears and desires of the human mind. And all this content is absolutely unfettered by any of the restrictions that media corporations, publishing houses and common decency would otherwise impose. In this sense, fan fiction provides a path to the subconscious of its authors, and thus ought to be (re)considered as a valuable genre of literature, and worthy of academic pursuit.

## **0.2 Subject matter: fan fiction**

After having briefly introduced the thesis in its ideological stance, its structure and its main themes, a few elements shall be reprised and expanded hereon for the sake of clarity. The first element is the subject matter: fan fiction.

Fan fiction is a literary genre whose authors regularly utilize pre-existing high and popular culture artifacts in order to create it (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 3). Because the cultural matrix is

protected by copyright, fan fiction circulates with no profit to be gained by its authors. Most fan fiction authors know that what they write and distribute for free is an act of rebellion against the copyright owners. Fan fiction writers know that they steal characters, settings, and plot elements from books, comics, cartoons, movies, television series, theatre plays, videogames, etcetera. Even more subversively, there are fan fiction authors who write and share stories about real historical or living individuals. These authors may include in their stories any person in the history of humanity, including medieval royalty, military exponents, serial killers, figures of prominence in any religion, artists, performers, sport players, and so forth (p. 4).

What fan authors do with the source text's characters is stretching their fictional limbs into different settings, or changing the original settings by small increments, creating new characters for the original ones to interact with, or change the relationship between the original characters. And all this is against the law, because the source text is copyrighted, and the vast majority of fan fiction authors do not ask for permission before appropriating somebody's characters for their entertainment.

There are numerous reasons why copyright owners overlook the legal pursuit of fan fiction. The first major reason is that fan fiction is completely free. Before fan fiction started to be archived digitally, the readers only paid for the shipping costs. Nowadays fan fiction may be accessed on the Internet and any cost is included in the bill of the Internet connection. Another major reason why copyright owners overlook fan fiction resides in its value as publicity. By definition, fans are dedicated readers and viewers, loyal to a fault, and fan fiction represents free, viral marketing that the copyright owners do not have to pay for, and may greatly benefit from (ibid).

One major characteristic of fan fiction authors is that their identity is normally unknown. Fan fiction is shrouded in secrecy more than any other literary genre because most of its authors choose pseudonyms or complete anonymity to share their works. This mechanism is in place in order to protect the authors from possible retaliations from the characters' copyright owners, but it is also a way for writers to avoid the ridicule of their peers.

This ridicule mostly stems from the derivative nature of fan fiction. Fan fiction comprises of stories written about pre-existing stories, which is silly enough to an outsider's point of view, but also in fan fiction, the characters' behavior (their sexual identity for instance) tends to deviate from the behavior of their original counterparts. This implies a mistake from the fan authors' part. In other words, to outsiders, fan fiction often appears both as a pointless past-time, because it is derivative ('derivative' as in 'copied'), and as a mistake because fan authors often have the characters behaving differently than in the source texts, giving the impression that they do not know the characters that well in the first place.

On the contrary, to an insider, fan fiction communities represent a safe haven, a supporting circle of friends. In fan fiction communities any aspiring or amateur writer may find the soothing companionship of like-minded individuals, even when everybody's real identity remains unknown (p. 6).

All these elements together paint the picture of a unique, elusive literary genre, almost unheard of in most institutions of higher knowledge. In fact, the peculiarity of the topic necessitates an extended contextualization about the reasons why fan fiction has been chosen as the subject matter of a thesis of a Master's degree.

### **0.3 Personal background information**

As rare as personal accounts are in academic texts, especially at the level of post-graduate papers, the rare subject matter of this thesis calls for an exception. This section shall contextualize how I first came into contact with fan fiction, how long ago, and why fan fiction is so relevant to me to warrant a final paper about it.

My first recollections of fan fiction date back to when I was between 11 and 13 years of age, almost 15 years ago. My imagination has always been a fervid one, having being fed by plenty of children's books, Japanese cartoons and comics, and all the movies and television series that my older siblings favored. Moreover, I attended every theatrical play I could find in my hometown, and understood the contents at the best of my mental capabilities at the time. These few facts are meant to convey that, since a tender age, my mind has been a fertile ground for the transmediatic, transformative, multi-faceted world of fan fiction communities.

The rise of the Internet in my area before my teenage years also helped in my cultivation of an interest in fan fiction. Whenever I wished to know more about any media narrative, I would look for its fan fiction community. In complete honesty, I cannot recall exactly *how* I stumbled upon the first online fan fiction, but I remember I read my first fan stories on the popular website FanFiction.net, still active today. I drifted there as I searched for more information about the *Harry Potter* saga (J. K. Rowling, 1997-2007), and found what I had always unconsciously looked for, all the possible outcomes of my favorite cultural products.

In time, I witnessed the growth of fan fiction communities into thriving queer-friendly, boundary-breaking collectives. I became conscious of a communal effort in exchanging more pleasurable knowledge about the same beloved source text, which sparked my interest as an incredibly selfless, friendly enterprise, since no fan authors asked for money in return. But I also

became conscious of the freedom that fan fiction writing could boast in comparison to commercial literary genres, which made me analyze fan stories more closely in the first place. If young and older, amateur and professional, authors alike could write anything they wanted with no censorship and no limitations, what would they write about?

The answer to this question is scattered in this thesis. I try to convey this answer specifically in the discussions about the themes I chose: observations on the sex/gender binary, analysis of the whole spectrum of sexuality, female empowerment, psychological and emotional abuse, healing and nurturing, monogamy and exclusivity. These are few of the themes I noticed in the fan stories. There was a realization that fan fiction is arguably one of the best literary genres in the world to reflect the unadulterated flow of consciousness of its authors. This privileged entryway into the collective consciousness of such a large portion of the reading and viewing public is what first prompted me to research fan fiction on an academic level. This reflection of the conscious and subconscious mind of the human being is what I intend to present as worthy of interest to the academic world.

## **0.4 Transcending the end**

Readers consciously engage with a text for a wide number of reasons. Some of these are objective ones, such as social, biographical, political, philosophical, moral, and religious reasons. However, subjective reasons must be taken into consideration too. These include amusement and escapism, and they play a crucial role in the popularity of fan fiction amongst youngsters and adults alike. Moreover, readers also unconsciously engage with a text for the pleasure of converting basic wishes and fears into significant and coherent meanings, but this is part of human nature and does not pertain specifically to literature, let alone to fan fiction (Miner, 1986: 188).

Every child with a zealous imagination will naturally muse about their favorite fictional universes, expanding them beyond their endings in order to enjoy more material. In their imagined scenarios, readers and viewers usually have the characters interact in different ways than they do in the source text, even pitting characters from different stories against one another. This instinct to prolong the story is rooted in the natural instinct to perpetuate the pleasure that is derived from the story. This instinct is inherent in human nature, therefore it should not be surprising that some individuals are frustrated enough by the end of their favorite plots that they feel compelled to act on their feeling of bereavement. This is how many fans forcefully prolong their most beloved stories, even if this means going against the creators' wishes (Grossberg, 1992: 55, Booth, 2010: 12). This

struggle is part of the reason why fan fiction is a valuable literary genre for civilized societies, it is the visible manifestation of the human desire to transcend the end of an experience of significance and coherence, against all odds.

## **0.5 Queer themes in fan fiction**

Fan fiction is too broad a topic even for the generous scope of a Master's degree final paper. In this thesis certain themes within fan fiction will be highlighted. The first major theme is queerness.

This literary genre contains, in fact, an incredible proportion of stories where the protagonists do not conform to the characteristics of maleness and femaleness according to essentialist theorists of gender identity. Many male characters display traditional feminine characteristics, and viceversa for female characters. Moreover, an astounding number of fan stories contains queer characters, displaying sexual identities belonging to the whole spectrum of sexuality as is known today. Outsiders are reasonably baffled by the sheer quantity of queer fan fiction stories in most digital archives. This abundance is due to the fan authors' preference to explore the original characters' personalities with a queer twist to them. There are very few source texts that completely prevent its readers or viewers from turning its characters into queer individuals. Alternatively, fan authors are not above forcing the source text's characters into queer sexual identities. Because of this, most fan fiction may be easily included in the macro-genre of camp literature.

As camp literature, the sociological value of fan fiction consists in concentrating queer-friendly individuals from around the globe in the same communities. These communities soon come to represent a safe haven for both queer and queer-friendly individuals, who can shy away from the real, everyday homophobia without 'outing' themselves. Alternative forms of gendered identities such as drags, cross-dressing, hormones treatments and surgical operations are also still vastly frowned upon in contemporary societies. In fan fiction, though, many of these practices are discussed with acceptance and respect. More importantly, the very fact that such practices are discussed in the first place outside of swift news reports, sparse newspaper articles and random blog posts, speaks highly about the level of knowledge and maturity of many fan fiction authors regarding such delicate and controversial matters.

It is in the light of such knowledge and maturity that a major point of focus in this thesis is the analysis of queer themes in fan fiction. It is important to convey that queer fan stories are not only created for the titillation of fan writers and readers, as researchers tend to report. These stories

are also written to provide a fertile ground for debates about questions of gender and sexuality which young readers would otherwise have little to no opportunity to linger on and discuss.

What is most interesting about the population of fan fiction communities is the presence of youngsters. Even though publishing extensive ethnographic studies about fan fiction communities has become increasingly difficult after the move to the Internet, there is substantial evidence that a significant number of fan readers and writers are not yet of age or barely above legal age in their countries. This is the main reason why fan fiction can be called informative and beneficial, because it can do a lot of good for the younger generations, for both writers and readers. More precisely, fan fiction stories represent a beneficial social service in so far as they educate the readers about delicate topics that are not discussed regularly in mainstream media.

## **0.6 Feminism in fan fiction**

The second major theme in fan fiction under focus in this thesis is female empowerment (also called feminism even though in many instances there is little to no political commitment). Feminism is treated with caution in this work because it is a very elusive topic to spot and analyze, in contrast to queerness, which is generally more evident both in real life and in fiction, even to the uninitiated. An example related to media fandoms shall help illustrate this point.

During their teen age years, many 1990s children must have come across the popular television series titled *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997-2003) at the turn of the century. The series featured a striking protagonist, a strong-willed, petite blonde girl named Buffy. She soon became a fan-favorite character. However, another character attracted the critics' and the public's attention. Buffy's best friend, the initially meek girl Willow Rosenberg (another example of producer Joss Whedon's feminist writing), eventually embarks in a romantic relationship with another girl, named Tara Maclay. Watching two girls interact in a romantic way on screen stood out more than the strong personalities of Buffy and Willow, whose sense of independence could be misunderstood as aspects of the so-called 'tomboy' personality.

This example serves to illustrate how subtle female empowerment can be, even when it is as obvious as in Buffy's character development. Buffy's example also serves to illustrate this thesis' approach to female empowerment and feminism in fan fiction. Fan fiction stories focus on male characters in same-sex relationships in the case of the slash genre, and on female characters in the case of the femslash genre, while other stories portray both homosexual and heterosexual relationships. The issue is that in all fan fiction sub-genres, fan authors portray women either very

negatively or very positively from a feminist point of view. There is very little middle ground regarding in this context. In the same story, the same character may show at intervals, signs of independence and submissiveness. This thesis will avail itself of ethnographic surveys and of feminist theories to account for the puzzling treatment of women characters in fan fiction. It is one of the goals of this thesis to argue that the historical poor treatment of women characters in high and popular culture is one of the main causes for this imbalance.

The focus on feminism aims to demonstrate how fan fiction communities may be highly contradicting. Most fan fiction writers appear to be young girls and women. Therefore the natural deduction would be that their women characters possess well-rounded personalities and are respected by other characters. However this is not the case, and further studies shall be conducted to disclose more elements about this puzzling phenomenon. A sensible question would be: since a significant number of fan stories represents the mentality of a portion of society, is the consistent lack of strong women character a sign of failure from the part of modern, democratic societies towards women? Is patriarchy still so overwhelming in its cultural representation that young, amateur writers feel the need to turn to male characters to spun their stories?

A popular theory against the lack of feminism in fan fiction posits that the focus of the analysis should be shifted from fan fiction's women characters to the male characters, especially queer male characters. According to several theorists, Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith (1986) amongst the earliest, male protagonists in fan fiction are mere proxies for the women writers. They allegedly are convenient emotional outputs for the authors, and the frequent utopian atmosphere found in queer stories shall be attributed to the authors' unconscious superimposition of their heterosexual identity instead of a serious drive for gender equality (Lamb & Veith, 1986).

However, the theory of studying the male characters as surrogate female characters eschews the primary argument rather than dealing with it. The primary argument being that there are feminist fan fiction stories, there are fan fiction stories which include some feminist elements, and there are downright sexist fan stories. Studying the array of gender-related themes in fan fiction means studying the conscious and unconscious opinions of young and older individuals about such matters.

## **0.7 The detractors of fan fiction**

The 'value' of fan fiction is a point of strong contention inside and outside fan communities. How can fan fiction prove its immediate worth to the outsider so that it won't be dismissed as a copy of

the source text? Before tackling this argument, the point of view of the detractors of fan fiction shall be addressed first.

One of the most common criticisms against fan fiction is that it is repetitive and unimaginative. This criticism is constructed upon a common misconception that all fan stories are similar and that fan writers are not aware of the plethora of stories deemed similar (or even identical) to theirs. First of all, it should be obvious that fan stories are not similar to one another as every story is penned by a different author, thus every story is imbued with one unique individuality. Secondly, fan fiction appears repetitive because outsiders are not privy to the fan writers' reasoning. Fan writers work on the assumption that there are as many stories to tell as there are characters in the scene. The underlying principle of fan fiction claims that every point of view matters, every viewpoint is to be explored to achieve a complete picture of the original characterization or plot device. One of the fan writers' goals consists in re-writing different interpretations of the events of the source text, and each version is meant to lead the readers into the visualization of the original scene in all its potential outcomes. When the plot of the fan story differs minimally or greatly from the plot of the source text, this is not a sign of ignorance from the part of the fan authors. Differing fan plots are merely a pretext to explore the characters' personalities in different settings and/or situations (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 65).

From an outsider's perspective, though, this re-interpretation of multiple perspectives translates into repetitiveness. The traditional opinion about any 'original' cultural product posits that this product with copyrighted characters, settings and plot elements is the only legitimate narrative and it shall exist in isolation from any other copyrighted cultural product. All reworkings based on this borrowed (read: stolen) copyrighted material are deemed copies of the original. Because of this, fan fiction is often denigrated as being a poor copy of the original story, and is consequently dismissed as sub-par literature, unworthy of any academic analysis.

This misconception also stems from the view that the 'stakes' of popular culture are considered trivial. The common opinion about fan fiction indicates it as a collection of stories hastily put together about somebody else's characters and settings, founded on little to no writing and editing experience. Yet, on closer inspection, fan fiction is a literary genre that coaxes millions of people around the clock and around the globe to write subversive, innovative, educational narratives featuring an astounding number of light-hearted and serious topics. Fan fiction is one of the few thriving literary genres offering the whole of the emotional, psychological, and sexual spectrum of the human being with no inhibitions or limitations. Just like high culture, popular culture's artifacts have 'stakes,' and fan fiction also has 'stakes' in modern societies (Harris, 1998: 43)

One of fan fiction's stakes is the alternative culture that fan fiction communities develop in time. These communities are perfect representations of shared cultural spaces with their own specific history, dynamics and traditions. In fan fiction communities there are no factions based on political sides, religion, nationality, age, gender or sexuality. This is partly due to the fact that the vast majority of fan fiction authors use pseudonyms or choose to remain anonymous. This mechanism assures that no individual can transfer his or her real-life social status into fandom, where only the actual contributions of its members are relevant.

Alongside the criticism of being a poor copy of the original, when outsiders discover queer fan stories (especially the sexually explicit ones), they tend to over-react and call the whole of fan fiction pornographic. As a consequence, fan writers and readers become, by relation, sexually deviant aberrations. With such a reputation, it is no wonder that fans choose the privacy of pseudonyms for their creative exploits. They do so to avoid being ridiculed and ostracized in the workplace, and by their families and friends (MacDonald, 1998: 141).

## **0.8 Sociological value of fan fiction**

Now that the common assumptions of fan fiction's detractors have been explained, it is time to expand on how and why fan fiction may be a valuable literary genre for contemporary, democratic societies. In this section, the question of why fan fiction is worthy of academic attention, and in particular why it is discussed with respect in this thesis, will also be addressed.

It is worthwhile to analyze fan fiction communities as institutions of interpretation of popular culture, because they develop their own distinctive reading protocols and their own keys of interpretation, as well as their own repositories of knowledge (Jenkins, 1992b: 211). Fan fiction is a communal and communitarian literary artifact: it is created by a collective of individuals simultaneously, and its primary purpose is to serve the needs and preferences of the whole community, including its creators. Academics have gone so far as calling fan communities "hive-minds," because all members are working in synchronous activity to satisfy the preferences of their fellow community members and their own. The vast majority of fan writers is perfectly aware of this shared nature of their production, part of the reason why fan fiction communities are so populous is that this communal act of creation can be extremely enjoyable and self-empowering (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 8).

One ancillary reason for the sociological worth of fan fiction resides in the amateur effort of its writers. Even the least edited stories are the product of a creative effort, namely, a person has

spent time and energy to write that story. In the case of young fan fiction authors, this is a relevant consideration to make because of the regular criticism moved against the so-called ‘millennial children,’ whose brains is allegedly atrophied by digital technologies. From this point of view, fan fiction proves its detractors wrong because thousands of millennials are challenging these malicious allegations in several ways, one of them consists in focusing their efforts on transformative literary works. Even if the literary quality of the less polished stories is dubious, the authors’ labor remains undeniable. Furthermore, fan fiction implies a double effort from the part of the young writers. They do not simply write what comes to their minds, they must possess a measure of knowledge about the source text, the deeper the better, and they must adapt it to the interests and needs of their community. On top of this basic preparation, the inexperienced writers also need to adapt the characterization and the specific language of the source text, the re-interpretations debated in their fan communities, and their own personal, unique writing style. The effort put into organizing these elements should be taken into account.

Another fundamental reason to study fan fiction as a proper literary genre from a sociological point of view is the subconscious factor. Fan fiction is an unadulterated collection of meanings generated through a partly-shared, partly-private process of self-reflection from the part of the fan authors (Jenkins, 1992b: 211). A key word here is ‘unadulterated.’ Fan fiction lacks any of the filters belonging to commercialized cultural products. As most of the content on the Internet, fan fiction is a prime example of the unfiltered voice of the people.

There *are* moral filters in place in fan fiction writing communities, but they are seldom enforced. The websites that do censor some stories risk a severe drop in popularity amongst fan writers, who tend to congregate in more liberal websites. A notable example is visible in the incredible upsurge in popularity of the archive called ArchiveOfOurOwn.org, to the detriment of one of the oldest fan fiction digital archives: FanFiction.net. According to FanFiction.net’s policy, the only content allowed on the website shall fall between the rating K and M of the Motion Picture Association of America, where ‘M’ stands for Mature, the equivalent of PG-14, which allows a certain degree of violence and sexually explicit scenes. Stories rated MA, for ‘Mature Audience (Only),’ the equivalent of NC-17, are not allowed. However, this rating existed in FanFiction.net until 2012, so authors obviously used it and published any level of violence, gore and sexual content undisturbed. A group of users started to demand that FanFiction.net’s administrators ought to better policy the content of the website, and in 2012 a great number of stories (roughly estimated to be more than 8000) was removed from the website, with no preemptive warning issued to the writers, resulting in many being banished from the archive. Rumors even circulated that the slash and femslash genres suffered the greatest losses. This unfortunate episode is known to fandom

history as the ‘FanFiction.net’s NC-17 Purges’ (Fanlore ‘FanFiction.net,’ 2017; Fanlore ‘FanFiction.net Purges,’ 2017). Television studies researcher Hannah Ellison rightly calls it “the book burning that wasn’t” because of the number of stories that were lost forever due to the lack of backup files by their unprepared authors (Ellison, 2012).

The harsh truth left behind by such purges is that they lead many writers to migrate into more liberal digital spaces, where they can publish every hidden, repressed thought they harbor on an infinite number of topics. While disconcerting for the outsider, this level of honesty is extremely valuable from a sociological and anthropological point of view, as it allows to peer into the subconscious creative mind of a considerable portion of modern societies.

### **0.8.1 Fanatics**

The main obstacle to overcome while considering fan-authored stories as worthy objects of study pivots on the figure of the fan.

It is often assumed that popular culture attracts only the least discerning segments of a population. Fans are deemed to be easily manipulated and distracted (both from high culture and from real social issues), whose presence is addressed by content creators solely to make a profit. Most forms of popular culture are engineered to appeal to the audience’s most debased needs and desires, causing individuals to become passive and less attentive to the shortcomings of the cultural product they are consuming. Fans are usually deemed incapable of recognizing that the culture they enjoy so much is actually drugging them and exploiting them. An alternative common criticism to fans assumes that they are either very young in age or juvenile, postponing growing up because they abhor social responsibilities and because they wish to enjoy the recklessness that comes with being a fan of something as long as possible (Grossberg, 1992: 51).

The argument in favor of fan fiction’s worth does not posit that all fans are active rewriters of popular narratives. In fact, audiences should be first divided into two macro-groups. The larger group comprises of barely-discerning individuals who passively consume popular culture. The other segment is smaller and more dispersed, but it is the one that comprises individuals, the transformative fans, who actively appropriate the texts, reworking them with new and original significance. Fan fiction authors belong to this latter category (p. 52).

Fans possess and use a semiotic productivity to create a textual form, the fan fiction, that can circulate easily amongst the initiated and that is distinctive of their own communities. Once this circuit of distribution is established, the fans have effectively created a shadow cultural economy

with its own systems of production and distribution, outside the clasp of the media industry, yet still entrenched in their native consumerist societies (Fiske, 1992: 30). The ultimate goal of this thesis is to show that this shadow cultural economy is worthy of academic pursuit, and that one easy way to analyze this parallel society is through its literary production: the fan fiction.

To summarize, fan fiction is worthy of study because it is a literary product which unites popular and high culture texts under the reinterpretation of critically aware, discerning individuals of all ages, sexualities, nationalities, beliefs and cultural backgrounds. Fan fiction represents a prime opportunity to delve into the collective mind of such a diverse audience, as an astounding number of individuals write about the same subject, the same source text. The common mainframe makes it easier to spot the subjective differences and the conscious and unconscious drives of the audience. These underlying subjective characteristics of fan fiction are a major focus of this thesis, they are meant to demonstrate the significance of fan fiction as a literary representation of the effects of popular culture on the readerships and audiences.

Now that this thesis' macro-subject and its main points of focus have been presented, before dealing with the bureaucratic part of the chapter (the methodology of this thesis and its structure), the social context that originates fan fiction shall be defined first.

## **0.9 Fandom: fanatic domain**

As an introduction to the first chapter, this thesis will now expand on the background context of fan fiction, the community of its creators: the fandom. Fandom is a compound work, where 'fan' stands for 'fanatics,' the enthusiast supporters of a cultural product, and 'dom' which stands for 'domain,' even though many individuals in fannish digital spaces seems to think that it stands for 'kingdom,' which links back to 'domain' (Fanlore 'Fandom,' 2017). An all-fandom digital encyclopedia, the website Fanlore.org offers a list of links that show how alive the debate around the values and defects of fandom life still is. This thesis however will not delve into such debates for the sake of remaining in topic.

As mentioned, 'fan' is the abbreviation of 'fanatic.' It denotes a person who is obsessed with something and can produce an abundance of information regarding their object of fandom. They can quote lines and lyrics, locate scenes and lines in episodes and chapters with ease, and are often highly articulate in the interpretation of the source narrative. Fans constitute a fascinating object of study because they interpret media texts in a variety of intriguing and unexpected ways. And fans,

even and especially in our computer-literate society, are not isolated readers/viewers, they participate in communal practices such as fandoms (Hills, 2002: viii).

In addition, a distinction ought to be addressed between affirmative and transformative fans. Affirmative fans range from the casual reader or viewer to aficionados, while transformative fans are deeply emotionally invested both in the source text and in their community. They can be very critical towards the source material while remaining loyal to it, their criticism is only a way to voice their wish that their favorite text needs to improve and become even more enjoyable and satisfying to read/watch/play. Transformative fans can also become attached more to their community than to the source text in time, as many find the communal act of storytelling to be very enjoyable. These fans are clearly not the passive consumers of many early media studies reports, but they are the active members of a fluid, sophisticated participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992a; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 4).

In his seminal work *Textual Poachers* (1992), veteran academic-fan Henry Jenkins describes fandoms as unofficial fan clubs whose members are engaged in continuous discussions around a common narrative, the source text, in order to resolve its gaps and contradictions and to spin more narratives from it. One of the main peculiarities of fan communities is a total disinterest in the hierarchy between 'original' and 'derivative' texts. To create their stories, fans draw not only from the material explicitly presented as primary or original, but also from secondary texts such as authors', producers' and performers' commentaries, and even from the speculations of their fellow fandom members. In this way, fans construct an increasingly complex reservoir of knowledge about the source text which can be tapped into at any moment by any member of the community (Jenkins, 1992a: 110).

Another peculiar aspect of fandom is that it reconstructs an alternative, multi-faceted version of society. As any collective of individuals, fandom cannot be depicted as a univocal object of study. Fandoms house millions of individuals around the globe, and they are self-regulated communities. Because of such aspects, fandoms deserve to be represented on their own terms. Only once this fact has been taken into account, a rough draft of the inner dynamics of fandoms can be drawn (Hills, 2002: xxiii-xxv).

Modern media fandoms distinguish themselves from real-life societies in a few, crucial aspects. Most media fandoms resist surprisingly well against most social boundaries, including gender, race, religion, nationality, political affiliation, and profession. Fans view their fan communities in stark contrast with the 'mundane,' non-fan societies. In general, those members who are more conscious of this difference tend to make an effort to be more tolerant in fandom than in real life because of the similar tastes and preferences of the members of the fan group. This

tolerance is often visible in an effort to be inclusive towards particular interests, and to negotiate multiple, mutually exclusive opinions during fandom debates. Jenkins goes as far as claiming that fandom inspires unconditional acceptance, because the use of pseudonyms strips individuals of their mundane social status and redistributes it based on the quality of their contributions to the community (Jenkins, 1992b: 213).

Contrarily to this point of view, fan culture scholar John Fiske argues that fans are so entrenched in mundanes society that they reproduce its institutional structures in fandom. According to Fiske, far from being subversive, fan culture is but a form of popular culture that echoes many institutions of high culture. For instance, fandom offers multiple ways to accumulate cultural capital, which stands for financial capital in mundane societies. Those community members who demonstrate to possess more fannish knowledge than others acquire social prestige, which is usually rewarded by financial capital in mundane societies (Fiske, 1992: 32).

Hills warns against calling fandom an opposite counter-community to mundane societies. The fans themselves are caught in this inescapable contradiction. Fans tend to resist the norms of capitalist societies, specifically the fast turnover of new commodities, while simultaneously being interlocked in the fast, unforgiving economic and cultural processes of consumerism. As a matter of fact, from the producers' point of view, fans are ideal consumers. Media corporations can predict the fans' consumption habits with a high level of accuracy, as these are likely to remain stable in time (Hills, 2002: 5). This mostly explains why producers no longer view fans as irritating hyper-enthusiasts, but rather as loyal consumers to be acquired whenever possible and to be courted for as long as possible (p. 11). However, it is important to remember that fans demonstrate to possess strong anti-commercial, anti-corporation beliefs, visible first of all from their fan production, but also from their repositories of criticism and meta-discussions (p. 5).

In fact, fannish repositories of knowledge constitute a major element to distinguish fandoms from the rest of the consumers. In order to build and accumulate cultural capital, each fandom avails itself of accumulated, shared knowledge which fans may use to discuss the source text and rework its meaning in line with their interpretations. This creative re-reading eventually leads to the creation of norms, standards, aesthetic traditions, and lastly to new reworkings such as fan fiction. Fandom is unique in generating its own genres, and in developing its own alternative systems of production, distribution and consumption, with fan writers, artists, video-editors and musicians creating works that speak to the exclusive interests of their community.

However, this act of creation is not sanctioned by the copyright owners of the source products. This turns fan works into subversive acts towards the media industry's claim to own the copyrights of popular narratives. This defiant mindset arises out of the fans' belief that once

fictional characters start to circulate among the public, they also start to belong to the people, and not only to the artists who conceived them or to the copyright owners. Fandoms do not recognize the clear-cut lines between artists and consumers that copyright holders would like to see strictly enforced. All fans are potential creators of additional content, whose talent needs to be discovered, nurtured and promoted, since any fan holds the potential to be a great contributor to their community, even the smallest contributions add up to the fandom's cultural capital. Fandoms' penchant for the creation of unlicensed content led to the development of systems of distribution which reject profit, and to the customization of who can access which content in order to protect the fan works from the copyrights owners (Jenkins, 1992a: 279-280).

For example, before the age of the Internet, fan editors shipped art works directly to the fandom members who requested them (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 28). In contrast, nowadays most fan writers publish their works online (most often these works are public, they are available to any person with an Internet connection), but authors can choose to customize, up to a point, who can view their work. Needless to say, now as in the past, there is a number of ways in which these restrictions can be bypassed.

One of the reasons why copyright owners do not prosecute fan creators is that fandoms have no heart or center at which to strike to eradicate the 'problem' that they represent. Media fan communities usually lack an established hierarchy altogether (p. 41). For instance, American ethnographer Camille Bacon-Smith (1992), the person who can be said to have invented 'fan studies' as it is now circulated within institutions of knowledge, discusses at length how fan writers and editors in the 1980s would distribute works only to trusted acquaintances. The identity of many fan writers was so well-concealed that only a selected few knew their real identity. Moreover, at the time, the fandom rule that dictated not to show fan works to outsiders was adamant (p. 5).

Nowadays, the Internet has spread fandoms and their art works in an inscrutable, highly dispersed web, to the point that fandoms are too widespread to be studied comprehensively over short periods of time (Jenkins, 2006). Furthermore, the fans' own accounts of fandom life are strikingly scarce. Even in the most articulated anthropologic reports, when fans are asked to dissect and explain their engagement as members of a fandom, their wording leaves to think that they have trouble rationalizing their own fannish life. This might be the reflection of a wildly multi-faceted approach to the same source text, even in the same fandom (Hills, 2002: xxii).

As elusive as online fandoms can be, academics often discuss them as if they were a uniform, enclosed object of study. Any scholar who has approached any fandom methodically will agree that such generalizations are used pragmatically and that they ignore the extent to which fans may be simultaneously fans of very different media source texts (p. xii). This type of generalizations are

inevitable to discuss fandoms in an academic work, as they are usually utilized for the sake of offering the reader an easily comprehensible report. The same mechanism in fact is in place in this paper.

The multi-faceted nature of fandoms can be summarized by the description of fandoms by two media scholars. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006) discuss the fandom by calling it at times a “collective hive-mind,” a collective of individuals with a sort of communal spirit/consciousness. This collective consciousness holds some guidelines in high regard, they are the foundational principles of the collective and they rarely changed, even though most of the shared concepts are constantly re-negotiated.

Fandoms as collective hive-minds seem to be constantly aware of these few, crucial underlying principles. One of such principles is the negotiation of common knowledge among the infinite readings. Through endless, constant discussions and debates, the fans’ individual interpretations of the source text come together in one shared repository of knowledge. This mechanism does not imply universal cohesion and order though. Hellekson and Busse regularly remind that fandoms are “fragmented and fragmentary” groups, in constant dispute over their own terminology and tenets. In the study of fan culture, rather than privileging a particular interpretation as the most accurate, scholars are reminded that alternative and contesting readings can and must coexist (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 8).

### **0.9.1 Female fanatic domain: Women in fandom**

Fan culture ethnographers have repeatedly confirmed the assumption that fan fiction digital spaces, especially slash fan fiction, are dominated by women. Very few men are involved in the production and consumption of online media slash fan fiction (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Bury, 2005; Hellekson & Busse, 2006, 2014). Women organized themselves in communities resembling fandoms before the 1960s, when science fiction female fans started to congregate and share their enthusiasm together (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 17-18). However, it does seem that the germ of media fandoms as they are known today was planted by one fandom in particular, the *Star Trek* fandom.

The rise of the first media fandoms was not painless though. Bacon-Smith reports how in the 1970s and 1980s, women science fiction authors were admonished by their publishers about their affiliation to fan magazines. However, while a number of writers complied and distanced themselves from their supportive and playful fan community, a significant number adopted

pseudonyms and continued to contribute to their fandoms of choice in secret (p. 39). Homage ought to be paid then, to those women who defied social pressure in favor of the first media fandoms of modern times.

## **0.10 Fields of study**

After having described the object of study, the background information and the specific themes in focus of this thesis, it is time to address the methodology of this work. In fan studies, the choice of a methodology is arguably the main hurdle on the path of the researcher.

Much has changed within the field of fan studies since its inception. The bulk of these changes is a direct consequence of the rise of the Internet, which changed both fandom and the academic world (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 3). Even before the shift to the Internet, fan fiction communities have always been elusive. The most obvious reason is because fan fiction is a derivative, unsanctioned product and according to the copyright owners' wishes, it should not exist. Hiding one's own community under a significant amount of undisclosed terminology and of pseudonyms should be considered a partly conscious, partly unconscious defense mechanism. These are a couple of the few but well-structured defenses that fan fiction communities raise when they feel threatened by outsiders because of what they write. Because of this, it has always been fairly difficult to approach fandom from an academic environment.

During the course of 50 years of media and fan studies, fan fiction readers and writers have understandably feared misrepresentation. Fans are unfortunately used to be ridiculed by outsiders, who view them as foolish, delusional and aberrant. There is always the possibility that even scholars who have actively participated in fandom life for years may misrepresent their own and other fan communities. Consequently, fans are usually wary and reserved in front of researchers, even though ethnographic studies have been extremely useful in gathering a complete understanding of fan communities, since they quote the fans' words with few or no filters (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 244).

The earliest academic works in the field of fan studies are relatively recent, they are dated mid-1980s, and the range of methodologies utilized by early researchers is quite astounding. Theory of literature and communications studies have been used to examine the interaction between literary source narratives and its fans, to interpret the fans' literary production, and to reconstruct the fans' rhetorical strategies during the creative phase. Media, film and television studies replace theory of literature for visual source texts. Anthropology and ethnography have been fundamental in painting

a picture of fandom as a discreet, coherent, thriving sub-culture, as realistically as possible. Modern psychology has valiantly tried to investigate the fans' motivations to re-interpret their favorite narratives by interpreting the answers of ethnographic surveys and what transpires from the fan works. Law has been arguably the most vital field of study in fan studies, but it is also the discipline that has been utilized the least in reality. Law analyzes all the issues related to the derivative nature of fan fiction, specifically issues concerning copyright, parody and rights of fair use (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 1-2). This thesis mostly utilizes theory of literature and media studies for its arguments. However, anthropologic and ethnographic studies are also used in conjunction to media studies. The value of these disciplines in portraying fan fiction communities realistically is undeniable.

### **0.10.1 Methodologies**

Fan fiction does not lend itself to be understood thoroughly within a short period of time. On the contrary, in order to notice contradicting characteristics such as sexist and feminist themes in fan fiction for instance, the only great advantage for researchers is the development of a considerable amount of insider knowledge.

Even though in today's digital era most fan fiction is readily available, an insider knowledge of the workings of fan communities can only be gained throughout a long period of time, generally years. Because of this, many debates in this thesis are necessarily tinged with the subjectivity that follows such insider knowledge, although a balance between involvement and detachment is always preferable and prioritized.

This is a fundamental notion to retain during the reading of this paper. Many times, when fan fiction is mentioned in this work, the academic source does not specifically discuss fan fiction, but it has been adapted from its related argument to fit the subject matter. This methodology may find detractors within several academic circles, but in truth academic-fans are so rare that most of the academic works on fan fiction communities have been conducted from a clear-cut outsider perspective, which is by definition insufficient for portraying the inner workings of fan fiction communities.

Fans show an uncanny awareness of the opinions that both the mundane public and scholars hold about them, and regularly distance themselves from these perspectives (Harris, 1998: 6). Most of the times, scholars possess second-hand knowledge about fan culture, which usually shows in their explanations of fan terminology and in their initial surveys. Moreover, fan fiction's queer

stories attract so much attention that scholars tend to over-concentrate on them. In fact, the interest in queer fan fiction often goes to the detriment of other fan fiction subgenres, which are rarely studied in-depth (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 81).

As mentioned, fans become instantly wary of the presence of outsiders, especially if the researchers have never been involved in fandom life before. This awareness towards academics is often detrimental to the study, because when fans become hyper-aware of being the subjects of anthropologic and ethnographic surveys, they tend to filter their responses to avoid moral judgment.

Breaking the guideline of impersonal formality, I shall specify on my perspective about fan fiction. My decade-long experience of fan fiction communities led me to possess an insider's perspective, thus my approach to this thesis' object of study is based on an insider's point of view. I argue that my insider point of view is valuable because it gives me an insightful advantage into this topic. Scholarly accounts tend to be uniform in their seeking why fans read and write fan fiction, especially queer fan fiction, in their quest for a theory that can account for the phenomenon as a whole, even if they have to generalize. As a scholar-fan, I intend to conform this thesis to the regulative ideal of redacting a report as rationally and objectively as possible. It is visible in fact, throughout this work, the struggle for a careful, balanced presentation void of an excessive enthusiasm. I strived to tailor my account of fandom mores and fan fiction to the norms of academic writing (Hills, 2002: xxvii).

### **0.10.2 Fans' self-analysis and academic-fans**

The fans' capability of analyze their own communities and their own production tends to create different results than the researchers'. This is mainly due to the fans' subjective and deeply-felt engagement with the source text and with fan works.

The fans' introspective analysis also differs from the analysis conducted following formal rules. This is due to the fact that fans' consciously and unconsciously reject specialized, technical language that belongs to a clinical, judgmental approach. Fans do show a tendency to focus on subjective rather than normative explanations when they discuss fan fiction, which is a natural consequence of their insider perspective (Green et al., 1998: 13). Moreover, fans demonstrate to be very accepting of how fan writers and artists have their own reasons for creating what they create, which links back to the atmosphere of tolerance in most fandoms (p. 11). This multitude of subjectivity is why in popular culture studies, the figure of the academic-fan is as fundamental as it

is rare. Only the academic-fan can successfully parse through the chaos of fannish discussions, distinguishing honest self-analysis from parody.

American media scholar Henry Jenkins (1992, 2006) is a prime example of the figure of the academic-fan. Jenkins confessed that queer fan fiction inspired him to investigate aspects of masculinity that he would have never investigated otherwise. This led him to notice that fear of emasculation prevents emotional and physical closeness between men. Queer fiction, as viewed by Jenkins, is the representation of what could and would happen if social barriers between men disappeared. Writers of queer fan fiction of all ages and cultures do this regularly, though, they are able to bridge the gap between societal constraints and dormant desires. Queer fan fiction represents what same-sex friendship and companionship might look like in alternative, more tolerant, societies (Jenkins, 1993 in Green et al., 1998: 19). More importantly, Jenkins disclosed that by ‘confronting’ queer fan fiction and analyzing his own reaction towards it, he also confronted his own sexuality and discovered that he himself is queer (Jenkins, 1996 in Lee, 2003: 75-76).

Jenkins’ revelations are striking in their usefulness to explain this thesis’ approach to fan fiction. Jenkins’ self-reflection after his initial encounter with fan fiction is of paramount importance to understand the state of mind of many academic-fans. It may sound sensationalist and improbable, but the perception of gender and sexuality can be altered by the experience in fan fiction communities, almost as much as it is altered by the study of high literature.

Another characteristic that regularly strikes researchers is that fan fiction feels instantly familiar and nostalgic because its nature is of a derivative and communal storytelling practice. Fan fiction offers the impression of participating in a circle of storytellers who all in turn offer their personal impression on the same old and beloved narrative. Fan fiction is also contemporary because many of its source narratives are relatively new. This conflict between the old and the new inspires outsiders to inspect fan fiction more closely and more attentively, until its underlying themes, including the concerns about gender and sexuality, come to the surface.

The approach of this thesis to fan fiction follows Jenkins’ footsteps. Mostly because Jenkins himself declared that he writes simultaneously as an academic and as a fan. For the sake of clarity and realism, but also for the sake of remaining within the guidelines of an academic report, this work also intertwines a decade-worth of insider knowledge with a scrupulous, formal methodology.

Jenkins repeatedly warns against the dangers of over-identification towards one’s object of study, but he also contends that both an insider’s and an outsider’s position are hindered by numerous limitations in terms of insight, especially if the study is conducted by one researcher and not by a group (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 18-19). This thesis is the coronation of a lone research, therefore it shall inevitably suffer the limitations that one single person is subjected to. In terms of

insider knowledge, the limitations in place include not being able to witness every aspect of every fan fiction community, as this is humanly impossible. In terms of outsider knowledge, the limitations are bound to the academic sources that have been gathered to compile this work, in the measure that was possible by unchangeable financial and legal conditions.

The conflict between these two points of view, the insider and the outsider, is crucial in this thesis. What distinguishes the fan from the bystander is of course the level of emotional commitment, in this specific case the level of emotional commitment is reflected in fan fiction. On one hand, fans are too emotionally involved to analyze their own production objectively. On the other hand, bystanders are too detached to commit themselves fully to understand the inner workings of fan communities. Therefore, a middle way shall be preferable. However, it is important to highlight how difficult it is for insiders to take a step back and inspect their community from an outsider perspective (Bury, 2005: 36).

Because of this difficulty in balancing an insider and outsider perspective, this work calls upon personal experience as little as possible, as the consultation with more experienced researchers is always preferable. Although not all academic pursuits have worked to the benefit of the relationship between fan communities and the public at large. There are several gross misconceptions in higher institutions of knowledge regarding fan fiction, mostly because many researchers are not willing to approach the innermost corners of fandom, both because of a lack of personal motivation, and because of the unfathomable scope of online fandoms today.

Thirty years after feminist author Joanna Russ (1985) and media scholars Lamb and Veith alerted the world and the academia of the presence of explicit *Star Trek* fan fiction, it remains a largely scandalous phenomenon. When a researcher begins their investigation into the workings of fan fiction communities, polite, puzzled expressions are the standard reactions within their surroundings. Many scholars blur the picture of what they are researching with generic descriptions to stray their colleagues' assumptions, and avoid their negative opinions (Bury, 2005: 204). While still respecting the context of a Master's degree final paper, it is not the purpose of this thesis to veil its subject matter with linguistic subterfuges, as it implies that fan fiction is something to be ashamed of, and it is not.

This introduction was meant to be as brief, yet as inclusive as possible. The sections about the definitions of fan fiction and fandom, especially, need to be expanded early on in this thesis. This will be carried out more in-depth in the first and next chapter in order to offer the reader a complete

picture of the subject matter before delving into the themes of queerness and gendered behavior in fan fiction. Consequently, the first chapter shall reprise these topics and discuss them in details, with the fundamental aid of the works of scholars from the disciplines of theory of literature and media studies.

# **Chapter 1: Fan fiction and fandoms**

## **1.1 Reading and comprehension**

Institutions of the academic world do not easily recognize fan fiction as a literary phenomenon worthy of close analysis. However, in this thesis fan fiction will be addressed as a proper literary genre and thoroughly analyzed according to the parameters of a formal, academic work. This decision is not meant to hide the fact that fan fiction is undoubtedly an extremely peculiar genre. In order to smoothly introduce the reader of this thesis to fan fiction, this first chapter shall approach fan production from the point of view of literary studies. Since fan fiction comprises of stories about pre-existing narratives, a discussion about the role of the reader is of paramount importance. This first chapter thus begins with an inspection of the figure of the reader and of the reading process.

Memory and comprehension share a number of underlying structures. According to recent cognitive studies, what is recalled of a text does not consist of actual sentences, but is a reconstruction based on what was generally understood. This is due to the fact that memory for meaning is more accurate than memory for syntax. The reader's prior experience is summarized into arranging structures, or schemata, which provide the necessary framework to understand the text. A cognitive schema is activated when part of the input information matches part of the cognitive structure already in place. The schema prepares a general outline of the expected events, of the actions creating each event, the pre-existing conditions, the props, the roles and the expected results. Afterwards, the mind's general outline of events is filled with details from the text. However, if the reading process fails to fill the slots with the text's information, the pre-existing schema provides additional details from the reader's own background knowledge and experience. It is crucial to note that this step may be repeated ad infinitum by the reader's cognitive schema, therefore, pre-acquired information may always be altered by new information, and integrated with the old. Later on, the reader may not distinguish between what was provided by the text and what was supplied by the schema. This mechanism functions at every level of the text, for sentences but also for the overall meaning of a narrative (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986: 4-5).

Comprehension is commonly considered a process of simply deducing the meaning that the writer hid in the text. According to this viewpoint, the writer arranges his or her thoughts into words, and the reader's sole task is to extract the thought behind the words. This empiricist view of the reader's passive mind allows minimal room for active participation. Recent studies of the reading process from the field of cognitive science have led to several theories, such as the above-mentioned reading schemata theory. The topic of reading schemata is relevant for this work because

this cognitive structure explains how comprehension and memory are *active* processes instead of passive, where the external message and the person's background knowledge interact in complex ways (p. 10). This is exactly how reading schemata are relevant for fan fiction communities, especially this complexity during the comprehension process of a narrative.

Once the emotional participation of readers and viewers slips into 'fanatism,' the schema theory is relatable to the fandom at large. Fandoms' reading schemata are visible in concerted efforts such as online encyclopedias, where the building of meaning is based on a series of alternative and distorted readings accumulated by the community (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986: 10; Flynn & Schweickart, 1986: xii). However, this method of acquiring knowledge, the new information replacing the old, does not translate into a linear stock of notions that the fandom members accept at face value. This is visible in all the fandoms that possess a moderate knowledge of digital archiving. Veteran fans tend to preserve all the layers of information that the community has collected over time, because they know that this multi-layered repository of knowledge will help the community's identity in developing steadily and coherently (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986: 12). A relatively easy method to trace the history of a fandom's life, is to purview the fandom's repository of knowledge, the layers will be evident in any moderately old fan community. An even easier way to trace the creative life of a fandom is to read its fan fiction production over the years (Jenkins, 1992a). In fact, only in fan production the outsider may account for the pieces of the collective knowledge gathered by each fandom, because the result of the collective cognitive schema of all fandom members is the fan production itself (Jenkins, 1992a, 1992b).

This gathering of collective knowledge provides a major advantage to fandoms. Single individuals need to accumulate considerable amounts of knowledge and experience to develop a reliable and flexible cognitive schema, whereas dedicated, veteran fans can obviously benefit from first-hand experience. Novice fans do not need to learn all the collected knowledge, since it is shared and always available. The advantage of a fandom's repository of knowledge consists in having a privileged access to an incredibly vast pool of information, without straining their cognitive schemata on an individual level (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986: 12; Grossberg, 1992).

Another element of text comprehension theory is useful in the context of fan production: when the reading process is interrupted by unknown, new textual cues, the cognitive schema provides additional information so the comprehension process may proceed smoothly. In this case, what is hindering a smooth reading is a fallacy in the individual's background knowledge or experience. This mechanism, though, is also activated when the fallacy is found in the text itself (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986: 4-5). A person's cognitive schema supplies the necessary information to fill the gap, whether the gap was left intentionally or unintentionally by the author of the text.

Popular culture researcher Henry Jenkins (1992a, 1992b) firmly believes that fan productions are first engendered by the need to fill the gaps of the source narrative.

However, fans may become so used to browse and fill the gaps of the source narrative (as this is an enjoyable activity in fandom), they may even seek imaginary narrative gaps just to prolong their speculations. In such cases, the narration's shortcomings favored by fans to base their speculations on, are not inherent in the text, but are visible only in the particular interpretative strategies employed by fans in their production (Schweickart, 1986: 37).

### **1.1.1 Reader-response theory**

Until recently, literary studies regarded reading as a rather straightforward process. The reader reacted to the text and its stimuli as expected, and both the set of stimuli and the reaction remained the same for every reader across the years. However, this view was destabilized as readers started offering different and contradictory interpretations of the same text. Since then, the process of reading has become a dialogic amalgam of the text's intended meaning and the background knowledge that the readers bring into it. Thus, differences in comprehension between individuals becomes normal because of the differences in their backgrounds (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986: 3).

This diversity of interpretations threatened the doctrine of the text's objectivity, and what's more, it threatened the integrity of literary criticism as an academic discipline. As a consequence, reader-response criticism was born to stand at the forefront of literary studies, to aid the scholars in focusing on the reader and on the act of reading. In the 1970s and 1980s, popular culture scholars started to adopt reader-response theory for their research on audience responses. In the past, the proper interpretation for each text was singular, now there is a wealth of readings for every single narrative. Instead of a doctrine, reader-response criticism strives to develop and teach a sophisticated awareness of the way perspective influences literary comprehension and interpretation (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986: ix, xxi).

## **1.2 Fans as active readers**

Fans as active readers are so emotionally engaged in a narrative to the point that they feel compelled to actively rework the source text on their own terms. Several popular culture scholars

state that fans are rapidly becoming the media market's favorite readers and spectators to involve and interact with (Busse, 2009: 106). Therefore, this section shifts the argument of reader-response theory towards the sophisticated and highly demanding niche of readerships and media audiences commonly called 'fans.'

There are countless ways in which a specific narrative may be interpreted and reworked by its audience, as individuals constantly struggle to make sense of the text itself and its world. Audiences are constantly constructing their own cultural environment from any cultural resource at their disposal. They are not cultural simpletons, many of them are quite aware of their own status in structures of power, as well as of the ways in which cultural inputs can manipulate them. Furthermore, popular culture audiences should not be considered homogenous entities: there are numerous differences within and between the various subgroups of the popular culture audience. Audiences do not normally engage with a single cultural text, or even with only one genre or medium. Culture is communicated through a broad range of texts, genres, media and codes simultaneously. The same text can be located in a number of different contexts, and in each context it will leave different impressions on its audience. Only transformative fans actively and regularly shift the same text from its original context into countless others (Grossberg, 1992: 53-54).

Fans are active, producerly consumers of knowledge: they are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, viewers who also participate. Fans produce meanings and interpretations, art-works, communities, alternative identities and much more (p. 52). Fans are used to draw on materials from their media of choice and employing them to serve their own interests and accommodate their own pleasures. Fans' consumer reception goes beyond temporary comprehension of the source text, towards a more permanent form of meaning-production, including writing stories, composing songs and videos, and drawing pictures. It is mostly the social and cultural context which differentiates the fannish mode of reception from other reading and viewing styles: this unique social and cultural context is the fandom (Jenkins, 1992b: 208, 210, 214).

### **1.2.1 Women fans as active readers**

It is universally acknowledged by the vast majority of fan culture researchers that most fan fiction communities are populated by young girls and women (see for example Russ, 1985 and Bacon-Smith, 1992). Therefore, the element of the gender of fan readers bears a significant importance in this study, therefore it shall be now addressed according to its prevalence in a work which strives to uncover the conscious and unconscious ideologies in fan fiction.

The most obvious instance of women fans as active readers is when they disrupt the producer-consumer path as they manipulate male-authored characters and re-write them with additional, original material, in reflection of their own tastes. This has always been a revolutionary move by women readers and spectators because for centuries women have been objects of fetishism, in the psychosexual and socioeconomic arenas, trapped in the historical Madonna/whore binary. Predominantly female fan fiction communities are populated by women who actively struggle against the constraints of fetishism, putting their psychosexual needs first, which is an aspect that shall remain relevant throughout this paper (Busse, 2009: 106).

Fan culture breaks the fetishistic gaze because readers and viewers intentionally become writers and artists, and the original producers of content unintentionally become readers and viewers. The fans transform the text from a clear-cut, finished narrative into a free-for-all sandbox, a fertile ground for community interaction and creative production where there are no clear-cut boundaries. The community interaction and the creative production themselves become indistinguishable, as fan works generate commentary and meta-criticism, and criticism and fan theories merge into fan works. Most notably, profit turns into a gift culture in a dynamics that makes fans look as if they are questioning capitalism while nonetheless participating and enriching capitalist societies (ibid).

It is crucial to remind here that even though the ‘good’ fan identity of the active reader is usually constructed against the ‘bad’ passive consumer, this is a rather simplistic binary. Cultural identities are not performed through binary oppositions such as fan writers/consumers, but rather through multiple overlapping layers. A more reasonable contrast would be the one between the communitarian ‘us,’ the fans, and ‘them,’ any external threat. This multi-layered cultural identity blurs any supposed boundary between ‘powerful’ and ‘powerless’ in the fandoms/corporations binary, and between ‘subjugated’ and ‘resistant’ in the fans/consumers binary (Hills, 2002: 3).

Having defined the particular anti-fetishism counter-gaze of women fans, it is time to link back to reader-response theory. The first signs of the recognition of a prevalently female readership appeared in eighteenth century literary magazines. This recognition by the literary establishment marks the emergence of women as consumers of literature. Yet, most women readers tended to be deemed less-educated than male readers (and they often were), thus a significant number of early literary magazines addressing a female audience were didactic in nature (Shevelov, 1986: 107).

In the context of fandom, it may be beneficial to compare a fandom’s source narrative with eighteenth and nineteenth century didactic texts. The didactic text is a text aimed at teaching readers how they ought to behave. Admonitory narratives for young girls and boys are ideal examples of

didactic texts, although any literary or visual story may contain didactic elements. The required cognitive structure to read didactic texts is not only based on literary interpretation, but on the complete introjection of hortatory social norms. The social and historical context brought to the surface by the narrative voice of the didactic text creates a rhetorical message activated during the reading process. The rhetorical effect is based not only on the content of the narrative, though, but also on the readers' introjection of the content's social frame. If the readers have correctly introjected their society's norms, they will read the didactic text as it is supposed to be read, absorbing it properly (p. 121). In the case of patriarchal societies' male-authored texts, the narrative voice is the authority of the paternal voice, whose rhetoric carries a different tone for female readers as opposed to males. One of the causes for this difference rests in the identification bond between father and son, which usually translates into a man-to-man business tone, as the son is supposed to grow up in his father's image and inherit the father's estate and responsibilities (pp. 109-110).

Male-authored didactic narratives tend to empower male characters and victimize female characters, as this often denotes a lack of identification with female readers, visible in less rounded female characters. The opposite situation tends to be true for female-authored narratives (p. 110). Literary theorist Elizabeth Flynn (1986) ascertained that within the interaction between the text and the reader, there are several levels of engagement. A novice reader may fail to resolve seemingly conflicting patterns in the narration, or may dismiss seemingly uninteresting characters, images and details of the narrative. Evaluation of details, in particular, is hazy in the interpretation process, until the reader achieves a balance between detachment and involvement. According to Flynn's findings, excessive detachment often results in excessive judgment, hence domination *of* the text, while excessive involvement often results in excessive sympathy, hence domination *by* the text. Readers who dominate the text have resisted its meanings and are mostly unchanged by the encounter. Whereas readers who submit to the text have allowed its meanings to become so powerful that the individual's contribution to the construction of the meaning is effaced. Once readers are able to integrate their framework of experience and knowledge with the newly acquired knowledge of the text through critical evaluation, comprehension and learning are achieved (Flynn, 1986: 270).

Taking control of the reading experience means reading the narrative as it was *not* meant to be read, in fact it is reading the narrative against its intended pattern. More precisely, readers must identify the nature of the choices of wording and, equally important, what readings the text precludes (Schweickart, 1986: 50). This mechanism of anti-reading is a natural trait in fandoms. For instance, queer fan fiction is the subversively reworked product of heterocentric narratives. Thus, queer fan fiction writers can be said to dominate the text because they read the characters' sexuality against the original authors' intentions (Busse, 2009: 106; Leavenworth, 2009: 442).

It is immediately evident how the fans' producerly interaction with their source material is founded on their active participation in the construction of meaning during the process of reading. Frequently, fans may be viewed as extremely assiduous active readers, who endeavor to identify with as many characters as possible, formulating hypothesis about the characters' untold fictional lives, and altering their accumulated knowledge every time new information is processed (Flynn, 1986: 269-270).

Fan audiences usually attract academic attention when large numbers of fans seem to fail in finding a balance between detachment and involvement. Extended research, however, has unearthed the tendency that fan writers consistently show a remarkable balance between these two opposites. The 1980s and 1990s saw cultural studies researchers struggling to admit that popular culture audiences are active, critically aware, and discriminating. Fan works can be both critical of various elements in the source material, indicating that fans can easily dominate and judge the text, while also displaying strong enthusiasm, indicating close identification (Jenkins, 2002: 1).

It is worth noting that nowadays the majority of fan fiction retrievable in popular digital archives is penned by women, based on prevalently male-authored narratives, and it tends to focus on male characters, with predominantly women stories being rare exceptions (see for example Russ, 1985 and Bacon-Smith, 1992). These characteristics show that women fans actively attempt to identify with fictional characters regardless of the characters' or the author's gender. This leads to the conclusion that the fans' level of engagement with their source material is extremely complex.

Different levels of engagement may be readily visible in fan stories. Egregious fan writing, in fact, denotes a balance in the writers' identification with the characters, of the same and of the opposite sex, but also a balance in fannish enthusiasm. A fan writer's high enthusiasm for the source material does not automatically engenders skillful fan production, rather the contrary is usually true, a measure of detachment aids a clearer interpretation. In this situation, fannish engagement with any text is similar to that of the average subject of reader-response criticism surveys (Flynn, 1986; Jenkins, 2002).

Fans train themselves to become very attentive towards all sorts of narrative gaps and inconsistencies in order to detect and act on all the possible opportunities for the creation of new fan stories. Experienced fan writers are used to exercise this skill in any situation. This strategy is comparable to what Bacon-Smith describes as 'talking story' and Baym (1998) as 'speculation.' Today, this practice can be witnessed every time fans exchange tropes, prompts, plot lines and character analysis in the entries of their digital journals, in the elusive messages of instant micro-blogging websites, in chat-rooms, as well as in the comments or reviews of any fan story (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 159; Baym 1998: 119).

## 1.2.2 Fans as subversive readers

Fannish active reinterpretation may not always be subversive, but it mainly pivots on subcultural re-appropriation and counter-hegemonic negotiations of meanings and of creative rights. The most visible instances of this subversiveness are the debates about fair use of copyrighted material, and the continuous discussion of themes that are overlooked in the source texts, such as gender equality, racism and queer identities (Benshoff, 1998: 201).

The subcultural re-appropriation of mainstream material is plainly evident in light of the overwhelming percentage of female fans in fan fiction communities. Jenkins asserts that fan fiction is an ideal literary genre for the subordinate minorities, as it arises out of a mixture of fascination and frustration towards the source text (Jenkins, 1992b: 213). As a matter of fact, even nowadays official statistics show a worryingly small percentage of women as producers of content in mainstream media, in comparison to the large percentage of women in fandom. These statistics led several media scholars to claim that frustration and disappointment may play a more important role than Jenkins supposes in the creation of fan fiction (Derecho, 2006: 71).

Another element which supports the argument of the subversiveness of the active fan reader resides in the risk of legal repercussions for fan fiction authors. Historically, fan adaptations have entailed significant risks for women fans. Online fan fiction, regardless of the gender of the writer, is constantly under threat of legal prosecution, and many administrators of fan fiction archiving websites have been issued cease-and-desist letters, that is to say warnings intimating to remove the stories from the Internet. Therefore, even the most lavishing, socially conservative fan fiction defiantly resists corporate control and constitutes a reclamation of the transformative readers' rights (p. 72).

Asserting one's own reading strategies can be extremely empowering, especially for women readers because of their aforementioned subordinate (in)visibility in mainstream media (Harris, 1998: 42). Fan stories featuring male characters, in fact, do not only delve into male psychology but also into male physiology. By writing fan fiction, especially about visual source narratives, women authors place the body, indeed their body, at the center of the stage, and assert authority onto it, reclaiming it for themselves. In the same way, they assert authority on the physicality of the male characters, much like a director with their cast, or a puppeteer with their puppets. With the plethora of female characters reduced to objectified bodies in mainstream media, fan fiction offers women writers the liberating possibility to do the same to male characters (Coppa, 2012: 213-214, 216).

However, even if fandoms are constantly reclaiming cultural content, control over such content does not naturally follow (Grossberg, 1992: 53-54). After all, the shift from passive consumer to active fan occurs in contemporary consumerist societies. This shift cannot occur in any other social space, simply because there appears to be no other space available for fans to build and anchor their affections into. In turn, the consumer industry increasingly exploits the audience's longing for fantasies and pleasures with an exponentially increasing number of attractive popular culture contents (Fiske, 1992: 47; Grossberg, 1992: 63).

A peculiar aspect of fan writers' active reading, as Bacon-Smith points out, is that closure does not make sense to fans, both in the source text and in fan works. Fan authors feel that, after the end of the story, the characters' lives continue in the yet-not-written fan text. The characters age, face new challenges and crises, mold their lives around their relationships, and grow old together in a loosely-knit fabric of experience. Whether this is a complete fantasy or a projection of the fan authors' lives or wishes, only the writers themselves know, but this is what transpires from many fan works (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 64).

Related to subversiveness, a peculiar aspect of the fannish reading process is decidedly gendered, and echoes Jenkins' theory of women's paradigmatic reading in opposition to men's syntagmatic reading (Jenkins, 1992a: 109, 113). More evident with visual source texts such as videogames, theatre plays, musicals, movies and television series, it is theorized that slash authors have always paid less attention to images devoid of meaningful content that are geared to appeal to female viewers, such as handsome looks for instance. On the contrary, slash authors are extremely attentive to actions still void of plot-related content that are geared to appeal to them, but instead carry interpersonal significance, such as body language. The fan authors' heightened level of concentration for seemingly inconsequential gestures is what elevates the homoerotic potential from its status of subtext in the source text to the level of text in fan fiction. In other words, fan fiction writers and readers are not used to interpret scenes and lines of source narrative as romantic or erotic based on the level of nudity or on explicit phrases. Rather, the observation of glances, body language and disposition between equally emotionally engaged characters is the principal mode of reading. Fan writers connect these cues into a pattern which spans the whole source narrative, and even its transmedia expansions, and utilize it as the base material for fan fiction. Writers then rearrange the pattern and add to it as they wish in the actual plot of their works (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 183-184, 196).

In the case of women fan authors, the perceived intimate relationship between the characters of the source text is usually based on women's cultural definition of intimacy. The fetishism of mainstream media and the genital fetishism in mainstream erotica seem to indicate that a patriarchal

society holds sexual power in high regard and intimacy in low regard. There is little representation, in mainstream media, of the daily concerns of young couples or of families, from the daily care of children to house chores, and there seems to be no representation of such mundane aspects in pornography. Displaying these ordinary matters is not a concern for most producers of popular culture narratives. However, they are often displayed in fan fiction, and the interpersonal meaning of small gestures and sounds is greatly amplified (pp. 193, 195).

### **1.3 Transmedia storytelling**

Related to the active cultural consumption is transmediality, which can also be discussed under different monikers. Media culture scholar Louisa Ellen Stein and gender studies researcher Kristina Busse (2012) address the phenomenon as *transmedia storytelling*, whereas media studies scholar Paul Booth (2010) calls it ‘New Media’ and ‘interactive media’ strategy.

Transmediality occurs when the plot of a narrative is distributed through multiple, different media. Henry Jenkins (2006) describes this transmediality as the spread of a narrative across a number of products including comics, light novels, movies, cartoons and games. Sometimes the time of distribution of the different products does not coincide, but for proper transmediality to occur it should. For instance, consuming a television series is no more an activity that is confined to a monitor screen, but is often expanded through the Internet. Details of the plot of many action movies are explained and stretched in videogames. Light novels can be transposed and continued in the form of comics, which can be later animated. Any starting point of this cycle can finish anywhere else, there are no pre-established paths in transmediality, nor there is a rule that a plot can be transposed in each media only once.

Transmedia storytelling necessitates of an active viewership to be prompted in motion. More precisely, for transmediality to occur there needs to be individuals who are willing and knowledgeable enough to seek a franchise across several media in order to consume as much of the plot as possible or to understand the original plot completely. This type of readers and viewers is also motivated enough to discuss the source text together, reinterpreting and rearranging it in fan works (Jenkins, 2006; Stasi, 2006: 119; Lamerichs, 2012: 181). This process of reinterpretation and rearrangement does not posit that the source text remains a separate entity from fan works. The single fan stories can be considered nodes in an intertextual web which the source text is still part of. The source text is reworked according to a postmodern, heteroglossic, intertextual sense of narrative

and many copyright owners are realizing this fact and accepting that this is a process that they can benefit from (Stasi, 2006: 119).

A growing number of mainstream content producers are training themselves to think and create across media, especially big media corporations are toiling to expand the venues of their narratives as widely as possible (Gray, 2009: 104). Since fans play a significant role in the consumption of mainstream cultural products, media producers have started to court fandoms into actively participating and contributing in many small ways (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 16). This new dynamic has inspired excitement both from creators of content, who can seize the opportunity for revolutionizing storytelling methods and scopes, and from the audiences, seeking to renegotiate their relationship with media corporations in a more entertaining, participatory way (Fiske, 1992: 47; Gray, 2009: 104). For instance, some television networks and some publishers provide hyperlinks on their products. These hyperlinks lead the viewers or the readers to a website for further insights, plot details, anticipations, additional background, depth of characterization and an overall sense of that inside knowledge which fans crave (Lamerichs, 2012: 181; Jamison, 2013: 99).

There are also television networks that encourage a dual-viewing experience, so that the consumption of the program is complete with the on-going discussion online, especially on micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter. These second screens are utilized to create a communal viewing experience during which the fandom members can discuss characterization and plot twists in real time (Jaclyn & Geidner, 2014: 400-401).

Transmediality has also been the cause of concern because there are corporations who view transmedia solely as a source of profit. This narrow point of view does not take into account the wish of fans to know more about the original plot and characters or to collect additional details about the source text, and very often the overall quality of the transmedia cycle is lowered. Without additional content, the new transpositions are merely repetitions of the original text in other forms, which may alienate fans altogether. Inevitably, the capitalization of the transmedia cycle ends up thwarting more creative competitors, re-establishing the binary of producers/consumers and endangering the fans' interest towards the source text (Fiske, 1992: 47; Gray, 2009: 104).

The Internet is crucial to transmedia storytelling because its hypertextuality forces the user to reconsider and explore the text's boundaries (Sandvoss, 2007: 23). Film studies scholar Francesca Coppa (2006) argues that fan fiction is incredibly appealing to dedicated fans precisely because of its transmedia nature. Essentially, fan fiction can be viewed as a mixture of textual, visual and performative genres, it can turn any visual and performative product into a literary text and fan fiction is in itself a theatrical, performative product, since fan authors direct a cast of characters according to their own scripts (Coppa, 2006). It may be argued that re-appropriative fans

such as fan fiction writers, do not represent an abnormal part of normal audiences and readerships, but rather a transmedia self-aware, postmodern avant-garde (Benshoff, 1998: 201).

## **1.4 Literary magma: the fan text**

For all the academic interest in fans and in their alternative reading practices, most scholars who approach fandom focus most of their efforts on fan production. Literary fan works, called fan fiction, may not be the most evident form of fan production, this position may be granted to fan-produced visual artworks, known as ‘fan art.’ However, fan fiction is undoubtedly the form that regularly attracts scholarly attention and that is bestowed with extensive, in-depth studies. This is mainly due to the fact that, thanks to fan stories, scholars may delve deeply into fandom mentality and explore the fannish psyche in all its congruities and idiosyncrasies. As the focus of this thesis is the examination of such fandom congruities and idiosyncrasies in fan fiction, this and the rest of the chapter’s sections are crucial for a proper introduction into this unique literary genre.

Fan fiction can be first contextualized in a broad sense: the fan text. The fan text is a basic concept in the understanding of fan fiction, it stands at the foundation of fan fiction. Rather than copying the meanings of media content, fan writers creatively fashion meanings that are a mixture of the source text’s meanings, fandom criticism and their own personal interpretations and original content (Lindlof et al., 1998: 221). More precisely, fan writings are built upon the fandoms’ interpretive practices, taking the collective meta-text as the base from which to generate a wide range of stories (Jenkins, 1992a: 156). The fan text is a continuous work in progress: it is the genesis of fan stories and the critical commentary written in a fandom, and it offers a prime opportunity to understand the lifestyle and workings of each fan community (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 7).

A mental image that shall aid in picturing the importance of the fan text is that fan authors do not just write fan fiction, they also produce their own criticism of the source text. Fans construct this layer made of critical accounts using primarily the theoretical approach of media studies and literary criticism. Fans analyze the source texts, they analyze each other’s criticism and they even analyze their methodology to find more accurate ways to theorize about their favorite plots, settings and characters. This is part of what constitutes the fan text. The fan text is not only fan fiction, fan art, head-canons and so on, it is primarily a literary magma underneath fan production that fans may or may not be conscious of (Hills, 2002: xxxiii).

From this preliminary definition, the parallelism between the fan text and folkloric storytelling may be already evident. This is the main reason why British poet Sheenagh Pugh (2005) indicates fan fiction as a “democratic genre,” since every fan reader or viewer is a writer-to-be, and because fan fiction abhors societal restraints. This parallelism between fan fiction and folklore is based on the foundational concept that myths and folklore are generally felt to belong to the population at large, rather than to one single person or to a minority. Since they are characterized by this collective nature, both myth and folklore offer their readers or listeners the freedom to interpret the narrative as they wish (Pugh, 2005: 10). In the past, when ancestral audiences wished for more of their favorite myths, they took inspiration from one or more elements of the source narrative and spawned their own. There was no ‘derivative’ storytelling, nor were ancestral readers and listeners ‘appropriating’ material, since the first official law on copyrights was compiled in modern times. As a matter of fact, the Statute of Anne, also known as the Copyright Act, is dated 1710.

In the same spirit, individuals write fan fiction because they wish for more of their beloved narrative (p. 19). The feeling of bereavement at the end of a book, a movie, a theatre play, a videogame, etcetera, eventually leads to imagery in a person’s mind which keeps the characters alive and explores alternative scenarios. This feeling, though, is not only related to loss. Sometimes readers and viewers feel frustrated by what they are reading, watching, or playing. What appeared to be a flawless character later reveals itself inadequate in contrast to what the fans’ imagination anticipated, thus they feel entitled to disregard certain aspects of the source narrative and modify the settings, rewrite some plot developments, and attribute different traits to the characters (p. 16).

This instinct to modify is actually a drive to retain the characters in their ‘original’ state as long as possible. The fans’ emotional investment in the source text engenders a heightened attention to details, consistency and continuity that sparks a sense of alarm whenever the fans perceive a negative change in their beloved characters, resulting in their attempts to mend what is perceived as an error. This mechanism often clashes with the source text’s creators’ need to narrate new stories to gain the interest of new readers/spectators/gamers. When fans begin to build an imagined infrastructure of expected plot developments, characterizations and background stories, if the source text’s creators turn the source text into a direction that the fans believe is detrimental to it, the fans retaliate with harsher debates and an outpouring of critical fan production (Hills, 2002: 4). These interpretations born from fannish debates, all the different possible outcomes of the source text (also known as ‘head-cans’) constitute a major, foundational element of fan fiction (Pugh, 2005: 16).

In regard to these subversive reinterpretations, a parallel shall be drawn between folklore and fan fiction. This parallel makes sense in so far as the use of folklore is related with the feeling

of disregard of transformative fans towards copyright owners. The fans possess a visceral, unconscious belief that any narrative is a popular narrative, it belongs to the people. The source text is known by its most dedicated fans, and especially by fan authors, as precisely as myths and folktales were once commonly known. Moreover, many fan communities tend to intertwine the official narrative of the source text and their fan elaborations in a dialogic web of references, as in the past was done with folktales. The source text is the narrative matrix upon which fans construct their own interpretations and stories. The two interact in complex, unfathomable ways in fandom life: the source text is by definition distinct and fixed, while the fan text is hazy and ever-changing (p. 26). It is important to keep in mind that fans build this collective understanding as *insider* knowledge, and that the longer individuals participate in the discussions of their fandoms, the longer they train themselves to introject the cognitive conventions of those fandoms. This mechanism is more strictly applied to fan works. Fan fiction, as the manifestation of the fan text, finds its specific traditions, tropes, aesthetics and functions within the fan community (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 48). Due to the fandoms' usually tolerant attitude towards diverse interpretations, these can be often contradictory yet complementary to one another and the source text, even within each fandom. Fans do not seem to find contradictory interpretations as problematic, since they read the source text through the filter of the multiple and diverse reinterpretations and characterizations already existing and circulating in fannish discussions (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 7).

This multi-layered, fannish understanding sheds light on another characteristic of the fan text: the creation of a strong sense of community, which has been theorized to be slightly different for men and for women (Booth, 2010: 104). For men, the confirmation of the self is generally perceived in separation, in rising above and moving away from the crowd. The importance of this separation is carried onto literature, with the formulation of literary canons based on works that stand apart and above the 'literary mass'. In contrast, fan fiction invites the integration of the single work into a common matrix, and fan writers are usually conscious of their group effort; many of them know that they write in a community and most of them relish in this aspect of fan production. Furthermore, fan creativity lies not necessarily in how a writer's work stands apart from the fandom's aesthetics, but in how the authors avail themselves of the fan text to offer their own version of the story. Usually, evaluations of the quality of fan fiction depend both on *whether* and *how* the fan story contrasts or aligns with the source material (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 56-57)

In addition to its ever-changing state, another postmodern aspect of the fan text resides in its ever-expanding nature. The canvas of variations which constitutes the fan text is constantly edited, every new addition changing the entirety of the interpretations (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 7). Media studies scholar Abigail Derecho (2006) calls fan fiction *archontic*, a term derived from Jacques

Derrida's notion of the archive. Derrida's archive is forever open to new entries, new artifacts, new contents and is driven by the archontic principle to gather knowledge, to augment itself, never remaining stable or still for long. In Derecho's view, the archontic fan text invites new artists and writers to poach with it. The fans select specific items that they find suitable for their needs, then they create new artifacts using these tropes, and finally they deposit the items back into the fan text's archive with the addition of their personal interpretation (Derecho, 2006: 65).

Interestingly, the fan text of many fandoms mostly focuses on the characters of the source narrative. Bacon-Smith was one of the first scholars to point this out: even for visual narratives, the fans' interest does not focus on the performers, but ranks almost always second to an interest in the characters they portray (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 36-37). Jenkins expands this viewpoint by aligning male fans' interpretive practices to a syntagmatic horizontal line, collecting details and plot lines. On the contrary, women fans' interpretive practices are compared to a paradigmatic vertical line, focusing on the characters' psychology and motivations (Jenkins, 1992a: 109, 113). This is why in predominantly female-populated fandoms there is a high interest about characterization, rather than plot or settings.

These paragraphs on the definition of fan text may erroneously have offered the illusion that the fan text is a clear-cut concept within fandom and in the academia. However, the sole term 'fan text' shall not be expected to appear anywhere outside of some academic reports. The fan text is a concept that some researchers have coined to easily explain fandom mentality and fan fiction. In ordinary discussions amongst fans, the fan text is most commonly referred either as the 'Canon', that is to say the source text, or as 'head-canons' or 'Fanon', that is to say the fans' musings about the source text. Fans appear to use these terms interchangeably, and the flow of fannish conversations is rarely halted by this characteristic because the interlocutors normally can deduce what the terms are referring to from contextual cues. Because of this, it is obvious that outsiders will initially find fannish discussions very obscure.

Fandom-specific terms such as 'Canon' and 'Fanon' are expanded in the glossary, but a brief example from actual fan stories shall be helpful for a smooth comprehension of the preceding paragraph. As mentioned, there are fandoms of just about any cultural product of high and low culture. There are fandoms also of podcast series. A podcast is the digital version of a radio program. It is an audio-only recording that is distributed to its intended audience by uploading the audio files on the Internet. Many podcast series nowadays are distributed entirely for free, the audience members only have to pay for their Internet connection. The producers and the voice actors and actresses make a profit from a number of gadgets such as pins, mugs, t-shirts, spin-off novels, and from the fee of the tickets for any live event.

In this example, the fandom of a podcast shall be utilized. A thriving fandom arose quickly from the paranormal, nonsense podcast series titled *Welcome To Night Vale* (Fink & Cranor, 2012-) since the summer of 2012. What is relevant about this fandom is that the fans have very little to no visual reference for their musings, not even illustrations or maps that many literary fandoms can boast. This gives a wide leeway for fan artists to work on. Moreover, belonging to the genre of nonsense, *Night Vale* fans can benefit from an infinite number of head-canons, since there are very few concepts that would not belong in their visionary source text. In the fan fiction community of *Welcome To Night Vale* it is not unusual to find author's notes such as the following:

Title from *Space Dog* by Tori Amos because she seemed surreal enough for this. I'm writing this having only really dipped my toes into the edges of the fandom, so, sorry if my voices/fanon are off. I've been working very hard with transcripts and the wikia to get my actual information at least *mildly* accurate. [...] Features a f\*\*\*load of my personal headcanon, so, yeah (paperclipbitch, 2013).

In this author's note at the beginning of the story titled *Lemon Pie – He's Coming Through* (2013), the author discloses a few ordinary elements of the fan text. First, the author warns about their inexperience in the specific fandom of *Welcome To Night Vale*, pre-emptively protecting themselves from negative judgment.

The "voices" of the quote stands for characterization, as fans are extremely attached to the source text's characters, and fan stories are judged based on the quality of their characterization. Judging from this quote, the author might seem a bit confused because they liken characterization and fanon elements instead of opposing them. However, the reason resides in the fact that the first two seasons of the *Night Vale* podcast are narrated almost exclusively by one person, so the *Night Vale* fandom only had one voice to base all their characterizations at the time. Second, the author discloses how they had to draw mostly from fandom resources, in this case fan-written transcripts of the recordings and a fan-created, fan-regulated digital encyclopedia (ibid). These are practical instances of the fan text. Transcripts, online encyclopedias, fannish conversations, are but fragments of a cultural magma that a few zealous, creative members turn into stories. It is also relevant the absence of the words 'fan text' in the quote, and the presence of "fanon" and "headcanon" instead. This shall prove that 'fan text' is a formal term coined by outsiders, while 'fanon' and 'headcanon' are the proper fannish terms that fan authors and readers utilize.

## 1.5 Defining fan fiction

There are several slightly different definitions of fan fiction among popular culture and literary studies scholars, but there seems to be a general agreement on a few elements, though the following order is not indicative of a hierarchy.

First, fan fiction is *derivative* (another common term is *transformative*) genre, fan writers ‘steal’ characters, settings, and plots from source texts. Secondly, fan fiction is *unsanctioned*, fan writers do not ask for permission from the copyright owners of the source texts to utilize their trademarked content. In 1992 Henry Jenkins introduced Michel de Certeau’s term ‘poaching’ to describe the fans’ re-elaboration of cultural capital and appropriate it (Jenkins, 1992a; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 10). Finally, fan fiction is *nonprofit*, fan authors are not expected to receive money by using borrowed copyrighted material without permission, as this is illegal. This is a characteristic which is inherent of fan fiction but remains extraneous to professional pastiche, such as published *Sherlock Holmes* stories. The nonprofit nature of fan fiction first became public knowledge thanks to the visibility of the *Star Trek* fandom in the 1980s through the essays of Russ, Lamb and Veith, and Bacon-Smith’s monograph.

### 1.5.1 The context of fan fiction

Fan fiction is not only peculiar because of the literary characteristics of the genre, it is a unique form of literature also because of its context of production. Contrarily to marketed literature, fan fiction authors do not write in solitude. Fan fiction may be viewed as the product of fandom debates about the fictional universe and its characters. Any fannish interaction may spun stories, alternate scenarios, and one or more interlocutors involved in the discussion may at any moment expand the topic into a full story, using the arguments of that discussion as the basis for the new narrative (Pugh, 2005: 41). Even when a fan story counts only one author, that story most likely was not born from one mind in complete isolation from the fandom. Fan writers compile prototypes of their stories from and in ordinary fannish discussions, and many write their works with their intended audience in mind, too. This implies a communal sense of authorship, even if the story sports only one author. Often a fan story is created as a mere expression of the author’s personal tastes and desires, but there is always a sense that the author is attempting to fulfill the community’s interests and preferences at least in part (p. 119).

There is a fundamental underlying *raison-d'être* for fan fiction. Fan fiction occurs because the readers and viewers of a story refuse to let it end the way its original authors chose (p. 31). Fans may also perceive that the original authors of their favorite narrative failed in certain ways, thus fan fiction becomes an outlet that the fans can use to resolve the source text's gaps and inconsistencies (as they perceive them). In the end, motivations for writing fan fiction may vary greatly from person to person. Fans write stories to pursue a political agenda, to spread messages implied in their words, they may parody, satirize or criticize certain aspects of the source text, or they may simply want or need to confess something in a literary form that they already enjoy and are familiar with (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 6).

### **1.5.2 Warning the readers: tags and spoilers**

Like any other literary genre, fan fiction is divided into genres and subgenres. It is extremely important in fandom etiquette that fan fiction genres and subgenres are divided properly. Unlike commercial fiction, this clear and transparent description of the content of the stories often leads to anticipations (commonly called 'spoilers') about the plot or about the characterization. And yet, curiously, this does not alienate the readers. In fact, fan readers prefer to be warned in advance whether their favorite or least favorite genres are present in the work that they are about to read. Correctly labeling fan stories is crucial for a proper categorization of a fandom's cultural capital within online archives (Jamison, 2013: 23).

Since all fan stories quoted in this thesis are hosted online, it shall be useful to list the main warnings of the most popular international fan fiction digital archives. LiveJournal.com hosts blogs, but these blogs can be privately used by one individual, or they can be open blogs, so to speak, where any approved contributor can add content. The latter type of blog is called a community, and every fan fiction community possesses its own rules and its own guidelines for publishing fan fiction. This makes the website LiveJournal a very sophisticated archive to browse for fan fiction, since every single fandom can be dispersed in an infinite number of communities. This is truly a pity for academic works focusing on fan fiction. LiveJournal is an incredibly thriving and creative fannish environment, but the structure of the website renders its content very difficult to browse and categorize neatly. This makes quoting general rules from LiveJournal impossible, since these rules would not apply to every fan fiction community hosted there.

Nonetheless, LiveJournal is such a staple of online fan fiction communities that it is worth listing at least a couple of samples. The ever-popular *Sherlock Holmes* community called `dispatch_box` uses the following format:

If you're posting a fic to the board, we request that you use the following form (simply cut and paste it into the 'update journal' window). Fanfic Title: / Authors [sic] Name: / Rating: / Pairings (if any): / Challenge Response/Individual Fic: / Synopsis: / Advisories: / Story Link or LJ Cut: / For ease of use, ratings are the same as those outlined by the Motion Picture Association of America (`dispatch_box`, 2017).

This is a very common format for LiveJournal fan fiction communities, especially the wording “Challenge Response” which is a staple of LiveJournal fandoms. Fan Challenges offer writing prompts that the fan writers need to claim and fulfill to the best of their abilities. Since the fans who write the prompts can set up any number of limits for the story that they want to read, the ‘Challenge’ part consists in meeting all the requirements of the chosen prompt. Even more intriguing, are the Challenges where the prompts are randomly assigned to the fan writers who subscribed to the Challenge. Another element that is mentioned in the quote is the rating. The use of the Motion Picture Association’s ratings to categorize the level of violence and sexual content in fan fiction is another staple of fan production that harks back to hardcopy fandoms.

Complete labels at the beginning of a story or of a chapter are often a form of caring from the fan authors to their readers. This is a trait unique to non-commercial fiction published online, but it is especially important in fan fiction, where a wide variety of light and dark themes are explored without reservations, resulting in a high possibility that there will be elements which may be highly disturbing for the readers, such as graphic violence, or sexual practices of dubious morality. These themes are usually called ‘triggers’ because they may engender unexpectedly strong reactions in the readers, including flashbacks of traumatic experiences, dizziness, nausea, anxiety attacks and panic attacks. To avoid these occurrences, most fan fiction authors take care of their readers by warning them at the beginning of the story and/or at the beginning of each chapter, even at the cost of spoiling the plot development.

Unfortunately, this peculiar literary device has not been the focus of major scholars of popular and media studies, but it is such a common occurrence in fan fiction that it is worth of mention. For instance, George R. R. Martin’s best-selling saga titled *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-), now adapted for the television in the popular American series called *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011-) has nowadays a thriving, creative fandom. The following fan fiction author’s note at the beginning of the story *Pride and Pack* (AllTheDances [2013], 2015-2016) is exemplary of this fandom’s standards of care towards fan readers:

Please (please, please, please) heed all the tags included in the summary. I will try to warn where I can, but trust that this story contains an ample amount of graphic depictions of (as well as allusions to) underage sex, emotional manipulation, sexual, verbal, and physical abuse, torture, violence, etc. Please be aware of your own sensibilities and proceed accordingly (AllTheDances, 2015-2016: chapter 1).

The formula comprises of a warning to the readers to acknowledge their sensibilities in front of the anticipated dark themes of the story. This fan author demonstrates to be an experienced member of the fan fiction community because they implement warnings in most of the triggering chapters, and are very thorough in their self-analysis of their production (AllTheDances, 2015-2016).

Less experienced authors may need the collaboration of the community to properly adhere to this common courtesy and adjust their warnings accordingly. In the same fandom, DoubleBit's author note of their story *Sons and Deadmen* (2013-2015) is also exemplary: "A/N: I've cleaned up my tags a little, doing my best to hit all the major ones, but please let me know if there's something big I've missed. I personally do not have triggers, so they can sometimes be difficult for me to spot" (DoubleBit, 2013-2015: chapter 1). The author then continues to list which chapters contain gory and violent scenes, ending with a good-natured "Take care everyone." This friendly manner of addressing one's readers is very common in fandom, where the line between one's own interlocutors of fandom debates and one's own readers is indistinguishable. This entails a certain bond of comradeship between writers and readers, even if the particular readers of that story have never had prior interaction with the author. This bond stands out in stark contrast to the writer/reader relationship in marketed literature.

In the rare instances that the author does not properly warn their readers of what is about to come, especially for darker themes such as mental disorders and violence, the hypothesis that the author is so inexperienced as not to have realized that this norm existed shall be taken into consideration. When fan authors do not wish to spoil their plot in what they deem an excessive manner to warn their readers of potential triggers, they pre-emptively warn the readers that they have taken such a decision. In a *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) Alternate Universe fan fiction titled *How to Get Away with Murder* (2017) the author, Hollycomb, expresses a reasonable sentiment: "So hard to know how to warn for this or how to write the note without spoiling everything! There are twists, and I'm happy to let you know who lives and dies if you ask me on Tumblr. [...] proceed with caution and please ask if you want clarification on something before reading" (Hollycomb, 2017: chapter 1). Hollycomb does not want to spoil his or her story's plot too much for their readers, and opts for a popular alternative. This alternative consists in providing the readers with an alternative means of communication, in this case the multi-blogging website called Tumblr, where the readers

who require clarification on the warnings or who prefer to know in advance about plot twists can ask the author directly.

### 1.5.3 The fan fiction community as a collective mind

DoubleBit's author's note in above-mentioned *Sons and Deadmen* (2013-2015: chapter 1) shows another characteristic unique to fan fiction: the dialogic collaboration between authors and readers for the good of the community. Fan readers rarely have reservations in telling their writers that they dislike some elements of the story. Dedicated readers will even point out these slights in great detail. Even when fan writers do not comply to the suggestions of their fellow fandom members, they nonetheless read this sort of feedback and learn from it (Pugh, 2005: 119).

Fan culture scholars Hellekson and Busse define fandoms as “collective hive minds” (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 8). A practical representation of this definition is often shown in the author's notes of fan stories. For instance, many authors take their time to thank whomever supported them during the time of writing.

As fan writers are fond of thanking their behind-the-scenes supporters, they also repeatedly and enthusiastically thank their readers for their continued support during multi-chaptered stories. There is one great example to illustrate this and another point too. In the Marvel mega-fandom there is one beloved cross-over fan story featuring a non-powered Peter Parker (Spiderman) and a plethora of villains who eventually form a secluded community around him. The story's title is *Peter Parker's Home for the Wayward Villain* (2015-2016), written by fan author BeanieBaby. This person's author's notes are comprised of common messages such as being amazed, honored and thankful for the support of their readership, all the while downplaying their work with phrases such as “this little piece of writing,” or “it's sort of made of nonsense” (ibid). Another common phrasing found in this author's notes is that fan fiction provides enjoyment and escapism both for the writers and for the readers, as this is the underlying principle of the vast majority of fandoms: “I have fun writing it and you have fun reading it, so win-win!” (BeanieBaby, 2015-2016: chapter 7).

There are also notes that illustrate exemplarily the creative collaboration between author and readers. For instance, one of BeanieBaby's notes reads: “I was blown away at how many people wrote back about their favorite villains, seriously, you guys have given me so much inspiration” (BeanieBaby, 2015-2016: chapter 8). This note indicates that the author is taking into consideration the comments of their readers for future chapters. On a similar tone is the author's note of chapter

19 when the author asks the readers to feel free to provide corrections regarding the Marvel comics universe, admitting that they are not very familiar with it. This collaborative effort is a perfect example of the “collective hive mind” described by Hellekson and Busse, as fandom members pool together their creativeness for the good of the community (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 8).

Other comments by BeanieBaby are practical examples of this thesis’ claim that fan fiction is a worthy object of study from a sociological point of view. Particularly, there is validation for the argument claiming that fan fiction helps in raising the level of literacy and the attachment to literary texts in the younger generations, who are often accused of having their intelligence atrophied by new technologies. BeanieBaby’s notes clearly state that s/he is young, a student (BeanieBaby, 2015-2016: chapters 15, 19, 23), and more importantly that this fan story is their first publication:

This is my first time actually posting my writing [...]. And with the amount of readers, there's bound to be some who are not satisfied with the way I handle the plot, characters, etc. I understand and respect that, however, this is also my story, so I will write them to my best ability. I'm not a professional writer, [...] I really really [sic] appreciate those who comment about typos and plot holes that I may have overlooked, but those who 'demand' that I do things a certain way will be ignored. I'm sorry, but I have everything planned out for the story already, [...] Thank you, and I apologize for the rant, but it is sometimes frustrating to try and meet everyone's tastes. Writing is supposed to be a way for me to relax and unwind, and that is my initial motivation. I do not plan for that to change. Please respect me as a person (BeanieBaby, 2015-2016: chapter 23).

This note contains a fairly common formula utilized by amateur writers. The author is publishing a fan fiction for the first time and accepts feedbacks about minutiae in their writing and additional details from more experienced members of the same fandom. Even if the author publishes their work impulsively without much editing, thanks to the community’s feedback, s/he decides to revise their story to match the community’s standards of quality, polishing their writing skills (ch. 20).

However, this note also shows a crucial characteristic of fan fiction writers. Despite common assumptions about fan writers blindly accepting everything their readers say, fan authors, even complete amateurs, are usually self-aware and self-respecting enough to stand by their initial plans and are not easily swayed into pleasing their readers. The tone of such self-reclaiming notes is in fact common in fan fiction archives. This display of self-respect is also a creative compromise, and it seems to be a successful compromise too, as fan authors often remark that they have fun writing their work as much as they enjoy tweaking it after reading their supporters’ feedback. There is much goodness in fandoms as creative communities, and these notes are exemplary of the creative spirit of fan fiction communities.

Since most digital archives enable fan writers to edit their works after the date of the official publication, sometimes (it is not an overly common habit) writers take their readers’ feedback and

suggestions into consideration and make adjustments to their works accordingly. This happens fairly regularly in stories dealing with topics and situations that lie outside of the writer's background experience and knowledge. Some fan authors choose to research extensively before they write, others prefer to join in the production of their fandom and ask their readers for feedback.

The fan works in the Marvel and DC comics fandoms, for instance, feature an extremely high number of characters (and therefore of background stories) that fan authors, especially the youngsters, cannot possibly be perfectly knowledgeable about. A brief overview of the most popular fan works of the *Daredevil* (Goddard, 2015-) fandom, for example, unearths author's notes such as the one in the story titled *Encounters* (Sonora, 2015), which reads: "And a couple of people were very helpful in comments [sic] section about how Matt's 'vision' works, so that's been corrected. Thanks!" (Sonora, 2015). This author has revised their works after having taken into consideration the comments of their fellow *Daredevil* fans. Instead of dismissing this feedback, the author recognized their own lack of knowledge about the minutiae of the source text and adjusted their story accordingly. This is a great example to show how fandoms can operate on a 'team effort' principle even after the story has been published.

This series of unspoken rules such as proper categorization, author's notes, warnings, and reader's feedback may appear paradoxical. Fan fiction is supposed to be free from any restriction and rule, as is often praised as such by researchers. Although a closer view on fandom dynamics reveals that fan fiction communities possess many formulae and guidelines. Most of these are not hortatory, but it is strongly suggested by the community that following these guidelines means a future smooth writing and reading experience for fan writers and readers. As a matter of fact, fan fiction may be surprising in how creative fan authors can be *within* set guidelines. Less experienced authors often demonstrate remarkable originality and discipline in their works, while keeping their works up to date to the current tastes of their fandoms (Pugh, 2005: 145). By creating infinite new stories within set boundaries (mostly plot and style guidelines), amateur writers can show surprising diligence and sensibility towards the needs and tastes of their community.

### **1.5.4 Subversive fan fiction**

No matter the reason behind fan stories, they are still unofficial, unauthorized reworkings published without the copyright owners' permission. In the transformation of the source text into fan fiction, the original creator of meaning, the mythical figure of the Author, fades into the hazy, distant and

unapproachable ‘Powers That Be,’ as the copyright owners are usually called by fandoms. The author’s institutional authority is not perceived as haunting and reproaching anymore, hence the fan readers feel that they are entitled to the right of becoming readers in the Barthesian sense. These transformative readers re-invents the source text from a writerly perspective, entering, interpreting, and expanding the narrative without ever asking for any sort of authorization. Moreover, the fan engagement with the source text is cooperative and in constant re-negotiation with the analysis already present in the fan text (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 6).

Since fan fiction authors manipulate the characters in a way that the original creators could or would never do, fan fiction is often defined as a boundary-breaking, subversive and even perverse genre (Grossman, 2013: xii). One of the most evident so-called subversive and perverse aspects is found in slash and femslash fan fiction, whose authors subvert the heteronormative pattern of the source text (in which the male hero ‘wins’ the female heroine), by shifting the focus on a same-sex couple. This shift of course disrupts the entire romantic subplot of the source text, and in the case of romantic source texts the disruption is even more drastic. Slash and femslash fan fiction also subverts the narrative pattern of the source narrative, because the main couple’s heterosexual bliss is a natural consequence of the heteronormative context. However in queer fan fiction, the main relationship is usually endangered because it is an irregularity in contrast with the surrounding heteronormative society. By having their queer characters successfully surpass a series of obstacles, the fan authors call into question the apparent stability and normalcy of the heteronormative source text (Leavenworth, 2009: 443).

Another subversive aspect of fan fiction, resides in how often fans risk prosecution and loss of reputation among friends and colleagues whenever they publish fan stories on the Internet. And yet, it is a risk that fan writers willingly take on a daily basis, moved by the strong feelings they harbor towards the source text and towards the storytelling-type of endeavor that fan communities induce in their members. Thus, publishing fan fiction becomes a way to participate in a shared hazardous activity with like-minded, creative individuals, and more experienced fan authors seem to enter a specific mindset where the habit of taking freedom of expression into their own hands becomes second nature (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 36-37).

## 1.6 Not quite fan fiction

When scholars discuss fan fiction, they first offer a definition of what they consider as such, since fan fiction can be the designation of a number of literary forms. For instance, several scholars may include unsanctioned rewritings of any text in the definition of fan fiction, although in this case fan fiction becomes an excessively broad umbrella term.

Abigail Derecho exemplifies this conundrum with a list of unsanctioned, subversive, female-authored texts. Women readers have proved to be active and productive rewriters since the seventeenth century. Lady Mary Wroth's 1621 *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, Anna Weamys's 1654 *Continuation of Sir Philip Sydney's 'Arcadia'* and Lucy Hastings' notes on the margins of her copy of Sir Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1590) are prime examples of unauthorized additions by women readers to a male-authored text. From these early instances, especially from Lucy Hastings' writings in the margins, already there emerges the sense that these women's adaptations and continuations were as subversive as much as they seem to lavish the source narrative with their homages. The sense of subversiveness is also enhanced by the modern reading of these adaptations as proto feminist. As a matter of fact, *Urania* and *Continuation* highlight the inequality between the sexes by judging several aspects of the British (patriarchal) aristocracy as absurd and unjust. Thus, modern fan authors can trace back their subversive use of patriarchal cultural capital to some of the earliest proses in English by women. It is important to note that the efforts of these women to add to male narratives were mostly ridiculed and minimized by male authors. However, these reworkings cannot be indicated as fan fiction because of the lack of a self-conscious community in the background (Derecho, 2006: 67-68).

When fan fiction is regarded in its broadest sense, as a form of collective storytelling, then the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* might be tagged as the earliest versions of fan fiction. If fan fiction is thought as a collective storytelling and also as a response to specific written texts, we can trace it back to the Middle Ages (the Arthurian cycle). If the term is understood to include a legal element, then fan fiction could not have existed before the institution of authorial copyright, so the first fan stories could have been, for example, some of the rewritings of Jane Austen's novels by her readers (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 6). If fan fiction only belongs to the context of a community of individuals who share a passion for the same source text, then the Jane Austen and more prominently the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom would easily qualify as the first ones, with fan-written pastiche being amongst the earliest instances of fan works. This is the preferred definition of a number of scholars who date the origin of literary fan fiction to the 1920s (Derecho, 2006: 62). Finally, if we inspect fan fiction as a rewriting of shared narratives in popular culture, then media fandoms, starting in the 1920s by literary science fiction fans, but more prominently in the 1970s by

the *Star Trek* fandom, would have started fan fiction proper (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 6). This list is meant to illustrate that there are several possible definitions of fan fiction, ancient and modern. For instance, Hellekson and Busse (2006, 2014) date the beginnings of media fan fiction to 1967, when the first collection of *Star Trek* stories was published in the fan magazine *Spockanalia* (Derecho, 2006: 62; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 75).

This thesis focuses on feminist and queer themes in media fan fiction, the most narrowly defined type of fan fiction among the preceding list. Namely, the fan fiction discussed here mainly refers to the works that are historically situated in the last 40-50 years. It is nonprofit, it tends to respond to a postmodernist form of media texts (alternatively called *transmedia* narratives, hence the name media fandoms), and it depends on an amateur infrastructure organized by a self-conscious fan community for its creation, distribution and reception (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 6-7).

It must be noted that before the 1960s, fan fiction as a term designated original fiction about fans, written by amateur (science fiction) writers, and published in fan magazines. It was many years before fan fiction in the sense of stories based on existing fictional worlds and characters began to appear in science fiction magazines (Jamison, 2013: 74).

## 1.7 Glossary

Since fan fiction is not widely known in academia, it might be useful to include here a very brief and not at all comprehensive list of fan fiction-related terms for a complete introduction of the subject matter of this thesis, as also for its smooth reading. Many of these terms are names of fan fiction genres and sub-genres, and they are usually displayed as labels or ‘hashtags’ as visually near the story’s title as possible.

One of the most accurate and regularly updated sources of information for fan terminology at the time of writing is a digital encyclopedia called Fanlore. However, published essays and studies have also been taken into consideration to show how the meaning of some terms has changed over time. It is important to remember that common terminology across fandoms is in any case provisional and constantly debated (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 9).

*Canon*: the word Canon etymologically refers to the foundational sacred texts of a certain religion. The term emerged in fandom history from the *Sherlock Holmes* fan community, it was first applied in a fannish, ironical tone at the beginning of the twentieth century to refer to the original stories published by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Klinger, 2007). Then as now, the term Canon refers

to the entirety of the fictional material offered by the source narrative. In reference to fan fiction, fan works are commonly judged based on how and how much they adhere or depart from the Canon (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 9).

As mentioned, Canon as understood in fandom is drastically different from its historical connotation. Writers in the past utilized historical or mythological material as their Canon, and they did so without consulting one another. Fan writers, on the other hand, have always confirmed what is Canon and what is not as a group, first in fan magazines and later in digital spaces. Another difference between reworking Canon material in the past and in the present is that in the past, individuals who published their works on folk-tales or religious material were inveterate intellectuals. On the contrary, nowadays any person with an Internet connection may publish their reworkings at any time. To summarize, the traditional notion of Canon indicates a sacred or popular repository of narrative material which was seldom but attentively reworked, and the fruit of this labor was published as any other work of literature. In contrast, fan fiction authors rework their Canon constantly, honing their skills not before but during the process of writing and publishing one work after another. Additionally, fan readers are generally very fastidious about what characteristics the new reworkings should display, but most readers are also willing, if not eager, to collaborate with the authors to adjust the stories in order to pay proper homage to the source text (Pugh, 2005: 35).

Even though a fictional Canon is usually enclosed within clear-cut boundaries, the parameters that dictate whether additional, extra material such as author's notes or interviews are to be considered Canon may vary wildly from fandom to fandom. Normally, fandoms make an effort to keep such parameters as uniform as possible, but factions are inevitably born within each fandom, and it is thus impossible to trace a fixed set of rules even within individual fan groups.

No Canon is exempt from the ministrations of fan writers, and there is no list of characteristics that may help predicting which source text will spur more fan reworkings than others. Fiske, however, theorizes that fans seem to rework more enthusiastically those source texts which are found lacking in some measure, either in plot organization, in characterization, in settings description, and so forth (Fiske, 1992: 47). From an opposite point of view, it would seem that the more complete and internally consistent the Canon, the harder it seems for fan writers to fill the gaps of the narrative with their speculations (Pugh, 2005: 40). It appears that fannish productivity is fully sparked by texts that are open and thought-provoking, rather than complete and all-satisfying ones (Fiske, 1992: 47). The fan fiction archives dedicated to this latter type of source texts are usually populated by Alternate Universe stories, where the characters are transplanted in completely different settings, or the original plot is rearranged in a radically different fashion.

Back to the definition of Canon, in other words, the Canon is the material distributed by the copyright owners. Naturally, this definition is only true for fictional worlds, but there is also fan fiction written about historical or living individuals, famous in their field of competence and knowledge. This fan fiction genre is Real Person Fiction. In this case, the definition of Canon may vary from fandom to fandom. In general, writers of Real Person Fiction may refer to Canon as to what they perceive is the truth of the private life of the individuals they idolize and write about. Fans may often refer to their Canon material as to ‘what really happened.’

The fandom term ‘Canon’ may sometimes be missing in online discussions involving canonical material. This phenomenon usually happens because novice fans may mistakenly type ‘Canon’ as ‘cannon’ in Computer-Mediated Communications, often causing the more experienced group members to bemoan the lack of proper knowledge of fandom terminology in new members (Fanlore ‘Canon,’ 2017).

*Head-canon* and *Fanon*: the fans’ creative impulse towards their source text prompts them to imagine more detailed backstories about the characters or about plot developments, or to research the narrative’s settings in-depth. The outcomes of these musings are highly subjective and are usually called *head-canons*. If a head-canon is agreed upon by numerous fans and reiterated in fan works, the head-canon becomes part of *fanon* (Fanlore ‘Fanon,’ 2017). This latter designation is seldom seen in ordinary fannish interactions, where the term head-canon is commonly used to indicate both a singular, personal interpretation and a shared agreement (Fanlore ‘Headcanon,’ 2017). In reference to fan fiction, the authors’ level of creativeness is commonly judged based on the extension and depth of their head-canons (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 9).

*Het*: ‘het’ stands for ‘heterosexual’, meaning that the main relationship portrayed in the story is heterosexual in nature. The presence of graphic depictions of sexual intercourse is not mandatory for a story to be labeled het (Fanlore ‘Het,’ 2016).

*Slash* and *femslash*: ‘slash’ is the generic designation for those stories that focus on the relationship of non-cisgender, non-heterosexual (also known as ‘queer’) individuals. The term derives from the eponymous character “/” which is often used to separate the names or initials of the characters involved in the relationship. Normally, the slash category denotes male or transgender male homosexuality, whereas female or transgender female homosexual stories are called *femslash* (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 52-53; Fanlore ‘Slash,’ 2017; Fanlore ‘Femslash,’ 2017).

Graphic depiction of sexual acts is not compulsory for the categorization, the implication that the characters are involved in an intimate relationship is also sufficient. This is a basic concept that often escapes scholars who approach fan culture. The misconception that slash fan fiction equals homosexual pornography harks back to the earliest essays about this genre: Lamb’s and

Veith's *Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines* (1986), and an essay by feminist novelist Joanna Russ titled *Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love* (1985), both about Kirk/Spock slash fan fiction. It is sufficient to state here that the essays focus predominantly on explicit K/S stories. Without openly stating so, Russ meant to involve fan fiction in the pornography debates carried on by feminist activists in the 1980s, so her essay is entrenched in this purpose. However, by not stating that explicit stories are a minority, these three authors left the readers assume that most or even all slash stories feature explicit scenes.

Other early scholars have been more cautious, but the perception that the vast majority of slash fan fiction is riddled with explicit sexual stories still thrives today. Amongst the earliest fandom scholars, Bacon-Smith researched the *Star Trek* fandom for nearly a decade before writing her report and her first-hand account sheds a truthful light on the matter. In fact, she is the scholar who asserts that sexual acts are not necessary for the label of slash fan fiction.

Recent academic studies demonstrate to be accurate and up to date with the percentage of explicit slash fan fiction. Such studies have usually been redacted by a person who can boast an insider point of view in fan fiction communities. As Salmon Catherine can benefit such a point of view, Salmon and Symons (2001) are careful with their wording: "While many slash stories contain detailed descriptions of sexual acts, the emphasis is on the emotional qualities of these acts, in stark contrast to the impersonal couplings of male-oriented pornography" (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 74).

Academic-fans such as Anne Kustritz (2003), Kylie Lee (2003) and Susanne Jung (2004) call the relationship portrayed in slash fan fiction merely "romantic" (Kustritz, 2003: 371). Lee also states that: "Slash is very often sexually explicit" (Lee, 2003: 71). In a similar way, Jung attests that slash fan fiction is: "often sexually explicit" (Jung, 2004: 1).

Sheenagh Pugh demonstrates her capillary web of contacts in fandoms by stating: "slash is a very small part of fanfic. There is more het than slash and a great deal more gen than either. Slash, however, attracts more notice and comment from outside the fanfic writing and reading community than any other form of fanfic" (Pugh, 2005: 91). The claim that heterosexual fan fiction outnumbers slash should be related to the scope of the analysis, since in the international archive called ArchiveOfOurOwn, slash seems to overpower heterosexual fan fiction in high numbers. In FanFiction.net het and slash seem to appear in fairly even proportions, whereas LiveJournal cannot be accounted with exact precision because of its widely scattered communities.

Nonetheless, any veteran member of a multi-fandom fan fiction community will find the claim that non-explicit stories outnumber explicit stories to be fairly accurate, unless they belong to a community which specializes in explicit stories. In some fandoms this proportion may be less stark than in other fandoms, and the fact that many fan authors do not read their archive's guidelines

and incorrectly mark their stories as Explicit (NC-17) instead of Teen and Up Audiences (PG) or Mature (PG-14) should also be taken into consideration when discussing the presence of explicit and non-explicit fan stories. However, even though the number of explicit stories is significant and seems to be on the rise in some fandoms, it does not outnumber romantic stories, nor explicit narratives appear nearly as often as the reports of the majority of the scholars would lead to believe.

It is opportune to debate on the scholars' definitions of slash fan fiction. Scholars are expected to be detached and rational, and inside and outside of academia, respect is given towards popular culture products only if they demonstrate to possess redeeming qualities that align them with high culture. The privileges of researchers in fact include influencing the public opinion about the social worthiness of popular culture's subcultures, such as fandoms and fan fiction communities. Over-emphasizing explicit stories over non-explicit ones certainly does not help towards adjusting the public opinion about the meaning of the existence of fan fiction. On the contrary, very few outsiders shall learn to respect fan fiction as a literary genre, dismissing it as pornography instead (Hills, 2002: xxviii). While denying the existence of explicit stories is a gross mistake, since so many of them are rewarded with dizzying numbers of positive reviews, comments and votes, analyzing only explicit slash fan fiction responds to a sensationalist rather than informative purpose. Being sensationalist does not fall within the parameters of a proper academic report, being informative does.

Slash fan fiction holds a prominent role in the studies of scholars who approach fan communities in general. It can be argued that scholars become obsessed with slash once they encounter it during their research. This scholarly attention, though, offers the illusion that slash comprises an overwhelming portion of fan production, while this is not always the case. There are fandoms where the number of heterosexual fan stories prevails, and there are fandoms where heterosexual fiction is almost unheard of. Scholarly statements about the total percentage of slash fan fiction in online fandoms should be considered from this point of view: online fandoms are unfathomable in their exact scope and each study conducted in fannish digital spaces should be contextualized on a case-by-case basis.

A certain strain between the slash genre and the canonical material is ubiquitous, within and without fandoms. This is due to the fact that the queer relationship of the protagonists is oftentimes not sanctioned by the Canon. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of slash stories posit a sexual relationship as the natural consequence of the homosocial/homoerotic subtext present in Canon, *as perceived and re-elaborated by the fans* (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 10). This means that the Canon does not actually sanction queer relationships, but the fans still perceive a homoerotic subtext, and some fans go as far as trying to prove that the queer pairing is implicitly sanctioned by the source

text's creators. In many cases, fans perceive the deep and trusting partnership between the male characters as romantic because the original authors planted the seeds for such an interpretation, either unconsciously or to spur fannish interest and, consequently, financial profit. As a matter of fact, the so-called homosocial comradeship has been a staple of Western cultures for centuries. At the roots of the homosocial partnership is the concept of two men turning their backs to heterosexual domesticity to pursue one goal, usually in a heroic or heroic-like enterprise (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 234).

*Gen*: Gen is the abbreviation of '[for] General Audiences,' which is a rating from the Motion Picture Association of America which most modern fan fiction communities use to categorize their works. As in its cinematic counterpart, the Gen warning indicates that the content of the story is safe for children, meaning that there is no violence or sexual content in the story, of any inclination (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 10; Fanlore 'Gen,' 2016).

Gen stories may be comparable to what Bacon-Smith describes as 'relationship stories,' stories that focus on the friendly, instead of sexual, bond between the characters (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 52-53). Lamb and Veith corroborate this definition when they indicate that in hardcopy fandoms, Gen fan magazines featured stories focused on character analysis and group dynamics, not on pairings (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 237). It is important to recall that some communities and indeed some individuals may disregard the general meaning of Gen and apply this category to those stories that contain violence or sexual content, but marginally so (Fanlore 'Gen,' 2016). Most fan stories in the most popular international digital archives on the Internet do abide to the 'traditional' definition though.

*Alternate Universe*: Fan creativity is founded on the concept of alternate 'universes.' The notion of universes can be first found in the science fiction timeline theory, and posits that the 'real world' we live in, is but one of an infinite variety. In Alternate Universe (AU) narratives fan authors apply a number of changes to the source text. This label might create some confusion in outsiders and in the neophyte fan fiction reader since, technically, any divergence from the original plot engenders an alternate timeline and thus an alternate universe. In fact, some fan writers might utilize the 'Canon Divergent AU' warning. Canon Divergent stories diverge from the source product in one or very few elements, namely readers can expect the characters to be entrenched in their original fictional world, with arguably minor changes applied to the plot. Strictly Alternate Universe stories see the borrowed characters living in a usually drastically different setting than their original universe, often with shifts in genre too. It is interesting to note that in the past, in media fandoms, the shift from the source text's homosocial atmosphere to the fan story's homoerotic content was often labeled Alternate Universe because the source text did not condone a

homoerotic subtext and many fans preferred to highlight this difference (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 60, 62).

Fortunately, for categorization purposes, most of recognized Alternate Universe stories fall into specific subgenres. Well-appraised Alternate Universe narratives maintain the characters' characterization as faithful to their canonical counterparts as possible, while drastically changing the fictional world around them. The Alternate Universe category is a fan-favorite way to stretch personal creativity and productivity while remaining within the familiar fan text (Fanlore 'Alternate Universe,' 2015).

*Crossover*: crossover stories combine characters from different source texts. The presence of any number of characters from one universe to another can produce a crossover story. The reactions of characters from different fictional worlds are usually utilized in a parodic manner (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 58; Fanlore 'Crossover,' 2017).

*Hurt-comfort*: in Hurt/Comfort (H/C) stories one of the protagonists is injured intentionally or unintentionally, while the co-protagonist comforts the other. Such stories are normally meant to push the characters' boundaries to the limit, to engender intimacy and eventually romantic feelings between them. The resolution of a Hurt/Comfort plot is usually meant to bring catharsis to both the writer and the readers. Moreover, through the Hurt/Comfort points of view of the victim, the nurturer and the perpetrator, readers and writers can ponder and discuss about pain in a way that does not involve personal compromises (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 52-53; Fanlore 'Hurt/Comfort,' 2017).

*Fluff*: Fluff (n.) or fluffy (adj.) stories are light-hearted narratives with a varying quantity of tender feelings and comforting themes. Prevalently fluffy stories do not normally unravel sophisticated plots or depict sexual acts, even if the characters portrayed may or may not be involved romantically. Explicitly sexual stories may also contain fluffy elements, and even single explicit scenes may present a high enough emotional involvement to warrant the label. This last situation falls neatly in line with the theory that sexuality in fan fiction is actually an outlet for the romantic musings of the fan authors. Fluffy stories hold an even higher potential of catharsis for the readers and writers than Hurt/Comfort stories, especially when the plot of the Canon is a very violent, unforgiving one (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 10-11; Fanlore 'Fluff,' 2014).

*Gender-swap*: in genderswapping fan fiction, a number of characters have their gender swapped. Male characters become female whereas female characters become male. This phenomenon is not usually explained in the plot and fan writers heavily rely on the readers' suspension of disbelief to legitimize genderswap stories. The gender-swap genre is mostly utilized to swap the pairings of the slash genre into femslash and viceversa, or in case only one partner is gender-swapped, to turn a slash or femslash pairing into an heterosexual one. In the history of

media fan fiction, the first documented gender-swapped pairing belongs to the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom. It first appeared in an essay where Dr. John Watson is theorized to be a woman. This essay was presented as a tongue-in-cheek speech during a meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars fan club by Mr. Rex Stouts. The speech was titled *Watson Was a Woman* (Jamison, 2013: 45).

*Mary Sue*: a Mary Sue is an umbrella denomination for a self-insertion archetypal character in fan fiction. She's a very young heroine, usually a teenager and seldom past her teenage years. Mary Sue appears as an original character in the fan plot, but is actually a proxy for the author, hence she is called a self-insertion character. Mary Sue is characterized by ethereal beauty, sharp and quick intuition, and by extreme competency in a wide range of areas of expertise. In the 1980s, Mary Sue's appearance in a fan plot was brief and intense. She normally gained all the other characters' affection and/or lust, and played a crucial role in the plot, saving every other character's life and dying a honorable death in the process (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 52-53; Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 11, 2014: 133). In the past and nowadays, Mary Sue is the most denigrated fan fiction trope, described as gauche and immature, as well as the most controversial (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 94; Lackner et al., 2006: 199; Fanlore 'Mary Sue,' 2017).

*Domestic*: Domestic or Established Relationship fan stories used to be called Curtainfic because they portrayed the characters as married and dealing with married couples' issues such as browsing shops for curtains. In Domestic fan fiction the setting is, self-explanatorily, prevalently domestic, while the plot posits a number of everyday situations. The Domestic genre often shows some overlaps with the *Kidfic*, where the characters adjust their everyday routine to include the arrival of a baby or child in their lives (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 10-11; Fanlore 'Domestic,' 2017).

*Darkfic*: the Darkfic genre deals with disturbing themes such as emotional, physical and psychological violence. The characters portrayed may be the victims or the perpetrators. Under the Darkfic heading several subgenres may be included, such as *Rapefic*, *Slavefic*, *Deathfic* and *Torture*. The Darkfic warning may refer to only a portion of a story, but normally a story is labeled Darkfic because it lacks a happy ending. This is the main and most important difference distinguishing Darkfic from the Hurt/Comfort genre. Both genres contain physical and psychological violence, but as the name implies, the Hurt/Comfort genre features a happy ending (Fanlore 'Darkfic,' 2016). It can be argued that fans who write such stories do so as a way of exploring haunting, oppressive memories and thoughts. Rape stories in particular can be strong outlets for rape survivors to process their traumatic experience (threepiohasnochill, 2015).

*Badfic / Crack*: Darkfics are not to be confused with *Badfics* which exaggerate certain aspects of Canon, or certain very popular head-canons, as a form of parody. The adjective 'bad' refers to the consciously exaggerated tone of the narrative (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 10-11).

Nowadays, the term ‘badfic’ is slightly outdated and not quite common. In its stead, the term ‘crack’ seems to have gained enough popularity to be found in any fandom online and offline. The history of this fandom term is quite interesting and amusing.

‘Crack’ in fandom has two meanings, both playing off the slang word for cocaine. The first, more evident meaning is that fan fiction (actually fan production in general), is a highly addictive activity, for both the authors and the readers. Apparently, in older anime (Japanese cartoons) fandoms, a popular running joke was “Anime: Crack Is Cheaper,” indicating both the addictiveness of the source texts and the high cost of VHS before the age of the Internet. The second meaning of the fandom term ‘crack’ indicates fan stories that start with a ludicrous premise, or stories that include a series of ludicrous or plain silly elements throughout the plot. The running joke in this context is that the author must have been on crack to write something so insane. This second meaning is the most widely known today. In digital archives, ‘crack’ may appear as a noun such as ‘crackfic,’ or as an adjective such as ‘crack pairing.’ Of course, both meanings may be used simultaneously for costly and chaotic cultural products such as comics (Fanlore ‘Crack,’ 2017).

All the above definitions are commonly found in fan fiction communities today, and most of the definitions have been present in fandom history since the rise of media fandoms in the 1970s. However, to approach fandom without confusion or erroneous preconceptions, it is paramount to better contextualize these terms, including the definition of fan text and fan fiction, into the history of modern fandom. By tracing the origin and the development of media fandoms, it can be useful to keep in mind reader-response theory, as the history of fandom is inevitably the history of the most active and productive audience members in modern consumerist societies. The next chapter will therefore trace the history of the formation and organization of spontaneous groups of passionate, like-minded individuals who identify themselves as members of fandoms.

## **Chapter 2: Brief history of fandom**

### **2.1 Brief history of fandom and fan fiction**

The concept of fandom and the related concept of fan fiction as discussed in this thesis have drastically changed over the time. As this thesis will attempt to trace the major ideologies, either explicit or implicit, in modern fan fiction, an understanding of the progression of these changes shall be achieved first. This process will also be beneficial to acquire a better understanding of the mechanisms and of the mentality underlying fandom life and its creative production. Therefore this chapter will present the history of what is today commonly understood as fandom.

#### **2.1.1 The *Sherlock Holmes* fandom and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective has been a particular focus of early fan fiction, although long-time sherlockian fan writers would resent the term 'fan fiction' and would prefer the high-brow term 'pastiche' instead (Pearson, 2007: 98-99).

The earliest known sherlockian parody harks back to 1891, only four months after the publication of *A Scandal in Bohemia* (Conan Doyle, 1891). The pastiche was a brief parody of just 1200 words, published anonymously in a literary magazine called *The Speaker*, it was titled *My Evening with Sherlock Holmes*, and it featured an imaginary supper between the famous detective and the author of the fan story. In modern times this would be categorized as a self-insertion trope. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle later confirmed that the parody was to be attributed to his friend, the Baronet Sir James Matthew Barrie, more commonly known as the author of the play *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904) (Press, 2011).

The first known reworking across the pond was penned by the American actor William Gillette, who starred as Mr. Holmes himself. After receiving permission from Conan Doyle, Gillette married off the stoic detective in one of his plays to spark new interest in the audiences towards his performances (Grossman, 2013: xii; Pugh, 2005: 232).

The earliest official *Sherlock Holmes* fan community – the exclusive fan club called 'Baker Street Irregulars' – has the privilege to be the first formal fandom with enforced written rules

(Jamison, 2013: 40). As a matter of fact, sherlockians pastiche writers have to abide to the rules of the Grand Game. One of the basic premises is that Holmes and Watson are historical figures, and that new, undiscovered tales narrated by Watson are still found today. *Sherlock Holmes* pastiches have always been filtered by a strict system of praise and censure from the fan clubs, ensuring that only the works written according to the rules are published in fan magazines (Polasek, 2012: 42; Pearson, 1997 in Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 45). Early sherlockian pastiche was not so dissimilar from modern pastiche, however sherlockian pastiche is generally different from contemporary sherlockian fan fiction. Many pastiche works are critical and historical in nature, with fans trying to intertwine the lives of the characters with historical events (Jamison, 2013: 74).

### **2.1.2 The Grand Game**

The fandom term ‘Canon’ first appeared in the context of the Grand Game. In 1911 literary scholar Msgr. Ronald Arbuthnott Knox presented a satirical essay titled *Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes*, where he analyzed the gaps and incongruities in the stories by calling them ‘the Canon.’ As a matter of fact, even though Knox approached Conan Doyle’s stories from the perspective of the academic tradition as a parody (‘all in good fun’), this mechanism and the semi-serious tone of his work outlived him in the works of young and new fans of every subsequent fandom. The employment of textual hermeneutics to solve the contradictions and lacunae of the source text has been a staple of proto-fan fiction for centuries. Simple practices such as writing in the margins may be comparable, but a semi-playful, pseudo-academic endeavor carried on by individuals who identify themselves as enthusiasts of the same narrative marks the basic condition for ‘meta’ fan fiction as is known today. This tradition gained popularity after the distribution of Msgr. Knox’s essay (Pearson, 1997).

Knox’s ironical writing style posits that Conan Doyle’s stories are to be revered and methodically analyzed with something akin to religious fervor. Of course the word ‘Game’ downplays the fannish enthusiasm to innocent daydreaming, another element for which this essay represents a milestone in fandom history (Polasek, 2012: 42-43). In Knox’s essay it is possible to recognize two elements which outlived literary sherlockian pastiche: the hermeneutic analysis of the source text to extract the characters from their original context, and the playful attitude of this operation.

Sherlockians have always been peculiarly fertile fans, having published more fan works in more media than most fandoms, to the point that the iconic detective is now one of the oldest transmedia characters in popular culture history (Stein & Busse, 2012: 10; Jamison, 2013: 40). There is nowadays more nonprofit *Sherlock Holmes* fan fiction online than the number of all official adaptations in the history of the fandom. This is to be attribute to rebooting and modernizing works such as the eponymous 2009 Warner Bros' movie, and the 2010 on-going BBC mini-series *Sherlock* (Moffat & Gatiss, 2010-) (Faye, 2012: 2). These two adaptations are well-known for having given a huge, well-needed boost to the detective's fandom, especially in terms of young members. Because the BBC series does not play by the rules of the Grand Game, it cleared a path for new fan discourse, unrestrained by a century of tradition. For instance, new sherlockian fan writers do not need to imitate Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's writing style, which is but one of the many restrictions imposed by the Grand Game (Polasek, 2012: 50-54).

The BBC series' focus on the close friendship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson signals how its producers have playfully tapped into slash fan fiction in order to appeal to the widest audience possible. Thanks to this strategy, the show has receive a warm welcome by a shocking number of fan fiction readers and writers. The subsequent financial revenue of this heightened fan interest indicates that the producers' strategy has been successful (Stein & Busse, 2012: 14). Sherlock removed himself from the prospect of a romantic relationship by declaring himself "married to [his] work" (McGuigan, 2010). This is an innocuous wording today, but in Victorian times the phrase was often used to indicate bachelor men with same-sex tendencies. Nevertheless, many fans ignore this connotation and view Sherlock as a modern, sexually heterogeneous character, unable to fully decode his own sexuality and non-normative desires. In modern online fan fiction, Sherlock is usually represented as asexual, demisexual, or still uncertain about the label of his sexual identity (Kustritz & Kohnen, 2012: 88). Notwithstanding the abnormality of asexual stories in fan fiction in general, the popularity of an asexual Sherlock in fan fiction communities is emblematic of the fans' impulse to blur boundaries and investigate the whole the spectrum of sexuality (Coppa, 2012: 222). The numerous discussions found in sherlockian fan fiction communities about not restricting oneself to the traditional heterosexual/homosexual binary indicate remarkable maturity about such a delicate topic.

The *Sherlock* fan fiction community is used to favoring non-typical romance narratives. Most fans are not averse to exploring relationships involving mental illness, physical disability, and various forms of addiction. These elements are usually explored for their romantic and stylistic possibilities, often with a complexity that would stand out awkwardly in commercial publishing (Jamison, 2013: 55). Transformative fans have always been interested in evaluating dilemmas like

the dyads between mind and body, work and partnership, friendship and love, expectation and experience, and have divided fan fiction into genres and subgenres to parse them out on their own terms (Coppa, 2012: 222).

With the example of BBC *Sherlock* it is also possible to witness what Stein and Busse call *transmedia storytelling*. Alongside the television series, *Sherlock*'s narrative is completed by digital spaces (John's blog and Sherlock's website), so that the viewers can pursue these digital traces beyond the boundaries of the broadcasted episodes. This phenomenon represents a clear signal that *Sherlock*'s producers know about the transmedia nature of today's fandoms, and that the producers are prepared to take advantage of transmediality to pursue profits (Stein & Busse, 2012: 13).

The traditions of media fandoms are comparable to, but distinct from, the history of literary pastiche. There is one major difference in the mechanism of the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom from its inception to today. While authors of *Sherlock Holmes* pastiche have been prevalently male, nowadays, digital fan fiction communities include mostly women, and only a minority of men (see for example Bacon-Smith, 1992 and Stein & Busse, 2012). This shift is exemplary of the essentially different nature of the Internet-based communities in contrast with paper-bound fan clubs (Coppa, 2012: 213).

### **2.1.3 The *Star Trek* fandom and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

This section introduces the rise of media fandoms as opposed to strictly literary and music fandoms. The history of media fandoms is steeped in economic and gender concerns from the beginning. Women fans created fan fiction communities to share their reworkings, since mainstream cultural products would not offer such content. Since the rise of media fandoms in the 1970s and 1980s then, an element of subversiveness has been strongly present in fan groups. This subversiveness is also tinged with a gendered confrontation, as the content of mainstream media was (and mostly still is) under the control of male boards of directors (Busse, 2009: 105).

Premiered on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1966, *Star Trek: The Original Series* was one of the first television series which spurred a large fan fiction community (Grossman, 2013: xi). Arguably, *Star Trek* fans ('Trekks') are the first fans who are publicly known for uniting a popular culture visual text and the complexity and peculiarity of fandoms. At the time, this meant turning viewing from silent consumption into active re-interpretation and knowledge exchange. This communal viewing

and re-writing led to the formation of the largest media fandom at the time (Coppa, 2006: 43; Grossman, 2013: xii).

It is important to highlight, though, that the first massive, international fan fiction community was the community gathered around science fiction literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. For decades, science fiction has proved itself to be a unique literary genre, which can contain an infinite variety of the issues plaguing humanity, in any discipline known and studied by mankind. Science fiction is a suitable genre to be 'queered' by fan fiction communities, as it provides a wide range of alternative scenarios for delicate concepts such as sexual identity.

For instance, one crucial issue often discussed in science fiction is whether and how a person's sex, gender and personality can change or be changed. A couple of examples shall better illustrate this question. In *Moonstar Odyssey* (1977), the author David Gerrold posits a humanoid species whose sexual phenotype remains undetermined until the end of puberty, before which experimentation is common and encouraged. Whereas in *Triton* (1976), Samuel R. Delany posits a world where sexchange operations are minor surgery operations, and radical alterations of an individual's personality can be achieved with common medicines. Delany's theory posits that the complex combinations of elements which are historically encoded into sex and gender ought not to be constricted in the simplistic, traditional sex/gender binary (Shuyler, 1986: 46-48).

With the *Star Trek* fandom, the public opinion regarding media fans degenerated to the point that fan fiction writers and readers are now deemed individuals plagued by delusional fantasies, including pairing up the (heterosexual) characters of the television series in perverse, homoerotic relationships, or even imagining themselves entering a romantic relationship with the fictional characters. Although there has always been a significant number of slash, even explicit slash fan fiction in media fandoms, the common understanding of *Star Trek* fans in the 1980s drew the picture of a group of squealing, scribbling women who lavishly adored the characters and the actors and wrote pornography about them (Grossman, 2013: xii; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 76).

Some of the heaviest denigration came from science fiction fans. They dismissed *Star Trek* as science fiction for nonreaders and thus greatly diminished the importance of many women who were building the first media fandoms at the time. Ironically, a significant number of these women were still literary science fiction fans or even commercial science fiction authors. They tended to be university graduates, heavy readers, and scientifically and even technologically literate individuals. Perhaps this profile could explain why the character of Spock was a fan favorite. In the 1960s and 1970s, women engineers, botanists, science teachers, and computer programmers must have intimately known what it was like to feel like an alien in the workplace with a foreign and inappropriate range of emotions (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Coppa, 2006: 45). Other prevalently female

fandoms with the same reputation as the *Star Trek* fandom gravitated around police, spy and mystery television series (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 6). Although a far cry from *Star Trek*'s fame, such series also focused on partnership, especially male-male partnership, thus attracting a high level of fan interest (Coppa, 2006: 48).

The *Star Trek* fandom represents a crucial milestone in fandom history for its social atmosphere. Camille Bacon-Smith describes this community as a safe place for highly intelligent women to re-write their favorite characters. For most of these women, fandom was also their first experience, since their school days, of community and close friendship with many other women (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 39, 219).

Fandom in the 1980s mainly manifested itself at fan conventions or in the houses of the individual fans, where the veteran members would take on a mentor role towards newcomers. Correspondence and telephone calls were the main venues of communication, but face-to-face interaction was the preferred way to form a communal repository of knowledge which was to set the community's standards in the future. Such standards included how to introduce new members to fandom mores, how to distribute fan stories and fan magazines, and how to judge fan works (p. 26). Bacon-Smith reports that the customary introduction into fandom to develop a working knowledge of the social mores of the community consisted of two years in the 1980s. In addition, several more years of fannish commitment from the part of the neophyte were necessary to gain access to the private circles where most of the fan writers' production circulated (p. 81).

In the 1980s participating in fandom, especially in media fandom, could bring serious consequences in the members' marital and working environment. For fear of negative repercussions, fan authors often adopted anonymity to distribute their work, although the practice was common only in the largest fandoms, where the risk of being exposed was logically higher (p. 206). Importantly, by 1975 the *Star Trek* community was the first fandom where fan fiction, including slash fan fiction, played such a central role that multiple fanzines devoted exclusively to slash were published (Coppa, 2006: 46; Jamison, 2013: 84). Much of early media fan fiction, in fact, was meant to fill in the gaps of the source narrative and to explain the source text's incongruities. The rest of the production was focused on dismissing the original plot to explore alternative scenarios (Pugh, 2005: 41).

Fan writers generally began their production with a self-insertion story or with an *episode fix*, a rewriting of well-known events of the source text, narrated from a different point of view than the protagonists' or written with a humorous twist (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 153). Amateur fans who revisited well-known scenes were not dismissed as unimaginative precisely because the fannish mindset easily accepts the fact that it takes more than one medium to tell a story (Jamison, 2013:

99). Therefore, all the stories that were similar because they all revisited the same famous scene were not deemed unimaginative copies, but they were regarded as different expressions of the same matrix. They were always considered different stories, and they were respected as the first steps of new writers into the community.

Old and new fan writers in a media fandom in the 1970s and 1980s typed their stories and shared them first with fandom members in their local circle at house gatherings. The stories circulated, gathered commentary and were eventually edited by the author to be adjusted to the community's tastes. Eventually, the final draft was submitted to a fan magazine editor.

## 2.1.4 Fan magazines

In origin, a *fanzine* was a staple of the science fiction amateur community. Also called a '*zine*' (pronounced *zeen* and usually spelled without the apostrophe), a fanzine is a compound word which indicates a magazine created by *fans* (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 44). In the depressed years of the 1930s, science fiction fan magazines compensated for the lack of new works on the market by publishing a minor quantity of critical comments, which normally occupied most of the space of the issues, and added more fan-authored stories (Jamison, 2013: 74). Science fiction authors such as Cyril Michael Kornbluth, Donald Wollheim, and Ray Bradbury started their careers with fan magazine productions (Coppa, 2006: 42-43). In the history of science fiction fandom, fan fiction designated original stories written by the fans and published in fan magazines. An alternative definition for fan fiction at the time was fiction that illustrated fandom mores and inside jokes in the form of parody (Sawyer in Jamison, 2013: 77).

A fan magazine usually saw one or two editors who received the subscriptions, be they illustrations, poems or stories. The editors stapled the material together and photocopied a number of issues depending on the number of subscription letters they received from fellow fans. An alternative mean of production was the Amateur Press Associations. An Amateur Press Association (APA) involved a small group, seldom more than 30 individuals, who shared the work of a fan magazine editor. The issues published by Amateur Press Associations therefore included different print formats and designs, as well as skill levels, in each copy. The most widespread form of fan works distribution in the 1970s and 1980s was the fan magazine. A standard fan magazine format was 21.5 per 28 centimeters and contained more than one hundred, less than three hundred pages (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 44-45). In the 1980s, at the apex of the production of Amateur Press

Associations in media fandoms, the age of fan readers ranged from their late teens well into their middle age.

The 1980s standard procedure to enter the fan magazine circuit as a writer passed through a lengthy mentor-student process meant to train new fandom members in roughly three stages. First, new members were tutored to consume the source text in a fannish manner. Secondly, the new readers were introduced to the group's fan fiction in increments, usually by showing them the heteronormative works first (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Coppa, 2006: 48). Finally, when the new members decided to become writers, their production was integrated into the fandom's aesthetics and conventions (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 81). Once the new writer had published their story in a fan magazine, they received additional feedback via comment letters, which were also published in fan magazines.

In order to publish a considerable number of pages at once, fan magazine editors usually worked over the span of one to two years to publish each issue. As previously remarked, at this stage the stories were usually the final drafts, polished by training and by the writers' home circle's feedback. Therefore, the fan writers' publication in a fan magazines represented the coronation of a long process of writing and editing within the community, giving the writers a degree of reassurance about the reception of their work and the readers a degree of reassurance about the literary quality of the new works. The stories of newcomers were generally immune from harsh criticism, as more experienced members were often willing to overlook accidental shortcomings at the condition that the new writers learned their lesson (pp. 153, 214).

The production of fan magazines entailed technical costs and inevitably involved outsiders, such as copy shop clerks. Uncontrollable venues of distribution were also involved, national and international mail services in primis. The costs of distribution befell entirely on the readers who ordered a copy of an issue, with the exception of equal trade exchanges (a 20 pages story for a 20 pages story, for example), for which only the cost of shipping was reimbursed. In this system of distribution, international fans were at great a disadvantage. The international fees of the postal services were normally very high and shipment often suffered from delays. This implied a great risk that the fan magazine could be lost in the post and never arrive at destination (p. 28).

There were also technical limitations involving photocopy machines. Apart from photocopy being very costly outside of large urban centers, the age and technological level of each machine differed greatly. Furthermore, fan magazines were frequently exchanged in person to allow as many members as possible to copy the issues for their own collection. However as a result, the pages of the magazines worn out very soon and often became illegible. For this reason, a few veteran fans used to collect fan magazines both in order to store them in a library-like fashion to render the

borrowing and lending easier for all the readers, but also in order to re-type barely legible stories in preservation of the cultural capital of their fandoms. Such fandom institutions could be regarded as the ancestors of today's online archives (pp. 217-218).

*Star Trek* fan writers are known in fandom history for being the first writers whose sexually explicit fan fiction became public knowledge. This was a gross misconception since the actual preference of the majority of *Star Trek* fans readers at the time still gravitated around heterosexual stories. Truthfully speaking, homoerotic content was hardly embraced or even tolerated by fans when the first fan magazines including homoerotic material were published. However, Bacon-Smith repeatedly describes how, during her decade-long study, a steadily increasing number of slash readers and writers can be registered (Bacon-Smith, 1992).

A couple of ground-breaking essays were the main cause for the exposure of *Star Trek* slash fiction to the public. One of these essays was written by feminist science fiction author Joanna Russ, and it was titled *Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love* (1985). Russ discusses at length the appeal and meaning behind Kirk/Spock (K/S) slash fan fiction. According to Russ, this type of stories is to be considered the first truly female writing because it is written by women and its intended audience is other women (Russ, 1985). According to fan ethnographers, in the 1970s, 90% of the *Star Trek* fandom comprised of women (Coppa, 2006: 47). During the 1980s Bacon-Smith's surveys would later confirm this percentage in several media fandoms (Bacon-Smith, 1992).

Russ also emphasizes how fan fiction is a female-authored cultural product and how it is free from any political agenda. Specifically, fan fiction is also free from the censorship policies of commercial publishing, which most often curbs writers' creativity rather than promoting it. Contrarily to this empowering view, several academics now agree that by turning patriarchal expectations of women into virtues projected onto male characters, most of the 1970s and 1980s *Star Trek* slash writers failed to ultimately escape patriarchal ideology (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 77).

Russ numbers among the first scholars who publicly argued that the male protagonists of slash fan fiction are surrogate women. In Russ' reasoning, the male body is a symbol behind which women authors can free themselves of patriarchal authority and express their own brand(s) of femaleness. Russ' essay also implied by omission that almost all *Star Trek* fandom members wrote homosexual erotica (Russ, 1985). Other undesired effects of Russ' essay included social ridicule, but also an influx of new members who approached only the slash fanzines subgroups without introducing themselves to the broader circles first, bypassing the proper initiation procedures (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 244).

Media fandoms at the end of the twentieth century might give the impression of being strictly regulated communities, yet taboos have always been broken. No human community is perfectly homogenous. Howls of outrage can be heard across 50 years of fandom life, but debates can be highly enriching in fandom. Fandoms also exist so that their members can produce cultural artifacts without feeling as inhibited as they would feel outside the fan community, and without a strictly enforced system of rules, dissidents are bound to appear. Any self-respecting fandom accepts this characteristic and embraces it, creating a social environment that is rife with disputes, negotiations, and compromises (Resch, 1992 in Green et al, 1998: 28).

In this section, the focus on the *Star Trek* fandom has been crucial. There is no doubt that this fandom wrote the history of fan fiction as is known today. One of the major reasons of this importance is that the *Star Trek* fan fiction community planted the seeds for all subsequent media modern fan fiction communities. Moreover, early *Star Trek* fan writers more closely resemble nowadays' fan authors in comparison to early twentieth century sherlockian authors. The main similarity remains evident in the level of heterogeneity of the fandom members and in the unprecedented high number of women. Early *Star Trek* women fans need to be commended for their pioneering efforts in creating a safe, welcoming social environment for a diverse, emancipated, self-sufficient community of women readers and writers.

## **2.2 The rise of the Internet**

Fan communities define themselves through affinities rather than localities. Fandoms have been imaginary and imagining, ergo 'virtual,' communities long before networked computers were allowed outside of military and scientific research environments. The history of fan fiction confirms that technology has been of paramount importance in the distribution and consumption of fan texts.

'Interactive technology,' as Jenkins (2002) calls it, shaped fandom life into a whole new participatory culture at the turn of the century. A participatory culture is a lifestyle that pivots on tools enabling the ordinary consumer to archive, appropriate, and recirculate media content. The promotion and spreading of Do It Yourself subcultures is a natural consequence of participatory cultures. Sometimes there are also positive economic responses to horizontally operated (grassroots) multi-media processes, encouraging the circulation of ideas, images, and narratives. Participatory cultures endorse, and later even demand, a more active mode of readership and spectatorship, which is exactly what fandom is founded on (Jenkins, 2002: 1-3; Deery, 2003).

Before fandoms' colonization of online spaces, fan communities' practices were transmitted in person through enculturation. Fan artifacts could only consist of physical goods, and geographical distances were often an issue. Rather than merely adding speed, the colonization of the Internet has changed all these characteristics. Although fan magazines are still published in a number of fandoms, or in the older fringes of large fandoms (*Sherlock Holmes* literary pastiche for instance), most fan fiction communities are thriving on the Internet (Harris, 1998: 7; Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 13; Polasek, 2012: 49-50).

Slowly but steadily, fans have abandoned the postal service, the 'snail mail,' because of its long waiting times in comparison to the Internet, and telephonic services because of international lags and fees (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 212-213; Lee, 2003: 72-73). The Internet, though, offers many interaction opportunities at an incredibly high speed. Fans have always been pioneers of digital technologies, partly because fan communication is greatly aided by digital means such as discussion lists, mailing groups and chat-rooms. With online archives and encyclopedias, fan communities can have one or a few main Internet addresses where they can store all the knowledge of the fandom, where the knowledge that no single fan can remember is pooled together.

The capability to store infinite amounts of collective intelligence is arguably one of the most useful features of the Internet for fandom, second to ease of communication. Jenkins uses the wording 'collective intelligence' to denote a fan community's capacity to infinitely expand its reservoir of knowledge beyond the limitations of individual research and memory. Collective intelligence is a crucial concept to understand fandom, since fans hold epistemophilia in high regard. That is to say, not simply the pleasure of absorbing increasing amounts of information, but also the pleasure of exchanging information within a group of like-minded, equally passionate individuals. Moreover, the value of any data collected by individual fans becomes relevant only when it is widely known and approved by the community at large. One could say that fandom itself is held together as much by shared emotions about the source text, as by shared information (Fiske, 1992: 43; Jenkins, 2002: 1-5).

## **2.2.1 Fandoms and Computer-Mediated-Communication**

On one hand, the emergence of the Internet helped fans around the globe to communicate with one another. On the other hand, the Internet does not force participation, its nature is that of a stream of data which first invites to be read, and secondly to be added to.

In practice, the Internet strongly fosters the phenomenon of ‘lurking,’ simply reading or watching digital content without providing one’s own feedback or input about the content. While fan conventions and letter exchanges were physical and ideological places of *doing*, because they demanded the participants’ actions and words to stand for themselves, the Internet is increasingly becoming a place of *being*. In a fannish context, such as in closed mailing lists and chat-rooms, once access is gained, one’s own fandom becomes such a massive stream of information, that individuals may not feel inclined to add to it. However, ultimately, the feeling of wanting to participate in the computer-mediated debates is completely subjective. For many, the Internet invites participation so easily that they feel compelled to spread as much information as they know, even if this information contains misinterpretations and false leads. This inconsequential data becomes a mass of indiscernible white noise which later becomes detrimental for the smooth introduction of new members into fandoms (Jones, 1997: 4, 13-16).

Communication on the Internet has considerably altered fans’ ‘voices.’ Before online fandom, the individual fans exchanged letters and/or met in person. These two modes of communication entailed a high level of vulnerability for the interlocutors, who often shared their home addresses and put their physical selves on the line in order to participate in fandom life (Bacon-Smith, 1992). Computer-Mediated Communication, however, enables a person’s words to become a sort of alter-ego coming to life as a separate entity. Messages can be quoted and so moved from one thread to another, they can be kept alive by being quoted in on-going debates, they may be archived for several years to be retrieved at a moment’s notice, or they may be dismantled into their original form of ‘0s’ and ‘1s.’ In other words, the individuals in front of a monitor become entirely disconnected from the lives of their words, even if they decide to modify them or delete them. This phenomenon has engendered numerous debates on the sense of alienation wrought by Internet communication, as the person’s identity is dislocated into its digital words. This transcends self-expression by fixing thoughts and giving them life at the same time. The same cannot be said about mail correspondence because of the contrasting ease, speed and immediacy of most communications occurring online. Of course this characteristic of Computer-Mediated Communication is not privy to fandoms but to all groups of digital networks (Jones, 1997: 25, 27).

Online communication alters a person’s voice in several other ways. Many supporters of the progress of digital spaces claim that, contrarily to assumptions of disembodiment, the Internet invites a more active participation in any discussion. In fact, the Internet is often celebrated as the ultimate means for the thrive of participatory democracy, because it appears to promise a single system within which all users are connected and can participate in equal measure (Faye, 2012: 2-3). Perhaps the Internet does allow individuals to use an outlet which can broadcast their ‘voices’ more

'loudly' than in real-life interactions. Namely, online messages can reach as many people as there are Internet connections around the globe, but the number of individuals actually reached can vary greatly. The impact of a digital message varies greatly too. In these aspects, Internet communication is not dissimilar from those open-letters published in the last pages of fans magazines (Jones, 1997: 27-28, 30).

Nonetheless, the shift of most fandom interactions from amateur-published magazines to the Internet did amplify the fans' 'voices' to one another. As communication researcher Nancy Baym observes, fan discourse creates a community that will eventually become more important than the object of fandom itself. With the Internet, as mentioned, it is very easy to unnaturally prolong the words of any person for years, even decades, after the type of their typing. In this way the fans' 'voices' is carried over through time to the new members of the group, while simultaneously the words become an entity in themselves, they become part of the history of the fandom. This concept is crucial in order to understand the constant magma of fannish online interactions still occurring years after the source text's publication or broadcasting. In many instances, the fans are merely reiterating, remembering or revamping the discourse that has been debated years prior and has been archived in the digital format (Baym, 1998: 124; Hills, 2002: 4).

### **2.2.2 Fandom dynamics on the Internet**

The Internet altered not only communication amongst fans, but also the very dynamics of fandom life. It is important to understand some of these dynamics in order to understand contemporary fandom life and the originating context of online fan fiction.

A characteristic of nowadays fandoms that was made possible by the Internet is the casual way in which individuals can enter a fan community. Bacon-Smith repeatedly remarks how the first steps for being accepted into a fandom are either attending conventions, or being introduced by fellow fans at social gatherings. In the 1980s one could not simply stumble into a fandom (Bacon-Smith, 1992). The Internet, though, engenders fan communities even when this development was not among the original purposes of the digital space where the communities thrive. While browsing the Internet, stumbling upon a fan group is quite easy and common. Individuals are pleasantly surprised by the sense that there are others like them, with similar tastes and interests. What differentiates Internet-based fandoms from hardcopy fandoms is the fact that fans can easily stumble into digital fannish spaces even when they are not looking for them (Jones, 1997: 17).

The emergence of the Internet radically changed many aspects of being a fan and interacting with other members of one's own group, but it also perpetrated aspects that already belonged to the paper-bound fan communities of the 1970s and 1980s. Bacon-Smith repeatedly describes how media fandoms can be surprisingly protective against anyone who might ridicule them, or even disrupt the community in any way (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 3). Similarly, researchers of fannish mailing lists have provided evidence of the sense of ownership that fans display towards the digital spaces they inhabit. The fans' protectiveness towards their community is visible when they are in any way threatened. Most communities resort to a mechanism commonly called 'going under.' In digital spaces this mechanism entails the concealment of the 'location' of the community by changing the website's address, or by restricting access to it (MacDonald, 1998: 148).

The traditional feeling of communal power and possession found in any community has a unique shade in fandom. The fans' sense of belonging can be quite diverse compared to many other communities. Members of a fandom do not exactly feel that they belong to the community, rather, they often feel that the community belongs to them. This feeling may also be found in grass-roots movements, and the Internet, with its encouragement to self-maintenance and self-policy, engenders and supports this mentality. Moreover, the complete and immediate availability of all the fandom's online interactions has enhanced the sense of belonging to one's own community. For fans, a sense of shared identity does not derive only from identification with the groups' interests, but also from the understanding of the group's unique sense of self, from the understanding of the group's identity itself. This sense of identity is readily available to any new members thanks to the infinite archival capabilities of the Internet (Jones, 1997: 16; Pugh, 2005: 67).

As protective as fans may feel about their communities, another characteristic which the Internet perpetrated from the past is the lack of control towards the shape of the boundaries between fan groups and the outside world. The fandoms analyzed by Bacon-Smith bemoaned the newcomers' lack of tact in informing outsiders of confidential matters and the new members' disinterest in experiencing the proper initiation into fandom life. Many ignorant new members, in fact, would delve directly into the groups' most intimate areas, irking the more experienced members (Bacon-Smith, 1992).

Relatable to the boundaries between fan works and the outside world are some governments' attempts to regulate such boundaries. Notably, the Communications Decency Act (1996) marks the United States' first legal battle about whether the Internet can be regulated by laws to limit its amount of explicitly sexual and violent content. The answer proved to be negative at the time, but fandom members had already been aware of this impossibility even before they shifted their

activities online. Fandoms were amongst the first communities on the Internet to witness how uncontrollable the digital world is despite their best efforts (Jones, 1997: 18-19).

Another fandom dynamic that changed drastically thanks to the Internet is the gradual movement of women fans online. The *Star Trek* fandom has been a model for other communities to create and populate digital spaces where fans could debate about the source text and about the fan production, where they could organize networks for the circulation of their works, and channels to contact the source text's producers. However, at the beginning of the movement to the Internet, there emerged an hostile reception from male science fiction fans, who were already populating the Internet for their fannish needs. Unlike male fans, many women fans who ventured online did not work for technological institutions such as research laboratories, they could not gain regular access to a computer, and therefore lacked a high level of technological literacy that was fairly common in men. Furthermore, heated debates erupted in many fandoms as hardcopy fans started to notice that an increasing amount of discussions were taking place online. Justly so, many fans who did not transitioned to the Internet fairly soon felt that they had been left behind (Jenkins, 2002: 3). This is partly why media fans have always been technologically advanced compared to the population at large, because they needed to organize fannish networks of communications in discrete online spaces. Many female fandom members in the 1990s worked in computer laboratories or were among early adopters of home computing equipment to participate in fandom life.

During the 1990s, several media fandoms could depend on a core of highly educated, technologically literate women. These fan women usually worked in high-level institutions of knowledge, as professors or more commonly as secretaries, but they were also housewives who taught themselves how to use a computer to join fannish discussions on mailing lists in-between house chores. By goading newcomers and veteran fans into joining fandoms on the Internet, the forceful drift of fannish discussion online greatly aided fan women in thriving in the new environment, and eventually also in emancipating themselves from the reproaches of male fans by creating women-only digital spaces (Bury, 2005).

Thanks to the speed of the Internet, computer-literate fans started to share not only massive amounts of information about their source narratives, but also parts of the source text itself. Most of these endeavors are illegal, but some are sanctioned by the source text's copyright owners. For instance, when the American WB Network decided to postpone the season finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the wake of the Columbine shootings (1999), director Joss Whedon, wrote fandom history by asking his Canadian fans to record the episode and re-distribute it through the Internet as soon as possible, so that the American viewers would avoid any further delays. In turn, fans sided with Whedon when religious right-wing activists flooded the network's mail for the

presence of a lesbian couple, Willow and Tara, among the main characters of the series. These occurrences are only two of a long list, demonstrating how the Internet changes the mode and the degree of interaction between consumers and producers, transcending hierarchies, and instantiating a sort of symbiosis between the two parties (Jenkins, 2002: 5, 9).

A symbiosis exists between fans and fan works, too. The digital publication of fan fiction, for instance, has almost entirely dethroned printed fan magazines. In the same way that fan magazines arose as the most efficient means for the publication and distribution of fan fiction, the Internet was eventually deemed more efficient in its international availability, and more cost-effective than mail services in many countries. However, fans have not completely abandoned their paperback production, especially in decades-old communities such as the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom. Moreover, the shift to the Internet also helped fandoms preserving their works by archiving them in the digital format. Many digital archives on the Internet are still active today because their sole purpose is to prolong the distribution of popular stories originally published in fan magazines decades ago (p. 6).

### **2.2.3 Mailing lists**

Before fandoms became too large to be reasonably quantified and thus studied, a number of ethnographic studies were conducted in online mailing lists hosting fan groups discussions. Naturally, larger fandoms could claim higher numbers, boasting separate categories of mailing lists. For instance, there were lists for distributing heterosexual fan fiction, both explicit and for general audiences, there were lists dedicated to slash fan fiction, those hosting discussions strictly regarding the source text, and finally there were lists for all sorts of everyday topics, for each fandom.

The advent of the Internet in the mid-1990s led most fandoms to move to a variety of digital interfaces. By the end of the 1990s, the emergence of mailing list hosting websites reached its peak, with fandoms converging in OneList, eGroups, and Yahoo. As new content-delivery technology became available, fans readily adopted it, and fandoms rapidly proliferated (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 13, 2014: 7). However, digital spaces at the time could not become overcrowded in order not to strain the main servers with an excessive number of input signals. Since mailing lists were growing in number but could not exceed a certain (very small) number of users each, most fandoms were in a situation where there were multiple lists belonging to the same fandom, discussing the same topics, but completely isolated from one another. The natural consequence was that more

extensive digital spaces arose, but this would occur only with the advent of the Internet 2.0 (Bury, 2005; Coppa, 2006: 53).

This abundance of choices effectively split fandoms into an untraceable number of separate, parallel discussions, paving the way for postmodern fandoms dynamics (Coppa, 2006: 54). Nancy Baym's (1998) extensive study of soap opera fans' online exchanges aided immensely in dispersing the general assumption that 'typical' soap fans are isolated and uneducated misfits. On the contrary, most of Baym's subjects are educated, employed, computer-literate women (Baym, 1998: 111, 113).

Regarding terminology, Baym ascertains for fandoms what other communication studies ethnographers had already surmised for the earliest non-fannish interactions online. Namely, fans consider the digital space they inhabit as a space meant to emulate the world as strictly as they wish. Thus, for instance, participants of a mailing list use words belonging to verbal, face-to-face situations in their meta-textual messages (p. 115).

Baym is also one of the first researchers to witness how the Internet's infinite storage capabilities start to alter fandom life. She remarks that the number of messages she inspected, as well as the background knowledge she had to acquire to interpret the discussions she examined, were very much above her expectations, despite her object of study being a fandom of fairly average proportions. The main cause for the unexpected amount of notions in any online fandom harks back to the concept of collective intelligence. Fandoms can accumulate, retain, and continually recirculate unprecedented amounts of information, and it is telling that Baym warns future researchers about this. She reminds how preposterous it is to delve into fan culture anthropology without keeping in mind that the exact depth of online fandom interactions is unfathomable. This notion will be reiterated by successive fan ethnographers, and it was first claimed by Bacon-Smith in 1992 (p. 118).

One of the main elements of fandom interaction witnessed by Baym is speculation. It is worth reiterating that this was the most pervasive fannish mode of interaction also according to Bacon-Smith, and it remains so decades later, with Baym's and Bury's (2005) surveys. What Bacon-Smith calls 'talking story,' Baym renames 'speculation,' but it is the same concept. First, Baym recognizes that speculation is greatly supported by the serial nature of the source material, and by its content too, namely plot developments and characterization. Baym claims that fannish discussions usually start with fans gathering the results of their reading process and attempting to fill in the blanks in the source text's plot, or imagine possible future plot developments. Another common topic for speculation is comparing the characters' lives and personalities to realistic situations (Baym, 1998: 119).

Baym also reiterates Bacon-Smith's observations that at a certain point, fan discussions stop being about the source text's characters and start focusing on the fans themselves. By speculating together on their differing perspectives about characterization, fans can shift traditional socio-emotional norms with an ease of mind that face-to-face discussions would not permit. This is possible thanks to the anonymity provided by Computer-Mediated Communications (p. 120). Therefore, one of the main aspects of fandom debates is, and has always been, the speakers' liberating tone in front of the opportunity to freely discuss normally private issues. Almost any aspect of the source narrative can be stretched to discuss real-life private matters and thanks to the Internet, all fans can discuss their own or vicarious experiences with a broad range of different individuals. The source text then becomes a mere pretext for discussion about other topics including personal issues, relationships, and world views. The possibility of discussing private matters in fandom was not engendered by the Internet per se, but it is greatly supported by this means of communication, especially by the anonymity that the Internet provides. It is also worth recalling how Bacon-Smith describes the sophisticated mechanisms adopted by her women to sneak private topics into their fannish correspondence and face-to-face meetings. All of this is not required in computer-mediated discussions (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 269; Baym, 1998: 127).

Online anonymity introduces a valuable aspect to fannish debates: an invitation to honesty. Baym keenly observes how her subjects do not blindly exalt their source narrative, on the contrary, there is a significant measure of criticism in the conversations. Criticism has always been an important part of fandom life, and it can be as enjoyable as a non-critical involvement. Criticism helps building solidarity among the members of a group, as it unites them under a common aggravation. Furthermore, criticism augments the overall value of the community since it guides socio-emotional discussion (Baym, 1998: 122, 124).

Additionally, criticism comes with the satisfaction of displaying genre and text-specific competence, which is highly regarded in fandom, as cultural capital is the official currency of online fan communities. Enjoyable criticism may sound like a paradox, however Baym remarks that if positive and negative comments are intertwined in a discussion, pointing out the source text's flaws becomes the base on which fans may entertain each other as much as they do while discussing the source text's qualities. This balance between upsides and downsides becomes a crucial aspect of any fandom's social life, because it is what makes it possible for any source text to hold the community's attention and interest at a high enough level to carry the text through its wins and losses. The Internet itself enables the community to keep the discussion alive when the source text presents shortcomings, or during hiatuses, because of the ease with which any person can start a conversation about any topic. This technological ease was not possible during hardcopy times,

when fandom discussions often slowed down severely due to technological restrictions, especially among international members of the group (Baym, 1998: 124; Hills, 2002: 4).

As with criticism, online mailing lists aided the distribution of fans' reworkings of the source text. This is not a focus of Baym's study, but it is nonetheless worth noting how an ethnographic study corroborates the assertions of digital media studies scholar Steven Jones regarding the Internet's capability to help in perpetrating this fundamental fandom activity. In particular, Baym parallels criticism and reworkings since they both enable fan writers to flex their competence muscles and are gladly received by other fans when the criticisms or the stories offer creative and witty insight on the source narrative (Baym, 1998: 126).

The anonymity provided by the Internet aids fandom life also by protecting the privacy of the group members. This way fans do not have to expose their enthusiasm in real life and risk becoming the object of their peers' ridicule. Thanks to anonymity, fans they can gush anytime and however much they desire in the virtual world. Online, the risk that fans are ridiculed for their past-times is minimal if they remain within the borders of their fandom's digital space, and if they avoid disclosing personal details (MacDonald, 1998: 141).

It is noteworthy to report a recent ethnographic study in mailing list-based fandoms. Media studies researcher Rhiannon Bury (2005) conducted several ethnographic surveys within *X-Files* (Carter, 1993-2016) mailing lists, reporting that the statistical majority of the members is female, white, heterosexual, past their teenage years, college graduates and middle/upper-middle class, while a minority declared themselves queer and feminist. Interestingly, this list of characteristics basically reiterates most of Baym's findings (Bury, 2005: 21, 23).

Bury also explains how the flourishing of women-only Usenet groups should not be deemed elitist, but was born out of a defense mechanism from of the vitriolic ridicule towards women fans in mixed-sex mailing lists. An exemplary comment would claim that "women 'couldn't possibly have anything interesting to talk about' by themselves without men present" (pp. 16-18). Bury estimates that only 20-25% of the lists' content is dedicated to fan talk, while the rest of the data ranges from the personal to the domestic, from local to international topics. Members of women-only lists have therefore challenged hierarchical gender norms by emancipating themselves in a digital 'room of their own,' safely housing their alternative fan activities (pp. 16-17).

## **2.2.4 Real Person Fiction**

Interestingly, in the 1990s, as media fans became computer literates and adjusted the first archives to host fan works online, there were still fan magazines in circulation which included self-insertion, heterosexual fan fiction about band members and other musicians. This might sound surprising because Real Person Fiction has always been frowned upon in fandom (less so today), but it is important to remember that celebrity fandoms are the oldest forms of conscious fan communities, mixing real events with imagined scenarios. Moreover, celebrity fandoms are now offered so many commercial venues that fans are often encouraged to create fan works about their idols as part of marketing strategies (Coppa, 2006: 55-56).

## **2.3 Online archives and the 2000s**

Popular culture scholar Henry Jenkins is an esteemed researcher of fan culture and of its history. He has written extensively about the relationship of new technologies with fandoms. Jenkins calls digital fandoms the 'new knowledge communities,' claiming that they are voluntary and temporary affiliations, defined by common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members of online fandoms may easily shift from one group to another as their interests and needs change, and they may participate in the life of more than one group at the same time. Yet, as previously remarked, no matter the digital advancements, fandoms are held together through collective production and continuous exchange of knowledge which may be performed with whatever technological means fans have at hand. They are very resourceful communities in this sense (Jenkins, 2002: 2).

### **2.3.1 Recent changes in online fandoms**

The expansion of the Internet allowed the exponential expansion of fandoms in turn. Many detractors of technological advancements, both inside and outside fan communities, often bemoan the brisk pace of this fragmentation of knowledge on the Internet, as it annuls all attempts to keep the growth of trivial knowledge under control. Increasing numbers of fandom members, though, are training themselves to filter the onslaught of data inputs, retaining what is relevant and discarding

the excess. In this way, fandoms organize themselves in defense of information overflow, unlike many other less organized online communities. Although it must be reminded that this filtering process is exponentially more difficult within mega-fandoms, as the data input flow is obviously more copious. Therefore, many fandoms choose experienced members to guide neophytes in the endless web of notions. This role is of crucial importance, especially in big fandoms, where the competence to parse through all the data may only be achieved after a long period of training (Jones, 1997: 21).

The exponential expansion of fandoms online begets more differentiated groups than it was ever possible before the worldwide mass-installation of the Internet connection. Fan groups, however, have been adapting unsurprisingly well to this multi-culturality, as they understand that they are enriched by multiple viewpoints and sources of knowledge. These far-reaching, multi-faceted groups are also becoming extremely difficult to supervise by media corporations, who have little way of knowing and controlling the flow of information in fandoms (Jenkins, 2002: 4; Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 8).

Another technological development which transformed fandom dynamics is the increased speed of the Internet connection in comparison to the 1980s and 1990s. There is a new, unparalleled expectation of timeliness to digital interaction nowadays. Before the global upgrade of the Internet's speed, there were expected delays in the distribution of cultural goods on the international market. Unfortunately, this used to hamper full participation in fandom life for those fans who consumed the source text with months or years of delay, in comparison to the fans living in the country of origin of the source text (Deery, 2003: 170). Consequently, international fans rightfully feel disadvantaged in fandom discussions because their first reading or viewing of the source text may be accidentally spoiled by online debates (Jenkins, 2002: 5).

In the case of literary texts, most publishing houses are very careful to avoid international delays, as they can cause dramatic damages to the initial publicity and sales. Of course fans are often cunning enough to bypass publishing time-lapses by purchasing, scanning and uploading the text online. Needless to say, this method is illegal and is not sanctioned by any author or publishing company. In the case of visual narratives, online streaming services often solve all international delays. Streamed videos, though, are sagged with two not insignificant characteristics. First, streaming is almost always illegal, unless the streaming service is hosted by the copyright owner's website. Second, streaming services take a considerable amount of random access memory and hardware power from the server to function correctly, otherwise the stream will suffer from severe lag.

The worldwide-broad scope of the Internet connection contributed in joining fandoms otherwise separated by continental and language boundaries. Fandoms centering on Asian textual and visual narratives, for instance, have been able to expand their scope to the Western market thanks to the Internet. Asian companies have powerfully exploited this scope to spread their market globally ever since the rise of the Internet.

Moreover, the majority of the fandoms pivoting around Asian texts prove to have an incredible sense of entrepreneurship. Western fans often learn the Asian language of their source text, either through courses, or by teaching themselves or each other outside of formal educational contexts, in order to start grassroots enterprises. These projects include acquiring the source material in the original country as soon as possible, scanning and uploading it on the Internet, and finally translating the text or adding the subtitles if the material is a video. Moreover, concerned about the sensibility of newcomers, the veteran members of Asian fandoms are used to organizing their own system of ratings for what is appropriate for individuals of various ages and what is not. The result is a system that closely resembles the *modus operandi* of media corporations, even though the fandom's system is, of course, entirely driven and managed by ordinary people for no profit (*ibid*).

As the global scope of the Internet enlarges the communities and its speed shortens reaction time, fandoms become increasingly effective as platforms for consumer activism. This is a characteristic that the Internet perpetrated and enlarged since its beginning. Even mailing lists could not boast the immediacy of many contemporary platforms such as forums, amateur broadcasting websites, blogs, micro instant blogging services, and chat-rooms.

Nowadays, fans can mobilize grassroots movements swiftly and easily. Any cause can gather unprecedented numbers of supporters, especially in the massively-populated fandoms. A good example is the Stop Dr. Laura campaign. This was not a campaign organized exclusively by fandoms for their source text, but it circulated among fandoms to call their queer and queer-friendly members to arms. At the turn of the twentieth century, radio talk show host Dr. Laura Schlesinger was the focus of a campaign against her show following her hateful statements against homosexuality and teen girl culture. Activists opened a Stop Dr. Laura website and circulated her transcripts of her shows on the Internet in order to put pressure on the show's sponsors to cease their support. Protests and boycotting actions were organized almost entirely online (Deery, 2003: 168).

The purpose of most fan projects usually consists in saving the lifespan of the source text in case of a serial publication or broadcasting. However, most campaigns demand the revival of abandoned franchises, and protest unpopular plot or characterization developments. These

campaigns are sometimes met with indifference by the copyright owners, but an increasing number of producers are starting to recognize that it is in their best economic interests to take heed of the petitions and surveys of their most loyal and dedicated consumers (Jenkins, 2002: 5; Deery, 2003: 162).

The speed of today's Internet may often achieve what was previously impossible. For instance, any user can organize a digital space for a new fandom, and the website can attract a number of fans even before the source text officially reaches the market. This is not a paradox, nor the result of illegal activity, but it is the result of today's advertisements of new publications which abound in mainstream media, in the form of authors' blog posts, interviews, published snippets at the end of a book, or placeholders in the websites of publishing houses. Also for new media content, fans may congregate before the broadcasting of the source material. This mechanism is put in motion via cinematic and online trailers, interviews with the cast and producers, via blog posts, online messages including pictures of the screen-wright, of the costumes, of the filming set, and via many more hints of what is about to arrive in the theaters or on the television (Jenkins, 2002: 5).

The speed and frequency of communication of the Internet has aided in the intensification of social bonds within fan communities. Not only because many websites combine text and image, which help developing a more complete mental picture of the person behind the screen, but also because the high frequency of communication is bound to promote intimacy between the interlocutors. In the past, fans participated in active fandom life as if it were a weekend-only world. Fans connected with a small number of people once every few weeks or months, and with a large number of people once a year, rarely more, at conventions. Letters were a viable means of communication, but they entailed certain costs and the frequency of communication remained very sparse, not to mention the difficulty with which somebody could modify any of their statements in mail-bound conversations (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 212-213; Deery, 2003: 170).

On the contrary, on blogging websites fans can customize the frequency of interaction. They can communicate daily, hourly, minute by minute or, thanks to instant messaging and chat-rooms, in real time. They may share pictures and videos of their real routines, or of those close to them, increasing the level of intimacy between one another, as they become privy to each other's private information. By availing themselves of websites which can host a number of content's formats including music, videos and animated images, fans may also steer the conversation away from fannish topics, thus seeking common tastes outside of the source text. This method often succeeds in engendering friendships and strengthening the sense of belonging within the community (Jenkins, 2002: 5).

Not only the frequency of interaction, but the timeliness of fan production also aids the growth of intimacy between fans. As it has always been the case in fandoms, fan fiction does not simply consist of stories written about other stories. Fan fiction is a multitude of stories being written about the same story, and all at the same time. A great deal of fandom life, then, for fan writers and readers, pivots on the knowledge of being part of this communal writing activity.

In paper-bound fandoms, fans saw the proof of this contemporaneous activity only in the few fan magazines that they could get a hold of. Thanks to Bacon-Smith's account, it has already been mentioned that the production times for a fanzine was usually one or two years, and even though there were dozens of fan magazines being assembled simultaneously, they could only be circulated somewhat quickly via face-to-face meetings in the same country. International fans lagged severely behind due to the shipping times and to the prohibitive fees of postal services (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 212-213).

The Internet radically changed the concept of writing and consuming fan fiction since hardcopy fandoms. Technological advancements made possible for every member of the community, even the farthest ones from the country of origin of the source text, to become conscious of the simultaneous production of fan works in their community. The awareness of this writing culture is both empowering and exhilarating, especially for new, uncertain members (Jamison, 2013: 104).

Unfortunately, the Internet's frenetic expansion also led to unwelcome developments. Many fandoms' members, but especially those of the bigger fandoms, may start feeling alienated from the growing numbers of strangers gaining direct access to the innermost recesses of their community. The same uneasiness can be caused by casual members who drift in and out of the group's digital spaces at random intervals. Besides, even if more experienced fans wished to become acquainted with every new member, the sheer rhythm of the expansion of the fandom's digital boundaries would outrace any effort of socialization.

This sense of internal alienation can be very detrimental for fandom dynamics, and one of the consequences consists, for instance, in the rising number of Real Person Fiction. Most fandoms have long signed a tacit agreement against producing fan stories, especially explicit fan stories, about real people, mostly for ethical reasons but also to avoid legal repercussions. As new fans approach online fandoms, they may not bother with becoming acquainted with such norms, or they may notice them but choose to ignore them, or they may simply refuse to accept these guidelines. Such brazen attitudes often become dividing points between more experienced fans, committed to traditional fandom etiquette, and less experienced fans, who usually, but not always, belong to

younger generations, who intend to assert their rights to populate and participate in fandom life on their own terms (Jenkins, 2002: 6).

Since most fandoms pride themselves on their high tolerance, in some cases, opposing factions may negotiate such ideological conflicts by trying to gather all the parties involved to discuss in one digital place, or by spreading information about their fandom's history and its norms and hoping that the wrongdoers repent (MacDonald, 1998: 136). Very often though, the factions end up emancipating themselves into narrower circles, according to different interests and mindsets. This solution may seem to be the easiest, because it steers clear of direct confrontation, but it also implies a high potential of alienation, because the members of the narrower circles tend to distance themselves from public debates and form separate communities of their own. Furthermore, new fans may stumble upon these separate narrow groups first, without being introduced to the larger community, and the original order of things becomes disrupted. This fragmentary image of fandom was not engendered by the move to the Internet, since Bacon-Smith accounts for the presence of several such sub-communities in her study, but the infinite scope of the Internet makes possible for even the tiniest fandom to easily become fragmented into an unfathomable number of sub-groups (Jenkins, 2002: 6).

Nowadays, participation in online fandom requires fans to possess a range of varied technological skills and knowledge of terminology in comparison to older fan generations or to more traditional niches of old fandoms. In general, an active participation in the life of a digital fandom implies a degree of practical competence, or at least familiarity with: coding, Web design, server maintenance, chat-room or message board coding, blogging and micro blogging, and digital audio and video editing (Karpovich, 2006: 173-174).

### **2.3.2 Digital fandoms and producers**

One last major change regarding digital fandoms consists not only in the relationship between fans and their digital space, but also between fans and the authors, producers and creators of the source texts. Publishing houses and corporations are increasingly conscious of fandoms, often fanning the flames of their enthusiasm through social networks. The case of Joss Whedon and *Buffy* fans has already been mentioned, but nowadays that type of symbiosis is even more complex and the lines between producers and consumers have become murky and unstable (Jenkins, 2002: 8-9).

The contemporary producer/consumer symbiosis is based on transmediality, on the willingness of fans to shift amongst several media in order to follow the content of the source narrative. Transmedia promotion presumes an active audience who also has the technical knowledge to follow these media traces. Transmedia marketing strategies promote both a sense of affiliation and immersion, but also encourage all audiences to become fans and to make the effort to learn how to navigate transmedia narratives (Jenkins, 2002: 9; Busse, 2009: 106).

In the context of transmedia, media studies researcher June Deery (2003) predicts the complete enfolding of one medium into another. Her research implies that network computing is the mode of distribution of popular culture most likely to dominate other any else, replacing the television. Today, a complete merging of media seems to be yet distant, but a dual use of two separate media such as the television and the Internet, or literature and the Internet, is growing in frequency.

The television seems to be the protagonist of many experimental strategies. Nowadays, every television network possesses an official website. Because of the rise of free (although illegal) streaming services, broadcasters are rushing to keep or win back their viewers, inviting them to participate online as players, commentators, or voters. Unlike the websites of publishing houses, it is improbable that the digital portals of television companies will boost business by converting casual browsers into new viewers. However, unlike the websites of publishing companies, official websites regarding visual texts often succeed in keeping the audience engaged and increase the viewers' loyalty to the source text, and to the network, of course. This dual use promotes the growth of an active, participatory audience who is also becoming increasingly adept at navigating transmedia texts (Deery, 2003: 162-164).

With the promise of deeper involvement, some producers even attempt to include readers and viewers in the production and marketing of the source text's content. Such strategies may be labeled 'permission-based marketing,' 'relationship marketing,' or 'viral-marketing,' and are increasingly promoted as the most cost-efficient method to sell goods in a transmediatic, interactive market. For instance, videogame companies often circulate their games' engine code as a momentarily free software, hoping to unleash their consumers' creative potential. Afterwards, the copyright owners may either strike a deal with the consumer or reclaim their contribution as trademarked, depending on the type of pre-existing agreement between the two parties (Jenkins, 2002: 10; Deery, 2003: 164).

These involvement strategies, however, have not been completely embraced by copyright holders and the popularity of such marketing strategies are worrying their detractors. Many media producers still operate within the strict producer/consumer marketing strategy, and think that letting

fans participate in any way represents a loss of control over their intellectual property (Deery, 2003: 180). To fight or prevent this, television producers, film studios, and publishers regularly issue 'cease and desist' letters to fannish websites in order to curb their unauthorized reproduction of trademarked images and text. Sometimes fans comply with these warnings, sometimes they resist them and 'go underground,' moving from their original digital space to another, and severely restricting access to it (Jenkins, 2002: 9; Hills, 2002: 14).

In a participatory, transmedia culture, the right to reproduce and distribute the content of the source text is bitterly fought over by both commercial enterprises and consumers (Deery, 2003: 161). Media companies have doubled their efforts in this conflict since so far, the vast majority of websites devoted to any visual narrative have been created by the viewers. Furthermore, these unofficial, impromptu websites are often more popular and significant for fans than the official websites, especially in terms of scope and diversity of content, since fans are not restricted by any marketing regulation about the content of their digital spaces.

Content is not the only reason why fan websites successfully reflow most viewers from official websites. The content in fannish online spaces is open and evolving, while official sites tend to be closed and fixed, inviting a readerly attitude rather than a writerly one. Naturally, there are also closed fan websites and highly-participatory official sites, but the first seem to exponentially exploit the Internet's interactivity more cunningly than the latter. So much so that networks seem to be taking their consumers' digital lifestyle as an example on how to run their transmediatic strategies. In particular, fandoms' digital spaces provide fans with online and offline places where they can buy merchandise related to their source text. Fannish digital spaces also allow fans to discuss the source narrative in a many-to-many mode such as message boards, or chat-rooms, where speculations and rumors are rife, and grassroots movements are organized to destabilize network control (pp. 164-165).

The delicate relationship between the digital domains of corporations and fans has often been called a conflict, but there is rarely an overt tension or competition between the two parties. Although the copyright owners may shut down fannish websites any time, these are also free publicity for the source text, and many companies tacitly regard unofficial websites as mostly beneficial for their products (p. 164).

Finally, a note about the relation between the Internet, explicitly sexual and violent material, and fan fiction. Regarding online content, estimations sustain that there is less romance fiction than pornography on the Internet. However, close inspections of the stories uploaded in fan fiction archives will confirm that the tags which warn against adult content are fewer in comparison to their less explicit counterparts. It is undeniable that the privacy allowed by online anonymity has

rendered the consumption of pornography by women (especially young women) easier, and public anxiety regarding ever-younger Internet users exposed to adult content is not unwarranted. However, public discourse still routinely slanders fan fiction communities by claiming that they do nothing else than promulgating pornographic content under the guise of more socially acceptable genres, especially romance (Driscoll, 2006: 81).

### **2.3.4 Beta readers**

Detractors of online archives might assert that traditional publishing methods serve as a quality filter for fan works. Yet, it would be wrong to assert that fan fiction entirely lacks screening mechanisms and quality control measures (Polasek, 2012: 49-50). Some fan writers compose their stories with the help of one or more beta readers (mostly referred to simply as ‘beta’), who read the story before it is posted on public archives, offering critique on various levels including spelling and grammar, style and structure. This is all done, of course, without any compensation (Jamison, 2013: 279; Karpovich, 2006: 174).

The word ‘beta’ originally belongs to the terminology of software development, where an incomplete version of a software, the ‘beta’ version, is offered to a limited number of individuals outside of the original programming team for testing. The adoption of such a specific technological term by a wide variety of fan fiction communities is a clear reminder of the existence of an inter-fandom repository of knowledge, most likely due to the convergence in the same technological means of distribution (Karpovich, 2006: 173). The term ‘beta’ is transplanted into the context of fan works including fan fiction, fan art, and fan videos, as the work is reviewed by one or more individuals who check for a number of elements and eventually correct mistakes or offer their feedback over the positive and the negative aspects they find in the work according to their areas of expertise (Fanlore ‘Beta,’ 2017).

The connection between beta readers and fan authors often begins from the part of the author. Fan writers in need of a beta reader may parse forums, multi-blogging websites and lists, post an announcement on the beta readers’ own blog or website, or seek the recommendation of fellow fan writers. Beta readers are normally expected to specify their strengths and weaknesses, how experienced they are, etcetera. Many self-respected fan authors tend to imitate the linguistic variety of the source text as closely as possible, so various beta readers include in their description

what their native language is and their linguistic competence in either their mother-tongue or in foreign languages (Karpovich, 2006: 174-175).

Other than foreign languages, beta readers may possess knowledge on a number of specific topics. As a matter of fact, fan writers may often seek beta readers who have developed specific areas of expertise. For instance, medical, western steampunk, and Regency fan stories are all narratives that require a specific knowledge from their authors if the authors wish to publish accurate stories, as is often the case. If the authors do not possess specific knowledge in such specific fields, they can ask the help of beta readers who specialize for instance in medicine, western lifestyle, steampunk machinery and the Regency period.

Fan authors may seek the aid of beta readers in a number of ways, especially in the modern days of computer-mediated communication. Usually, each popular digital archive of fan fiction offers an infrastructure dedicated to connect fan authors with beta readers (Fanlore 'Beta,' 2017). On the ever-popular blogging website LiveJournal, there are a plethora of communities created for this purpose only. Fan authors can require the assistance of beta readers with community-specific formats, indicating the story that needs revision and what specific aspects the beta reader shall focus on, such as only the grammar, or only the characterization. In these communities beta readers can disclose their experience as editors, list what they specialize in, what aspects of the story is easier for them to spot and concentrate on, and eventually provide ways for the fan authors to contact them.

Some beta communities on LiveJournal host beta lists for any fandom, such as the veteran community `find_me_a_beta` (2005-), while other communities may be fandom-specific. For instance, `find_me_a_beta` recommends a specific format for the posts of its members. These messages are expected to include the questions: "How long have you been writing/beta-ing?: / What genre of stories to you like to write/beta?" These are very standard questions in any digital space connecting writers and betas (`find_me_a_beta`, 2005).

It is worth mentioning the digital archive FanFiction.net regarding beta readers. The website did not implement a feature to connect fan authors and beta readers until a few years ago. A registration form for readers and a directory for authors were simultaneously released in early 2008: "A beta reader registration and directory look-up service is finally here" (FanFiction.net, 2008). The directory in particular is very helpful, since it is organized by fandom, it hosts a distinct profile format for beta readers, containing their strengths and weaknesses and areas of expertise, and most importantly where they can be contacted privately to discuss beta reading services. What is most intriguing is that prior to the existence of this service, the users of FanFiction.net already utilized the website's forum for the same purpose with commonly agree-upon formats for authors and readers. For the users who find the directory too sophisticated to navigate, though, the forum section

called Beta Readers Central is still a viable option, and it is still used today (FanFiction.net 'Beta Reader', 2017).

Beta reading has significantly influenced the way fan fiction is presented within the community, but also how fan fiction ought to be taken into consideration by media scholars. The social expectation that the works of experienced authors should be preliminarily submitted for peer criticism is akin to professional standards of quality before publication, which is a relevant piece of information for the defense of fan fiction as a self-respecting literary genre (Karpovich, 2006: 176). Another aspect of beta reading that is relatable to commercial publishing is that competent, experienced beta readers quickly gain a substantial reputation, especially when experienced fan writers occasionally double as beta readers. In both cases the name of the beta reader in the header or in the notes of the story is a widely-sought seal of approval in most fan fiction communities (p. 181).

The name displayed near a fan fiction's title is the name of the original fan author(s). However, a well-respected fandom convention dictates that the author should acknowledge and thank the effort of the beta readers, and should also place their names as close as possible to the title. Some fan writers emphasize their gratefulness for their beta readers by dedicating a small message to them in the author's notes at the beginning or at the end of every chapter. Thus the beta readers visually share the responsibility for a readable, grammatically correct prose. This practice is an indicator of the value that fan communities place in this tradition (p. 174-175).

An alternative mechanism to beta reading views fan authors posting early drafts of the story publicly and revising their work according to the comments and reviews that they receive from the community. Individuals who have already uploaded content online, such as bloggers, may find this mechanism of feedback and adjustment natural, but it has struck most media studies academics as a highly irregular practice. Apparently, this is a signal that the authority of the author and of the bound text is undermined or in immediate danger. It is thus important to remind here that the very nature of fan fiction consists in being in part a response to the source text, but also in part it is a response to the creative environment of fan communities. Being open to adjustments from communal feedbacks is in the nature of fan fiction (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 6-7; Karpovich, 2006: 176).

These few paragraphs about beta readers are meant to defend fan fiction from those detractors who consider this genre repetitive, unimaginative, and full of spelling and grammar mistakes. Even Lamb and Veith, who count amongst the earliest supporters of *Star Trek* fan fiction, held a negative opinion of the literary quality of fan fiction. In their words: "As with all other zines, the writing is uneven, but a surprising proportion of the K/S zines are of good literary quality"

(Lamb & Veith, 1986: 237). The opinion that any good quality writing in fan magazines constitutes an exception is, unfortunately, still circulating.

However, truthfully speaking, no matter how many carefully edited fan stories are to be counted in fan fiction archives today, there is an equal if not greater number of un-edited, unpolished fan works as well. Hiding their presence by only discussing beta reading would be lying by omission, which is not condoned in academia, where a balance between involvement and detachment is most prized for the sake of a complete presentation of the subject matter. But why fan readers, who expect fan works to be neatly contained into categories, sub-genres, ratings and warnings in a rigid set of requirements that are meant to ensure quality, tolerate hastily written, unpolished stories? Janice Radway's (1991) study of romance readers shall provide the answer to this question in light of the regular comparisons drawn between the romance genre and fan fiction. Radway's women admit that they feel an intense need to read romance as an indulgence to themselves, similar to a gift or a reward to themselves. They also admit that their own imagination only ever takes their consciousness so far, and they attribute this shortcoming to the lack of new material. Because the escapist activity of losing oneself in the fantasy of the novel's world is so enjoyable, sometimes romance women read books that they do not fully like, even from a literary quality point of view. One reader goes as far as admitting: "Sometimes even a bad book is better than nothing" (Radway, 1991: 50).

This type of chronic impulse to reading stems from the natural instinct to perpetuate a pleasurable experience. It also explains perfectly why even un-edited fan works can receive a high number of positive votes and reviews, and why many unpolished stories even end up rising to the top of their fandoms.

### **2.3.5 Fan fiction warnings regarding beta reading**

As mentioned, credits to beta readers are extremely common in fan fiction, but for the sake of clarity a few quotes from actual fan stories shall be included. A popular Alternate Universe story of the *Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) fandom, Kryptaria's and rayvanfox' story titled *Critical Feline Mass* (2014) appears to be the fruit of group effort. Apart from having two authors, several other individuals are credited:

Betaed by the absolutely wonderful stephrc79 and zephyrfox. Thanks also to scriptrixlatinae for her witty, insightful, rib-cracking comments. [...] And extra-special thanks to medievaldreamer and husband for answering questions regarding the Medal of Honor (Kryptaria & rayvanfox, 2014).

This passage mentions two authors, two beta readers, one additional source of feedback, although the authors do not specify whether this individual was a real-life acquaintance or a fellow fan met on the Internet, and most importantly, a couple who has specific knowledge on the American military Medal of Honor, since the story focuses on war veterans.

Another common form of credit to beta readers can be found in a story in the *Captain America* (Johnston, 2011) fandom, by fan author Etharei. The story is titled *lonely houses off the road* (2014). Etharei's author's notes read: "An endless RIVER OF THANKS to nanoochka for beta-reading this fic and ~~not running away screaming~~ gently curbing my excessive love of commas, hyphens, and relative pronouns. All remaining mistakes are mine alone" (Etharei, 2014: chapter 1). This is an even more formula than the previous quote. The immense thankfulness of the fan author in front of the help received by their beta reader is expressed by the "river of thanks." Etharei also exaggerates the quality of the un-edited draft that the beta reader handled by conveying the image that the beta should have run away screaming. The author again expresses gratitude by emphasizing how the beta stayed and read the story despite the state of the first draft. Etharei's author's note is another that, not all that commonly, reveals the exact area of knowledge that the beta reader was required to have for the task: in this case grammar and word choice. And finally, the author ends the note with an extremely common phrase. Etharei claims responsibility for any and all remaining mistakes that the readers may spot in the narrative. With these words, fan authors mean to convey the message: 'If you find this story wanting, it is my fault alone and not my beta's fault, whose job was flawless.' This is done in order to leave the beta's reputation intact in case the beta is also a fan author, or in the case the beta would ever wish to offer this story as part of their credentials for a future editing task. Such authors are not untruthful because they are the ones who have the responsibility to do a final check to the story's draft before publishing it.

Fan author BeanieBaby's most popular story *Peter Parker's Home for the Wayward Villain* has already been quoted for its author's notes, since they are written in a very common format. It shall be reminded here that one of the notes in this story mentions beta reading: "Working hard to ram up the quality of things. Maybe go back and do some careful editing. Let you guys in on a secret, I have no betas, I literally do no editing. I go on a writing spree and post immediately after. All mistakes are mine" (BeanieBaby, 2015-2016: chapter 20). This note illustrates a common courtesy in fan fiction communities: it is polite to warn readers whether a story has been checked by one or more beta readers and when it has not. This is due to the fact that there are fan readers who

prefer to read only works that have been reviewed and edited by different individuals than the authors before being published. Some readers may be so adamant in this preference that they will refuse to read stories that have been published without ‘due’ revision, dismissing them as poorly written from the start (Tivka in Bury, 2005: 99).

BeanieBaby’s impulsive publication might appear quite shocking from an outsider’s point of view, but it is actually a fairly common practice in fan fiction communities, especially in fandoms whose source text has been very recently published, broadcasted or otherwise made public. The fan authors are often in a frenzy to provide others with the continued enjoyment of the source text by writing and publishing fan fiction as quickly as possible. This results in writers uploading their works to the currently most popular archives without a second thought or indeed without waiting for the screening of beta readers first.

This urge is so strong that in new fandoms, fan stories can be written and published even before the whole of the source text is released to the public. A few teaser pages in the case of books, and trailers in the case of movies, musicals and television series, will be sufficient to spark the authors’ imagination. Cult fandoms such as the Marvel and the DC Comics fandoms are rife with such stories nowadays, and reasonably so. For instance, in the *Avengers* fandom, *Homefront* (2012) by fan author copperbadge, seems to have been published a couple of months after the movie’s release date, but the story’s initial author’s note reveals otherwise: “This was written and posted on my personal archive in February, before Avengers came out, so suffers from Doesn’t Match Canon syndrome, sorry about that. I’m posting it here late” (copperbadge, 2012). This note shows the presence of a common practice: the author has started writing fan fiction right after the broadcasting of the movie’s first trailer.

When fan writers revise their work by themselves, one wording to warn the readers about the lack of a beta is the fandom term ‘self-betaed,’ where the noun ‘beta’ is turned into a verb, as is the norm for many nouns in Computer-Mediated Communication (Angela in Bury, 2005: 102). The term ‘self-beta’ is not widely known though. Alternative terms such as ‘self-edited’ can be found, while most commonly, the fan authors simply write whether they have revised the story at some point in time, sometimes providing the date in case their readers have first read the un-edited version of the story. Some fan writers communicate their intention of editing their work shortly in the future. Other times, there might be a note that the story is unrevised but then there is a line just below, usually starting with the word ‘edit’ that communicates to the readers that the story has been revised in some way.

It is important to keep in mind that edits are entirely different from re-writings. Fan authors may offer notes for minor edits or they may overlook this tradition. When they decide to

communicate edits, authors usually write them inside the body of the chapters. In this way they are inconspicuous and the readers may or may not notice them. On the contrary, re-writings, as the name conveys, usually involve the whole infrastructure of the story. Because of this, they are normally signalled in the summary of the story, so that they are immediately evident to any reader who is about to open the hyperlink of the story in question. Some authors may decide to re-publish their re-written stories from scratch, sometimes deleting the previous version if it did not receive acclaim within the fandom. When authors decide not to delete the previous version of their work for archival purposes, they may re-direct the readers to the new version via hyperlink.

It is the purpose of this chapter to trace a brief yet complete history of media fandoms in order to introduce the analysis of a few major themes present in fan fiction as smoothly as possible. Between consistency of fandoms and choice of relevant themes and elements, the latter has been preferred.

The ultimate purpose of this chapter is to show a glimpse of the nature of fandoms in relation to their fan works. As the next chapters shall demonstrate, the covert and overt ideologies underlying fan fiction production, which is the primary focus of this thesis, sink their roots in the history of the peculiar communities they are created into. In other words, fan fiction is such a multi-faceted, thought-provoking literary genre because its social context, the fandom, is heterogeneous and unfathomable. Most of nowadays fandoms are such diverse communities, which members are pioneers in debates on human gender and sexuality, because they are the result of their historical path. This chapter attempts to trace this diversity and pioneering efforts.

The next chapter will focus on the debates on gender and sexuality in fan fiction. First, the chapter will trace the nodes where gender and the process of reading intertwine. Secondly, the gender of fan readers and authors will be foregrounded, the chapter will examine how and why the (female) gender identity of the writers and readers is relevant during the consumption of the source text, and of the fan fiction production. The predominant element of femaleness in most fan fiction communities will be expanded upon for its stark contrast with the focus of the fan production on the male characters of the source texts. As a consequence of the discussion of these topics the composite and fascinating psychology behind most fan-authored stories shall, at least partially, become more evident.

## **Chapter 3: Sex and gender identity in fan fiction**

After having introduced the subject matter at length, it is time to analyze the first topic under focus in this thesis: questions of sex and gender identity in fan fiction. To introduce this topic, the discipline utilized is theory of literature. Thanks to psychology and gender studies, the relationship between a person's gender identity and literature has been thoroughly examined by the theory of literature since the second half of the twentieth century. After this introductory section, this chapter examines the figure of the archetype self-insertion female character called Mary Sue, and what its female identity discloses about the personality of the fan authors. Most of the chapter is dedicated to an in-depth explanation of the studies conducted on women fan writers and their male characters, as well as on the similarities and differences between fan fiction and the romance novel. In these sections, the relevance of the female and feminine identity of the writers and readers in fan fiction shall become clear.

### **3.1 Gender and reading**

Recent scholarship on the relation between gender and reading has been engendered primarily by two sources: research on reading comprehension in tender-aged individuals, and feminist literary criticism based on reader-response theory. Both fields of study will be utilized in this section and in the following chapter. However, before delving into childhood readings and feminist literary criticism, a key concept shall be explained first. This concept is the sex/gender binary, and it is of paramount importance to discuss this before approaching both gendered reading practices and feminism (Flynn, 1986: 267).

The sex/gender binary started to be theorized by researchers of transsexuality. The binary explained how a person may identify as a woman even if they have been identified as male from birth due to their biological sex, and vice versa (Richardson, 2015). While sex is in most cases immediate to differentiate and verify, societies impose various mental and behavioral expectations on individuals who then *become* women and men. What Simone de Beauvoir (1953) calls 'becoming gendered', Judith Butler (1988) renames 'performative gender,' since genders are what individuals perform daily (de Beauvoir, 1953; Butler, 1988). The distinction between sex and gender has been a crucial conceptual breakthrough in queer and feminist studies because it supported the argument that the gender roles performed by men and women are not biologically fixed and so they may be changed (Richardson, 2015).

In recent years, however, a new understanding of the binary has emerged. The distinction between sex and gender is now challenged by theorists claiming that sex is as much a social construct as gender. Supporters of this theory distance themselves from the reasoning that sex is the biological matrix upon which gender is imposed, but gender is increasingly being used to refer to any social construct which concerns the male/female binary. Consequently, nowadays the usefulness to separate sex from gender is debatable, and the usefulness of the concept of the binary itself is also debatable, paramount as it has been in the history of feminist studies. This recent theory argues that the gendered body, as the gender identity, is also a socially constructed phenomenon, its femaleness and maleness are imposed by society. The theory's core concept states that gender is such a deeply rooted category that human beings differentiate and understand their own bodies through it, namely gender creates sex and not vice versa. Studies support the argument that most understandings of sexed and gendered bodies have been socially manufactured, and what biologically constitutes a 'sex' has been up for debate since medical cases of 'doubtful sex' started to appear (ibid).

Several scholars of reader-response criticism address the dialectic and not unproblematic relationship between the text and the reader's gender, which is a paramount concern for fan culture studies, given that the vast majority of fan fiction writers and readers is female (see for example Russ, 1985 and Bacon-Smith, 1992). Human beings apply a set of pre-existing meanings (the schemata) as they read, providing the foundation upon which the text is understood. The reader's background knowledge provides the foundation upon which a new set of meanings is created, or it modifies the interpretive schemata with new knowledge. Thus, what readers extrapolate from a text is always entwined with what they have read *into* the text in the first place (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986: xi-xii). The reader's gender is relevant in so far the background schemata for women and men differs: the sum of those differences that can be traced back to one's gender is the gender schema. The gender framework is diverse and widespread, and it is deeply rooted in a person's psyche; in fact, gender notions take roots in the psyche around age three. It would not be excessive to state that the gender schema is an integral part of an individual's sense of self. However, it must be stressed that the gender schema is not biologically ingrained, but it is an extremely well-seated, internalized social frame (pp. xii-xiii).

A sex-specific development of the self produces sex-specific personality configurations. Men and women, raised differently as boys and girls, often prefer different texts, and when they read the same text, women and men tend to respond to and derive satisfaction from different aspects of the text (Miner, 1986: 189). For example, reader-response surveys show that the majority of male readers' responses display detachment from the characters. Men tend to rationally take part and

analyze the plot of the story, whereas women tend to emphasize with the characters and report their reading as an ‘experience,’ which involves more than one’s own rationality. Female responses tend to show that women experience the text in a more immediate and deeper way, they react emotionally as well as intellectually to the narrative (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986). More importantly, women readers seem to be more adept at negotiating narrative themes that are both implicitly and explicitly present within the text.

### **3.1.1 The division between boys’ books and girls’ books**

Although fan fiction communities prove to be greatly sensitive to issues about gender equality and female empowerment, a significant portion of the best fan fiction roles is given to male characters. This chapter mainly explores the argument that most fan fiction authors, being women, write about male characters for a number of reasons, chief among them is because historically, male characters have been rewarded more active roles than female characters. This perception is engrained in a person since childhood readings thanks to a careful gendered division of books for children. The so-called girls’ books intended to inspire obedience and passivity, while boys’ books intended to encourage leadership and entrepreneurship which can explain why most fan authors abide to this distinction in fan fiction (Segel, 1986).

Before childhood reading was divided for the two genders, fiction for children was domestic in settings, heavily didactic, and tinged with religious spirituality. The Puritan tracts populating the shops of seventeenth century publishers portrayed saintly children on their deathbeds and emphasized that for both boys and girls the desirables juvenile qualities of obedience, industry and good temper were necessary if they wanted to go to heaven after their death. Early educational books of Georgian times aimed at the development of an upstanding person, taught obedience, submission to authority and selflessness, and were dedicated to children of both sexes.

The first signs of a division in the editorial department begins from the titles of the books. In reality, book boys’ and girls’ books teach the same abovementioned qualities to both sexes, but the narration pivots around different gendered past-times, no doubt a mechanism conceived for easier marketing. By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the distinction became more rigid. Juvenile adventure fiction became known (as was commercialized) as ‘boys’ books,’ while domestic chronicles were the realm of ‘girls’ books.’ Ironically, childhood literature writer Elizabeth Segel (1986) describes boys’ books as a defense mechanism against the restraining domesticity of earlier juvenile, didactic tracts, and against the female domination of the domestic

sphere. Adventure books offered young readers the freedom to take off on their own, to escape from the female world of mothers, sisters and aunts, with whom they spent much of their time since child rearing was the exclusive task of women (Segel, 1986: 168).

In books, young boys could explore the world of sailors and pirates, visit rain forests and participate in wars and battles, and left their sisters in the infantile enclosure of home and family. In boys' books, freedom was not only implied in the remote and exotic settings, but also in the protagonist's characterization. Most boys' books protagonists operated under a loose, simple code of honor, where heartfelt introspection and extensive moral arguments were taboo: the protagonists were young men of action (p. 171). On the contrary, books for young girls contained lengthy discussions of moral introspection, designed to persuade the reader to accept the confinement and self-sacrifice pertaining to her sex (pp. 172-173).

Consequently, a clear binary emerges from childhood reading concerning what is acceptable for boys and girls. The successful protagonist of boys' books is the 'bad boy' type, who gets away with disobeying adults because his defiance of authority is ultimately necessary for the conclusion of the plot. This charming rascal earns the admiration of his peers and adults alike thanks to his carefree suspension of morals. On the contrary, if the protagonist of girls' books is deemed rebellious in any way, she is thoroughly punished. Once the rebellious girl is properly tamed into a sedentary role in the home as caretaker of her father and brothers in preparation of her wifely duties, only then she earns or gains back the love and approval of her relatives and friends (pp. 171-173).

This profound difference between the ideal young man and young woman is not puzzling considering how different must adults behave according to their societies' gender norms. The reason for the cultural shaping of the charming bad boy stems from the man's role in the wide world outside the home, where his battles of commerce and social advancement await. Boldness and sense of adventure is a virtue to cultivate in boys, so that they can leave childhood obedience behind and take control of their lives as they are supposed to be in control of their household in their adult age.

In marked contrast with the enterprising young male protagonist, books for older girls still taught docility, obedience and domesticity. Many girls' books prepared girls for womanhood by narrating the tension between the heroine's drive to active agency and autonomy, and by expanding on the societal pressure that the protagonist feels to suppress these drives. The obedience, self-sacrifice and docility encouraged in these books were the primary desired traits in women, single and married, as the vast majority of women had been until the end of the nineteenth century (p. 174). By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, literary critics and reviewers endorsed this division with articles such as *What Our Boys Are Reading* and *What Girls Read*, showing a concern about

making sure that what youngsters read was appropriate for their gender. The plots of boys' books, for instance, were deemed too strong for girls (pp. 168-169).

After children's books, boys could advance directly to proper literature, whereas young adult novels were created to be an intermediary form of appropriate literature for older girls. Young adult novels were (and still are) characterized by the aim of introducing more sophisticated content in girls' literature, while keeping the girls' imagination pure and unsullied as long as possible (p. 170). This strategy did not last long though. The careful separation of boys' books from girls' books is not an accurate reflection of the real reading habits of children. Actual reading behaviors are not as easy to keep under control as the content of the books. Even though it was easy to preclude young girls from joining male past-times, it was harder to keep them away from fictional exotic exploits, and since boys' books were understandably far more interesting than most of the dull girls' books, young women have always been avid readers of masculine adventure literature. Since most girls' books were severely short on action and long on submission, it is no surprise that boys were in return less than willing to cross over and read their sisters' approved texts. The few reports of boys' enjoying popular girls-oriented books belong to successful men who can safely reveal such bizarre literary tastes from the comfort of financial stability or fame (pp. 175-176).

The first changes in girls' books are visible in the mass-market pulp fiction at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. A number of syndicate-produced series of girls' books started to emulate the popular and financially successful adventure books, finally providing girls with the first few instances of active, independent young women heroines (pp. 174-175). This type of protagonists, however, remained a minority, while school syllabuses were dominated by male literature and masculine adventure tales reigned indisputably in the literary and cinematic markets throughout the twentieth century. The message of most available literature to young and older readers remained the cult of bold manliness and the praise of female subservience. For the most part, this division continues nowadays in the fixed roles of female characters in adventure fiction, ranging from the meek intended to the lustful femme fatale (p. 177).

## **3.2 Writing and reading for fun**

Scholars and outsiders often remark on the high and increasing numbers of literary fan works produced both in the times of hardcopy fan magazines, as in the recent times of digital archives. A major reason why fans write and read such copious quantities of fan stories is because this is an enjoyable experience for them. This may appear a very banal argument, but it is a noteworthy topic

to discuss to complete the introduction into slash fan fiction, and to introduce the comparison between fan fiction and the romance genre, both topics that feature prominently in this chapter. As is the case with romance novels, fan fiction provides such an enjoyable writing and reading experience that a large number of girls and women, as well as the occasional man, wish to turn this experience into a routine (Radway, 1991: 44).

It has been previously remarked that fans often dislocate the source narrative from its original context into countless different others, be they physical, such as the media of distribution, or fictional, as in Alternate Universe stories. Fans seem to devote their energies to this activity with tireless abandon. One simple reason for this practice is that the transformation of the source text into a different but still recognizable form is enjoyable. Fans engage with the source texts in all their forms and representations because it is entertaining to trace all the differences and similarities of the original, it is an activity which provides a measure of enjoyment and pleasure (Grossberg, 1992: 55).

The element of 'playfulness' in this thesis stands for a range of emotions that cause fans to write copious amounts of unauthorized, free fiction about their favorite characters. To answer questions such as why fans read and re-read stories about characters that very rarely resemble them or people in their lives, the mind-vs-matter binary may prove useful. After all, rationality is rarely involved in developing a strong attachment to a fiction genre or subgenre (Tennison, 1992 in Green et al., 1998: 19).

Media scholar Paul Booth asserts how the element of playfulness is often ignored or downplayed in studies about fan culture (Booth, 2010: 2, 43). This silence on the matter is peculiar, since nowadays the whole contemporary digital scene seems to be dependent on a culture of ludism. This section strives to emphasize that the nature of fan fiction is not just that of literary exploits that the fans publish to show off their knowledge of the original characters or to criticize the source text, the existence of fan fiction is rooted in simple enjoyment (Booth, 2010; Jamison, 2013). Fan authors write tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of words because they find this activity highly enjoyable. For the same reason fan fiction readers read across disparate genres and writing styles about the same few characters (Glasgow, 1995 in Green et al., 1998: 31).

The communal nature of fandom life is also enjoyable. The effort that fans utilize writing fiction, editing videos, drawing art, designing digital archives, can be attributed to the fact that sharing these resources with the rest of the community is pleasurable (Kylie, 2003: 80; Booth, 2010: 12). The mischievous joy of writing for a subcultural, subversive literary community includes a sense of sharing a secret pleasure with the rest of the group's members (Kustritz, 2003: 380).

In several occasions fan authors, no matter how popular their works are, and no matter the copious number of words they have labored on, may underline their writing as a game or as a hobby,

even with self-deprecating words (Bury, 2005: 101; Booth, 2010: 71). One of the contributors to literary scholar Anne Jamison's (2013) monograph on fan fiction, pits commercial writing and original character development against fan fiction. The first activity can be very stressful, while the second is "a way to have fun, to learn to do something, to create something new from something beloved" (Billings in Jamison, 2013: 198). These words indicate fan fiction as a welcome break from the pressure of daily work, even for professional writers (Lee, 2003; Billings in Jamison, 2013). As peculiar as it seems, seeking shelter from extensive writing with *more* writing can be quite liberating. For example, fan fiction offers elements which commercial publication cannot offer, including total freedom of style, copious and fast feedback and even total moral freedom in certain online archives (Bury, 2005: 82; Jamison, 2013: 262). As a matter of fact, one of the most appealing aspects of fan fiction is the joy writers can derive from informally publishing their works for their community without worrying about what will sell best. Of course, writers may use pseudonyms and post any piece of plot in blogging platforms to the same effect, but fan stories sink their roots into an already familiar source material, so the stories resonate immediately with the readers (Booth, 2010: 70; Jamison, 2013: 282). Notwithstanding this playful relationship between the source text and the fans' producerly practices, the high value that fans place on each other's works should not be dismissed (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 55).

### 3.3 Mary Sue

Fan fiction provides a fictional space in which any author might re-live and alter unanswered fantasies and fears that hark back to their infancy (Miner, 1986: 188). Because of this, a detailed explanation of the Mary Sue archetype may prove fruitful for a smooth understanding of the nature of fan fiction writing. A separate section of this thesis is dedicated to Mary Sue because her characterization, even her mere presence in a fan story, contains hints to extrapolate the psychology of the fan authors. It must be noted that the Mary Sue archetype has been (and still is) the focus of numerous, fierce debates within fandoms, but even with such heated discussions, the true reason behind the existence of this character, as well as its true meaning, remains unclear.

The name Mary Sue was coined within the *Star Trek* fan community to denote impossibly perfect female protagonists in fan fiction (Coppa, 2006: 47). Since Mary Sue is a proxy for the author, most of the debates around this "ultimate self-insertion" persona are based on feminist and anti-feminist attitudes within fan fiction communities. For the culturally anomalous fan fiction authors, Mary Sue combines several culturally approved traits, including beauty, modesty and sense

of self-sacrifice. These qualities irrevocably award Mary Sue the love of several male characters simultaneously including, obviously, the male hero's (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 100; Kustritz, 2003: 380; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 133).

Bacon-Smith is the first fan culture researcher to have written extensively about Mary Sue. Bacon-Smith posits first and foremost that the Mary Sue character could only be born from a predominantly female community. Since Mary Sue is the proxy of the author, the collection of the characteristics of this archetypical character speaks volumes about female mentality and about women fan authors (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 52-53).

A parallelism between gendered reading and Mary Sue can be drawn. In theory of literature, learning is achieved during reading when a person is not too detached nor too involved in the text. When readers are detached from the text, they tend to dominate it by applying their background knowledge to the story, whereas the readers who are emotionally compromised tend to be dominated by the story, absorbing it at face value without enriching their reading with their own interpretations (Flynn, 1986: 270). The parallelism posits that the Mary Sue archetype is associated with young and novice fan writers, who have yet to distance themselves from the source text enough to write about it rather than writing themselves in it (Driscoll, 2006: 90). In fact, the most highly appraised fan stories demonstrate that their authors managed to find a masterful compromise between overly emotional characters and puppets on strings. Regrettably, recognizing the discrepancy between a fan author who is too detached, one who is too involved, and one who has found a balance can only be achieved through first-hand reading of fan fiction over an extended period of time.

According to Bacon-Smith's analysis, Mary Sue is a woman's literary passage from the enterprising child/teenager to the passive adult. Young girls who suffer their peers' scorn either because of their non-ideal appearance, or because of their interest in masculine cultural products, such as action-adventure and science fiction, are more likely to find Mary Sue liberating. This would explain why Mary Sue is usually an adolescent character or she behaves like one, she represents a shift of roles, or even a shift of identity, in a woman's life (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 100-101). Mary Sue's naïve adolescence may also be a reflection of the author's young age. Young fan fiction authors may need to write several stories before they develop a narrative voice that is sufficiently detached from the source text, thus these overly attached narrators are often embodied in Mary Sue characters (Driscoll, 2006: 90).

According to media studies scholar Anne Kustritz, Mary Sue's perfection is a symptom of the romance genre's influence on its readers. The romance genre teaches that women are rewarded the unconditioned love of the man of their dreams only after they have reached perfection. With her

ideal feminine curves and modesty, Mary Sue is a reminder to ordinary women of what they could never be, which is the most prominent argument in fandom debates around this subject. Mary Sue sets the bar of female competition too high, thus discouraging many girls and women that they will unlikely attain their desired partner if they do not strive to achieve their society's ideals of beauty (Kustritz, 2003: 380).

Interestingly, Kustritz' description of fan fiction's male hero is notable for its parallelism with Mary Sue. Kustritz describes the male hero as being always in control of his and of the other characters' narratives. By being dominant, impenetrable, and skillful, the male hero wins the love of uninteresting, helpless heroines, while also winning the admiration of other male characters. The first possible parallel with Mary Sue is visible in Mary Sue's perfect control in any situation (p. 376). This trait often proves to be unnerving for many fan authors and readers, who find Mary Sue's masterfulness absurd, giving the character no real depth of personality. Although it is worth noting that in the stories where Mary Sue is the one who propels the plot forward, she offers a sense of female empowerment (pp. 376-377).

Mary Sue's flat characterization is the focus of most fandom debates about her. She is supposed to be the proxy of the woman author, and women are supposed to know the inner workings of the female personality enough to prove this in their writing. However, Mary Sue's personality is appallingly shallow and repetitive in comparison to most of fan fiction's male characters, whose overpowering attitude is a façade for their inner demons, which turns them into round, interesting characters to relate to. In addition to adapting swiftly to any situation, Mary Sue also wins the love of the male hero very easily, sometimes right after the beginning of the narrative, and she often gains the affection of the rest of the male characters too (p. 376). As for whether Mary Sue inverts the male hero's archetype by gaining the admiration and respect of her fellow female characters, the reports are scarce and contradicting about this parallel.

A staple of the Mary Sue archetype is the ritual death that the character usually faces at the end of the story. This death normally serves the purpose of restoring the source text to its initial status before Mary Sue was introduced in the fan plot. In this way, writers who use the Mary Sue characters symbolically kill their witty and no-nonsense alter-egos and their ideals of feminine beauty to settle into a socially approved, adult lifestyle. Wit, in particular, is a typical fan author's trait which is highlighted by a number of fan ethnographers (see Bacon-Smith, 1992, Bury, 2005 and Jamison, 2013), and yet, even the overpowering Mary Sue must abide to a few restrictions. For instance, her problem-solving capabilities are to be dismissed as (female) intuition rather than rational analysis and deduction. Since Mary Sue's death is seen by many as self-demeaning, in early media fandoms, fan magazine editors would rarely accept to publish Mary Sue stories in order to

encourage women authors to look beyond self-sacrificing, idealized feminine stereotypes (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 102). Many fan readers are still extremely wary when they notice an ‘Original Female Character’ warning in a story’s summary, and they tend to pick apart any original character to check if there are any traces of the Mary Sue archetype (Kustritz, 2003: 380; Lackner et al., 2006: 199).

Bacon-Smith traces Mary Sue’s exaggerated sense of self-sacrifice to the extremely high percentage of expendable women characters in source texts, such as the ‘pretty thing’ or the ‘useful sidekick’ archetypes. Even women protagonists do not normally enjoy a satisfying love life unless they learn to step down and accept the role of co-protagonists to the male hero in their own adventures. Witnessing Mary Sue characters reflecting this self-demeaning trait in fan fiction is highly disturbing for strong-willed fan readers who may not hesitate to ostracize the fan author because of it (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 241; Lackner et al., 2006: 199; Holliday, 2015). Bacon-Smith ultimately hypothesizes that Mary Sue represents the internalized model of the ideal woman in patriarchal societies. Therefore the community’s hatred towards Mary Sue characters is not meant to be interpreted as anti-feminist or as self-hatred, but it is actually meant to be regarded as feminist, since the detractors advocate the overcoming of traditional gender roles that the Mary Sue archetype enforces (Bacon-Smith, 1992).

There is an upside in the Mary Sue archetype though. Mary Sue characters can be positive outlets for introspection. When writers build literary alter egos, they imbue them with certain ideal characteristics, but at the same time they may also acknowledge some of their needs and desires that they had not acknowledged before. While writing self-insertion characters, fan authors may discover manifestations of their subconscious and, hopefully, grow the wiser in the process (p. 97).

### **3.4 Women authors, male characters**

An intriguing characteristic of fan fiction is that, penned by a majority of women, its natural subject matter ought to be women characters, whereas most of its characters are male (Russ, 1985; Bacon-Smith, 1992). The history of fan fiction studies reveals an incredibly high rate of scholarly attempts to pinpoint the exact reason why women fan authors write slash stories, even at the cost of neglecting other fan fiction genres (Hellekson & Busse, 2006, 2014). Researchers from a wide range of professions have debated over the meaning of slash male characters, namely whether they are women in disguise, whether they are androgynous, truly gay or homophobic, and whether they are women’s ideal type of masculinity (Bury, 2005: 76-77; Lackner et al., 2006: 194).

Fans – female fans especially – have always concocted tactics with which, in the spirit of the *carnavalesque*, they arbitrarily rearrange the gender roles set out for them by mainstream culture. Through their fan production, they offer instead a playful, diversified, even perverse femininity (Dell, 1998: 105; Jamison, 2013: 19). In slash fan fiction, women authors question and defy the heteronormative structure of the source text, pairing up male characters who have no chance of becoming partners in Canon. More importantly, slash authors often do this in spite of the original copyright owners, who deny any possibility of homoerotic developments in the source text (Kustritz, 2003; Leavenworth, 2009: 442).

Traditionally, strong women protagonists are not easily born from the efforts of women authors. In slash fan fiction this phenomenon is evident and endemic. Bacon-Smith discusses this shortage by pointing out that our culture so thoroughly belittles women that they cannot see themselves in heroic roles unless they don the male hero's clothes. A severe lack of well-rounded and interesting mainstream female characters also contributes to women fan authors shifting their focus on male characters instead. Respondents to Bacon-Smith's surveys confirmed this theory by explaining that they are not interested in exploring the personality of the source text's female characters, in writing the source text's male characters in a heterosexual relationship. Specifically, they believe that the fans simply cannot write women characters who can suit their favorite male heroes or their own ideals of a good female protagonist (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 240).

In a compelling argument, Bacon-Smith discusses the lack of women characters by relating the masculine entrepreneurship of slash fan fiction male protagonists, the Mary Sue archetype and the fan writers' psychology. When fan authors write male protagonists, they can experiment with the cultural model of the man as active agent and creator in society (Segel, 1986). The male protagonists may possess a 'feminine' emotional spectrum because they display a wide, deep range of emotions in fan fiction. They can display a heightened sensitivity without losing the strengths of the traditional male hero, in a hermaphroditic combination of the best of both genders (Tennison, 1992 in Green et al., 1998: 20). Some fans even integrate this sense of bold entrepreneurship into their lifestyle by participating more actively in fandom life, or within their family dynamics, or even within their workplace, becoming more subversive and unfeminine by social standards (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Kustritz, 2003; Derecho, 2006).

Fandom teaches its female members how to reinterpret the male hero of the source text, adding a heightened emotional sensitivity to his characterization in fan fiction, which is culturally associated with the female (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 150). The openly displayed emotions of fan fiction's male protagonists are said to stand as a proxy for the authors' feelings without forcing them to write overly emotional female characters. From one viewpoint, the male protagonists'

heightened emotionality represents the writers' efforts to understand their characters better, but also to understand *men* better. By delving deeper into the male characters' personalities, fan authors strive to mediate between the male and the *humane* (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 248; Salmon & Symons, 2001). Some fans, though, deny that they stage their male characters with feminine characteristics, asserting that they strive to portray all their characters as simply humans (Glasgow, 1992 in Green et al., 1998: 31). This kind of mindset, still discernible in online fandom today, is controversial in so far it ignores those gender theorists who argue that the identity of a human being is shaped according to gender roles from a very tender age. Gender is extremely difficult if not almost impossible to separate from one's sense of self (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986; Crawford & Chaffin, 1986; Segel, 1986; Richardson, 2015).

Instead of a feminine range of emotions, many fan authors tend to imbue their protagonists with a set of their own concerns and issues. In this case, writing fan fiction is a way for fans to vocalize their issues without disclosing personal details, but it is also a way to reach out to others, to approach supportive and understanding individuals. Many of these fans reach out to others via fandom because they cannot find enough support among their current relations in real life. In this context, the communal act of fan fiction acquires a therapeutic effect for both readers and writers (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 93-94).

### **3.4.1 Telepathic bonds and soulmates in fan fiction**

A popular fan fiction trope concerns an extremely heightened psychological affinity between the protagonists, which usually manifests in soulmate or telepathy plot devices. Telepathy or soul bonds might seem an extreme way to pair two characters together, because the protagonists are forced in a relationship together by the bond. Among the first to discuss the trope are Lamb and Veith, who argue that the bonding trope in slash is founded on an idealistic heteronormative mindset. The bonded characters are proxies of the authors' desire to know every single notion there is to know about one's partner. As mentioned, this mindset is idealistic because the characters are meant to accept every aspect of their partner's personality wholeheartedly. The concept of such an indissoluble, intimate partnership discloses a romantic, idyllic prospect of marriage in the author's psyche (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 247-248).

Interestingly, Bacon-Smith interprets telepathic bonds as a female characteristic of giving centrality to emotions and intimacy. In fan fiction, telepathy is not usually viewed in terms of personal violation and lack of privacy, but rather the contrary. Empathy and telepathy stand for the

emotional closeness and ideal understanding, which many women wish for or value in their relationships. Women fan authors do not seem to regard telepathy as weak ego boundary syndrome, or as a failure in keeping each individuality separate from one another, but as an alternative means of communication when words fail to consolidate the characters' relationship. With a telepathic link, the characters are able to absorb all the aberrations that a person would hardly ever expose (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 146, 161). Another possible explanation for the popularity of telepathy or soul bond tropes would hark back to Nancy Chodorow's analysis of the pre-oedipal phase. Girls and boys live through different environmental and relational experiences in their infancy, since until very recently women had been the exclusive child-rearing parent. Therefore girls are normally raised by a person of the same sex, which can cause them to experience difficulties in perceiving each person's psyche as separate from another (Chodorow, 1974: 47).

Another theory to explain the lack of relatable women characters in fan fiction, is that literary genres with a high abstract level create a great psychological distance between the writer and the characters' feelings and issues. Fan writers are not weighted down by the policies of publishing houses, so they can match what they want to convey and the level of abstractness that they need to convey it, to the fan fiction genres which offer an equivalent level of personal exposure (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 204). Women fan authors may have conscious and subconscious reservations against instilling themselves into their characters, and in the case of women characters the transition may happen too naturally for the author to notice. Women fan writers would write themselves and in and identify with their women characters without noticing. These characters then become uncomfortably personal for the authors who wish to remain emotionally detached from what they write (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 133). Men, though, are the alien 'other.' Male characters are often preferable to women characters because their gender adds an advantageous layer of psychological distance, which the writers need in order not to identify too closely with them (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 110-111, 247).

The psychological distance granted by male characters includes moral distance. Historically, men have been granted more liberty to control their own sexual mores than women. Young girls learn this fact when they approach 'boy's books' who star active, wandering young heroes who get away with all sorts of morally dubious acts (Segel, 1986). Therefore women authors may favor male characters to enjoy a high degree of moral laxity. Many fan authors perceive that they are more free to add morally dubious elements in their stories, because they can ascribe such unfeminine demeanors to the more liberal male sexuality. This also explains why many slash authors write unequal power relationships between their protagonists. Since both protagonists are males, the usual submissive-female, dominant-male binary cannot subsist, thus the authors eschew exposing

themselves as the submissive or the dominant partner. This characteristic is extremely intriguing since, for all the arguments about equal relationships in slash fan fiction, a fair number of fan stories investigate unequal power dynamics (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 246).

Notwithstanding the low numbers of women who create, or contribute to create, popular culture icons in the mainstream industry, there is a growing number of tough women characters on print and on television for which feminist movements, amongst others, ought to be thanked for (Richardson, 2015). This increasing feminine presence in mainstream media is already exerting positive influence on fan authors, as the presence of well-rounded feminine characters in their works is the rise (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 142).

### **3.4.2 Heterosexual women authors and homosexual male characters**

Once the fact that mostly female-populated fandoms read and write mostly male-populated stories has been discussed, once the aspect of gender has been breached, the aspect of sexuality must be addressed too. On the level of sexuality, most fans who have participated in surveys tend to declare themselves heterosexual, while most slash fan fiction protagonists identify themselves as queer, or they reject this label but engage in activities that only queer individuals would define 'normal.' By the difference between the gender and sexuality of fan authors and the gender and sexuality of slash protagonists, it is a given that most debates around slash fan fiction would converge on this topic: heterosexual women writing about queer male characters (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 76).

An extremely popular argument for writing slash fan fiction concerns equality. Slash fan fiction is able to voice some of women's desires for gender equality which fall outside of the accepted parameters of a conservative, heteronormative society (Cicioni, 1998: 175). This argument was first introduced by Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diane Veith's essay *Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek zines* (1986). They discuss how many slash stories depict a loving relationship between equals since homosexuality falls outside hierarchical gender roles. Slash characters often display both masculine and feminine traits, so that even graphically described homosexual relationships may function as a metaphor for women's wish of gender equality in heterosexual relationships. The homosexual partnership becomes a metaphor for an idealized heterosexual partnership where compatibility, mutual support and understanding are favored over mere sexual satisfaction. Thus slash fan fiction becomes a powerful literary instrument for any

woman who may wish to share with others her egalitarian sexual fantasies (Leavenworth, 2009: 446; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 79; Kustritz, 2003: 377).

Much in the same way that women slash fan authors prefer to focus on male characters because they wish to avoid identifying with women characters, many heterosexual fans prefer to write about homosexual characters to avoid identifying with the woman in a heterosexual relationship. Equality among the protagonists plays a major part amongst the reasons why any writer and reader would prefer to avoid identifying with a woman character. Fan fiction authors show extreme sensitiveness for this subject, and many have argued that portraying an equal partnership between two men (or two women) is infinitely easier than portraying an equal relationship between a man and a woman. Lamb and Veith argue that this mechanism may be triggered unconsciously in the mind of slash authors, since heterosexual partnerships are historically encultured as unequal, with women traditionally depicted as the weaker side (Lamb & Veith, 1986; Kustritz, 2003: 380).

Inequality in heterosexual relationships is believed to stem from society's presentation of sexual intercourse to women. Historically, heterosexual experiences have been very intimidating for womankind. In patriarchal cultures, most girls are sexualized in heterosexual terms, and these terms often dictate that women ought to learn to be obsequious in front of the sexual pleasure of men and to live for reproduction. A popular image of a woman's sexual identity is the Madonna/whore binary. In this binary the woman is portrayed either as over-saturated with carnal desire, as the so-called femme fatale, the temptress, or as a serene, honorable mother whose sexual appetite is dormant but for the times when the father/husband requires it. Such cultural representations effectively silence women's wants and needs in personal relationships (Dunk-west & Brook, 2015: 155; Holliday, 2015).

The unequal power relationship of heterosexual couples is visible in the symbolic meanings which (hetero)sexual positions have accumulated over time, and which are historically imbued with decisional power. Traditionally, being 'the top' has positive connotations because it means being the active, leading partner, whereas being 'the bottom' carries negative connotations, because it is associated with the passive acceptance that women had to show in the marital chamber as in most other aspects of marital life (Holliday, 2015).

In slash, women fan authors do not have to worry about who is going to be 'on top' in the power dynamics. A male/male relationship does not easily show who is the submissive partner, since the traditional cultural representation of men is that they must be all equally dominant. In slash fan fiction the explicit scenes, no matter how clinically narrated they are, are pervaded by a sense of trust and confidence. Part of the enjoyment and challenge for slash writers lies, in fact, in

successfully negotiating the power balance between two equally dominant, independent, masculine protagonists. Since some women raised in conservative, patriarchal cultures may find traditional sexual roles problematic, they may prefer to write slash so that they do not have to face this problem (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 146, 242; Kustritz, 2003: 377). Slash stories are then a ‘win-win’ situation for heterosexual women authors and readers, who may prefer to read about relationships without the depressing presence of passive women characters, who await to be ‘taken’ by the hierarchical (hetero)sexual claim (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 146; Kustritz, 2003: 377, 380; Holliday, 2015: 244).

The presence of two male protagonists in slash also solves the fans’ issues about whom they prefer to identify with. Those fans who wish to partake in the fantasy of being romantically involved with one of the male heroes may do so by identifying with his partner, while those who may wish to experience the relationship from the point of view of their favorite male hero may do so by simply switching the point of view. With slash fan fiction, women writers do not have to impersonate the passive woman by default, and they can experience both parties at once, both receiving and giving physical and emotional pleasure. This consuetude to identify with both sides of a relationship tends to be so strong in fandom that even tropes which have spawned a plethora of stories over time are still highly productive and appreciated (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 239).

The wish for a more satisfying sexual life emerges from many of the explicit scenes included in both slash, femslash and het fan stories. They describe the kind of relationships that women authors would like to enjoy with their partners. And yet, at the same time, many explicit scenes in slash and het are underlined by fear and anxiety, signaling that sexual intercourse involving men is simultaneously desirable and threatening. It is noteworthy to mention that when fan authors disclose personal details in their author’s notes, they usually reveal emotional turmoil in their lives. Fan fiction thus acquires an exorcising power which permits the authors to assign their emotional and sexual anxieties to the culturally braver male characters. Slash fan fiction is imbued with an important, liberating value for the heterosexual women authors who wish to write their desired partnerships, by turning the source text’s male characters into ideal partners (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 246, 248, 268; Cicioni, 1998: 166).

Writing about queer characters often involves writing about the upsides and downsides of an oppressed sexuality. Here a parallelism can be drawn between queer individuals and women. (The term queer in this context is used as an umbrella word to indicate any sexual identity that falls outside heterosexuality). Like homosexual men, women of all sexualities are regularly silenced by patriarchal cultures, and they are allowed a measure of personal success only when they mold themselves to the feminine image that their society has set in place for them. In addition, women

who express the mere interest for 'exotic' sexual practices according to their societies' standards, are classified as degenerates. For instance, one crucial heterosexual practice that is deemed appropriate for women involves providing sexual pleasure unselfishly, not actively seeking it out (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 247).

There are many slash stories where sexuality is a non-issue. Fan stories in which the protagonists live in a community where their relationship is wholeheartedly accepted may be very relieving to read. In such stories there is no trace of homophobia, of course, since there is no discussion about sexual identity at all. This literary device is also utilized to concentrate on the development of the psychology of the characters, or on the plot (Tennison, 1990 in Green et al., 1998: 22). This writing strategy works best for those writers who wish to expand on the protagonists' romantic feelings and on their dynamics in an established relationship in comparison to having the characters negotiate their sexuality during an identity crisis (Kustritz, 2003: 379). Furthermore, bypassing sexuality discussions is very enjoyable for those fan authors who do not wish to delve deeply into the topic of sexual identity, either because they have never questioned their own sexuality, or because the theme does not fit their plot (Phoebe in Bury, 2005: 91-92).

In Green, Jenkins and Jenkins' (1998) research, many reasons for the choice of queer protagonists are enumerated. Among them, a fan discusses how she chooses to write slash because she identifies with the male hero of the source text despite being a woman. The fan author is led by the original narrative to experience the adventurous plot through the point of view of the hero. Eventually, the transformative fan wishes to experience love and arousal through the male hero too. To achieve this, the author must pair the male hero with an intriguing love interest, who can't be a female co-protagonist because if she were a round character, the author would have chosen her to identify with in the first place. Moreover, as discussed, strong women characters are very rarely portrayed in mainstream media, much less strong women protagonists (Holliday, 2015). Random strong women characters with whom the male hero enjoys brief escapades are also excluded because of the ephemeral inconclusiveness of such escapades. The other characters who show strong feelings, either positive or negative, for the male protagonist are the villain and the male co-protagonist. Many fan authors latch onto the comradeship that the hero enjoys with the male co-protagonist, since it is based on affection (rather than the antagonism of the relationship with the villain), and it is not based on a heterosexual, unequal power relationship. Even when the co-protagonist is less intelligent or less physically gifted than the hero, he is not essentially inferior because he does not belong to a more delicate, weaker sex. Besides, since in mainstream media the male hero is normally heterosexual, his affection is not based on the appreciation of the male co-protagonist's looks. Without the emphasis on the looks of the partner, the relationship between the

protagonists focuses on how they adjust their own personality to one another's to work well together. This type of supportive partnership is very positive in the eyes of the readers and viewers because this is a paramount requirement for any exclusive, long-term, romantic relationship (Anestopoulo, 1990 in Green et al., 1998: 16; Kustritz, 2003: 377).

This so-called 'male-buddy' relationship at the center of many mainstream cultural products, appeals to slash fans because of its in-depth focus on the development of the relationship on the characters' psychology. In many mainstream media, female characters are meant to let the readers explore the male hero's lustful side, while the male co-protagonist is meant to let the readers discover the hero's both emotional and rational sides. In other words, while the male hero entertains volatile passions for women characters, he spends the bulk of the plot in the company of the male co-protagonist, with whom he shares his emotions, thoughts and to whom the hero devotes most of his time and attention (Kustritz, 2003: 377; Holliday, 2015).

The male-buddy relationship is an enriching element for the source text according to many fans. This is due to the fact that the original producers, often show more imagination in developing the male characters' psychology rather than the female characters', who are often passive pawns in the plot. Moreover, female characters do not often interact with each other in mainstream media, and more importantly they do not develop such a deep companionship like the one the male characters enjoy (Tennison, 1992 in Green et al., 1998: 20). Because of this, readers of slash fan fiction usually praise fan stories involving well-developed canonical female characters, especially when these characters are empowered in some way. There is undoubtedly a measure of feminism in this endeavor, and it is also a testament to the creativeness of fan authors, who are able to expand on potential that is barely hinted in the source text (Tomorrow, 1990 in Green et al., 1998: 21).

The male-buddy relationship would not be at the center of such appreciation if the source text's male hero was involved in an equal, long-term, exclusive relationship with a well-rounded heroine. Since this is rarely true, the conclusion fans draw is that either the male hero is incapable of sustaining an intimate relationship, or his comradeship with the male co-protagonist is so fulfilling that the hero does not need to pursue a steady heterosexual relationship (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 197). Interestingly, even in front of a canonical heterosexual relationship, many fan fiction authors still focus on male/male pairings, even concentrating on secondary characters at the expense of the protagonists. One reason for this is that many fan writers are not interested in further investigating a perfectly satisfying, steady, canonical relationship, but would rather pursue alternative, queer scenarios to fully explore their narrative potential. Another explanation posits that the fans find faults in the canonical partnership, specifically in terms of intimacy. Normally, when the sexual tension is resolved between the male and the female protagonists of a story, verbal reinforcements

and the occasional, semi-explicit scene seem to take over in place of the previous solidarity and mutual understanding. Since many fan fiction authors keep these elements in higher regard than attraction, they may revisit relationships of the source text that pivot on understanding and intimacy instead of sexual intercourse. Fan authors may also reinforce the relationship's intimacy by writing stories where the protagonists have been a couple for a long time but need to solve issues of trust and misunderstandings instead of tending to their sexual life (ibid).

In Green, Jenkins and Jenkins' report, a fan author argues that one of the appealing aspects of slash fan fiction is that the woman writer gets to unleash her emotions as much as she wants by placing a wide array of emotions in the male characters. This can be a very liberating practice for those women who think that men in heterosexual relationships are less emotionally involved than women. Therefore, in a story which focuses on two men's consensual, satisfying and long-term relationship, the readers are assured to come across at least one man who is deeply, emotionally involved, which is what they wish to witness. This is also one of the reasons why some fans bridge the gap from an intimate but merely friendly relationship in Canon, to a sexual one in fan fiction. By admitting their feelings, the male characters approach the female level of emotional involvement in sexual relationships which makes them extremely intriguing for the fan readers (Katherine, 1992 in Green et al., 1998: 19).

Regarding the risk of personal exposure that fan writers face (since they are at liberty to write about anything, especially in very tolerant websites such as LiveJournal and the ArchiveOfOurOwn), they may opt for the high possibility of revealing personal details in heterosexual stories, or they may eschew this risk by choosing slash. Some fan authors fear scorn for poorly-written heterosexual explicit scenes, since they are expected to have practical if not first-hand knowledge of the dynamics. With slash fan fiction this issue disappears. No slash reader expects the writer to have first-hand knowledge of homosexual intercourse, slash authors are less pressured to demonstrate a certain level of expertise in the matter. Thanks to this artistic liberty, fan authors can write their queer couples in any way they want, which is very liberating and empowering (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 204, 248). Despite the risk of social ridicule and censorship carried by queer themes, the significant high number of slash fan fiction in multi-genre archives seems to indicate that women writers do prefer the high level of abstraction of male homosexuality to expand on a wide range of interpersonal issues (p. 204). For example, there are fan authors who write anti-queer themes in slash stories because they are interested in pitting a queer couple against homophobic attitudes to investigate the characters' reactions against discrimination. This kind of approach undoubtedly adds a more political and realistic layer to the story (Tennison, 1990 in Green et al., 1998: 22).

### **3.5 Fan fiction and the romance genre**

Fan fiction and the romance genre may be compared effectively for several reasons. Outside of the content of these two genres, both romance novels and fan fiction are mostly penned and read by women. Additionally, both genres suffer from social denigration as an aesthetically inferior, morally dubious form of popular culture (Radway, 1991; Salmon & Symons, 2001; Bury, 2005: 42; Driscoll, 2006).

Historically, romance novels have been considered texts of dubious nature because they provided young women with shameless, dangerous fancies which allowed girls and women to detach themselves from their bleak and repressive surroundings (Radway, 1991: 61; Bury, 2005: 93-94; Driscoll, 2006: 86). Because of this morally dubious reputation, both romance novels and fan fiction are normally consumed privately, like a guilty pleasure. Under this viewpoint, in the history of female-authored literature, fan fiction perpetuates the romance novel's legacy of causing moral concerns about what girls and women actually read in contrast with what their society expects them to read (Driscoll, 2006: 80). Fan fiction also breaks tradition for being possibly the only widely popular literary genre that allows women complete freedom over their writing (Penley, 1997: 489 in Driscoll, 2006: 82; Kustritz, 2003: 371). With no word limit and no genre restrictions, the romance formula in fan fiction is easily transposed and expanded, for instance fan fiction allows for unlimited in-depth character analysis (Bury, 2005: 82).

The comparison between fan fiction and the romance genre plays a major role in explaining the constant enjoyment that fans draw from reading and writing fan fiction. There is a very basic, primordial pleasure involved when women readers consume female-authored narratives. Literary theorist Judith Fetterley (1986) claims that the consumption of women's narratives enables women readers to discover previously ignored or repressed sides of themselves. The readers acquire a deeper sense of self from women-authored texts that male-authored texts are unlikely to ever unearth. In both romance and fan fiction, this all-female literature is often also tinted with sexual pleasure. As Fetterley states, sexist cultures have institutionalized and enforced heterosexuality in order to serve the sexual interests of men. The consumption of pleasurable female-authored texts, however, lets women become re-acquainted with their own passions and their own libido on their own terms. Thus fan fiction and female-authored romance are relatable because their reading offers women a knowledge of their flesh which traditional male-authored novels may not be able to provide (Fetterley, 1986: 151-152).

Another point of connection between romance and fan fiction is the foregrounding role of emotions. In both romance and fan fiction the focus is on the emotional inner journey of the protagonist(s). The presence of a flawed hero or heroine, as well as the presence of a flawed villain or villainous character is also an element in common between romance novels and fan stories. However these are general aspects, the following paragraphs will relate more specific aspects between the genres.

Bacon-Smith has been one of the first scholars to point out that the traditional, (heterosexual) romance formula is often reproduced in slash fan fiction (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 228). This statement was rather revolutionary, since even nowadays there are scholars who pit heterosexual and slash fan fiction against each other, as manifestations of romance and pornography respectively. The romance conventions that are to be found in fan fiction include, for instance, drawing out the protagonists' discovery of their feelings until right before the end of the plot (Driscoll, 2006: 84).

Narrative suspense in both romance and fan fiction depends on *how* the main couple establishes an exclusive, healthy relationship, and not about *whether* the protagonists are going to succeed or not. Apart from the fan stories that end with a non-happy ending (which is usually specified in the story's warnings or in the author's notes), the conclusion of both fan stories and romance novels is pre-established and it follows the 'happily-ever-after' formula. Part of the readers' delight consists in discovering all the possible variations and all the possible sequences of events leading up to the same kind of happy ending that has become the standard of both the romance genre and of fan fiction. Although it is not uncommon to find fan stories with open or dubious endings (Cicioni, 1998: 171; Driscoll, 2006: 85).

In romance the heroine start her adventure basically ignorant, especially in regards to sexuality. This lack is corrected by the end of the narrative, culminating in heterosexual fulfillment. In romance, love and sex are fused together but they are not interchangeable, and if one of the protagonists (usually the male hero) has been sexually promiscuous prior to the beginning of the story, they have never known 'true love.' This mechanism assures that the theme of virginity and discovery of love are intertwined, because even if a character is knowledgeable about sex, they are unsullied from a romantic point of view (Driscoll, 2006: 84). The theme of emotional virginity may be best illustrated with the 'blush'. The characters of slash fan fiction, as masculine as they may be in the source text, tend to blush and interact awkwardly with one another prior and after the beginning of their relationship. This is a parallelism with the ever-present 'blushing bride' of the romance novels (Bury, 2005: 85). The theme of virginity is most evident in a trope shared by commercial romance and fan fiction: the 'First Time' trope (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 228-229).

The First Time fan fiction genre, as its name suggests, narrates the protagonists' discovery of mutual attraction. The culmination of this attraction in graphically depicted scenes is usually necessary to warrant the label. The genre can alternatively be called 'From Friends To Lovers' or 'Courtship.' The latter denomination clearly recalls romance novels of medieval or regency era settings (Fanlore 'First Time,' 2017). In both romance and fan fiction, the trope usually starts with one or both characters secretly harboring romantic feelings for the other. Intriguingly, in slash fan fiction most of the times the protagonists disclose their feelings for each other accidentally, after outbursts of aggression and frustration, or during other such emotional crises. In romance the narrative climax normally coincides with the final love declaration, however in fan fiction the narrative climax is usually split between a prelude, when the protagonists realize their own feelings and deal (or not deal) with their non-normative sexuality in case of slash and femslash fan fiction, and the climax proper when the two confess their feelings and discover that they are returned (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 229).

Fan culture scholar Catherine Salmon and anthropologist Donald Symons stand out for their in-depth comparison between slash fan fiction and the romance genre in order to shed light on female sexual psychology. The first evident common characteristic that they highlight is the fact that both fan fiction and romance novels are often labeled 'pornography for women' even for subgenres where explicit stories are not the norm (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 61). Symons comments on how women-authored slash fan fiction is an intriguing, uncensored insight into female mating psychological history. According to Symons, literary romantic and explicit narratives offer a precious insight into the subconscious desires of men and women. More importantly, during the creation of these narratives, the authors can compare their real relationships vis-à-vis their sexual ideals (p. 3-4).

Symons combines romance and female sexual psychology to explain why nurture and monogamy are more important for women than sex, while the contrary applies to men. This would explain why romance novels are usually enough to satisfy women's sexual fantasies instead of pornography (Salmon & Symons, 2001; Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 21). In the history of human adaptation, it has always been advantageous for men to lay with multiple partners, whereas the contrary has been true for women, due to the numerous risks connected to pregnancy and childbirth. By selecting random and multiple partners, ancestral women would have reaped very few, if any, benefits (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 40-41). Symons lists the results of several studies confirming that nowadays most men are more comfortable with having random strangers as casual partners than women do. Actually, in one study he quotes, not a single woman declares herself willing to have sex with a stranger. Symons also quotes the disconcerting number of men who are willing to

purchase sexual favors. This mentality stems from men's conviction that they are paying for "just sex", and not for all the other elements that come with an exclusive relationship such as attention, devotion and commitment, which is a very liberating prospect for them (p. 48). According to sexuality studies, queer male and female individuals generally enjoy more sexual liberty than straight women, mainly because they do not have to acclimate their personality to the psychology of a person of the opposite sex, and they do not risk pregnancy. Moreover, among queer individuals there is less risk of non-consensual sexual acts, especially when both parties are evenly matched in strength, and there is more open-mindedness towards non-conventional sexual mores. Such differences between the typical male's and female's sexual identity are so deeply rooted in our minds that they are deemed biologically determined (p. 49).

Symons elaborates on how romance novels teach women that the female heroine successfully secures a bright future for her and her offspring because she 'wins' the most suitable mate for her needs through a series of obstacles. Eventual explicit sexual scenes (for such scenes can be commonly found in romance) are not gratuitous, impersonal acts among strangers, they are cornerstones in the relationship of the protagonists, precluding the couple's future family life. This is why serial romance narratives featuring the same heroine are not convincing, since each narrative should end with a permanent union. Moreover, the romance heroines are meant to be faithful to the male heroes, which precludes the presence of romantic subplots featuring the heroine and any other secondary character. This characteristic marks a difference between the romance novel and fan fiction, where the lax sexual mores of modern democratic societies are also applied to the women characters. Contrarily to traditional romance heroines, serial narratives are more suitable for male heroes because of their lax pre-marital sexual mores. In action-adventure series with romantic subplots, for instance, it is acceptable for the male hero to sleep around before settling down with the main love interest. This explains why adventure tales engender copious numbers of fan stories, the fans have more original material to work on with the male hero's libido than the heroine.

Explicit scenes in romance novels are usually narrated through the point of view of one of the protagonists, whom the readers are led to identify with. This narrative voice is usually the female heroine's, but in many romance novels the point of view shifts between the heroine and the hero, a sign that romance readers often enjoy identifying with the opposite sex. This presence of explicit scenes and of shifting female/male narrative voices prompts Salmon and Symons to define the romance genre as a successful mixture of female erotica and adventure fiction, a description which readily fits most fan stories (p. 61). Moreover, explicit scenes in fan fiction do not usually portray submissive women characters, but women who are in control of the situation. This is arguably different in traditional romance novels, while in both genres the overall emphasis of such

scenes pivots on commitment, domesticity and nurturing (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 62; Bury, 2005: 85).

Anthropologic analyses of successful romance novels reveal the most popular characteristics of male protagonists, shedding light on female mating psychology. Romance readers appear to prefer strong, confident men who are tamed only by the love of the female heroine, while gentle, hyper-sensitive male heroes are usually rejected (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 58, 62). Common physical adjectives for male heroes include muscular, strong, large, tanned and masculine, while some of their contraries, such as short, skinny, fat, weak, small, pale and effeminate, are nowhere to be found. In general, romance heroes are older and taller than the heroines. The male protagonists' wealth is not a crucial parameter for the readers' enjoyment, but this characteristic holds true only for fictional works since, according to mating psychology, in real life most women do take into account a potential mate's socioeconomic status to provide for them and their children (pp. 63-64). In terms of personality, romance heroes are physically and socially skilled. Common adjectives for romance heroes include sexually bold, calm and confident, whereas adjectives such as sexually inhibited, timid, fearful and clumsy are absent. Relationship-wise, romance male heroes are sexually desirous towards the heroine, they usually declare their intentions first, their desire and love for the heroine is unparalleled even when they have had numerous lovers before. Romance heroes are kind towards the heroine and consider her unique, and they regularly feel possessive and protective towards her, and jealous of potential competitors for her affections (p. 64). Interestingly, these latter characteristics are regularly found in fan fiction (Green et al., 1998).

Fan fiction parts ways from romance in the physical and psychological description of its male heroes. Since its rise, fan fiction has subverted gendered power structures and has questioned masculine norms by investigating non-masculine, vulnerable male heroes. This depowering process is not automatic nor constant, but it is pervasive, especially in slash fan fiction, where the abovementioned negative traits of the typical romance novel's male hero are regularly used (Kustritz, 2003; Leavenworth, 2009: 457-458). The extensive use of this array of unmanly characteristics mean that some slash writers do not feel as confident as they would like to be, therefore they project these 'negative' characteristics onto the protagonist to exorcise them. Other writers may not feel completely emotionally attached to the original male heroes, thus they turn the extra-manly protagonists into more approachable individuals. Slash fan fiction protagonists usually negotiate their weaker points and their desire for confidence and success in life by interacting with their co-protagonists. Thus fan writers and readers can enjoy the protagonists' dynamics as these adjust their personalities to navigate around each other's idiosyncrasies. Finally, slash protagonists diverge from the formulaic description of the romance genre because this is how many men are in

real life, and fan authors draw inspiration from what they know rather than trying to appeal to a paying audience. Not all men are older, taller and bolder than their female partners, and not all men are muscular, confident and socially competent. Fan fiction writers are not afraid to portray realistic men, and their readers tend to recognize the accuracy of such idiosyncrasies and still show appreciation for this type of characters (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Woledge, 2006).

As hetero-saturated as romance novels may be, the main heterosexual romance plot is a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of the genre, appearing around the Age of Chivalry. The homosocial partnership between the hero and a male co-protagonist, on the other hand, has been a staple of proto-romance narratives since antiquity (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 234). A successful homosocial trope in adventure literature is that of the ‘co-warriors,’ (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 89). Co-warrior protagonists alternatively support one another as they face numerous life-threatening challenges. Many women find slash fan fiction appealing because both partners are warriors in their field of expertise who play active, leading roles in their own adventures. In the romance genre the adventures are a prerogative of the warriors, whereas the female characters stand by the sidelines (pp. 82, 89). Fan stories, on the other hand, are highly polarized in this aspect. Some stories feature women characters being in charge of their own plot, while other stories are clearly dominated by the decisions of the male characters. Adventure and romance genres often blend inconspicuously in fan fiction thanks to the unpredictable gendered behaviors that the fan authors concocted. There is no way of knowing which slash protagonist will be more in control of the story’s plot like a romance hero, and which protagonist will instead follow like a romance heroine, neither in slash and femslash, nor in het fan fiction (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 12).

### **3.5.1 The Domestic trope and the romance novel**

A recurrent fan-favorite narrative device used to generate and increase intimacy between the protagonists is domesticity. In Mirna Cicioni’s words: “The household chores are seen as just as valid a part of life as the confrontations with the villains” (Cicioni, 1998: 166). An intimate friendship may rapidly become romantic in close quarters. This reasoning posits that even friends start to resemble a married couple when they need to maintain a household (Bury, 2005: 85; Lamerichs, 2012: 188).

Domestic fan stories have several elements in common with romance novels, as they usually contain a significant amount of romanticism, but it is not the grand romanticism of epic romance novels, it is an everyday type of romanticism. Many fan fiction authors are deeply concerned with

following the characters in their everyday routine, so the grand romanticism of romance novels is tinged with a more simple and attainable atmosphere in fan fiction. Because of this, domestic slash and femslash fan fiction can be very educational because it represents queer individuals in normal, everyday settings. This sort of reading is a crucial experience for those readers who have been raised in a homophobic environment, for instance. Moreover, Domestic fan fiction that contains explicit scenes connects romance and softcore or hardcore sexual content by connecting the characters in the sexual scene with the characters in domestic scenes. In fan fiction, the characters' 'everyday life' is not disconnected from their sexual life, as commercially distributed sexual content leads us to believe. This is very informative especially for young readers. The romantic and the sexual parts of the protagonists' life are not disjunct, they are connected and mutually influential. Where mainstream storytelling fails to represent everyday scenes of human experience, fan fiction is obsessed with it. This aspect of fan fiction ultimately enhances the romantic potential of its storytelling (Coppa, 2012: 218-219).

Green, Jenkins and Jenkins claim that fan fiction readers and authors are generally aware of the intertextuality between heterosexual romance and slash and femslash fan fiction. This is not to say that those fan writers who do not actively participate in surveys and monitored debates are not self-aware of what they write. It is important to remember that there is always a measure of the subconscious in an author's characterization, even when the writers utilizes pre-existing characters (Green et al., 1998).

Considering fan fiction merely a different flavor of women's romance, though, would mean ignoring the ways in which fan authors consciously or unconsciously attempt to escape traditional feminine narrative styles. Joanna Russ numbers among the first scholars who reclaimed fan fiction's differences from the romance genres. Both genres are nowadays mostly produced for the emotional satisfaction of women by other women, but fan stories differ in their exclusive relationship with women's libido. In fact, from a chronological point of view, fan stories have started displaying explicit language earlier than romance novels (Russ, 1985). In front of such unequivocal differences, several media scholars prefer a hybrid definition: fan fiction is not pornography nor romance, but a dialogic amalgam of the two (Driscoll, 2006: 82, 94).

### **3.5.2 Intimatopia**

In her essay *Intimatopia: Genre Intersections between Slash and the Mainstream* (2006), Elizabeth Woledge discusses at length fan fiction's pervasive characteristic to focus on intimacy. Woledge

draws inspiration from Salmon and Symons' (2001) use of the term 'romantopia' and utilizes the term 'intimatopia' for slash stories (Salmon & Symons, 2001; Woledge, 2006). Intimatopic texts, Woledge argues, entwine sex and intimacy until they become inseparable. However, the label of intimatopia does not apply to all fan fiction genres, and it does not apply to all the stories in those genres where intimatopic texts regularly appear. The category of intimatopia can only be assigned on a case-by-case basis. Intimatopic slash fan fiction is a cultural oddness because it portrays a level of male/male intimacy which is frowned upon by society at large, even though a diluted version of it is constantly displayed in popular and high culture in the homosocial 'male-buddy' bond (Woledge, 2006: 100).

One crucial difference between romance novels and intimatopic fan fiction consists in how emotional and physical intimacy coexist in the same story. In romantopia, the protagonists rarely share intimate, self-revealing moments alone with one another before the sexual scene near the end. This scene is usually the first, deeply intimate interaction between the protagonists, while in the other tropes it is actually a scene at the beginning sparking the intimacy between the protagonists. In both types of plots, the narrative may end with the heroine still marveling at how little she knows about the hero. Contrarily, in intimatopic fiction, intimacy is established throughout the whole plot, and sexual intercourse represents one stage of this increasing intimate relationship (p. 106). Obviously, this discourse does not apply for fan stories containing dark themes, such as death, torture and rape.

Intimatopic narratives regularly display homosocial themes, such as the male-buddy relationships of detective stories or the warrior bonds of action, historical and fantasy plots. However, in intimatopic slash fan fiction, this homosocial environment is so widespread that it involves all the main characters. The stories depict a highly supportive and loyal community around the queer protagonists that is very heartwarming to read (p. 100). In this atmosphere both homosociality and homosexuality are perceived as natural, or are swiftly accepted, so that queer and non-queer couples mingle together seamlessly. As a consequence, such stories are hardly ever concerned with the real issues of queer individuals, such as homophobia, discrimination and isolation from society. Alternatively, intimatopic slash stories may enhance the couple's detachment from a predominantly heterosexual world, perceived as alien and hostile. In this context, intimatopia is tinged with oppression and secrecy, and many fan authors utilize overt and covert homophobia as if it were a villainous character that the characters never meet. This strategy works very well in engendering political and ethical reflections about homophobia and heteronormativity, while the intimatopic bond is endowed with a defiant, heroic tone as the protagonists share adventures in safe isolation from their hateful surroundings (pp. 101-102). However, the stories which deal directly

with homophobia are a minority. In Woledge's words: "Intimatopia is [...] a world of male intimacy, yes, but not the world of the modern homosexual. [...] It is not homophobic so much as homoindifferent" (Woledge, 2006: 103).

In intimatopia, sexual intercourse is pervaded by a sense of 'oneness,' much similar to the telepathy trope, and these scenes are often intertwined in the plot, increasing the intimacy between the protagonists as any other daily activity would. This might rule out the 'Plot, What Plot?' fan fiction genre, but many of these stories are pervaded by emotional intimacy, making clear-cut boundaries between intimatopia and romantopia very difficult to determine in fan fiction (p. 104). As mentioned, in intimatopic slash, sexual intercourse may be used as a plot element in itself, it can occur even at the beginning of the narrative. When it appears early in the plot, sexual intercourse is meant to force a high level of intimacy between the protagonists, for whichever reason the fan author might need to force that level of intimacy for the plot. This intimacy is later reinforced through emotional closeness and friendship (Driscoll, 2006: 85; Woledge, 2006: 105).

Another fruitful comparison involves intimatopia, pornotopia and explicit fan fiction. Salmon and Symons report that homosexual pornography is radically different from slash fan fiction, although many detractors compare the two. Pornotopia lacks the amount of interpersonal interaction that leads to proper character development, or any semblance of characterization overall (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 5). Respondents' to Bury's surveys, straight women authors of slash fan fiction, agree with Salmon and Symon's assessment of the difference between pornotopia and fan fiction. Specifically, the characters in commercial erotica are mere puppets who are physically close to each other, while fan fiction protagonists enjoy both emotional and physical intimacy, and are almost always well-round characters. One of the respondents specifies her impression of pornotopia: "Anonymous. Quick couplings of various permutations. Partners chosen strictly by their appearance. Underlying theme that the appearance was enough to insure compliance, since this was purely a sexual act. It was nothing like the slash that I cherish" (Estraven in Bury, 2005: 83). The detractors' comparison between fan fiction and pornography does not hold any ground according to researchers and ethnographers of both genres (Salmon & Symons, 2001).

### **3.6 Queer fan fiction authors**

The most popular definition of slash fan fiction reads: straight women writing about gay men. Although scholars usually use this definition in good faith, it is obviously based on a broad generalization. For all the high numbers of heterosexual women in fandom surveys and studies, they

do not comprise the entirety of fan writers (see for example Bacon-Smith, 1992 and Hellekson & Busse, 2006). It can be argued that unless specific results are shown, this definition remains true, because the vast majority of girls raised in heteronormative, patriarchal societies is heterosexual, but this 'natural' identification is being challenged in a number of countries where children are raised by same-sex parents or following gender-neutral strategies. Therefore, a high level of precision is adopted in this thesis to honor such changes (Dunk-West & Brook, 2015).

The straight-women/gay-men definition has been deconstructed by recent scholarship, primarily by queer fans and academic-fans, such as Henry Jenkins. Nowadays gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and queer fans are increasingly 'coming out' in fandom life. There is anecdotal and informal evidence that the ratio of queer individuals coming out to their fan communities is greater compared to queer individuals coming out to their real life communities. Many fandoms are very sensitive towards non-hegemonic sexual identities and show greater tolerance towards non-straight members compared to society at large. (Busse, 2006: 208; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 80).

It is important to remind that fandoms have always counted queer individuals amongst their ranks, but nowadays they are more visible both in fandom and in real life. One of the reasons for this recent visibility is mainly due to changes in cultures. There might have been so few queer individuals in fandoms in the 1980s because survey respondents may not have been comfortable with declaring themselves queer, even from the relative safety of pseudonyms and anonymity due to the lack of pro-queer education at the time. Today queer men and women are often comfortable enough to admit their sexuality in public, but more so or on the Internet. Apart from the anonymity, the Internet offers numerous ways to investigate non-hegemonic sexualities than mainstream media, thus individuals are more inclined to discuss queer sexual identity. As a consequence, even heterosexual fandom members may avail themselves of the queer-friendly atmosphere in their fandoms to explore different sexual identities in their writings (Busse, 2006). Women fan writers may also question their sexuality involuntarily, due to their sense of femininity within their society. Since in heteronormative societies femininity is denigrated as a lesser form of masculinity, as is queerness to the standard of heterosexuality, women may relate more easily to the forms of oppression that queer individuals are subjected to, and by emphasizing with them, they may question their own sexual identity. Femslash fan fiction is a prime example of this process. Several feminist media scholars have focused on this questioning phase, noting that queer experimentation in fan fiction communities is common and widely available (Bury, 2005: 12).

A controversial topic of debate is whether the stories penned by queer fan authors are distinguishable from those penned by non-queer authors. Do queer writers unconsciously write in ways that are characteristic of their sexuality? Very few fan fiction authors state their gender in the

opening or closing notes of their works, and the number of fan authors who volunteer information about their sexuality is even lower. Therefore, to discern in what proportion queer fan fiction is compiled by queer individuals, the fan production shall be closely examined (Kennard, 1986: 65-66).

Fans are used to discuss the whole spectrum of sexuality, and it should not be surprising that some media scholars regard fan fiction as 'queer literature.' Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006) for instance, call fan fiction queer literature because of the exchange of pleasure that occurs between fan writers and readers. One of the main purposes of fan stories is sexual satisfaction, both the readers' and the writers'. In other words, fan fiction consists of language masking the exchange of sensual and sexual stimuli among women. From this point of view, even heterosexual fans are not exempt from queer undertones. What fans write then is always queer in nature, regardless of the sexuality of the characters portrayed (Russ, 1985; Busse, 2006; Lackner et al., 2006).

The fans' negotiation of their sexuality is not only visible on the level of fan works but also on the level of personal interaction. The Internet is free from the embarrassment of physical proximity, thus online interactions regularly display a high rate of sexual innuendos, especially in fannish interactions between straight women. It is important to recall that fan fiction writers and readers skillfully extract any homosocial subtext of a source text and turn it into homoeroticism. Interestingly, this attitude bleeds into fannish discussions, where fans tease one another with sexualized language to deepen their friendship. The regular joking tone of such discussions though, means that most of these queer undertones are utilized as a form of entertainment, the queer subtext remains an amusing fantasy and fans do not necessarily reassess any aspect of their sexuality. Consequently, fandom members who have actually reevaluated (or had to reevaluate) their sexuality at any point of their lives may, understandably, grow to resent these forms of interaction as a debasement of queer sexual identities. This resentment is justified when the same individuals who adopt queer attitudes in their fan community are quick to object to any non-straight behavior in real life in an astounding show of hypocrisy (Busse, 2006: 208-210).

### **3.6.1 Queer fan fiction readers**

After having introduced the argument of queer individuals in fandom, especially queer fan writers, it is important to shift the focus of this section to fan fiction readers. Reader-response theorists have first asked themselves whether queer readers process the text differently than straight readers and if they do, how their sexual identity affects their reading practices (Kennard, 1986: 63).

A major principle about the influence of sexual identity on a person's reading process is the distinction between nature and nurture, how queer individuals were raised, how their childhood traumas influenced them, and how naturally they apply a homosocial atmosphere to what they read. The nature/nurture binary is often discussed in conjunction with the debate between choice and no choice. Do non-straight individuals choose to read a text from the point of view of their non-hegemonic sexuality, or do they 'naturally' read all narratives in this way? And how does this difference impact on their reading process? Some individuals actively choose their own sexuality to claim or to regain a sense of independence over their life. On the other hand, other individuals feel that their queerness is an aspect of their 'true self,' and their applying queer reading schemata during their reading practices is a natural and unconscious process that emerges only through a retrospective self-analysis (p. 64).

Choice is certainly involved in living one's own queer sexuality. Any person could deny their queerness, they would just "stay in the closet," but is the argument that queerness is natural a valid one? Theorists admit that all the shades of sexuality visible today are to be found in human nature, simply because if a trait is found in the human behavior, this trait stems from the human biological matrix, which contains, in potential, any behavior that a person can display. From this point of view, the unconsciously queered reading process of queer individuals is as natural as their sexual identity. However, this should not and must not deprive the political validity of those individuals who actively choose to read a text through a non-hegemonic, non-straight point of view (p. 65).

It must be noted that queer readers grow in overwhelmingly straight societies, and inside and outside of school the default sexuality they find in literature and in visual media is heteronormative. Consequently, queer readers grow up without a wide selection of similar experiences to identify with, contrarily to heterosexual readers and viewers. Queer readers grow to relate to their opposite in mainstream culture, to the heterosexual 'other,' as women readers are used to identify with the male hero of adventure tales. In order not to exclude themselves during the process of reading, queer readers have to twist what they read according to their specific needs, much like women readers do with androcentric narratives. However, while women readers 'simply' have to include their metaphorical selves in the generic masculine pronouns of the male-authored story, queer readers need to wholly transform the relationship of the heterosexual characters into a queer one (p. 63).

Needless to say, this process of identification is easily comparable to what fandom members do with their source texts, which is why fandom and fan fiction are very appealing for queer readers and viewers. They find like-minded individuals and a wide pool of characters with whom they can

relate easily. This is a strong point in favor of the sociological value of fan fiction as a valuable literary genre for mankind, which is one of the foregrounding arguments of this thesis.

This chapter aimed at introducing and analyzing the first macro-topic under focus in this thesis: gender and sexual identity in fan fiction. The female identity of fan readers and writers has played a crucial role in the discussion of the related topics of this chapter, since the vast majority of readers and writers of contemporary online fan fiction is female. Continuing to keep this data in the highest regard, the next chapter further explores what the female identity of fan writers and readers entails in fan fiction. Specifically, the next chapter focuses on the second macro-topic under focus in this thesis: female empowerment and feminism in fan fiction.

## **Chapter 4: Female empowerment in fan fiction**

The previous chapter focused on the first of the two main themes inspected in this thesis: gender and sexuality in fan fiction. Fan fiction communities are apparently over-crowded with women writers and readers, making theorists questioning recent studies about gendered reading and writing. The gender and sexuality of fan writers is closely linked to the gender and sexuality of the characters portrayed in the stories, for the principle that writers imbue their characters with fragments of their identities. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate how the characters' gender and sexuality is represented to form a plausible interpretation of the psychology of the authors.

Related to the question of the gender and of the sexuality of fan fiction characters is the question of gendered power structures in place among the characters, how they relate to one another. In this context, fan fiction is a relevant object of study because it reflects the mentality of an audience who is actively and discerningly consuming high and popular culture products. By examining the gendered interactions of the characters, the outsider can analyze how gender norms are substantiated in the minds of a considerable portion of the reading and viewing public.

Feminism is useful to apply to fan fiction to show the coherent and contradicting aspects of a prevalently female-authored literature in their treatment of their women characters. By applying feminist theories to fan fiction, the scholar can discover whether young and old fans are receptive of these theories, if they apply feminism principles in the way their characters think and interact, and *how* they apply these principles. It is interesting to notice how slash fan fiction, being so focused on male characters, may also present feminist ideals. Sometimes feminism in slash is overt, it is visible in how the male characters think and interact with girls and women characters, and sometimes it is covert, being present in the male characters who possess socially-defined 'feminine' characteristics but who are not harassed or debased for displaying these feminine traits.

### **4.1 The sex/gender binary**

Before examining feminism in fan fiction, it is important to properly introduce certain feminist theories first. A proper introduction requires the unfolding of the history of feminist struggles and milestones first, as well as a brief explanation of the main currents of thought amongst feminist theories.

Since the 1960s, in all fields, the examination of the possible ways in which gender shapes experience and behavior has been mostly guided by feminist consciousness-raising movements. A study of inter-gender relations necessarily calls for a feminist discourse, since it is nearly impossible

to separate gender theory from a politically aware feminist philosophy (Butler, 1988). Feminism is always implicated with politics. This relation has been brought to the surface by a feminist viewpoint on the essentialist understandings of gender and sex.

The essentialist approach to gender and sex reached its conceptual peak in the late nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The theories presented by biologists, doctors, and psychologists dominated the understanding of gender at the time. Essentialist theorists were mainly preoccupied with establishing ‘natural’ and ‘biological’ explanations for the human behavior. In particular, essentialist gender theories sought to prove that underlying ‘sex differences’ caused different psychological and behavioral patterns in males and females. Theorists spoke of ‘sex’ not ‘gender,’ as the two were not differentiated concepts as they are regarded today. Within an essentialist view of sex/gender, there is a series of binaries: male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine, and the two elements of the binary are understood as opposite yet complementary halves. For centuries gender remained undifferentiated from sex because it was understood as a ‘natural fact,’ genetically engineered in a person’s sex/biological body. Thus, a male person would ‘naturally’ be masculine, while a female person would ‘naturally’ be feminine (Richardson, 2015: 4).

This binary is often dismantled by numerous fandoms across all the sub-genres of fan fiction. Young authors, in particular, seem to be very adept at discussing sex and gender identity. In the thriving fandom of a currently popular sport manga/anime (Japanese comics and cartoons) called *Haikyuu!!* (Furudate, 2012-), there seems to be a series of fan stories in the chat-room format. The authors reproduce the visual format and writing style of a group chat application. A popular fan story in this format is *captains (feat. friendship, memes, emotional stuff, and relationships)* (2016) by fan author mukeandziamgotmelike, who tackles an incredible number of sensitive topics including sex, gender and sexuality.

In the second chapter the author explains polyamory and open relationships. The subsequent chapter reveals a male character who sometimes wears feminine clothes and is afraid to disclose his secret to the members of the chat for fear of being ridiculed. In order to coax the secret out of their friends, the other interlocutors reveal their own secrets. Another male character is revealed to wear makeup outside of school days for example. Later on, the author presents asexual characters, and talks about asexuality and biromanticism in general. And finally demisexuality is discussed in the last chapter.

This is quite a wide array of gender identities and sexualities for a story of ‘only’ 20000 words. As mentioned, the format is that of the chat-room, meant to emulate as closely as possible the conversations held in real life through smartphone chat application. Such a format makes the

story become of immediate, smooth comprehension for the readers, because it is very familiar. Another point in favor of the educational potential of *captains (feat. friendship)* regards the discussions about questions of sex and gender. The author never goes into detailed descriptions of the gender identities and sexualities that are illustrated, so these parts do not drag for long and are not boring. However, this does not detract from the effectiveness of the portrayal of such topics (mukeandziamgotmelike, 2016).

*Captains (feat. friendship)* is a great example for one of the points in this thesis, that fan fiction eases the representation of delicate topics such as gender and sexuality to the younger generations who may not be interested in researching at length these topics, or who may still be confused about how terms such as polyamory and demisexuality are substantiated in real life situations. This story is certainly a light reading, written in a very informal style that may not attract the attention of scholars and researchers, but its educational potential remains true for all the readers who speak its language fluently, and this potential should not be ignored.

In this story there is also an underlying principle of helping the readers to understand terms such as polyamory, demisexuality, etcetera. The story's informal tone should also not be dismissed so quickly, but rather enhanced because the meaning of these terms reach the readers with an immediacy that encyclopedias and newspapers would hardly surpass. In fandom, this kind of immediacy and ease of communication is only possible thanks to the informal tone of the stories (ibid).

Essentialist views of gender have greatly contributed in reifying the status of male and female individuals in heterosexual relationships. In fact, traditional heterosexual couples are expected to fall into a pattern to be considered 'normal' and 'natural.' In the domestic life of an essentialist-viewed heterosexual couple, the status of women is often subordinated to their male partner's, economically or socially or both, and in the long term this may prove extremely detrimental to the longevity of the relationship. The current situation of the majority of women in sexist societies leads them to aspire to equality with the opposite sex, and to exclusive reciprocity in intimate relationships. Many women, however, despair of ever be considered equals by their partners, especially after the arrival of children. The mother is viewed as the primary (most often sole) caretaker, and the child is considered her first and only priority, taking precedence before her needs. In a heterosexual relationship, the male parent may fail to renounce to his past-times in disregard of child rearing, and may often regard his needs as beneficial to the whole family (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 240).

In the 1960s and 1970s a new conceptualization of gender emerged, mainly due to the shift away from biology-based research towards sociology-based research. The new theories were

therefore based on a social constructionist reasoning, not necessarily denying the role of biology in sex, but also emphasizing the crucial role of social and cultural influences in determining gender (Richardson, 2015: 5). This differentiation represents a colossal milestone in the modern understanding of sex, gender and sexuality, and it is one of the greatest ideological conquests for feminist theorists up to date.

The concept is commonly called the ‘sex/gender binary.’ The new constructionist binary presents sex and gender as separate categories. While sex is referred to as the biological differences between males and females defined in terms of anatomy and physiology, gender is referred to as the series of meanings attached to being male and female in a social context, expressed in terms of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ (ibid).

The development of the sex (biological) and gender (cultural) binary has been an important contribution for the emergence of liberation movements from both women’s and queer individuals in the United States and in Europe. This is due to the fact that traditional gender roles promote inequality between male and female individuals, elevating the former above the latter. Since most societies are patriarchal, gender inequality is geared to perpetuate men’s benefits over women’s. Each gender is culturally associated with a set of expected behaviors and aptitudes. For instance, women are associated with the responsibility of childcare and with a sedentary lifestyle inside the house, while men are considered the principal breadwinners, and are associated with leadership and mobility outside the house. By theorizing gender, feminists have exposed such social divisions. They have explained how the perpetration of gender roles is connected with social inequality between men and women. Therefore, by disrupting gender discourses, feminist activists advocate to consider all individuals as human beings, instead of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ to consider every person on the same level of importance (Richardson, 2015).

This reasoning explains why sex, gender and feminist discourses in fan fiction are often discussed together. Since feminist activists advocate the disruption of those social norms that elevate one gender above the other, when fan authors disrupt these norms, they are implicitly complying with a feminist agenda. It is of interest to observe this phenomenon when it occurs in slash because slash authors often succeed in re-interpreting the traditional norms of sex and gender, as well as inter-gender relations. In fact, both of the main themes of this paper happen to be present fairly often in slash stories because of their queer context, and it is worthwhile to examine how slash authors resolve their conflicts.

Fan fiction communities are arguably the only literary communities where transgender and genderfluid characters feature in significant numbers. For all their young age and inexperience, fan authors display an astounding sensitivity to alternative gender identities. A fan author under the

pseudonym of bixgchan who favors anime (Japanese cartoons) fandoms, utilized an interesting author's note in their *Yuri!!! on Ice* (Yamamoto, 2016) story *I'm not upset* (2016) that is telling of this sensitivity to the sex/gender binary: "also, before anyone asks, i [sic] did post a genderfluid!yuuri and deleted it a few hours after, it just didnt [sic] sit right with me, sorry" (bixgchan, 2016: chapter 2). The term "gerndefluid!yuuri" is a fandom compound word where the first word is a noun or an adjective that is used as a specific adjective for the word that comes after the exclamation mark. The second word is usually the name of a character, as is the case with this quote. An infinite variety of such compound words may be found in fan fiction communities.

Commenting on the quote specifically, what is interesting about it is that the author is hyper-aware of their previous work. The writer recognizes the inadequate cultural representation of genderfluid individuals that they had written, edited and published, but later deleted. The author did not recognize the story as being up to their standards of representing genderfluid individuals. This example represents how aware some fan authors are about questions of sex and gender. Genderfluid characters are almost non-existent in mainstream media, but in fandom they are so well-known that fan authors have standards of representation and hold onto them quite strictly (ibid).

### **4.1.1 Performative gender**

Fan fiction writers are very fond of disrupting the sex/gender binary. Many fan stories actually seem to do justice to Judith Butler's precepts. It seems that one of Butler's basic concepts, the performativity of gender, is especially dear to fan fiction authors. The theory of the performative gender posits that social actions constitute languages, gestures, and all sorts of symbols specific to the individual's culture. In the case of gender:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (Butler, 1988: 520).

Here, Butler's ground-breaking theory on gender starts to take shape. She asserts that gender identity is the result of socially-induced compulsions, therefore gender may be deconstructed and reshaped by contesting its performances on a day-by-day basis. This is a concept that fan fiction authors seem to be very receptive to.

Arguably, questions of sex and gender in fan fiction are commonly found in source texts that already speak about these topics, or in source texts that include characters who are or have the potential to be aware of sex and gender issues. Victor Hugo's historical novel *Les Misérables* (1862) gained a thriving fandom after the adaptation of the novel into the eponymous musical in 2012. A popular *Les Misérables* fan story, idiopathicsmile's Alternate Universe story titled *World Ain't Ready* (2014-2015) transfers many of the musical's characters in a modern high school settings. The author repeatedly focuses the attention of the readers on issues of sex and gender. The character of Enjolras is faithful to his original counterpart by loudly voicing his opinions:

“Does this school really not have a single gender-neutral bathroom? Grantaire tries not to goggle at him. “Over two thousand kids go here every year,” he says. “Statistically, the odds that there isn't a single one who identifies as transgender—it's not even worth considering.” [...] “You don't need to *be* transgender so see what an unsafe environment that's gonna make for everyone who falls outside the, the traditional gender binary,” says New Kid. “And it should be the school's number one duty to ensure the safety of its students, especially the ones already at the margins of society.” (idiopathicsmile, 2014-2015: chapter 1)

With these words, Enjolras advocates for transitioning individuals who are constrained into a gender that they do not identify with because of societal norms harking back to the traditional 'sex equal gender' mentality. The specific context of a gender-neutral restroom (or the lack thereof) denotes an awareness of the current debates over transgender rights in the United States. So called 'bathroom bills' allowing or barring individuals from using facilities that do not match their birth gender are being fervently discussed in and out the United States (Grinberg & Stewart, 2017; The New York Times, 2017).

This quote aids in illustrating one of the main points that this thesis is meant to convey. Namely, fan fiction is the reflection of how crucial issues such as gender and sexuality are perceived and elaborated by a portion of readership and audiences. Moreover, fan fiction is a phenomenal means of communication for educating individuals who are less knowledgeable about or not aware of such issues. As fan fiction is a familiar, enjoyable reading, it can better convey delicate topics such as transgender issues without alienating or boring the readers, as a congress debate or a newspaper article might do.

Idiopathicsmile's fan story is a rarity in fan fiction communities, since the story is deeply focused on political issues. To illustrate how political *World Ain't Ready* is, another story from the same fandom shall be a fitting example.

Fan author luchia's story titled *Coffee Hooligans* (2013-2016) is a *Les Misérables* Alternate Universe narrative set in the modern day, where Enjolras is a violent barista with anger issues. The

passage of this story meant to illustrate a situation of performative gender belongs to Enjolras' musings about one of his friends, the meek-looking Jean Prouvaire:

At a glance, Jehan is the most harmless person on the planet. He's thin, has long hair usually tied in a braid and often with flowers in it and absolutely no fashion sense but a dangerous passion for floral patterns and has zero interest in conforming to gender stereotypes. He likes skinny jeans and maxi skirts and poorly-knitted sweaters and is usually carrying a bedazzled purse around. He has a pink bicycle and twenty different kinds of sunhats and is a professional landscape designer and poet and blushes constantly (luchia, 2013-2016: chapter 1).

These lines, together with a few other paragraphs, constitute a perfect example of the concept of performative gender in fan fiction. Jehan's gender is performed both through feminine characteristics, such as the hairstyle, the flowers and the floral patterned clothes, skirts and purses, the color pink, and the tendency to blush. However, masculine characteristics are introduced in the subsequent description. Jehan is said to be an extremely violent man when necessity calls, he can face and best multiple opponents various times his size with his no weapons thanks to his training in brutally demanding martial arts. Passages like the one just quoted, indicating that a person's clothing and mannerism do not convey everything about the person's gender identity and sexuality, are common in today's fan stories.

These quotes are meant to show that those fan fiction authors who use characters like luchia's Jehan seem to have perfectly understood Butler's theories. One principle is Butler's claim that a person's body comprises of infinite gender possibilities that are circumscribed by historical conventions. Another precept that fan writers seem receptive to claims that a person's gender is constructed through specific behavioral acts, and consequently that the tacit, collective agreement over discrete gender norms can effectively be disrupted by changes in the performance of gender (Butler, 1988: 521-522).

Connected to issues of sex and gender, are the issues of inter-gender relations and of gender hierarchy. In this context, feminism shall be very helpful in explaining how this theme emerges in fan fiction. As fan fiction is addressed as a proper literary genre in this thesis, in order to examine fan fiction from a feminist point of view, a brief overview of feminism in literary studies shall be offered first.

## **4.2 Feminist discourses in literary studies**

Literature has been one of the major cultural products that feminist theorists relied onto to explain the relationship between the genders, especially the power hierarchy in place between male and female.

Feminist theories in literary studies primarily assert the importance of the interests and experiences of women writers and readers, as well as a focus on female characters. According to feminist theorists, the gender inscribed in the text (the gender of the author) is equally important to the gender of the reader, as it is through the process of reading that issues such as gender equality or inequality come to the surface. As a matter of fact, feminist literary criticism may be indicated as a branch of reader-centered criticism, since it provokes in the readers the awareness of how a feminist viewpoint radically changes the comprehension of a text (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986: xiii, xxi; Crawford & Chaffin, 1986: 22).

### **4.2.1 Women readers**

Early feminist reading strategies pivoted on the principle that women ought to play a central role in the study of female-authored texts and in the study of female-reader response. Women's literary criticism of women's texts represents a milestone in the history of gender equality because the practice was frowned upon until the advent of feminism. As a matter of fact, until recently, this self-reflecting feminine reading needed to remain a covert and hidden affair, since it offers women the possibility to see themselves as the protagonist of the story, as the most important character, the subject-agent, the point of view. It is of little wonder that a women-centered mode of reading counts amongst the earliest concerns of feminist literary studies, since it is undoubtedly very empowering, as it resists the design of a patriarchal culture to keep women subdued and not self-aware of their presence in the literary establishment (Schweickart, 1986: 40; Fetterley, 1986: 151).

During the years of hardcopy fan magazines, there were fans who wrote stories and circulated them amongst their immediate circle, and the smaller circles may have not been aware of a bigger community of fan writers and readers. Alternatively, there were fans who redacted stories on their own after discussing the source text with other fans, again ignoring the fact that their friends were writing fan fiction too. These did not even know about the possibility that fan fiction could be a communal experience. In both cases, but especially in cases of fans who do not know about other fan writers, it is highly unlikely that such women could ever read the source text from a feminist viewpoint. First, because they were not taught to do so from outsiders, and second because

when fans become aware of the prevalently female identity of their fan community, they recognize that they are a denigrated minority, and communities who are under distress respond better to principles of change such as feminism (Bacon-Smith, 1992).

These situations are nearly unthinkable in today's digital era. Nowadays, fans easily become aware of a like-minded community thanks to the Internet. In digital fannish spaces such as multi-blogging websites, fans may easily learn to develop a discerning, feminist mode of reading by discussing the source text together.

Literary theorist Patrocínio Schweickart (1986) stresses the importance of disclosing the differences, be they linguistic, biological, psychological, or cultural, of women's reading as much as of women's writing. Furthermore, within gendered reader-response studies, a close feminist analysis ought to be applied to both female readings of female-authored and of male-authored texts.

A female-empowering reading mode shall be the underlying frame of reference for this chapter, as it is a mode of reading very important to understand fandoms and fan fiction. In fandom, a feminist mode of reading the source texts occurs when fans become critically aware and dominate the male-authored source text, disrupting and twisting its intended meanings in a conscious effort. Secondary feminist readings can be witnessed in the comments and reviews of fan production, either related to the source text or to the specific fan production (Schweickart, 1986: 38).

## **4.2.2 Feminism and social change in romance and fan fiction**

The aim of feminist criticism is not only the interpretation of texts in order to empower the reader, the promotion of change on a global scale is also advocated. Feminist critics trust in the political power of literature, and they believe that through literature, universal changes are possible, because literature acts on the world by acting on its readers.

Therefore, writing and reading are deemed an important arena for political struggles, especially in sexist societies, ever since childhood readings. Feminist reading and writing are aimed at the creation and growth of a community of committed feminist readers and writers, with the ever-present resolve that this community ought to include every individual (Fetterley, 1986: 151; Segel, 1986).

An example of women reading a literary genre often compared to fan fiction, Janice Radway's 1984 study of romance readers is also aimed at understanding whether and how these romance aficionados develop a feminist attitude from their reading. From direct interactions with the participants, Radway discloses that no woman in the group she studies declares herself a

feminist. However, Radway's women repeatedly demonstrate to be perfectly aware that women have been deemed inferior to men for centuries, and that even nowadays ordinary women are constantly demeaned as childish, ignorant, and capable of doing little more than house chores.

Radway reports that while her respondents agree that women are due equal pay and work opportunities in comparison to the opposite sex, they are surprisingly close to other feminist goals too. For instance, the romance readers admit that small, slow political milestones such as abortion laws, are crucial if women are to finally gain control of their bodies and, to an extent, of their lives. Such statements demonstrate that even devoutly religious and overall conservative women may have reasons to stand for one or more feminist causes, as most feminist activists hope for. While Radway's women report that female-authored romance literature did not turn them into feminists, they nonetheless confess that they have gained more knowledge about female-male gender hierarchy from their books that they bargained for, and this knowledge changed them (Radway, 1991: 54).

These findings are useful in the context of fan fiction because fan stories can be easily compared with romance novels, and romance readers who become aware of the power hierarchy between men and women can be compared to the fans who become aware of social issues that they did not know of prior to their encounter with the genre.

Radway explores the dilemma of the readers' insistence in believing that the romance heroine is intelligent, independent and assertive, even though she is repeatedly victimized by male heroes, foils and villains alike, and even though she ultimately falls into the protective embrace of her husband. Radway explains that this conundrum is the expression of the readers' unconscious desire for some of the benefits of feminism (such as female independence), within a traditional, heteronormative environment. Hence the simple, wishful thinking towards the romantic heroine's strong will and independence. The readers believe this through the heroine, they can strive for independence and assertiveness without disrupting the inter-sex status quo of their society. In this utopian romance fiction, the sense of independence of the female heroine is never endangered by the paternalistic care of the male hero, which also helps reassuring the readers that they can keep dreaming of gender equality without disrupting their lives (p. 79).

It is important to remember, though, that while Radway's respondents firmly believe in the heroine's desire to live self-sufficiently, they also recognize the mimetic accuracy of the external circumstances which prompt the heroine to fall into the hero's all-encompassing protection in the first place. In this regard, Radway's subjects display more sense of realism than most feminist critics when they recognize the inevitability of male power, and the pressure of social conventions that thwart a woman's efforts towards independence. Additionally, Radway points out her

respondents' practicality in their belief that any woman should be able to compromise her strive for independence in favor of a stable, long-term relationship (p. 78).

From a radical feminist point of view, Radway's findings do not bode well. Radical feminists would like to see women as promoters of real social change, and romance reading often results in a practice that disrupts any impulse to change. This is caused by the fact that romance readers have their needs and desires *vicariously* satisfied by the happily-ever-after formula. However, in the real world most women readers fail to put forward their demands to reconstruct gender relations in their favor (p. 213).

A parallelism may be drawn between Radway's findings and fan fiction communities. There are no extensive studies to attest that fan fiction readers who have become aware of equal gender relations through fan stories will put their new knowledge into practice in their everyday lives. This leaves both scenarios open, that is to say: women applying or not applying feminist principles in their personal relationships. In the first scenario, fan fiction becomes what Radway advocates for romance novels: a wide-reaching narrative that holds the potential to change the minds of a massive number of women if the novel's feminist ideals are properly absorbed. In the second scenario, fan fiction is not a feminist reading because it is not imparting feminist ideals onto its readers.

Radway ultimately states that romance reading may be interpreted as a form of mild protest and as a longing for social changes in the institution of heterosexual marriage (pp. 212-215). However, a mild protest does not hide the fact that Radway's respondents firmly reject men's standards of real and fictional interpersonal relationships, generally finding them crude, vulgar and excessively sadistic. Radway's women refuse to renounce to their romantic values, and wish that men would compromise on theirs. This mindset denotes a feminist approach to an intimate, long-term relationship. The favorite novels of Radway's respondents are also tinged with feminism, since they are portraits of how women wished men were, in contrast to how men are. In conclusion, romance novels always contain an empowering element, because both women writers and readers feel energized and satisfied at the end of the writing and reading process (Radway, 1991).

The argument of the alternative representation of men in romance is relatable to fan fiction communities, as many fan stories view heterosexual relationships from a non-traditional point of view. In slash and femslash fan fiction this is overtly obvious, as the mere presence of homosexual characters disrupts traditional heteronormative societies, but also because heterosexual fan stories tend to diverge from the submissive-woman, dominant-man historical formula. It does not naturally follow that fan authors will actively disrupt the formula in their real lives, but as Radway reports, it is undoubtedly empowering for writers and readers to spell out the alternatives to a traditional heterosexual union.

### 4.2.3 Androcentric literature

The entry of feminism into the arena of political change begins with the realization that the literary canon and the vast majority of mainstream content in Western cultures are androcentric. A literary canon is androcentric when it is overwhelmingly authored by men, its intended readers are men and its subject-matter is the lives of men. Naturally, androcentric texts are incredibly detrimental for the development of the identity of female readers (Schweickart, 1986: 39-40; Suleiman, 1986: 142).

Androcentric literature is tinged with narcissism. In both high and low culture, men wish to see their own gender reproduced on the center of the stage, endorsing a narcissistic image of themselves through an overwhelming number of well-rounded male heroes. Still today, most boards of directors in mainstream media are comprised of men, and by determining what cultural products are consumed in the media, they deny women this experience. Male resistance to an equal gender representation in fiction is evident in those female characters who are mere accessories to the male hero. Androcentric narratives tend not to allow women readers to assert their difference as *women*. Instead, women readers become inadvertently complicit in elevating the male viewpoint into a universal truth, and in belittling the female viewpoint into an excluded otherness (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986).

Feminist criticism towards androcentric literary canons is visible in fan fiction in so far as fan fiction writers implicitly comply with the feminist drive to challenge androcentric literature with their female-authored works. This relation is only complete, though, if fan fiction's male characters are deemed women characters in disguise. This principle stems from feminist theorists' claim that only female-authored works populated with strong female characters are able to properly challenge androcentric cultures. However, interpreting fan fiction's male heroes as façades of women characters is only one mode of reading amongst others. In truth, many fan fiction writers claim that their male characters shall not in any way be read as surrogate women characters.

In sexist cultures, the interests of men and of women are oppositional more often than not. What benefits men is detrimental for women, and vice versa. Inevitably, texts produced in sexist cultures will reflect this. For instance, male-authored texts in a sexist society will often show signs of misogyny, because when men were the only supposed audience of a text, the (male) author naturally assumed that misogyny did not bother the readers (Schibanoff, 1986: 84). In most mainstream media, men decide what women read and watch, and as they do so, they are in fact making women experience an hostile cultural knowledge, and they are simultaneously protecting themselves from the same experience. However, ultimately women readers and viewers have learned how to adapt to consuming sexist and even misogynist texts, as is confirmed by the

existence of women-populated fandoms centered on androcentric source texts. The point is that feminist theorists want women readers and viewers to recognize the misogyny in these texts as they enjoy the contents.

A feminist perspective towards an androcentric body of texts can radically transform a woman's perception and attitude towards male-authored texts. This is why paramount concerns for feminist theorists include analyzing how androcentric reading operates in the mind of the readers, and examining how an education based on androcentric readings impact on daily gender dynamics. It is one thing to notice a phenomenon and leave it unaddressed, or to dress it up with the illusion of universal truth; it is a completely different matter to bring the phenomenon to the surface and examine it closely to expose its significance. The usefulness of such practices for and by women readers is so important that feminist activists consider it a matter of necessity (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986: xvi; Suleiman, 1986).

The importance to recognize the misogynist elements in published narratives is also related to the sheer amount of androcentric, misogynist works in literary canons. Feminist readers can hardly refuse to read or view any patriarchal narratives, because they are everywhere. From a very young age, it is deemed appropriate for girls to read texts with male heroes, and until they become aware of the androcentric nature of literature and mainstream media, they have no reason to question the validity of what they read (Schweickart, 1986; Fetterley, 1986: 150). This argument pertains to professionally published androcentric narratives, regardless of the gender of the author. It is only through a literary education that women readers may learn how to question the homogeneity of the narratives that they consume (Fetterley, 1986: 150). The feminist reader can recognize the process of immascultation which the androcentric text imposes, and this heightened awareness is going to complete the person's reading strategies thereon. By repeating this process over and over, even after decades of deep-rooted androcentric narratives, feminist readers are able to trigger appropriate, resisting responses almost unconsciously, as if they were second nature. What the feminist reader does, then, is taking control of her reaction during the stage of text comprehension, in an empowering and even therapeutic way (Schweickart, 1986: 49-50).

These previous paragraphs are meant to show why fan fiction is deemed a valuable object of study in this thesis because of the presence of feminist characteristics. Fan fiction is a cultural product created by women for women, therefore it ought to be free of mainstream's misogyny, even if this is not always the case. Moreover, although it is true that many current mainstream media products are still produced or managed by men, women fan fiction authors choose to resist the hostile context of knowledge in mainstream media. This is evident in endeavors such as fan

production, where women fans re-elaborate the narratives they consume into something they enjoy and love.

From this point of view, fan fiction has a strong underlying feminist nature. It represents resisting women consumers who actively re-interpret and re-work cultural products in a male, androcentric environment. The fight for gender equality in cultural institutions and in mainstream media carried on by feminist activists is perceived as a threat against the patriarchal monopoly over the creation and distribution of knowledge. Thus, the association of fan fiction with feminism is not far-fetched even in front of the overwhelming presence of male characters in the stories. In any case, fan fiction certainly possesses a high level of potential for women's retaliatory strategies against an androcentric cultural establishment (Schweickart, 1986: 42; Fetterley, 1986: 153).

### **4.3 Female empowerment in fan fiction**

The first half of this chapter introduced the second main focus of this thesis, feminism in fan fiction. The previous paragraphs served the purpose to ease into a multi-faceted topic such as feminism in literary studies without straying too much from the topic of fan fiction. To do so, several feminist theorists and literary studies scholars have been cited, relating their theories to fan production.

Since there are very few clear-cut feminist discourses in fan fiction because of the overall lack of political debate in the genre, this section often designates feminism as 'female empowerment.' To discuss the topic in regard to fan fiction, the sources used are the works of scholars of popular culture and media studies who either discussed female empowerment in fan works, or whose arguments are very closely related to questions of gender equality, which is a very relevant topic in the examination of fan fiction.

One of the major focuses of this thesis is a feminist reading of fan fiction. Re-reading fan fiction from a feminist point of view may prove extremely fruitful in order to understand how complex and contradictory this literary form can be. In particular, feminist studies may help locating the signs of queer and/or feminist authors and distinguish them from the more conservative authors across innumerable fandoms, be they focused on media, literary, cult content, or even on real people. With the support of such dedicated disciplines as women and feminist studies, this thesis may shed some light on the palpable frustration in the works of young and old fan writers, as they strive for feminism and gender equality from the depths of their patriarchal education (Cicioni, 1998).

One major hurdle towards tracing the exact trajectory of feminism in fan fiction consists in the complex ways in which overt and covert feminism are conveyed in fan works. In fan fiction, many stories might not strike the casual reader or the outsider scholar as feminist, since the feminist principle lies between the lines, underneath the surface, in the way girls and women fans subversively manipulate media representations (Busse, 2009: 104).

On a basic level, all slash fan fiction authors may be labeled liberal feminists, mainly because they reject the source text's heteronormativity and bend male-authored narratives to their will. Although many fans are not conscious of this subversive effort and think that they are only teasing out the sub-textual homoerotic tension, what their works actually show is a redefinition of sexuality against the establishment's official presentation (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 76).

There are plenty of fan fiction researchers who do not explicitly say that fan fiction is a feminist writing practice, but their reports about fan fiction communities hint very heavily towards this conclusion. In particular, when the content of fan stories corrects and/or replaces a scene of the source text, this endeavor is deemed anti-hegemonic and subversive. The stories are not feminist *per se*, but their subversiveness plays in favor of feminist ideals. This is true even if the subversive content of the stories was not meant to be read as feminist, and even if the fan authors do not show signs to be struggling against societal norms in their author's notes or in the comments' section of their works.

Fan fiction communities are mostly crowded by highly educated but underpaid women, and in many instances, the process is entirely subconscious: neither fans nor readers are aware of it, and yet the text may transpire a resisting attitude against media corporations because of the secondary position of many women employees in society (Kustritz, 2003). Many if not most female-authored fan stories are oppositional to the cultural products created by men in mainstream media, in so far they posit a value system pivoting on equality, reciprocal feelings, and personal interaction (Derecho, 2006: 71-72).

Feminist re-readings of literary works have been instrumental, for example, in giving a name, a voice, and a round personality to marginal women characters. An androcentric body of literature contains many female figures who symbolize wives, mothers, providers of food, care and sexual favors. They are glimpses in a sea of faces, interchangeable and anonymous. These women characters exist as extensions of men, who instead possess a past, a present, and a future. These female shades may be re-written into full-fledged characters by interpretations that favor strong women characters, so that future readers may come to consider the feminist revision as complementary, or even preferable, to the original (Suleiman, 1986).

A few instances of this phenomenon are witnessed in the published parodies that remain highly recommended readings today. Such texts include Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2011), which subvert the narrative voice of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) respectively. The authors of the published parodies sought to de-center the original text's focus from the male hero and from a white female heroine respectively (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 23).

The following argument is not supported by a scientific study, but it is a phenomenon that may easily be encountered in fan fiction. In most works of the literary canon and in mainstream media, male characters tend to address female characters harshly or condescendingly in comparison to how they talk amongst themselves. Women characters, when addressed at all, tend to be addressed with disregard, scorn, and mocking condescension. When men grow to respect and admire a woman character, it's because she displays some masculine trait (Suleiman, 1986). Although it must be recognized that this phenomenon is disappearing from many modern books, movies, television series, videogames, and theater plays because of the growing influence of feminist theorists on everyday manifestations of gender equality. In many fan stories though, no matter how strong or weak the feminism in the source text is, there is an overall sense of feminist principles in how the male characters address the women characters with respect and admiration.

Obviously, this phenomenon is better witnessed in heterosexual fan fiction rather than slash and femslash fan fiction. A recently thriving fandom whose most popular stories display evident tendencies towards feminism is the *Arrow* (Berlanti et al., 2012-) fandom. IT specialist and genius hacker, Felicity Smoak is arguably the most beloved female character in the show. Felicity was initially supposed to be present in only one episode, although her actress' talent captivated the fans and she is now a regular character in the series. Felicity's rise in popularity amongst the fans even prompted her character to be re-introduced in the *Arrow* (Marvel, 1951-) comics for several issues.

A well-received story in the fandom is *The Reluctant Queen* (2014-2015) by December\_Daughter. It is an Alternate Universe story where Felicity has is escaping from her father, a boss of the Italian mafia and seeks Oliver's (a prominent figure in the Russian mafia) protection for herself and her mother through a fake marriage. This initial plot device already twists the original fandom trope called Arranged Marriage, centering it entirely on the female character. Most times, in fact, it is the male character who convinces the female character that their union will be mutually beneficial, but in *The Reluctant Queen* it is Felicity who takes the initiative.

The author of *The Reluctant Queen* masterfully portrays Felicity as a strong, capable woman who is not above shedding tears in public in dire situations, who is embarrassed by her own

stuttering, and is not always sure of herself. Most interestingly, this does not cause denigration from the male characters around her:

She wasn't crying, but the sheen of tears in her eyes made them seem luminescent behind her dark glasses. [...] Felicity was not a big person, but the only word that came to Oliver's mind as he looked at her was fierce. [...] she reminded Oliver strongly of a wild cat that had been backed into a corner and was fighting to escape (December\_Daughter, 2014-2015: chapter 4).

These lines are emblematic of the overall positive attitude by many fan authors towards beloved female characters. Whether this attitude is present in the vast majority of fan fiction, thus labeling the genre feminist once for all, is highly debated and not entirely possible to ascertain for Internet-based fandoms. However, there is a strong tendency in fan fiction towards considerations such as the one quoted above.

In the quote, the sheen in Felicity's eyes recalls her frequent crying and panicking in the beginning of the story towards her and her mother's safety. The description of her petite frame is in line with the idea that the female body is statistically weaker than the male's, which historically has been the cause for condescension towards women in the workplace and in sports. However, the fan author's remarks: Felicity may have a petite, lithe physique, but her spirit is strong. This is a fairly common principle in fan fiction communities, denoting feminism. In *The Reluctant Queen*, Oliver is a prominent member of the Russian mafia but he still calls Felicity fierce. In the quote above and regularly onwards in the plot, he acknowledges Felicity's strength of character.

Another positive aspect of Felicity's personality is that even though she blackmails the male protagonist, she is surprisingly unselfish in her demands:

In the twenty-nine years of his life, he'd known very few people who had wanted nothing from him. Women wanted his attention, socialites wanted his favor, the paparazzi wanted his photo; everyone else wanted his money, or for him to make money for them. Not only did Felicity apparently not want any of those things, she'd forfeited a perfect opportunity to take them (December\_Daughter, 2014-2015: chapter 5).

The influence of feminist theorists is evident in this passage. Before feminism influenced the public at large, women characters were usually written following the saint/femme fatale binary. The 'saint' type is a passive woman who stays at home and holds an unwavering faith in the strength of the male characters, while the femme fatale is the active woman who shrewdly seduces the male hero only to betray him after having reaped the benefits (ch. 4-5).

In December\_Daughter's story, though, Felicity sacrifices her pride and asks for protection but refuses to reap additional financial benefits because of her good nature. As idealistic as this

might sound to the standards of the real world, in the midst of misogynist mainstream products, the fact that young and older amateur writers are portraying their women characters as in *The Reluctant Queen* is a comforting thought.

December\_Daughter's treatment of her women characters is exemplary because it strives for a measure of realism. The character of Thea Queen, for instance, is that of the younger sister who is initially jealous and wary of the arrival of Felicity in the Queen mansion. The author matches Thea's young age with petty tricks and snide remarks at the beginning of the plot, consecutively portraying her in a slow but steady growth into a level-headed young woman towards the end of the story (ch. 4-9).

Another empowering element that women readers may find in *The Reluctant Queen* is that Oliver assigns a bodyguard to Felicity, Sara Lance. Sara is even more petite than Felicity, but is as agile and effective as any other male bodyguard in the story. Despite the fact that Sara is one of the ex-lovers of the male hero, her interactions with Felicity, the female heroine, lack the resentment usually accompanied by this combination (ch 10). Here, too, the author is not too idealistic in her portrayal of women characters, and assigns the classic ex-lover resentment to two other women characters later in the plot.

Although feminist ideology has greatly helped popular culture studies so far, the enthusiasm of feminist theorists has engendered unpredicted and sometimes negative consequences. For instance, the legacy of 1980s and 1990s feminist debates around pornography has caused a disproportionate scholarly attention on the pornographic aspects of fan fiction, replacing the earlier emphasis on romance (Driscoll, 2006: 83; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 76). The main reasons for this shift are, first, the defensive stance of early fan culture researchers, and second, the feminists' struggles to legitimize female libido as a positive trait in popular culture (Russ, 1985; Gray et al., 1998).

Researchers of hardcopy fandoms have not left much room for hope regarding feminist fan fiction readers and writers in the 1980s. Bacon-Smith, for instance, accounts for the spreading of feminist ideals in her surveys and interviews. From her observations, it emerges that in the 1980s, in media fandoms, 'out and proud' feminist members were very rare and, worryingly, they were treated with benign tolerance at best by the rest of their community (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 203).

Transitioning from hardcopy fandoms to mostly online-based communities, Bury's analysis of Usenet mailing lists is enlightening. Her findings show that in the *Due South* (Haggis, 1994-1999) slash mailing list that she examines, all participants but two declare themselves feminists. Whereas in the *X-Files*' mailing list, which is not centered on fan fiction at all, only a small minority of the surveyed women are feminists (Bury, 2005: 22-23).

These findings suggest a higher congregation of feminist ideals in fan fiction communities. However, considering all of slash a feminist practice would be an exceedingly broad generalization. Reading and writing fan fiction does not turn readers into feminists, nor are all feminist fans fond of fan fiction. There are fan writers who swear that their works do not contain political statements, although they admit that a feminist ideology influenced their interpretation of the source material. This means that feminism may still influence fan writing, but the authors may be unaware of it (pp. 77-78).

There are fan fiction authors who may be uncomfortable with seeing their craft as part of a political agenda, and they do not seem to notice any political statements behind other fans' works. As a matter of fact, scholarly attention has turned a number of fan authors and readers wary of associating their writings with feminism. Members of fan fiction communities feel understandably objectified when they are clinically discussed as mere samples of a cultural phenomenon. Fan fiction can be a feminist practice, but the opinions of its writers and readers ought to be taken into consideration in the matter. And yet, as previously remarked, being completely free of censorship or repercussions, fan fiction is undoubtedly empowering in a number of ways and this is, in essence, feminist (ibid).

In particular, it is interesting to note that Bury's findings in the slash mailing list denote higher awareness of contested meanings and higher tolerance for contrasting opinions than the findings of the non-slash mailing list demonstrate. The interviewed fan authors repeatedly remark that their opinions originate from their own subjective, even biased, point of view. Researchers are often confronted with survey responders who tell them that they ought not to take each fan's word as the norm of the community. This heightened attention of subjectivity and particularity may seem odd, but it is useful to recall that fan fiction readers and writers are more accustomed to negotiate a plethora of transient and contradicting meanings simultaneously than fellow fandom members. After all, without this ability to negotiate multiple, contradicting interpretations, fan fiction would not be a thriving genre (Fiske, 1992: 42).

### **4.3.1 Feminist slash fan fiction?**

After having delved deeper into feminist discourses in fan studies and in fan communities, it is important to seek precise reports, amongst researchers, whether slash fan fiction may be deemed a feminist genre or not. This section focuses specifically on slash fan fiction because it is a thriving

genre penned mostly by women but hyper-focused on male characters. Therefore, the presence of feminism in slash is, logically, called into question.

There has always been disagreement amongst feminist theorists as to whether slash fan fiction is feminist. Most slash fan fiction does reject patriarchal elements, but it can also be deemed anti-feminist because of the absence of *strong* women characters in those few stories which include women characters at all (Bury, 2005: 77; Derecho, 2006: 72; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 80). It is important to recall here that even if a significant number of fan stories tend to support traditional gender roles, fan fiction in general qualifies as a resistant practice.

Within fan fiction, the genre of slash in particular attracts a lot of scholarly attention for its potentially subversive possibilities. Although there is a small number of fan stories that deals with themes involving politics, the whole slash genre reflects a wide variety of political issues on sex, gender and sexuality. This is why slash is an especially relevant genre to approach in an academic work meant to analyze conscious and subconscious themes in fan fiction (Cicioni, 1998: 175).

The main characteristic of slash, the presence of a homosexual couple, is often viewed as a sign of feminist rejection of heteronormative, hegemonic structures. The main promoters of this viewpoint have been Russ, Frazer and Lamb, Bacon-Smith, and Jenkins (1992a, 1992b). However, the development of post-structuralism and deconstructionism led many contemporary researchers to reconsider their opinions and cast reasonable doubt on the interpretation that female-authored slash fan fiction inherently equals resistance to hegemonic structures (Leavenworth, 2009: 445).

Nowadays many scholars reject the validity of arguments in favor of feminist slash fan fiction. To support this rejection, the main point claims that no matter how well-written slash stories may be, women characters are generally kept at the margins. They are extras on a stage dominated by male characters. Furthermore, the chief characteristic of women characters in mainstream androcentric media is silence, and one of the main concerns of feminist researchers towards slash stories is that very few women characters are present, let alone gifted with a voice. Fan fiction's male characters are inveterate thinkers and talkers, but they rarely address women characters at length if at all (Suleiman, 1986; Kustritz, 2003: 376-377).

Empowered women characters in slash stories are more frequently found in fandoms whose source text belongs to the action genre. Regardless of the importance of the role of the original female character in the source text's plot, with an action-drive plot the fan authors seem to easily find cues from which the women characters can truly shine.

For instance, in the *James Bond's* (Fleming, 1953) fandom, the character of Eve Moneypenny often shines through for her wit and skills in fan fiction, even in very brief scenes. In the slash story *Denominations* (2014) by fan author WriteThroughTheNight, Moneypenny's

appearances are brief but very positive. She is portrayed as a capable field agent, an efficient secretary, and a fiercely loyal friend. Most importantly, she is of crucial aid to the main pair of the story, opening their eyes to each other's feelings and urging them to compromise with their own pride and meet their partner on a middle ground (WriteThroughTheNight, 2014). In this aspect, this story's Money Penny is exemplary of all the women characters in slash who have feelings of attraction or at least strong attachment for one male character of the main slash couple. And yet they still support the couple's happiness, acknowledging and eventually accepting their own emotional dilemma.

### **4.3.2 Joanna Russ and feminist slash fan fiction**

The first references to feminism in fan fiction may be found in Russ' essay and in Penley (1991). They claim that slash is a form of feminized pornography which rejects the usual anonymous, emotionless sexual experience formatted by patriarchal power relationships, and in this regard it ought to be considered as feminist literature (Russ, 1985; Penley, 1991).

Russ in particular, amongst the earliest scholars to focus on slash, celebrates slash fan fiction as the only non-commercially-bound, female-authored, explicit literary genre, produced for the pleasure of its authors and aimed to please other women. This cycle of exchanging pleasurable reading and writing experiences denotes a female-to-female sense of solidarity and empowerment that is heart-warming and should be preserved. In Russ' discourse, the fact that women fan authors consciously choose to help other women in achieving the same pleasure that they felt when they read and write fan fiction is a key concept. Russ also emphasizes the cultural legacy of pioneering slash writers because they introduced explicit sensual and sexual scenes in cultural products that were never going to show such scenes. Specifically, the source texts were never going to show sensual scenes for the pleasure of women readers and viewers. Therefore, pioneering slash women authors may be considered feminists because they introduced the perspective of female libido in the interpretation of mainstream cultural products. In particular, Russ praises the courage of women fan writers to create images of male characters as objects of desire on their own terms (Russ, 1985).

Not exclusive to slash fan fiction, an inter-genre type of fan stories are included in Russ' argument of female-to-female feminist pleasure exchange. This type of fan stories is the explicit category, what Russ interpret as sexual fantasies. Fan fiction women writers who choose to use explicit ('unfeminine') writing styles, actively choose to pursuit their own sensual and sexual satisfaction and wish for other (women) readers and writers to do the same. According to Russ, the

only fact that these women are acknowledging their sexual fantasies is empowering in itself, especially in combination with the support of a like-minded community. From this point of view, explicit fan stories have an underlying feminist principle, as these fan authors elevate and promote women's libido, that has been long suppressed by societal control (ibid).

To be precise, no fan fiction community is supportive of women's pleasure only in explicit sub-genres, but explicit-rated stories show this tendency more plainly. Regarding slash communities, as this section focuses on the delicate issue of feminism in an almost exclusively male genre like slash, this kind of promotion of femaleness is ever-present in slash fan fiction communities. The notes and comments in these communities are never tinged with judgment or debasement, on the contrary, they are always good-natured and humorous.

Russ also backs up the claim that most explicit stories do not represent degrading behaviors for any character. This argument is in line with Russ' macro argument to defend slash fan fiction as a feminist enterprise of amateur women authors, and more simply for all women who extemporaneously write their fears and wishes in fan stories. Specifically, Russ' essay is aimed at those critics who viewed fan fiction as either innocent romantic literature or as 'Barbara Cartland in drag.' The first judgment downsizes the importance of the afore-mentioned supportive and non-sense atmosphere in fan fiction communities regarding female sensuality.

Detractors of Russ' essay claim that by discussing only explicit fan fiction, outsiders may view the whole genre as pornographic, but this section of the thesis is aimed at demonstrating how Russ' discourse was focused on explicit slash fan fiction because its feminist elements are much more plainly evident to the outsider. Of course, there are many fan stories that have no trace of explicit scenes. In many fandoms this type of stories actually comprises the majority of the works. But it is worth analyzing the more explicit stories for their sociological value.

Russ firmly situates explicit fan fiction within the 1980s liberal-versus-radical feminist debates on pornography, but her argument is still relevant today. Especially when she mentions a delicate point, one that is gladly picked apart by fan fiction's detractors: the fact that there are also violent explicit stories in fan fiction. According to Russ, the violent fantasies present in some stories are not the literal representations of what women desire (this is especially true for rape stories), but they channel inner fears and concerns (ibid). This theory is strongly supported by Mirna Cicioni (1998), who defends slash fan fiction as as one of the most liberating channels of expression for the female subconscious (Cicioni, 1998: 167).

As relevant as Russ' argument is today, her essay harks back to 1985, when media fandoms were still in the making and bound to fan magazines production and distribution, a rare form of

fannish life today. The next section presents Bury's more recent findings from her study of fandom mailing lists at the turn of the twenty-first century.

### **4.3.3 Feminism in fan fiction mailing lists**

One of the bridging fandom researchers between hardcopy and online fandoms, Rhiannon Bury's study examines at length the exchanges of the participants of a *Due South* and of an *X-Files* mailing list.

From a feminist point of view, Bury's data draws a peculiar picture. Bury analyses two *women-only* lists, created when the fan members chose to distance themselves from larger inter-sex communities, where they felt denigrated and ridiculed by fellow male fans. By creating a digital space of their own, these women succeeded in emancipating themselves and in taking control of their space and of their interactions. Additionally, they claim that they take comfort in a 'plus female' category, and which is an attitude that is akin to certain, radical, feminist precepts (Bury, 2005: 12).

Another element that is empowering and therefore is a feminist practice for Bury's women is their twisting the source text to their tastes. This is something that all fandoms do, but it shows very plainly in Bury's selection of quoted messages. During Bury's analysis of the large *X-Files* fan group, she highlights how its members, who are all women except one gay man, extrapolate and enhance the romantic subtext of the paranormal mystery tale, a typical male-oriented narrative, and discuss it with enthusiasm amongst themselves. As mentioned, appropriating a male-oriented Canon to suit (female) tastes in an almost female-only environment is an empowering, feminist endeavor (p. 31).

Bury often denotes her respondents' explicit sexual discussions about the characters and the actors who portray them. Contrarily to popular assumption, Bury's women carefully separate the fictional characters from the real individuals, but what is more interesting is the liberating openness with which the fans sing the praises of their idols. As Bury reports, even if these women may not be aware of this, it is mainly thanks to early feminist and queer debates that they can discuss their libido straightforwardly, even in the privacy of a women-only digital space. Men are not the sole beneficiaries of the voyeuristic gaze anymore, women in fandom are now comfortable in reclaiming their own lust, refusing to be bound to the realm of courtly love (pp. 11, 37, 123). Although this reasoning pertains to the experience of fandom in general, it is worth noting for the sake of discussing feminist discourses in fan fiction.

Amongst the points of contention against the argument that fandoms are in any way feminist communities, postfeminist theorists explain that creating women-only spaces does not help women's struggles in unequal societies. Ideally, women ought to establish themselves as equal to their male peers in mixed-gender environments. There are also several gray areas where it is not possible to identify, without the shadow of a doubt, when fan writers display feminist or non-feminist beliefs. Therefore, it is reductive to claim that participating in fandom turns a woman into a feminist since she constantly reads against the hegemonic frame of the source narrative (pp. 205, 211).

Bury's study of the *Due South* slash mailing list shows several examples of such gray areas. For instance, the respondents are eager to claim that slash ought not to be accused of anti-feminism just because it doesn't focus on women characters. Even if these women admit that their stories pivot almost solely on male characters, and even if many outsiders are miffed by the lack of female heroines in a prevalently female-authored genre, fans contend that the genre's subject-matter is men, and that justifies the absence of women characters completely. Bury's women fail to see how it may be contradicting to reject anti-feminist accusations for being more interested in exploring male/male relationships while neglecting female/male and female/female couples in their works (p. 78).

Proof of the development of feminist critique within media fandoms harks back to the inception of feminism itself. The efforts of feminist critics work on two fronts: on one hand the expansion of the literary and visual canon to include more women-authored works; this is aimed at reclaiming the cultural territory that should have belonged to those women writers who have been pushed to the margins or silenced. The other goal is the development of feminist reading strategies in a community of women readers trained to reverse androcentric texts and committed to the cause (Schweickart, 1986: 44-45; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 75). Women fan fiction authors consciously or unconsciously work on both fronts. They are expanding female-authored literature exponentially, and they have trained themselves to reverse a variety of canonical elements, primarily characters' gender roles and sexuality. Feminist readers' engagement with androcentric texts may vary from a detached to a downright adversarial attitude. Fan fiction communities may thus be readily associated with feminist criticism because their readings of male-authored texts are commonly resisting (Schweickart, 1986: 45-46).

Resisting feminist readers of male texts normally strive to disrupt the process of cultural immasculation. Whereas feminist readings of female texts strive to connect women writers to one another, to women readers and to critics. From this point of view, female-authored romance consumed by women readers and viewers (often compared with fan fiction), may be unintentionally feminist. As Radway (1991) claims, at the center of heterosexual romance is the female identity of

the protagonist, which is arguably a proxy for the author, a facet of her subconscious, similar to the Mary Sue archetype. As such, the reader may recognize herself in the heroine and, through her, relate to the psyche of another woman (Radway, 1991; Fiske, 1992). This is a moment of psychological connection between reader, text, and writer. Being penned and read mostly by women, fan fiction well serves the feminist cause of bridging the gap between women of different beliefs and ideologies, and it also offers the scholar a valuable opportunity to analyze this exchange.

Crucial tasks for feminist readers include: recovering the social and cultural context in which women authors have written/are writing; highlighting meaningful female-authored works in high and popular culture; and celebrating the resiliency of women-authored content in spite of the overwhelming pressure of androcentric cultures. In this way, feminist reading becomes a question of reconnecting critics with the lives of women authors. In a media studies content, this writer-reader relationship may greatly help in contextualizing fan fiction (Schweickart, 1986).

It may be necessary to show a modern example of a slash fan fiction author whose writing may easily be defined as feminist. There is a story in the *Harry Potter* fandom which is going to illustrate a few of the points listed in this section. In fan author montparnasse's story titled *Let Nothing You Dismay* (2014), the character of Sirius Black faces a sexuality crisis at the end of his teenage years. Related to his sexuality crisis, there are also passages where the author slips in quick jabs at the gender norms of modern societies, such as:

[...] he saves himself the trouble of wondering this time and points to the sport section of the Muggle newspaper, where an oiled-looking rugby whastit with arms like sheer granite is doing something manly and severe with what appears to be a large egg. The women's team gets a byline and two paragraphs near the bottom of the page, and no photo. "That, there, that's weird," he lies, triumphantly. "Muggle women having to play on different teams. What happens if they mix, do the men get crushed between their steely thighs? Is that why it's all separate?" (montparnasse, 2014)

Here the author uses Sirius' point of view, whose education in a magical community separate from modern societies gives him an outsider's perspective, to close in on a few issues of these societies. The first issue is that in sports newspapers, male teams are endowed with a disproportionate exposure in contrast to female teams. The author pokes fun at the newspaper article because it attributes a gender to a sport. Next, the author focuses on the women's team sidelined presence. And finally the author takes advantage of Sirius', an outsider's, joke to point out that the separation and disproportionate praise of male teams in manly sports is likely the result of fear of emasculation in front of a female team that is proving to be successful in the same sport.

In this quote, Sirius remarks that separating teams according to their gender is weird only so he can continue this train of thought with: “‘You know what else is weird?’ asks Sirius, bravely, so very, very bravely. ‘That they won’t let men marry other men.’” (montparnasse, 2014). This quote completes the previous one and is a perfect example of how slash fan fiction is a very fertile literary genre for sex, gender and sexuality issues, even from a political viewpoint. In a few lines the author spells out few, brief yet punctual complaints about the state of gender inequality and of queer people’s rights in society, without ever assuming a formal or polemical tone. The readers are amused first by Sirius’ outsider perspective into the workings of their society, with hilarious results such as the comparison of a rugby’s ball to an egg, while exposing delicate and serious matters such as the lack of marriage rights for homosexual couples (ibid).

As it is also shown by this quote, the concept of the sex/gender binary is fundamental to navigate many fan fiction genres, especially the slash and femslash genre. Slash and femslash authors tend to demonstrate an accurate knowledge of the binary, and the creativeness to use it to expose and discuss several other related issues that often have political relevance. Moreover, as shown by the previous quote, Sirius’ remarks about the newspaper article also offer concrete, everyday examples of the sex/gender binary that can help young readers understand this concept with more immediacy and efficacy than formal essays about the same topic may achieve (ibid).

#### **4.4 Feminist or not? The gray areas**

This chapter is meant to convey several arguments in favor of the theory that fandoms and fan fiction communities operate on an underlying feminist principle of female-empowerment. This sense of empowerment can operate both on the level of the writers alone, through the activity of writing and reading, but also on the level of the readers or fellow fans in general, through the circulation of fan fiction and communal discussions in comment sections or in chat-rooms. There are instances where feminist principles shine through very clearly in fan production, but there are also many instances open to contention, as well as gray areas where determining the presence of feminist principles is nigh impossible.

Hopefully, it should be fairly evident by now that fandom is always more complicated than the reports of both insiders and outsiders can convey. In the context of feminist theories in fan culture, scholars need to proceed with caution because they run the risk of portraying fandoms as imaginary feminist idylls (Busse, 2009: 106). This thesis too must tread lightly on the subject, as

fan fiction communities *cannot* be defined once and for all feminist communities, as much as a significant number of stories hint or openly display feminist principles.

It is important to recall here the points of contention disclosed by recent queer studies about the objectification of queer individuals in fan cultures. A pre-emptive argument shall be explained first. Many scholars agree that fan writers are subversive and democratic because they strive to revert the producer/consumer binary. This is due to the symbolism of the producer/consumer binary. the producer is associated with the active subject and the consumer with the passive object. However, in the case of slash and femslash, fans, specifically heterosexual fans, force queer readers in the same position as women readers and viewers are forced when they consume mainstream media in patriarchal societies. They are objectified.

The counter-argument of queer researchers against the argument of feminism in fan fiction posits that when fans write slash and femslash fan fiction they become active subjects, but they also force queer individuals into the representation of passive objects. This phenomenon can be very demeaning especially when queer identities are objectified solely for the entertainment of writers and readers, without any regards to the struggles of queer individuals in the real world. It is very easy to slip into such undistinguishable grey areas when discussing topics as delicate as feminism and equal rights in grassroots-based, unregulated communities (ibid).

The following chapter is the last one and it focuses on these gray areas. The main arguments contend against fan fiction as a time-worthy object of study, not only because of the absence of feminist principles, but in general because of the high numbers of unequal power relationships, heteronormative stories, homophobic characters, and psychological and physical violence in fan fiction. These counter-arguments shall be presented extensively because this thesis strives for a degree of objectivity and for a balance between involvement and detachment. Even though fan fiction communities are extremely open-minded and tolerant from many points of view, they also include traditionally-minded individuals, whose production shall not be ignored for the sake of a complete presentation.

## **Chapter 5: Hurt or comfort? Abuse and education in fan fiction**

### **5.1 Physical and emotional pain in fan fiction**

This thesis investigates the literary genre called fan fiction by focusing on questions of sex, gender, sexuality and feminism in its stories. In the previous four chapters, this thesis might have seemed to fail in the academic principle of an objective study, a report that shall not appear too involved in its subject matter, nor too detached from it. This last chapter strives to maintain the balance by showing the so-called ‘dark side’ of fan fiction communities, the ‘darker’ themes of the stories such as homophobia, sexism, and psychological and physical violence, including sexual violence.

Before discussing each theme in-depth, a brief summary of the themes present in this chapter shall be presented.

In this chapter, homophobia is addressed at length because it is related to both feminism and heteronormativity in fan fiction. Homophobia is related to feminism because fan authors demonstrate to be receptive of gender equality, and to be aware of gender norms to the point of deconstructing them by writing drag, cross-dressing, transgender and genderfluid characters. In other words, fan authors demonstrate that they are fighting traditional gender norms by writing homophobic characters and by having their protagonists prove that these homophobic characters are in the wrong. In defense of fan fiction writers, openly homophobic fan stories are very rare. Normally, the homophobic themes that are found in fan fiction nowadays are very subtle, and they are spotted only during close reading by queer readers who have experienced homophobia first-hand.

Nowadays the most common form of homophobia in fan fiction is educational. The authors mention homophobia as an external threat to the characters’ relationship and as a disease of society. From this point of view, the presence of homophobia is extremely positive. This is not a paradox. This type of homophobia is not the representation of the fan authors’ beliefs, it is a means to write informative and realistic stories without employing a formal or polemical tone. This kind of homophobia is readily recognizable throughout the plot of the fan story, because the overall message can be thus summarized: ‘This is what a homophobic society thinks about this story’s queer characters. It is awful and it must stop. And to show you that this attitude can be stopped, the characters are going to defy and defeat homophobia by staying together and by stronger together.’ This is an extremely powerful and important message that is conveyed in fan stories containing homophobic elements. In this way fan fiction becomes a crucial literary genre in the global fight against social intolerance and queer discrimination.

Heteronormativity is useful in fan studies because it can show that, contrarily to feminist ideals of gender equality, there are fan writers who neatly separate femininity and masculinity,

applying to each a set of personality traits. These traits are usually pre-determined by the society where the fan authors have grown up in. In case of patriarchal societies, heteronormativity in fan fiction is often represented by traits of independence, strength, confidence, and leadership being ascribed exclusively to male characters, while supportiveness, empathy, and self-abnegation are assigned exclusively to female characters. Heteronormativity in fan fiction thus shows how worrying it is that after decades of struggles for equal gender rights, there is still a portion of discerning individuals who are still captive of their society's gender norms (Butler, 1988: 522).

By the sheer numbers in the fan fiction genres dealing with physical, psychological and emotional pain such as Hurt/Comfort and Darkfic, it seems that a plethora of fan authors are obsessed with men's vulnerability and pain. A likely cause for this phenomenon resides in the perception of vulnerability and pain in patriarchy. Historically, government have instructed young men that deadly situations are to be faced bravely and heroically. This education is meant to ignite a patriotic sense of self-sacrifice in times of need. This mechanism is reproduced in popular and high culture with astounding regularity. In front of self-injury or overwork, in front of sacrificed bystanders, and in front of lost comrades, the encultured image of the male hero is a stoic demeanor and an unwavering sense of duty. On the other hand, fan fiction authors do not shy away from the consequences of violence, war and survival. They delve deeper and deeper into these themes with their male characters, reuniting the glorified self-sacrifice with bodily pain (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 273-275).

In this chapter, the Darkfic category (Darkfic denotes a fan story with no redemption and no happy ending) will not be discussed in-depth, but it is important to note that a subgenre of the Darkfic category is the Rapefic, sometimes labeled Dub-Con (Dubious Consent), or Non-Con (Non-Consensual). Different from stories which feature unequal power relationships between the parties involved, Non-Con stories can be so graphically accurate and disturbing that fan authors repeat the Darkfic warning multiple times. It is usually present first in the header of the fan fiction, then in the initial notes, and in case the non-consensual scenes appear in isolated chapters, the warning is reiterated another time in the opening notes of those particular chapters. The vast majority of the times, the theme of rape is meant to be educational for the readers. Readers are supposed to emphasize with the pain of the abused characters and learn to treat their partners better.

Scenes of explicit sexual violence are relatively infrequent in fan fiction, they are usually embedded in Hurt/Comfort tropes. Sometimes the victimizing character is not conscious of what he or she is actually doing to their partner, while in other instances the cause for the violence is external, such as when the protagonists are forced by someone else to use violence or they are mentally unstable at the moment. In fan fiction, sexual violence is commonly followed by nurturing

and healing scenes. Many scholars have interpreted scenes of after-care as women's self-reassurance of their physical integrity after thoughts of rape and domestic violence (Cicioni, 1998: 168).

Rape has always been a major threat for women in many civilized societies. As early as the 1980s, a number of governments published statistics according to which a significant percentage of the female population declared to have suffered sexual abuse at least once in their life. A common denomination for societies which are perceived to implicitly endorse rape are called 'rape cultures.' Mechanisms of rape endorsement include advising women to protect themselves by staying indoors at night, by avoiding traveling alone, and by exercising caution in the initial stages of a relationship. These and other advices focus solely on women's responsibility to remain 'pure,' implying that the blame is to be attributed to the victims, even potential victims. This discourse retaliates back against men themselves when they are presented with male homosexuality (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 278).

## **5.2 Homophobia in fan fiction**

This chapter discusses disturbing themes in fan fiction, be the authors conscious or unconscious of them. Since spotting and explaining unconscious themes in any literary work is more complicated than spotting and explaining plain evident aspects, a major, immediately evident disturbing theme shall be discussed first. This section thus presents the concept of homophobia in fan fiction, even in slash and femslash fan fiction.

As queer-friendly as most fan fiction communities tend to be, there is a significant amount of subtle and less subtle homophobia in a worrying number of stories, even in slash. One of the most accredited theories for the presence of homophobia in such seemingly queer-friendly communities, is that homophobia is so deeply ingrained in patriarchal societies, that despite their best intentions, individuals struggle to recognize it and often fail to eradicate it from their minds.

One of the main reasons why homophobia is so deeply-rooted in modern societies is the scarcity of psychologically deep friendships among men in modern cultures. That is to say, most individuals live in societies where men are not supposed to be very close friends, unless they accept the risk of being 'accused of' being queer. However, fear of homosexuality is not the primary cause that keeps men at a distance from each other. Male/male distance is mostly a consequence of failed close friendships, as these bonds require individuals to share confidential information about themselves, their worries and weaknesses. However, if men grow closer to each other, they tend to lower their 'defenses' and become 'vulnerable' in the eyes of a potential competitor. Many men

thus prefer to keep their distance from each other in order to avoid exposing their weaknesses (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 239).

All individuals in modern societies are used to this distance between men of every age, and women are also aware of it. This knowledge is so ingrained in each person that it resembles a common truth or even an unspoken rule: everybody knows it even though they may not acknowledge it out loud. Individuals soon learn that straying from these truths brings instant ridicule and discrimination from their peers, because by closing the gap between each other, they fail at performing their gender correctly, endangering the whole structure of gender itself. Other members of the same society react to this danger by ostracizing the abnormal individuals. The so-called 'no homo' jokes that are common both on the Internet as much as in real life are a clear example of this reaction. Upon close inspection, there is a deep underlying fear of societal punishment underneath this type of 'humor.' In Judith Butler's (1988) words: "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler, 1988: 522). Thus the interpersonal distance becomes an instinctual maxim.

This ought to explain how very complicated it is for every person, and indeed also for fan fiction writers, to fight homophobia. Their daily experience of male-male companionship is ruled by distance and competition. Non-queer fans who cannot parse through their set of homophobic internalizations may even end spreading homophobic notions unconsciously through their fan works. This is why many fan writers may refuse the accusation of being queer-phobic even though their works contain homophobic elements (Boal, 1990 in Green et al., 1998: 22-23).

Despite overt or covert homophobic attitudes, fan fiction's counter-hegemonic nature remains true. Even when authors vehemently deny that their characters are queer, they do write hundreds of thousands of words about characters involved in queer activities. Fan authors may reject the claim of being involved in any feminist or queer agenda, but they are spreading infinite combinations of queer attitudes and beliefs, just like contradicting urges and idiosyncrasies intertwine in real queer communities. Many authors and readers choose not to give homophobic stories any sort of positive feedback, to show future readers that these stories are not worth the time spent reading them (Benshoff, 1998: 217; Bury, 2005: 90).

### 5.2.1 Overt homophobia in fan fiction

The boundaries between overt and covert homophobia are not clear-cut as the following two sections of this thesis would lead to believe. The current separation has been made only for ease of reading and organization.

Although there are many gray areas, the end of the spectrum of the evident homophobia is, well, quite obvious. The presence of blatant hate speech in media fandoms should not be shocking, as the anonymity that the Internet provides, often exposes the darkest sides of any person. The presence of evident homophobia in fan fiction communities is an interesting trait from a sociological point of view, because it disproves many scholars' statements in the early stage of fan studies, that fandoms are extremely accepting, tolerant, basically idyllic communities (MacDonald, 1998: 136).

One of the most explicit appearances of homophobia in fan fiction is visible when fan authors write slash for their amusement or for the amusement of fellow fans, but are in reality opposed to homosexuality on religious and/or moral grounds. These authors fail to see that queer and queer-friendly fans may become extremely disconcerted when they discover that the author of a queer story has no intention of supporting queer communities in real life.

Bacon-Smith repeatedly remarks that 1980s mentor fans took extra care in introducing new members to slash fan fiction. Fortunately, this attitude is seldom witnessed in fandom nowadays. In 1992, Bacon-Smith reports that in her eight-years-long ethnographic study, the number of readers disgusted by homoerotic stories decreased sharply (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 222-241).

Throughout a fan plot, overt homophobia is easily recognizable when authors repeatedly and vehemently deny that their protagonists, involved in an exclusive same-sex relationship, are in any way gay, even as they assure their readers that being gay is perfectly fine. What is portrayed in such stories is not a condemnation of homosexual acts, but the rejection of a homosexual *identity* (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 70-71; Leavenworth, 2009: 448-450).

One common sign of this kind of homophobia is when one or more queer characters state a variant of the phrase: 'I am not gay, I am a heterosexual man who just happened to like/love/fall in love with another man' (Boal, 1990 in Green et al., 1998: 22-23). This wording indicates that the bond shared by the protagonists is different than any two given men's relationship, since any two given men would be gay, and the beloved characters are not. The protagonists' bond is often idealized as standing above any alternative arrangement, especially queer relationships, since theirs is a higher, purer bond, hence it is not distasteful and homosexual. This reasoning indicates that, by proxy, the author finds homosexuality alien and/or distasteful, and this is homophobic attitude (Green, 1991 in Green et al., 1998: 27-28).

Another very common wording to deny the characters' queer identity is: 'It's so wonderful nothing else could ever compare.' When the previous relationships of the characters are heterosexual, this phrase denotes both misogyny, since it implies that the only partner who can fully satisfy a man is another man, and homophobia, since the issue of questioning one's own sexuality is dismissed in favor of mere carnal satisfaction. More precisely, with this phrase the author clarifies that the protagonists' desire is not queer in general, but is kindled by one particular individual, and the intensity erases any possible negotiation of one's own sexuality (Leavenworth, 2009: 452).

When the authors annul sexuality discourses with such plot devices, they are in most cases struggling with deep-rooted, unconscious homophobia. However, authors may also be struggling with internalized homophobia. In such cases, fan fiction holds a high potential of becoming a therapeutic way in which the writers can experience a sort of 'coming out' to themselves through their stories (Morgan, 1990 in Green et al., 1998: 24). Claiming that slash fan fiction is the genre where fan authors experiment with their libido across the whole spectrum of sexual identities would be too dismissive, but it is a valid explanation for some homophobic stories.

### **5.2.2 Covert homophobia in fan fiction**

There are covert as there are overt forms of homophobia in fan stories. In this section, a few such forms shall be exposed and discussed.

Feminized male characters are a form of covert homophobia. These characters are problematic because fan authors may utilize them as a pretest to retaliate against men. It is important here to recall the discussion about sexual positions and power imbalance in heterosexual relationships in heteronormative societies. The 'top' position of men corresponds to the active decisional power in the relationship, whereas the 'bottom' position of women corresponds to the passivity that women must show in deference to the decisional power of men. By feminizing their male protagonists, some fan authors subject them to countless sexual humiliations. Moreover, these authors may justify this deplorable practice with the excuse that the characters are secretly enjoying themselves. This kind of mentality is not only covertly misogynist, but also homophobic. Gratuitous emotional, physical, and psychological violence without any form of after-care in queer couples, stems from the subconscious notion that what the characters are doing is wrong and unnatural, thus only a warped and twisted version of heterosexual 'love' is suitable for them. An extremely puzzling example of homophobia in slash can be witnessed in the works of those authors who claim

that they cannot write female/female stories because they think lesbianism is distasteful, all the while they glorify male/male pairings (Boal, 1990, 1991 in Green et al., 1998: 21-23).

### **5.2.3 Homophobia and lack of political involvement**

Despite the large presence of slash fan fiction in most fandoms, only a limited number of slash authors writes for political reasons. Mostly, the issue of homophobia is raised, but is quickly dismissed. Although it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of slash writers and readers is informed, to a degree, about contemporary debates on homophobia, the writers may not know how to insert these themes in their narration. Similarly, politically aware writers may support pro-queer campaigns in real life, but they may also choose not to divulge their political beliefs through their fan works (Busse, 2006: 211-212). The polarity of these attitudes can be explained with the fact that there are some fans who consider queer awareness to be an integral element of slash, but the opinion that any political discussion of queer issues does not belong in fan fiction is still very common and widespread (Green et al., 1998: 22).

In this context, fandom ethnographer Rhiannon Bury reports that slash writers would regularly debate about political issues amongst themselves, but not in their stories. In particular, Bury quotes the message of an author who received a challenge to insert Gay Pride-themed elements in her slash stories to support Gay Pride parades:

> Well ladies and gents, pride is coming up and here is  
>a challenge for that event. Lets [sic] show our support and  
>start writing some pride marching, rainbows, coming  
>out, h/c pride slash. (Phoebe)

[...] I saw this message this morning posted to Serge and I must admit to uttering the words “Eek! Blech! Go away!” Okay they've already done the marching thing, but I just can't see it with most other shows' characters.  
(Jeanne) (Bury, 2005: 93)

This quote shows that both fan authors Phoebe and Jeanne are disgusted by the initiative. They claim that they support the civil rights of queer individuals in real life, one of them even claims to have participated in Pride marches, although they cannot view their favorite pairings in such a situation. What is reasonable in this argument, according to Bury, is that fan authors already struggle a great deal when they turn canonically heterosexual characters into partners of a same-sex relationship. Inserting these characters into Pride-themed situations would be even more

complicated, and would unlikely produce satisfactory results for the readers (Jeanne in Bury, 2005: 93).

## 5.2.4 Educational homophobia

Even though this chapter is meant to convey the dark themes in fan fiction, explicitly, blatant homophobia in fan fiction is quite rare. A more common form of homophobia in fan fiction communities nowadays is educational homophobia.

This section thus focuses on this kind of homophobia that is actually beneficial to the readers. Homophobia can be educational when it is described as a social disease that needs to be purged from civilized societies. When homophobia features in slash or femslash fan fiction, it normally becomes a threat, a sort of villain, that the queer protagonists must defeat in order to reach the usual happily-ever-after finale.

This resolution is clearly queer-friendly and is meant both to reassure queer readers that their sexuality is not 'wrong' or 'unnatural' as homophobic precepts would lead them to believe, but is also meant to inform non-queer readers about the hate and ridicule that queer individuals have to endure in order to live a 'normal' life in modern societies. In the case of non-queer readers, the ultimate goal is to spread a queer-friendly mentality so that hopefully the readers will curb their homophobic misconceptions when they meet queer individuals in real life, spreading an environment of social tolerance and acceptance.

It arises the opportunity now to show a few examples from actual fan stories. One of them comes from the *House, M.D.* (Shore, 2004-2012) fandom, that hosts a popular story featuring educational homophobia. The story is titled *A Modest Proposal* (2007-2008), it is written by fan author Ignaz Wisdom, and its plot pivots on an arranged civil union between Dr. Wilson and Dr. House to keep the latter out of prison during the Tritter case, a narrative arc of the third season. Several times in the first half of the story Dr. Wilson reminds himself that the civil union is a mere arrangement of convenience, not without a hint of homophobia:

It wasn't that he was gay -- he was irrefutably not gay. He loved women, [...]. He'd had three marriages and more affairs than he cared to remember to prove it. He hadn't really thought about men in ages, and he hadn't done anything about it since before his first marriage -- since med school. So he wasn't even close to being gay, not really. Or at least not *mostly* (Ignaz Wisdom, 2007-2008: chapter 4).

In this case Wilson is being homophobic because even though he experienced homosexual intercourse in college, he had refused to entertain the idea that he might be anything other than heterosexual until now.

In the same chapter, educational homophobia is present again when Dr. Wilson compares the bureaucratic route for heterosexual and same-sex civil unions:

Wilson found a brief list of the requirements a couple would have to meet to get a civil union license, alongside a list of the old requirements for a 'domestic partnership,' and discovered, with some distaste, that at least one of his marriages would never have been up to snuff. It struck him as deeply unfair that he'd been able to get married and divorced three separate times by the time he turned forty, while committed same-sex couples had had to deal with half-assed domestic partnership rights (Ignaz Wisdom, 2007-2008: chapter 4).

In this quote, Wilson clearly sympathizes with queer individuals who need to show more proof of their love to society in comparison with heterosexual couples in order to seal a union.

As these two quotes indicate, in *A Modest Proposal* one or more characters display homophobic attitudes, right before they realize the social inequality between heterosexual and queer individuals in heteronormative societies. This story thus holds a high potential as an educational opportunity for readers to become aware of issues related to non-hegemonic sexual identities in real life situations, such as applying for marriage (ibid).

Another prime example of educational homophobia can be found in the *Merlin* (Jones et al., 2008-2012) fandom. *For Your Information* (2012) was originally published anonymously in the multi-blog website 'LiveJournal' in response to a writing prompt. The story was later reviewed by a beta reader, and finally it was published in the 'ArchiveOfOurOwn' under the username *reni\_days*. However, at the time of writing, the story has been very recently deleted by the author from the ArchiveOfOurOwn. The source shall then be the un-edited version in LiveJournal, but for the sake of clarity, the author shall be here called 'reni\_days' instead of 'anonymous.'

*For Your Information (FIY)* is an Alternate Universe set in modern settings, and it can be defined as a story specifically on homophobia. Because of this it is both a prime example for this topic but it is also a rare sample, since very few fan stories feature homophobia so prominently as *FYI*, even in slash fan fiction communities. To illustrate this point, the only warning of the ArchiveOfOurOwn version stated: "Warnings for implied bigotry and homophobia."

In the story, Arthur's father Uther Pendragon discovers that his son is homosexual, so he seeks Merlin's counsel on the matter since Merlin is the only homosexual person amongst his trusted acquaintances. *reni\_days* shows an extreme example in Uther's ignorance about queer people in order to better convey the themes of bigotry and homophobia. Uther harbors gross,

common misconceptions about queer individuals. For instance, he is of the opinion that a queer sexual identity is akin to a physical or mental affliction, and that queer individuals commonly sport rainbows on their everyday attire. Merlin is very patient in front of such blatant ignorance, the author states: “[Merlin] stays through questions like, ‘So...I understand your people wear a lot of...colours,’ and ‘Are there charities of some kind I should be donating to?’” (reni\_days, 2012).

Ren\_i\_days constructs a remarkable number of statements to counter-argue the homophobic opinion according to which queer individuals are supposed to come out not only to their relatives, but also in the workplace and amongst their acquaintances. Through Merlin’s character, the author remarks:

no one obsesses about the sexual preferences of heterosexual people. You're not expected to put an ad in the paper, or make an announcement at the office about what you like to do in the privacy of your own bedroom, or who you like to do it with. And you *shouldn't* be. It's no one's business but yours. Some people choose to come out with banners and streamers and rainbow t-shirts, and some people choose not to make an issue of it outside their family and close friends. Those are *both* valid choices. (reni\_days, 2012)

With these words, reni\_days masterfully defends the rights of queer individuals to their privacy. Like any other heterosexual person, queer individuals are not supposed to flaunt their sexual identity if they do not wish to do so. As queer sexualities are oppressed in many societies around the world, queer individuals have the right to protect themselves from discrimination by asserting their right to their privacy.

Elsewhere, the author draws a parallel between the supposed obligation to come out and the invented obligation that heterosexual individuals have to share the details of their sexual preferences to colleagues and acquaintances. Naturally, heterosexual fan readers are supposed to feel violated by this prospect. The ultimate lesson is for readers to feel offended on behalf of queer individuals when this argument emerges in real life, and eventually to support queer colleagues or friends in their decision to come out to whoever they wish.

In *FYI* reni\_days develops Uther’s character with remarkable craft. At first, Uther gives the impression of being a rude, demanding, homophobic man, but Merlin repeatedly lingers on the fact that Uther is trying to understand and accept his son’s newly-discovered sexual identity. As shown in the following passage:

And yes, it's awful and sad and kind of hideous that he *has* to try this hard - that he is such a natural bigot that he genuinely cannot seem to function at all in the face of homosexuality – [...] but the fact that he's *here*, treating Merlin like a research experiment to be dissected and studied and *understood* – There's a kind of love in that. For

all his faults, and however ridiculous his methods, Uther is reaching out in his own way, trying to find a way to understand his son. (reni\_days, 2012)

This quote offers a fairly realistic description of a non-queer parent who has to deal with the coming out of a queer child. This is one of the major reasons why *FYI* holds a highly informative value for its readers. The author shows here a positive example of a non-queer parent. Even though Uther says incredibly inconsiderate things in the beginning of the story, the author remarks that this is due to the social bigotry he was raised in. Furthermore, reni\_days soon redeems Uther by repeatedly specifying the mental effort that this non-queer parent is making in accepting his queer child with an open mind. In conclusion, *For Your Information* is an extremely well-thought and considerate story that handles the delicate topic of homophobia and coming out remarkably well, providing many realistic situations and reactions, starting from the setting: a parent seeks the counsel of a queer person to dismantle their own homophobic preconceptions for the love of their queer child.

Ren\_i\_days categorizes *FYI* as a Crack story, a parodic exaggeration. This is a common recurrence in fan fiction communities. Many authors prefer to feature themes such as homophobia in a comical way, usually to psychologically distance themselves from this disturbing topic, or to avoid triggering their queer and queer-friendly readers excessively. *FYI* is a very light-hearted narrative for the theme, since homophobic characters swiftly realize how to correct their behaviour (ibid).

A fan story that has already been quoted shall be discussed again for its relevance in the topic of educational homophobia in fan fiction. Idiopathicsmile's *Les Misérables* fan story titled *World Ain't Ready* features numerous homophobic situations and a high level of educational potential. In the story, Enjolras' passionate speeches for human rights are translated into the opinions of an idealistic teenager in a modern high school settings. However, the theme of homophobia is first portrayed in relation to the story's protagonist and narrative voice, Grantaire:

Columbus High is not a mecca of love and tolerance. Last week, Grantaire's Government class debated gay marriage, and literally the one person arguing in favor was Cosette Fauchelevent, who only got away with it by virtue of being a pretty girl. Otherwise, middle ground was somewhere around "Sure, gays are an abomination, but maybe it doesn't make sense to compare them to axe murderers." There were also plenty of kids well beyond the middle ground (idiopathicsmile, 2014-2015: chapter 1).

This paragraph is well-balanced with humour and seriousness. There is a comparison of homosexual individuals to axe murderers and a description of a class of teenagers who hold extremely homophobic opinions even at their young age. The whole situation may seem exaggerated, but the author needs this level of homophobia to transpose the original settings of

social injustice of early nineteenth century France into a comparably oppressive and violent environment.

In the passage, IdiopathicSmile also sheds light on a relevant issue evident in modern schools. Apparently, pretty girls can get away with anything because of their looks, as Cosette does in the quoted episode. Moreover, after this description, the author describes Grantaire's reaction: he draws on his arms during the whole lecture in order to occupy his thoughts, to prevent himself from speaking up against such blatant hate because he fears negative repercussions. Readers later realize that this demeanour is a self-defence mechanism because Grantaire is bisexual, but not 'out' (ibid).

*World Ain't Ready* offers many instances of high school bullying due to homophobia, including destruction of private and school property, and verbal and physical abuse in and outside of school. The strongest scenes include Grantaire's locket being marred with the word 'fag' on the front, Grantaire being pushed near a drinking trough, causing a head injury, and Grantaire's locket being filled with pamphlets about Christian anti-queer correction camps. This last passage is cleverly balanced by the author.

For the pamphlet scene, IdiopathicSmile initially describes how the pamphlets about "youth brainwashing camps" shock Grantaire more than any other homophobic remark or attack. The person who put the pamphlets in Grantaire's locket was a perfectly friendly classmate until the day before, but now that Grantaire is in a relationship with another boy, he is considered an abomination, destined for Hell (ch 7). To compensate for this heavy scene, Grantaire later confronts his Christian, anti-queer classmate with a hilarious statement: "I can save you some time. I'm sure God is great and all, but the homosexuals got to me first, and frankly, their recruitment package was better. Bright colors, coupons, nobody trying to make me feel like a living sin, it's a pretty good deal over—" (ch 8). The humour in these words cleverly balances the situation without depressing the readers and urges them to read on. This is a relatively common device in fan fiction.

Those fan authors who decide to include heavy themes such as religious intolerance, bullying and homophobia as in *World Ain't Ready*, do not normally prolong these topics excessively, in order not to alienate or trigger their readers. This results in a successful compromise between informing the readers about these themes and letting them enjoy the reading at the same time.

### 5.3 Slash fan fiction without politics

Apart from overt and covert homophobia, there are fan authors who are completely indifferent to all such matters of categorization and political sides. As a matter of fact, fan writers may distance themselves from the category of queer fiction for a number of reasons.

A common explanation posits that many slash stories are not, in fact, about homosexual men and women, and the authors are often quick in pointing this out (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 252-253). On one hand, some authors claim that even explicit slash fan stories do not display homosexual relationships per se, but mere physical intercourse. Other authors claim that they are not writing homosexual literature, but simply an intimate relationship between two men. In both cases the accusation of homophobia is legitimate, since this ‘othering’ of queerness portrays it either as debased pornography or as an idealized dream, far from the everyday lives of individuals. On the other hand, authors may wish to avoid confining their work to the label of homosexuality, unwilling to lose the readership of other genres (Woledge, 2006: 102-103; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 80).

Lamb and Veith count amongst the earliest scholars who puzzled over a body of literature focused on homosexual men but that did not talk about the queer identity. According to the scholars, most slash stories are not about a person’s sex or gender, and they are certainly not about homosexuality (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 252-253). Writers may opt for slash because they are unsure about how to write women characters in functional, healthy relationships with male characters, thus they feminize one of the protagonists to stand for the female heroine.

Several authors agree that it is absurd to consider slash as queer literature. Many authors admit that they simply appropriate the bodies of male and female characters for their own satisfaction according to their personal preferences, without paying any thought to the fact that they write queer characters. From this point of view, slash fan fiction is merely an artistic outlet with no possible connection to politics (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 246; Shell, 1994 in Green et al., 1998: 25).

Queer fan writers are very vocal in denouncing the incongruity of slash fan stories that do not tackle the realistic problems of queer individuals. By default, queer readers are extremely receptive of homophobia in slash, and are quick to realize when fan authors fetishize queer sexualities. Moreover, queer fans take care to denounce the lack of a socio-cultural and historico-political contextualization in the majority of queer stories. Queer romance without a proper contextualization of what this implies in modern societies is made of empty words. According to queer readers this lack denotes not ignorance, but unwillingness or indifference in raising queer political issues, which is worse than mere ignorance. The objections of queer fans to this type of fan fiction, far from being meant as polemical, are meant to aid the community by raising political awareness about what fan authors are spreading with their writing (Busse, 2006: 211).

Most slash writers do in fact appropriate the physicality of the source texts' characters. They adapt the characters' sensuality to suit their own standards of emotional satisfaction, writing the type of relationships that they prefer, with themes such as 'true love,' virginity, Hurt/Comfort, monogamy, and so on. This is true for both heterosexual and slash fan fiction, and from this point of view, the argument that slash fan fiction has nothing to do with the lives of queer individuals makes perfect sense. These stories truly are queer-blind narratives, even when they are categorized as slash. Slash fan stories that are penned with this mindset are not meant to address queer individuals, they are meant to address the author's own feelings, and the feelings of who requested the story, that is to say the intended audience, mainly composed of heterosexual fellow fandom members (Tennison, 1992 in Green et al., 1998: 26).

However, fandom debates about the misrepresentation and objectification of the lifestyle of queer individuals led many authors to feel compelled to portray their protagonists more realistically. Since the majority of slash authors may not count queer individuals amongst their acquaintances and thus rely on media representations of queerness, it is understandably common to find evidence of naivety, ignorance, and even homophobia in fandom without the authors realizing this (Shell, 1994 in Green et al., 1998: 25).

## **5.4 Heteronormativity in fan fiction**

After having discussed the theme of homophobia, this section breaches the topic of heteronormativity and sexism in fan fiction.

As much as feminist scholars would like to number countless feminist fan stories, many of them do not leave much room for doubt: they are undeniably void of any anti-patriarchal attitude. The characters' gender roles are often entrenched in traditional, conservative mindsets, even in the case of slash protagonists (Lackner et al., 2006: 194-195). This heteronormativity may be explained with the fact that fan fiction authors, as their non-fan peers, have been raised in heteronormative societies, and therefore they subconsciously hold heteronormative precepts (Russ, 1985; Kennard, 1986; Leavenworth, 2009).

Heteronormativity is a system of societal norms that reifies the essentialist view of the sex/gender binary. In heteronormative societies, gender is neatly coded into 'masculine' and 'feminine' identities. A male body corresponds to a masculine personality, whereas a female body corresponds to a feminine personality. Also, in heteronormative societies, heterosexuality is understood as the only natural sexuality of all individuals. To ensure this system's longevity,

heterosexuality is thoroughly imbued with a series of gendered assumptions and expectations throughout a person's life.

To better relate heteronormativity to a fannish context, an example from the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom shall be drawn. In the latest adaptation of the famous detective, the BBC's television series titled *Sherlock*, the otherwise infallible detective incorrectly assumes a character's gender and sexuality. In particular, in the first episode of the series John Watson talks about a relative of his called 'Harry.' Sherlock deduces that Harry is John's brother, spouse of Clara, and an alcoholic. However, 'Harry' in this case stands for 'Harriet,' who is in a civil union with Clara. Scholars of this fandom have remarked that this scene is an instance of overpowering heteronormative precepts that are unavoidable, even for the great consultant detective. Scholars also point out that Sherlock often stumbles through situations involving gender norms and sexual identity, both because of his reliance on heteronormative schematics in approaching witnesses and acquaintances, and because of his own hazy sexual identity (Kustritz & Kohnen, 2012: 88).

In a heteronormative system, femininity is devalued as a deviancy from the masculine norm, as is homosexuality to heterosexuality. Amongst ordinary gendered assumptions in heteronormative societies, female individuals are characterized as 'receptive,' while males are characterized as 'assertive.' This dynamic effectively subordinates women to the private sphere, while granting public life to the 'active' men (Dunk-West & Brook, 2015: 153). This explains why, even in slash fan fiction, reflections of traditional male/female hierarchical dynamics are very common. Young or amateur writers are not able to write masculine male characters, so they assign feminine characteristics to one of the protagonists, relegating one in a passive role and the other in a more active role (Bury, 2005: 7; Leavenworth, 2009: 460).

From this point of view, heteronormativity is relevant for analyzing fan fiction because it may be utilized to examine how gender dynamics are portrayed in the stories. Moreover, heteronormativity relates to feminism in many complex ways. Feminist popular culture scholars nurse an understandable wish to collect as many women as possible under the banner of feminism. Scholars often rely on the idea that women, simply because they are women, are also a fighters for equal gender rights. This is a false ontological concept, as not all women share the same set of political goals regarding gender dynamics, and not all women strive for specific political goals regarding gender dynamics (Butler, 1988: 523).

The reason why this type of indifference towards daily gender power relationships is connected to the level of deeply-seated heteronormative precepts in each person. Heteronormativity is so engrained in current cultures that, as Butler (1993) remarks: "identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not

realizable” (Butler, [2011]: 86). This quote is supremely important to illustrate the point that heteronormativity is a set of norms that is normally retained at a subconscious level in human beings. Regarding fan fiction production, this is why fan authors who write heteronormative stories should not be blamed for doing so and should not be accused of anti-feminism or of patriarchal support.

Elizabeth Woledge even hypothesizes that in current cultures, a heteronormative mentality is almost impossible to transcend, since it appears perfectly justified and normalized by the current status quo between the genders. Woledge posits that the gendered hierarchical structure of heteronormative societies actually invites intimacy between the partners, namely, the greater the social gap between the parties, the greater the intimacy required to bridge over. Since men and women in heteronormative societies are supposed to be divided by a gap in their social status, the high level of intimacy that is required to begin a relationship between the parties is beneficial for the longevity of the relationship itself. This system ensures its own longevity because once a couple reaches a high level of intimacy, the partners cease to question and doubt the underlying social structure of their community, as they are satisfied by their current predicament (Woledge, 2006: 109; Leavenworth, 2009: 449).

Mainstream literature also helps enforcing heteronormativity. This is evident for instance in the majority of romance novels, where authors rely on tropes based on heteronormative principles to drive the plot forward. By doing this, many authors continue to endorse heteronormativity and traditional gender roles, naturalizing them in the eyes of their readers (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 133).

Lamb and Veith are amongst the first scholars who debate on the connection between conservative and resisting viewpoints regarding gender roles in fan fiction. They initially identify a heteronormative mindset in the many K/S (Kirk/Spock) First-Time stories, in which many tropes of the romance genres can be found. *Star Trek* is certainly not the only fan fiction community that has become enamored with the First-Time sub-genre, but it is undeniable that *Star Trek* fan writers have been pioneers in turning the First-Time trope into such a popular, ever-present genre in fan fiction communities today. The high interest in this trope is based on the fact that women raised in patriarchal cultures are normally firmly discouraged from initiating sexual relationships. As a consequence, women tend to be very intrigued by the shift from close friendship to a romantic (and sexual) relationship (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 246). This is another reason that explains why so many fan fiction authors may write heteronormative stories, even in slash and femslash genres.

Ethnographic fan fiction studies tend to corroborate the claim that there is a subconscious underlying heteronormative matrix underneath many fan stories across all genres and sub-genres.

For instance, in Green, Jenkins and Jenkins' survey of the opinions of *Star Trek* fan authors, an author confesses: "Two heterosexual males becoming involved in a sexual relationship is my standard definition of slash" (Shell, 1994 in Green et al., 1998: 25). The fan author specifies 'heterosexual' males because she views slash as the product of the sexuality of its authors, and since the majority of slash authors were and still are heterosexual women, their sexual identity inevitably reflects on their works (Green et al., 1998).

Another author remarks that the heteronormative mindset is so visible in slash that it may as well be considered a heterosexual genre that happens to feature same-sex couples (Resch, 1992 in Green et al., 1998: 28). These statements are not as enigmatic as they might appear, since these authors understand slash fan fiction as the literary outcome of the authors' subconscious desires, of their understanding of intimacy, love and sexuality. What heterosexual women authors want to write and read is not reflected in the lifestyle of queer individuals, but in their heteronormative identities.

This kind of heteronormativity is not often evident in the fan stories, it can be so subtle as to pass unnoticed. Most heteronormative elements in fan fiction surface from subtle cues and hints throughout the whole story, thus heteronormativity can be extremely difficult to spot and explain. Many if not most fan fiction writers are not professional authors, their words aptly lend themselves to reflect their thoughts, desires and fears towards their ingrained heterosexuality and heteronormativity. This is why this subtle kind of heteronormativity is one of the elements that contribute to render fan fiction an intriguing topic of research, since it invites an increasingly closer reading and analysis in search of the idiosyncrasies in the personality of its authors (Cicioni, 1998: 154-55; Leavenworth, 2009: 449-450).

Heteronormativity can be found in fan stories as part of the authors' identity. However, heteronormativity can also be applied to fan fiction from the outside, by the readers. Green, Jenkins and Jenkins rightly point out that as much as fan fiction authors may strive to write stories that disrupt their society's heteronormative mindset, there is always the possibility that the readers will (mis-)read the stories from their own heteronormative point of view, and so they will fail to realize that the essentialist heterosexual life is only one possible way to live one's own gender. How the readers' viewpoint changes the meaning of fan stories will not be analyzed in this thesis because these re-worked meanings are extremely difficult to isolate and shed light on. Indeed, the interpretation of fan fiction readers is discernible mainly from the comments section of a fan story, and from the answers of ethnographic surveys and interviews (Green et al., 1998: 11).

### **5.4.1 Heteronormativity in the characters' sexuality**

A major sign of heteronormativity in fan fiction is hidden in how the characters live their sexuality.

According to an essentialist view of gender, one of the main characteristics of female individuals is to be passive and receptive during an intimate relationship. Interestingly, romance genre researcher Janice Radway claims that sexual violence in fiction instructs men how to keep female sexuality repressed in order to be in control of the relationship. For instance, even in a literary genre that is meant to titillate female sensuality such as romance novels, the sexuality of women characters is always circumscribed within the absolute boundaries of essentialist heteronormativity (Radway, 1991: 143).

If the correct female sexuality is receptive, the incorrect female sexuality is assertive. This is especially evident in the treatment of improper sexuality in mainstream literature, for instance. Radway's description of incorrect sexuality in the characters of romance novels shall be greatly helpful to illustrate how heteronormativity transpires from the characters' sexuality. This mechanism can easily be transposed to other literary genres, such as fan fiction.

In romance novels, very sexually active characters are usually villains and foils, indicating that an excessive sexual appetite is not acceptable, and must be repressed and punished. This is true for both women and men, although it must be noted that female characters normally receive harsher punishments than male characters if they attempt to assert their sexuality. This aspect signals that if women want to partake in the male hero's financial and social resources and protection for themselves and their offspring, they need to curb their sexuality considerably and relinquish control to their partner (*ibid*). This conservative mindset is often present in heterosexual fan fiction too, even in stories that contain lax sexual mores.

In slash and femslash fan fiction, characters who have an active sexual appetite are often forced to go through a period of complete abstinence before (re-)uniting with their partner. According to Salmon & Symons, this mechanism stems from the romance genre, since in traditional (heterosexual) courtship, men and women can initiate sexual contact only after marriage. In fan fiction, marriage is often represented by the confession of one's own feelings for the partner, after this, sexual intimacy is officially sanctioned (Radway, 1991: 74, 143; Salmon & Symons, 2001: 93).

## 5.4.2 Heteronormativity in the Established Relationship trope

To remain in the topic of heteronormativity, marriage and fan fiction, Bacon-Smith's study is still relevant, especially her analysis of the Established Relationship trope.

In Established Relationship stories, the protagonists have been together as a couple for a long period of time, thus the term 'established.' This type of stories is often nostalgic and light-hearted, featuring a happy ending. The characters usually recall a series of obstacles that they had to face until the present. Bacon-Smith comments that in slash and femslash the Established Relationship trope is rife with examples of idealized heterosexual unions, only that instead of a woman and a man, the partners are both of the same sex. A telling characteristic for this transposition is the practiced ease with which the protagonists navigate the highs and lows of their relationship (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 231). Simply put, most of the relationships portrayed in this trope are too idyllic in comparison to the life of queer individuals. Queer individuals are living a secondary, repressed sexuality in most cultures, whereas heterosexual couples represent the hegemonic standard, and thus do not have to concern themselves about external threats to their union.

In other words, in many slash stories that portray established relationships, the heteronormative mindset is present because the characters did not incur the same social hurdles as real queer couples have to face in real life. All the subversive, political potential of slash becomes void in these domestic, blissful narratives, not because it is impossible for same-sex couples to achieve domestic bliss, but because this is extremely unlikely in heteronormative societies. The fan writers who portray idyllic queer relationships are actually thinking about heterosexual couples, because in heteronormative societies this type of partnerships are naturalized and cause no social faux pas amongst their peers. This also deprives fan fiction of the possibility to denounce the social oppressions and the ridicule that cohabitating same-sex couples inevitably face in heteronormative societies.

It must be noted that the whole argument about the Established Relationship trope is not relevant for fan stories that portray the beginning of a queer relationship. Realistically speaking, the characters may enter an intimate relationship without being 'out of the closet' in public. For long-time couples this would be exponentially more difficult, which is why heteronormativity is so visible in stories belonging to the Established Relationship category (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 81).

Even though Bacon-Smith reports that fans themselves often scorn the excessively idyllic tones of many Established Relationship stories, the popularity of this trope has not decreased in time and across fandoms. This long-lived success is mainly due to the fact that writers and readers identify with more ease and immediacy with the heteronormative matrix underlying these stories.

Alternatively, even if there is no evident or subtle heteronormative matrix, many readers will superimpose this matrix onto the same-sex couples for the pleasure of identifying with the characters (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 231; Salmon & Symons, 2001: 93).

### **5.4.3 Heteronormativity in slash couples**

Another example of heteronormativity in queer couples in fan fiction is visible when the characters choose to abandon a heterosexual lifestyle to commit themselves to a queer relationship without any mention of political elements related to this choice anywhere in the story.

As a matter of fact, when fan authors fail to mention any social issues related to living a queer relationship in heteronormative societies, this leads to believe that the authors are applying the normalcy of heterosexual couples onto the queer characters. Usually, the characters choose a queer relationship because the author hints that this is the natural conclusion of their mutual attraction. However, the authors are superimposing their ideal (heterosexual) relationship onto this decision, dismissing what living a repressed, socially ridiculed sexuality might entail.

Fan stories that dismiss any speculation about what living a queer relationship in a heteronormative society means, are detrimental from an educational point of view because of the obvious lack of realism in this scenario. Although fan authors need very few remarks to turn their stories into informative, educational narratives. It is sufficient that the characters actually consider the upsides and downsides of following their true sexuality and embarking on a queer relationship, in comparison with the easier but more forceful route to blend in their society and force themselves into a heterosexual lifestyle. In the first case, homosexuality is portrayed in a positive light, offering a more satisfying bond for the characters, defeating the institution of heteronormativity (Cicioni, 1998: 162).

For all the theorists who pointed out heteronormative elements in queer couples in fan fiction, it can be strongly argued that most fan writers nowadays actually resist heteronormativity. As a matter of fact, in slash and femslash stories the writers reconstruct the gender identities of the characters according to modern mores. For example, in slash and femslash fan fiction, when male characters display feminine characteristics, and viceversa when female characters display masculine traits, it can be argued that the authors are not thinking in heteronormative terms. Rather, fan writers tend to apply the theories of performative gender and of gender-fluidity to the characters because these notions are now part of mainstream culture. If there are mixed results, and some characters truly are described completely in terms of the opposite gender, this is due to the fact that many fan

authors are still too inexperienced to properly apply gender-fluidity to the characters. Even in such cases, the fan authors' efforts should not be dismissed by calling such experimental stories heteronormative. Even when authors fail to apply gender-fluidity in believable terms, the very attempt at describing male characters in feminine terms and vice versa, denotes an unconventional mindset regarding gender identity, as well as a commendable level of rejection of essentialist heteronormativity.

#### **5.4.4 Heteronormativity VS androgyny in fan fiction**

Fan culture scholars have argued over the problematic presence of androgynous characters in fan fiction. It is a controversial point amongst theorists whether or not fan fiction characters that defy heteronormative descriptions are indeed androgynous. The debate is especially active around feminized male characters, who are often argued to be no more than proxies for the women authors (Driscoll, 2006: 84; Leavenworth, 2009).

A well-structured theory about this argument is that any characteristic that comes across as 'feminine' or 'masculine' is founded on traditional (heteronormative) gender roles. Lamb and Veith's (1986) analysis of *Star Trek* fan fiction pertains to this argument. The scholars observe that the relationships in K/S stories feature equal power relationship: the dominant masculine traits and the submissive feminine traits balance each other out within and outside the characters. Externally, the scarceness and the poor characterization of women characters in early *Star Trek* stories permits the readers to concentrate on the personality of the protagonists, adding feminine facets for instance. Internally, the feminine and masculine characteristics of a character balance each other out, to every feminine attitude that the male character presents, there is a corresponding masculine attitude that redeems it. This mechanism is both heteronormative and misogynist, because thanks to the lack of women characters, this androgynous balance in the male hero's personality makes his character all the more interesting to read (Lamb & Veith, 1986).

How do more recent fan fiction characters fare in terms of androgyny and can they truly be androgynous, or is heteronormativity still in place in current fan stories? The answers to these questions are too complex and still in development to be summarized in a few sentences, so a few illustrative examples shall be offered instead.

One notable example of arguably androgynous queer characters is visible in the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom. One of the most popular stories (which is a not insignificant accomplishment in such an old and large fandom) is *Nature and Nurture* (2013-2014) by veteran fan author

earlgreytea68. This story is a modern example of the old Kidfic trope, where the queer couple somehow comes across a child and has to take care of the baby, either for a while or indefinitely. In *Nature and Nurture* the child in question is not adopted (as is the norm of the trope) but is Sherlock's clone, and the task of educating the toddlers befalls onto the detective himself and his loyal blogger. (In this story there is also the theme of internalized homophobia. John initially insists that he isn't gay and is only agreeing to raise a child with Sherlock for the child's sake, but it is the theme of androgyny that is most relevant to this section of the thesis).

One non-heteronormative characteristic of the story is immediately visible in which characters raise the child. There are women characters in *Nature and Nurture*, but they never assume that they are better suited to raise the child than the male characters simply because they are female. The male protagonists struggle against many doubts and moments of crisis, but they also come to believe in themselves and in their ability to care for the child.

Feminine and masculine traits effectively balance each other out in *Nature and Nurture*. Sherlock is usually assumed to be the brains, the intellectual side of the relationship, which traditionally corresponds to the male, while John is supposed to be the heart, the emotional side, which corresponds to the female. However, the author evenly distributes the rationality-vs-emotion struggle between John and Sherlock by having one being at times very reasonable and at times extremely emotional.

Another androgynous element in *Nature and Nurture* is visible in the dynamic of Sherlock's and John's parental roles. During the many medical and social trials of the plot, Sherlock and John alternate themselves in being the strict parent and the comforting parent towards the baby. This mechanism serves the purpose of avoiding that the baby will associate one of them as the sole comforter and the other as the enforcer. Since the comforter role is associated with the passive wife and the enforcer role is associated with the dominant husband, the author of *Nature and Nurture* re-distributes these roles in order to avoid this association.

The author's skill in balancing traditionally feminine and masculine roles within the protagonists is also aided by the considerable length of the story. However, even in short scenes there is always a strive for balance, which speaks highly about the determination of the author in his or her strive towards androgyny (earlgreytea68, 2013-2014).

## 5.5 Racism in fan fiction

Racism is another disturbing theme present in fan fiction, although it appears very rarely in modern digital fan fiction communities. As is the case of homophobia, educational racism – where racist remarks are meant to portray realistic inter-race societies – is a more common form, although still very rare in comparison to other violent themes such as homophobia, heteronormativity and abuse (Kustritz, 2003: 376; Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 134).

It is fairly common to find racism as a minor theme, present only in passing remarks. A prime example of this characteristic can be found in a story of the *X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn, 2011) fandom by veteran fan author manic\_intent, titled *Any Measure of Peace* (2011). Mid-way through the plot of the story, Sergeant Fury (the future Director of SHIELD) tries to recruit Charles Xavier (Professor X) and Erik Lehnsherr (Magneto) to join a militarized division of mutants. In particular, one conversation between Lehnsherr and Fury is of interest for the topic of racism in fan fiction:

The murmur of voices around him rose, edged in hostility, but Fury merely chuckled. [...] You see, most of these good folks think that you've come on in to a black diner and started mouthing off to a black army man. What they don't know is that we're friends, and you've just got a lot of personal problems, given that you went through the Holocaust when you were a kid." [...] It was the most awkward cup of coffee he had ever drunk, with Fury smirking all the way opposite him as total strangers put forward friendly *how'd you'd do's* and asked solicitously after his experiences, eyeing the tattoo on his arm reverently, like it was some sort of battle scar (manic\_intent, 2011)

This scene clearly features educational racism. It is meant to bring together two categories of victims of social oppression: black people in the United States in the 1980s, and Jewish people during the Holocaust. Manic\_intent handles the scenario admirably by uniting these oppressed minorities through the recognition and reverence towards the power of survival from the horrors of the concentration camps. The union of the minorities is conveyed by the handshakes, apologies, and friendly greetings between Lehnsherr and the black visitors of the pub.

As rare as racism is in fan fiction, the popularity of manic\_intent's stories indicate that readers are not displeased by the mention of serious topics such as the ones included in this passage. This example shall demonstrate that fan fiction readers do not approach fan fiction for simple titillation, but also for educational purposes (Bury, 2005: 88-89; Driscoll, 85).

## 5.6 The Hurt/Comfort genre

This section deals with an often discussed genre of fan fiction, the Hurt/Comfort genre, as an example of the macro topic of physical and emotional pain in fan fiction.

By following the traces of the Hurt/Comfort genre, the fact emerges that almost every fandom includes characters who suffer an astounding number of disablements and maladies by the hands of their writers. Normally, what causes one or more characters in the story to be in pain is an external threat and the characters have to collaborate with one another to extinguish the pain and regain health. This close collaboration draws the characters to be more or less intimate with one another, which in many stories translates into the beginning of a romantic relationship between them.

The Hurt/Comfort genre is not to be confused with sadomasochist genres such as BDSM (an acronym standing for Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism). In BDSM stories, the source of the pain stems from within the protagonists' relationship, it usually belongs to an intimate setting and its usual purpose is pleasure. In Hurt/Comfort the source of the pain might originate from outside the couple or inside, but it does not stem from an intimate situation, and its initial purpose is not sexual pleasure. This divide was much more pronounced before the development of liberal sexual mores at the turn of the century. In hardcopy fandoms, in fact, BDSM themes were basically non-existent and there was no pleasure involved, of any form, in the scenes featuring physical violence (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 255).

The Hurt/Comfort genre is not utilized merely to evolve a friendly relationship into a sexual one, it is most commonly used to increase intimacy. Readers may wish to read a pairing from their source text, but the source text puts many obstacles between the Canon reality and a scenario where that is possible. A Hurt/Comfort situation circumnavigates any blocks that the Canon has put into place because it forces the characters to grow extremely close to each other, emotionally and eventually physically, starting from the original, canonical characterization. Hurt/Comfort creates an immediate build-up of physical and emotional stress for the characters, and through the Comfort phase it creates an outlet for this stress. Even without any hint of sensual or sexual contact, the release of the tension and stress creates a strong bond between the characters. This bond is what the readers wish to read but they cannot from the canonical plot. Thus, Hurt/Comfort is particularly useful for writers who do not know how to shift the canonical situation into a romantic relationship, or who do not wish to write Alternate Universe stories to circumnavigate the incompatibility issues of the Canon characterization (p. 256).

Hurt/Comfort is of paramount importance for any slash and femslash fan fiction community. The main reason for this popularity is because patriarchal cultures do not normally allow physical

proximity between men, otherwise they risk losing their masculinity and are punished with ridicule. Sex and pain are two situations where any culture allows close proximity for members of the opposite sex. In the case of two men or two women, sex of course is traditionally off-limits, leaving only pain as the scenario where two individuals of the same sex can become physically and emotionally close without raising suspicion (more so men than women). This is where the Hurt/Comfort theme demonstrates its usefulness, since it can be applied even for the most masculine, reserved characters of any source text (ibid).

### **5.6.1 The psychological value of Hurt/Comfort**

The Hurt/Comfort genre is not only relevant as a plot device, but also as a literary survey from a psychological point of view. As Bacon-Smith explains, the Hurt/Comfort genre allows the fan writers and readers the opportunity to explore multiple roles in situations of discomfort or pain. Namely, they can empathize with the victims, with their pain, shock, panic or anxiety, but they can also empathize with the nurturing or comforting figures as they strive to restore someone else's health, and with the relief and joy when said health is restored. In case the infliction of pain is portrayed in the plot, the authors and readers can even allow themselves to empathize with the perpetrators, in a vein of sadism that is so foreign to fan fiction (p. 271).

Of these three points of view: the victim, the comforter, and the perpetrator, women are traditionally attributed the role of comforter (Radway, 1991: 45). 'Good' women are not supposed to lash out against others, and they may be ignored or even blamed when they confess that they are victims of abuse. This is why it should not be surprising that the roles of the perpetrators and of the victims feature prominently in fan fiction. Women can be victims and abusers too, and Hurt/Comfort is but one reflection of this reality. This aspect of Hurt/Comfort is to be read in confirmation of the argument that fan fiction is the reflection of the deepest desires and fears of fan writers and readers, especially women. From the Hurt/Comfort genre, there emerges the lashing out of the 'weaker sex' against their cramped gender role as nurturers. The women's internal struggle between their need for nurturing as well as their need to be nurtured is evident (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 271).

It would be remiss to interpret the emotional content of the Hurt/Comfort genre only from a female point of view. As it was discussed during the presentation of the slash genre, in many fandoms there is a significant focus on the source text's male characters. This argument shall be related to Hurt/Comfort too.

According to Bacon-Smith, the argument that women fan authors write male characters so assiduously to try to understand the ‘Male’ better is relevant in the context of Hurt/Comfort. As a matter of fact, many slash stories imply that the purpose of slash writers is to investigate male feelings. In the case of the Hurt/Comfort genre, how male characters react and cope with hurting others, suffering and needing to be nurtured. It seems that such stories investigate a side of the male human being that is not the historically hegemonic one. Historically, men are the main perpetrators of violence and abuse, but modern mores teach that men can also be the victims of violence and abuse. Therefore, Hurt/Comfort stories may be viewed as an attempt by women fan authors to explore this hidden side of men and reconcile it with the historical image of violent men to understand them and humanize them (p. 272).

A great Hurt/Comfort story that has fortunately been finished in time for the writing of this thesis belongs to the *Teen Wolf* (Davis, 2011-2017) fandom. The story is *Home* (2015-2017) penned by TheTypewriterGirl. The Hurt/Comfort theme is present right from the premise of the plot, following the death of the father of the young protagonist, Stiles Stilinski. Since Stiles is a minor, he loses his home and starts living together with Derek Hale, a distant, brusque, at times even violent adult werewolf, whose family has been decimated by a fire. *Home* is a great example of the Hurt/Comfort genre, first because Stiles, dealing with depression and even suicidal tendencies, is continuously helped by his friends, especially by Derek. Whereas Derek is basically forced to face his past traumas and recover from them, all the while reluctantly nurturing and offering comfort, at the risk of appearing ‘soft’ and weak.

A main aspect of *Home* that is relevant for this section is that the author alternates the point of view of the protagonists, so that the readers can empathize at times with the immeasurable grief of Stiles, and at other times with Derek’s clumsy attempts at nurturing. Interestingly, in many instances where the narrative voice shifts from Stiles to Derek and viceversa, the author rewinds the plot a bit so that for some scenes, the readers can witness the emotional and psychological process of both characters (TheTypewriterGirl, 2015-2017).

Most of the healing process in *Home* pivots on empathy and sympathy. In fact, the main reason why such a brusque character as Derek offers to house the grief-stricken Stiles, is because he reminds Derek of his past self:

It was like all the life had left him, leaving him hollow, dead-eyed and quiet, which was something Stiles was never supposed to be. It terrifies Derek. And that terror unravels a small, quiet seed of sadness at the very depth of his core, because looking at Stiles now as he lies gaunt and neck-high in sorrow is like facing a mirror (TheTypewriterGirl, 2015-2017: chapter 4).

This is a common recurrence in fiction: cold and violent characters, especially male characters, have become villainous after traumatic events that they had to weather through either alone or with very little sympathy from the people close to them at the time. This relates to the theory that men cannot show emotional vulnerability to other men because this would render them inferior and weak. However, his past experiences give Derek the clarity to realize that this reasoning is meaningless, and he becomes first a nurturer, then a symbol of family, and finally a partner for Stiles. What is most interesting is that the author never portrays Stiles as weak or inferior because he needs help to recover from his grief, instead the narration always empowers him (TheTypewriterGirl, 2015-2017).

Another theory about the meaning of the Hurt/Comfort genre indicated by Bacon-Smith is that this genre holds a very deep introspective potential about the existence of pain in life in general. In Hurt/Comfort, the woman fan author can question her ability to take care of somebody in and outside an intimate relationship. She can investigate whether she accepts pain as a fact of life, whether she prefers help while she is in trouble, or whether this makes her feel inferior or juvenile. If a person finds talking out loud about these issues too difficult, she can disclose her feelings through her fan writing. And finally, the author can also examine her own feelings while inflicting pain onto her characters to wonder how abusers in real life might feel. If the author has been victim of abuse before, this action might provide a sense of closure (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 207).

Not all fan culture scholars seem to agree with Bacon-Smith on the introspective potential of the Hurt/Comfort genre. Lamb and Veith claim that the Hurt/Comfort trope is an effective literary device to get the two characters to come in contact with one another. Their argument relates to the theme of heteronormativity, as they argue that the character who comforts automatically assumes feminine traits, independent of the original gender. These traits include compassion, tenderness, meekness, gentleness, altruism, and the sensibility to always wait for permission from the other person before initiating physical closeness in order to provide medical and psychological help (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 247). This is a major drawback to an essentialist view of gender, harking back to the argument that male characters in fan fiction are mere proxies for the women authors, and dismisses Bacon-Smith's claim that Hurt/Comfort hides the need to understand the Male/Other.

### **5.6.2 Hurt/Comfort and romance**

Outside of fan studies, popular culture scholars discuss literary themes that can easily be related to the Hurt/Comfort genre.

Radway, for instance, reports the regular occurrence of physical and psychological violence in romance novels. However, the relation with Hurt/Comfort only occurs in the novels where the violence is ultimately dissipated by comfort and love. The novels where this does not occur are called ‘failed romance’ novels by the readers themselves, and are relatable to the Darkfic and Rapefic genres rather than the Hurt/Comfort genre. It is important to remember that the type of violence in fan fiction discussed in this section belongs to the Hurt/Comfort genre, not to the Darkfic genre.

The first element of relation between Hurt/Comfort and the romance novel manifests itself when the heroine must provide comfort to a sick or hurt character, especially to the hero. In the romance novel, heroines possess an awe-inspiring capability to transmute the sick into the healthy. This natural instinct or cultivated ability reassures the readers that the heroine is a ‘true’ woman, possessing all the nurturing skills associated with the female according to society. Thus the heroine becomes worthy of the readers’ sympathy and support (Radway, 1991: 127). This argument relates to Hurt/Comfort in so far as the character who comforts the sick is heavily endowed with feminine traits. The argument also relates to heteronormativity because corresponding healing capabilities with the female is a tenet of an essentialist view of gender roles.

The heroine’s success at nurturing the sick and the wounded in romance novels is also a foreshadowing mechanism for her relationship with the hero. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the plot, the romance hero is very brusque or indifferent towards young women, sometimes he is even violent, but he comes around as a compassionate and protective partner thanks to the heroine’s gentle ministrations. By seeing that the heroine is a capable healer, the readers are reassured of the fact that she will be successful in transforming the brusque and sexual promiscuous hero into an affectionate and faithful husband (ibid). This argument cannot be aligned perfectly with the Hurt/Comfort genre, since what the readers ultimately expect from Hurt/Comfort is intimacy, not marriage. However, the parallel can be drawn between the romance hero’s change of attitude and the change in the hurt character in fan fiction. Not always, but often, the protagonist who is wounded or sick becomes mellowed by the end of the convalescence thanks to the tender ministrations of the nurturing character.

An interesting perspective regarding the healing process involves the change in the hero’s personality. The romance heroine does not turn the brusque hero into somebody else, she reverts the hero’s personality to its initial good nature. More precisely, the healing process brings back to the surface a gentle nature that was already there and had mutated into a cold and violent personality over time. The romance novel regularly fails to inform how a heroine/woman would go about teaching a hero/man to be gentle when patriarchal education systematically represses any traits of

kindness in boys. In addition, most romance novels hint that signs of tenderness in the hero are not desirable traits to begin with (p. 129).

This is much different in fan fiction, where the fan authors enjoy changing this or that aspect of the characters, tweaking them a bit, transforming the personality of the characters to fit the different settings or plot of the fan story. In Hurt/Comfort in particular, even the most violent of characters shows signs of redemption and change by the end of the healing process. This shift is befitting of the fan authors' modern ideology, as modern psychology does not only accept, but also welcomes feminine traits in male characters. Another modern element of the Hurt/Comfort genre concerns the humanizing process towards men and villainous characters in order to fight against the historical representation of villains as mindless brutes.

Another difference between the hurting and the healing phase of the romance novel and the Hurt/Comfort genre resides in psychological abuse. The heroes of bad romance novels often resort to both physical and psychological violence to subdue other characters to their will. In successful romances, while the male hero may be initially brusque and manhandle the heroine and other characters, he is not above emotional blackmail or carefully-studied indifference to mold the heroine's personality to his will. Although normally romance readers have to endure a few short scenes where the hero physically hurts the heroine, his power to emotionally hurt her by toying with her feelings recurs repeatedly throughout the whole plot, almost to the end of the novel, where the whole ordeal is forgotten with marriage (ibid).

Fan fiction has several warnings in place for such behavior, one of the most common warnings is the label of 'Emotional Abuse.' It is also common for fan authors who use this warning to expand upon it in their author's notes and further inform their readers about the specific circumstances of the abusive relationship. If the psychological violence appears in passing, fan authors may warn readers to avoid certain parts and also may reassure them that there is a happy ending. If the psychological violence does not end in redemption, it is standard procedure to warn specifically that there is no conventional happy ending at the end of the story. In Hurt/Comfort, obviously, there is a measure of redemption for the characters involved, and psychological violence in general seems to appear less frequently than physical violence, but it is extremely rare that the fan author does not include warnings for such unsettling themes.

What appears to be a point of contention for romance readers (their enjoyment of the plot and their empathizing with the characters despite the regular emotional abuse), is not a problem for fan fiction readers due to the warnings. Thanks to the warnings, no fan fiction reader can say that they have been negatively surprised by the violent themes in the story, since fan authors are normally upfront about the content of their stories. Fan fiction readers thus can psychologically

brace themselves, unlike romance readers who are left alone to deal with this negative emotional onslaught.

This fifth and last chapter of this thesis concludes here with a reminder that fan fiction authors do not care about spoiling their own plot for the psychological safety of their readers. For the plethora of disturbing themes in fan fiction such as homophobia, sexism, racism, and in general psychological, emotional, verbal, sexual, and physical abuse, fan authors always take care to warn their readers as accurately as possible. If readers wish to face such unfortunately realistic themes, it is their free choice to do so.

The next section concludes this thesis by reprising a few elements that have been overlooked before, by summarizing the content of this work, and by providing a few closing considerations about fan fiction in this and recent studies.

## 6.1 Conclusion: the story so far

Now that this thesis has arrived to its conclusion, it is time to recapitulate its content. This thesis represents an occasion to discuss how questions of gendered bodies and behaviors, gender identities, queer identities and female empowerment are represented in fan fiction today.

The introduction illustrates the context at the origin of the fan fiction, which is the fandom. The introduction also explains the purpose of this thesis: to present and analyze fan fiction and argue in favor of its introduction in the academic world, as well as the methodology utilized for the compiling of this paper. The disciplines utilized in this thesis are mainly media studies, gender studies, theory of literature and anthropologic surveys.

The first and second chapters are introductory in nature. The first chapter is introduced by reader-response theory, as it is essential to understand the subversive nature in the reading practices of transformative, active readers also known as fans. In this transformative, active reading befalls the explanation of transmedia storytelling. The chapter also includes more in-depth definitions regarding fan fiction, such as the definition of ‘fan text,’ and many remarks about the nature of fan fiction communities in modern media fandoms. For example, the collective mind of fan fiction communities engenders its own traditions and guidelines. Some of these guidelines, such as fan fiction warnings and author’s notes, are extensively illustrated. The chapter is concluded by a glossary explaining the most important terms related to fandom and fan fiction, such as names of sub-genres and tropes.

The second chapter briefly summarizes the history of media fandoms. This overview is not meant to be in any way comprehensive due to the space and relevance of it in this work, but a few points have been discussed in that chapter to better introduce the next ones. The overview of the history of the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom is meant to introduce the topic of hardcopy fan groups, which production is still circulating today, despite the overwhelming efficiency of digital technologies. The discussion of the concept of the Grand Game is also meant to specify that the definition of fan fiction used in this thesis is based on the existence of a self-conscious fan community in the background. A corollary purpose of that section consists in showing the readers that there are several elements which survived history and changes in technology from the original *Sherlock Holmes* fan clubs to the contemporary sherlockian fandom. This continuity should reassure outsiders that no matter the amount of peculiar, fast-changing terminology in today’s fandoms, many underlying principles are deeply ingrained in these communities and they will unlikely disappear soon.

The ultimate goal of the second chapter, though, is to show the major changes in the dynamics of fan fiction communities with the rise of the Internet. The overview of the history of the

*Star Trek* fandom is a perfect example for this, as well as arguably the only one worth analyzing so in-depth in an academic work, as the *Star Trek* fandom gained its relevance by mobilizing an unprecedented number of women fans. Women fans are extremely relevant in this thesis, as they compose the vast majority of the population of the fan fiction communities discussed here. *Star Trek* women fans were amongst the first to defy the sexism of early science fiction fan clubs by emancipating themselves, both in real life and on the Internet. They organized their own conventions, their own Amateur Press Associations, their own fan magazines circuits and libraries. During the 1990s, *Star Trek* fans were also amongst the first women to populate the Internet, creating specialized mailing lists for fannish purposes, educating themselves and their fellow fandom members about how to use these digital spaces.

The second chapter takes advantage of this move to the Internet to launch a detailed analysis about the major changes that the Internet forced upon fan communities. By the expansion of the Internet to a global scale and the upgrade to the fast speed and availability of the Internet 2.0, fans took active control of their digital fandoms by creating digital encyclopedias and archives to store fan-related knowledge. With the development of online archives and the extreme ease of use of the Internet, fandoms thrived very easily on the Web. The extended discussion about beta readers is meant to convey that this upsurge in fan production did not necessarily correspond to more lax quality checks. The tradition of beta reading is long-lived and steadfastly strong in most fan fiction communities today, and more efficient ways of connecting fan writers and readers are being perfected by digital archives continuously.

The third and fourth chapter constitute the core of the thesis because they deal with the two main focal topics of this work. The third chapter deals with the macro-topic of questions of sex and gender in fan fiction. Theory of literature introduces ancillary topics such as the relation of gender in reading practices, gendered reading such as children books, and the concept of how liberating fan fiction can be for women writers who view it as an enjoyable writing and reading practice. Next, the interesting topic of the Mary Sue archetype character is explained, since this is the prototype of all self-insertion characters in fan fiction. Denoting an excessive involvement in one's work, the Mary Sue archetype is relevant for the heated debates around the meanings and values surrounding self-insertion characters in general.

Most of the third chapter discusses the prevalent female presence in fan fiction communities, in comparison to the overwhelming presence of male characters in fan fiction, especially slash fan fiction. This topic is extremely relevant to understand the sociological value of fan fiction, as slash male protagonists are extremely complex, sophisticated, multi-faceted characters. Whether these are proxies of the authors, humanized men, or androgynous human beings, they are one of the most

peculiar and note-worthy aspects in fan fiction communities today. A large section of the third chapter is dedicated to the comparison between most fan fiction genres and the romance genre, especially for the heavy emphasis of both genres on characterization over plot.

The fourth chapter pivots on the second macro-topic that is the focus of this thesis: female empowerment in fan fiction. Due to the high percentage of women writers and readers in most fan fiction communities, the female identity is an element of paramount importance in this thesis, and the third and fourth chapters are meant to emphasize this point.

The fourth chapter begins by explaining the concepts of the sex/gender binary and of performative gender in order to illustrate how incredibly sensitive fan fiction writers and readers are towards questions of sex and gender. Then the chapter discusses feminist theorists and feminist criticism of literary works to introduce the discussion of female empowerment in fan fiction. Slash fan fiction is a delicate topic in this chapter because most of its characters are men. Some theories about the presence of female empowerment in slash are presented, especially the one explaining that women writers use male characters to humanize them and emphasize with them in order to better relate with and feel more at ease around men in real life. Overall though, since slash fan fiction is so overwhelmingly male, elements of feminism in fan fiction must be investigated in the underlying principles of the stories. For example, fan fiction is subversive and empowering because women writers twist the source text's androcentric point of view to their tastes.

To counter-balance the deceptively rosy picture of fan fiction drawn by the third and fourth chapters, the fifth chapter is meant to shift the focus towards fan fiction tropes containing physical and psychological violence. Most of the times, these themes are meant to be educational, they do not portray the actual opinions of the fan writers. As disturbing as themes such as homophobia and abuse may be, they serve a crucial purpose: they involve realistic scenarios in a literary genre that would otherwise be extremely detached from the readers' reality. The theme of homophobia in primis includes slash and femslash fan fiction in a global discussion of the many hurdles that queer individuals need to face in real life. The familiarity of fan fiction and the mostly informal tone of the narration makes sure that stories containing dark themes such as homophobia, rape, and abuse have a higher educational potential than most lectures, essays and newspaper articles, especially for young readers.

This conclusion aims at recapitulating a few core themes explained in this work, as well as providing a number of conclusive remarks about fan fiction as an object of study.

## 6.2 Copyright disclaimers in fan fiction

One crucial characteristic of fan fiction that should be rephrased is the non-profit nature of fan fiction. It is humbling to think about how much time and effort fan fiction authors pour into their works only to make the fruit of their labor completely available for free, with the added risk of seeing their work removed from fan magazines or from digital archives by the owners of the copyrights on the source material.

To avoid the removal of their works, there is a long-standing tradition in fan fiction communities that consists of explicitly writing a short message called ‘disclaimer’ at the beginning of the story. Disclaimer statements are common in all fandoms, even in Real Person Fiction communities. In disclaimers, fan authors indicate that they do not own any copyrighted character or concept of the source text contained in the story (Lee, 2003: 73). Some fan authors may write general disclaimers on their digital profiles, or in a specific section in their digital journals and blogs, while others include a customized disclaimer in each individual story, some even in each chapter of each story.

There is no universally agreed set of rules for the content of disclaimers. Some authors write concise, perfunctory sentences such as “Not mine,” while others may name the entity that they understand is the legitimate owner of the source text (who may or may not be the copyright owner), for instance, “*Firefly* belongs to Joss Whedon” versus “*Due South* belongs to Alliance Atlantis” (Fanlore ‘Disclaimer,’ 2017). An extremely common element included in disclaimers appears when fan authors specify that they are gaining no monetary compensation from the distribution of the story (Tushnet, 2007: 63-64; Fanlore ‘Disclaimer,’ 2017).

Naturally, a few words can do little to protect a fan fiction author from being sued by the copyright owners of the source material, which is why disclaimers hold a symbolic connotation nowadays. Disclaimers are generally viewed as a gesture of good will from the part of fan authors. There are still communities that continue holding disclaimers in the highest consideration though. Some archives and mailing lists warn their writers that any story published without a clear disclaimer will be removed (Fanlore ‘Disclaimer,’ 2017).

As mentioned, disclaimers are to be found even in Real Person Fiction. Such disclaimers are normally meant to convey that the story is a work of *fiction*, meaning that the author recognizes that the fan story does not describe the actual life or the actual personalities of the historical or living people involved (ibid).

For example, the author’s note of *In the Red* (2013), a story of the *Harry Potter* fandom, by fan author Dinkel, includes: “All the characters, places, spells, potions, creatures and objects you recognize from the Harry Potter universe are the intellectual property of J.K. Rowling. I mean no

offence to her or to anyone else. I make no money with this” (Dinkel, 2013). This note is a testament to how much fan authors are acquainted with delicate topics such as intellectual property. This knowledge is almost necessary to fan authors to avoid witnessing the outcome of their efforts removed from the Internet by the cease-and-desist counter-measures of the copyright owners.

Another exemplary disclaimer is found in the *Arrow* fan story titled *The Reluctant Queen* (2014-2015) by December\_Daughter, whose initial author’s note ends with: “Arrow is not mine. I’m not making any money off of this work of fiction; please don’t sue” (December\_Daughter, 2014-2015: chapter 1). The last request to the copyright owner/producer/creator not to sue is another long-standing staple of fan fiction communities (Tushnet, 2007: 63-64).

Fan studies scholar Rebecca Tushnet (2007) offers her impression that disclaimers are less common today. If a moment of reprieve from the formal tone shall be excused: while my assiduous, decade-long experience does not corroborate this statement, I agree that many disclaimers give the impression of being inner jokes between the authors and the readers rather than genuine, heart-felt pleas. Tushnet theorizes that the informality of many disclaimers nowadays is due to the sense of normalcy that is palpable in many communities.

Increasingly few fan authors are worried about a real retaliation from the source text’s copyright owners. This change is partially due to the increasing numbers of fan authors and readers, who find comfort and reassurance in being part of a very large crowd. It is also due to the ignorance of less-experienced authors who fail to dedicate enough time to comprehend fandom guidelines and traditions (Tushnet, 2007: 64). But recently, it is also due to the increased specialized knowledge that many authors develop about copyright laws and transformative works. On this matter, a recent survey illustrates clearly the level of knowledge of a large body of fan authors. The Legal department of the OpenDoor office that administrates the fan fiction digital archive called ArchiveOfOurOwn, has recently conducted a survey about the users’ knowledge of transformative work rights and fair use. The results show that most authors do have an adequate preparation on the matter, or are learning or willing to learn about what rights they can claim to defend the existence of their works (OTW Legal, 2017).

## **6.2.1 Giving credit where credit is due**

An ancillary topic to the one regarding disclaimers in fan fiction regards crediting fan authors properly when fan stories are to be quoted. There is a gross yet common misconception amongst outsiders. This misconception teaches that because fan fiction is a derivative literary genre, any

person can appropriate the words of fan authors without linking back to them, without naming them, without giving the fan authors proper credit for their work (Fanlore 'Plagiarism,' 2016).

This mistake is frowned upon as a social faux pas when it is committed by novice members, but it is heavily criticized and punished when this behavior persists in individuals who already have some experience of the workings of fan fiction communities. This is plagiarism: verbatim copying somebody else's work demanding recognition as if it were one's own. This is one of the most, if not the most serious offense not only in fan fiction communities but in fandom at large (Tushnet, 2007: 65). The principle underlying this reasoning is that fan fiction is an unauthorized homage to the source text, and this is always clearly indicated in all stories. Fan fiction is not the product of plagiarism, this is against its very nature (Fanlore 'Plagiarism,' 2016). Fan fiction in the definition that is used in this thesis, born from the communal effort of self-conscious communities, is always meant to attribute due credit where credit was due.

All responsible fan authors respect the source text, and rightly demand to be respected in return. This thesis does not account for every existing fan fiction community in and out of the Internet for obvious reasons, but in all the communities under scrutiny prior to the writing of this paper, every one distinguishes between plagiarism and crediting. Plagiarism is publishing another fan's work in one's own archive profile or journal and taking credit for it. Plagiarism is quoting sections of a fan story without stating that the specific words are to be attributed to another person (ibid).

On the contrary, fan authors are highly concerned with attributing proper credit where this is due (Tushnet, 2007: 65). Crediting occurs when a fan author states that his or her work has been inspired by another fan fiction, even linking back to the original fan work via hyperlink. Crediting means quoting either the source text or another fan story, but warning the readers upfront that there are such quotes in the story. Many fan authors turn this warning into a sort of game, wherein the authors simply state that there is a quote in the chapter or passage, but leave the readers to guess what the quote is, eventually providing the answer in the comment's section.

Apart from these general rules, fan authors may apply any of their personal distinctions. There are tolerant fan authors who declare, either in the author's notes of their stories, in their digital profiles, or in their online journals and blogs, that their readers have pre-emptive permission to publish fan fiction inspired by their works. Usually, the only condition that such authors demand is that they are provided the hyperlink of any homage or translation, so that they can integrate it somewhere in their story.

Other authors are less tolerant, though. Some wish to be the judges of what is worthy to be published alongside their story, they want to be contacted before a person writes a story inspired by

theirs, and they claim the right to decide whether the other work can be published or not. Others wish to be contacted first about eventual translations of their works. These and others such conditions may be called unreasonable in the context of fan fiction, a derivative, transformative literary genre where every work is but a grain of sand in a communal sandbox. However, fan authors usually offer ample explanations as to why they feel the need of policing any adaptation of their narratives.

Even though fan fiction communities may appear idyllic, unfortunately, plagiarism regularly occurs in fandom too. Fan authors who have been robbed of their words without any crediting by ill-meaning individuals usually employ two counter-measures. The first one consist in publishing an author's note explaining the circumstances of the theft, and asking the readers to report any similar occurrences in the future, so that the culprit will be instantly banned from the community. The second common route to deal with fan fiction plagiarism is the most definite, because it involves closing all possible revenues of writing tributes to an existing fan story. It is rare but not implausible to find author's notes explicitly forbidding any form of direct or indirect quotation from the story, any appropriation of plot elements, characterization, tropes, etcetera, is forbidden. Such drastic measures are a testament to the gravity of plagiarism in fandom.

### **6.3 Gift culture in fan fiction communities**

The concept of the gift culture in fandom shall be reprised as it has barely been discussed in the introductory chapters.

It can be argued that any and every fan story in the sense that is understood in this thesis, is a gift. No fan fiction that remains true to its modern definition shall be read after paying the author or the hosting website. Fan authors distribute their stories expecting no money in return. In the case of digitally distributed stories and fan magazines, the readers must pay only the fee of the Internet connection and the cost of shipping, respectively. This has always been true for self-conscious fan fiction communities, from hardcopy fandoms onwards. The gift culture that is explained in this section is not the one indicated by this general meaning, it is more specific. This meaning depends on the word 'gift' being explicitly included in a fan story. Gift culture is an actively conscious form of gift exchange.

The basic mechanism of fannish gift culture consists of three phases: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. The negotiation between the three phases results in the growth of social relationships

that are constructed upon a common interest in a profit-free, stress-free environment. Fan fiction communities highly regard the exchange of gifts (Hellekson, 2009: 114).

## 6.4 Fan fiction authors and research

A characteristic of fan fiction that was not explained in the previous chapter for lack of pertinence in its topics shall be expanded here. This characteristic is research in fan fiction, and it is relevant for the argument that fan fiction holds value as a literary product that reflects the efforts of its authors, but it is not a common aspect of fan fiction and shall not be generalized.

Most fan authors complete and publish their works, with little to no editing unless they have been flanked by one or more beta readers, or unless they take into account the feedback of their readers. There are fan authors, though, that conduct extensive research before they write a fan story, and will later edit the contents if they discover that parts of their research were inappropriate or misleading for the story (Booth, 2010: 112).

Veteran fan author manic\_intent, for instance, is well-known for conducting extended research for their multi-chapter stories. The author explicitly refers to their research in an author's note of a *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* fan story titled *From Geneva With Love* (2015): "While writing the Tartarus Affair I realized some readers are actually interested in the background research I do for my fics, so I'm just going to link them all in notes from now on, except for the wiki articles" (manic\_intent, 2015). True to their words, manic\_intent currently adds descriptions, comments and hyperlinks about the background research that they conduct for their longer works. The element of research constitutes an additional argument in favor of the worth of fan fiction as a literary genre worthy of attention, and in particular in favor of the informative value of many stories for their readers.

An even more exemplary note showing background research in fan fiction is in the *Les Misérables* fandom, at the end of a story titled *Maybe In Another Universe I Deserve You* (2013) by flaneuse. The story is an Alternate Universe describing the many encounters of Grantaire and Enjolras around the world across two centuries. The two protagonists are constantly killed and re-born (Grantaire is actually immortal), and they meet before or in the middle of civil uprisings or socially revolutionary moments, which the author describes with remarkable accuracy. At the end of the story the reader finds out why:

This fic is very much based in historical reality. I researched every single revolution and rebellion mentioned in this fic, and only included ones that I truly believed Enjolras would be part of. The last one, of course, takes place in the not-so-distant future, and is entirely fictional. In case there are any history buffs, or simply curious minds who want to read a little about European revolutions, here is every single revolution mentioned in the fic, in chronological order (flaneuse, 2013)

The author then proceeds in listing the revolutions discussed in the story. This author's note is the epitome of how diligent fan authors can be about their writing, and summarizes well the argument of the legitimacy of fan fiction as a literary effort worthy of academic consideration.

## 6.5 Fan fiction of her own

Throughout this thesis, close attention has been paid to keep the identity of the quoted fan authors unidentifiable, either with the use of the plural pronoun 'they,' or by addressing fan authors in general. It is important to recall now some early statements in the studies of the *Star Trek* fandom. For instance, Lamb and Veith's (1986) claim that the entirety of the editorship, authorship, and readership of fan magazines was so close to 100% female, that the readers were always designated with feminine pronouns. Even in those years, this was true not only in *Star Trek* fandom but in many others literary and media fandoms as well (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 237-238).

It is fairly easy to assess whether this proportion is accurate nowadays. Sometimes fan authors use gendered pseudonyms, such as 'TheTypewriterGirl' containing the noun 'girl.' Often fan authors keep their pseudonyms gender neutral, but in author's notes most of them talk about themselves using feminine pronouns. Ultimately, it is incorrect to draw conclusions about the percentage of this recurrence without the confirmation of multiple statistics results.

The norm of formality in an academic final paper shall be broken once again here to include a personal remark. In more than a decade of experience in fan fiction communities, I became acquainted with one male fan writer. I acquired this information during the exchange of personal correspondence. The writer did not divulge his gender in his digital profile or in author's notes. I will not disclose his pseudonym, nor the fandoms he wrote for. This information cannot be made public as I have not received his permission to do so, but from a psychosexual perspective, it is noteworthy to mention that he wrote exclusively femslash. Accurate or inaccurate his descriptions of female sexuality may have been, this information forms an interesting parallel between the pleasure that women authors derive from writing slash, femslash and het, and the pleasure that this male author derived from writing femslash.

This parallel corroborates several theories of reader-response criticism stating that female readers emphasize with the humanity of the characters, thus they can connect on a deep emotional level with both female and male characters. Consequently, female fan authors experience very little difficulties in writing their own gender in the stories, as well as writing protagonists of the opposite gender. More importantly, this data indicates that fan fiction, no matter the genre or the nature of the relationship portrayed, is a predominantly female literary endeavor, where ‘predominantly’ in fact means ‘almost completely.’

Re-addressing the topic of the percentage of female writers in contemporary fan fiction communities is paramount to close the argument interspersed in all the previous chapters. The argument posits that fan fiction shall not be considered camp literature, gay literature or pornographic fiction, but it shall be considered romantic literature instead, akin but not identical to romance, and in the case of explicit or violent stories, adult literature (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 238; Bacon-Smith, 1992: 229). As demonstrated, ‘women’s literature’ would be a suitable umbrella term for the vast majority of fan fiction.

## **6.6 Commercialization of fan fiction**

The main purpose of this thesis is to portray fan fiction in its current status, but it is possible to speculate on the future existence of this literary genre in this conclusive section. The commercialization of fan fiction is part of this speculation.

Although the non-profit characteristic of fan fiction has been a staple of media fandoms since their inception in the 1970s, the seeds for the commercialization of fan fiction are to be found as early as the 1980s. Bacon-Smith in fact asserts that a clear distinction between commercial fiction writers and fan writers is not possible because many fan writers eventually become professional authors, while professional writers may continue to contribute to various fan magazines and online fan communities. It is visible in this osmosis-like mechanism, that fan writers are not immune from wishing that they could make a living out of their writing, or at least that they could publish some of their original concepts (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 41; Russo, 2009: 130; Jamison, 2013: 261).

Henry Jenkins (1992b) also witnesses this movement to the publishing world. Fan fiction seems to be the perfect training ground for aspiring professional writers. This is mainly due to the fact that fan fiction communities are incredibly supportive spaces, where anybody can nurture and develop their literary skills and writing styles, and most importantly where anybody can gain,

review by review, enough self-confidence before they try to enter the book market (Jenkins, 1992b: 212; Jamison, 2013: 20).

Even though the 1980s marked the birth and growth of media fandoms, earlier signs of a blurring between fandom and publishing houses can be found. In the early decades of the twentieth century, many significant science fiction professional authors emerged from fandom. Given the ease with which the publishers accepted their drafts for publication, fans who aspired to become professional writers were not uncommon. This period marks the beginning of an increasing blur between fan works and commercial works (Jenkins, 2002: 2).

Recent examples of this blurring of boundaries include Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (1997), Linda Berdoll's *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* (1999) and *Darcy and Elizabeth* (2006), Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), and Isabel Allende's *Zorro* (2004) amongst others (De Kosnik, 2009: 121).

One of the basic aspects that induced publishing houses to think that fan fiction could be commercialized is the similarity of some fan stories with romance novels. Even in explicit stories, the main theme remains love, a psychological, emotional, and physical intimacy that knows no boundaries, including those between high and low culture, between different literary genres, as well as between profitable and non-profit fiction (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 238; De Kosnik, 2009: 123).

This affinity can lead to thinking that only non-explicit fan fiction may aspire to be published professionally, and yet this is far from the truth. Commercial erotica occupies a significant portion of the marketplace, which polar opposites are male-oriented pornography and female-oriented romance novels. Both of these genres are enormously profitable across languages and cultures, as their typical features are determined by the preferences of millions of men and women who have expressed these preferences with their money. Commercialized literary sexual content exists in every industrialized society and in many developing societies as well (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 56).

Since a significant number of fan stories contains explicit scenes, fan fiction can be highly appealing to many publishing companies, if not for male readers, certainly for female readers (De Kosnik, 2009: 123). There are few literary commercial genres that combine elements of the so-called pornotopia and romantopia as seamlessly as fan fiction does. There are even fewer movies that include elements of both pornotopia and romantopia. These movies should be a perfectly-balanced mixture of romantic comedy and action, they should include compelling plots, witty dialogues, round characters, top-notch acting, happy endings, explicit sexual scenes and plenty of romanticism. However, such movies would not be commercially viable to produce because they

would require an extensive budget, they cannot be widely distributed, and they would jeopardize the careers of the members of the cast.

In commercial literary and visual arts, romantopia and pornotopia are effectively incompatible. The main reason is because impersonal coupling, a staple of pornotopia, is anathema in romantopia, where the emotional implications of any act of intimacy between two individuals must be emphasized in the foreground. When publishers and movie producers notice that so many fan stories manage to unite elements of romantopia and pornotopia successfully, they are naturally tempted to gain the profits that the audiences of both genres combined can bring (Salmon & Symons, 2001: 68-69).

Fan stories that are crowned with publishing contracts are not scandalous anymore, but this does not preclude the fact that fan stories are still being published. The type of fan stories that attract the attention of publishing houses is, naturally, the incredibly popular stories. The stories that amass hundreds of thousands of read counts online are the most appetizing to publishing houses at the moment. The principle is that publishing an ex-fan work with a record of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of readers, is less risky than publishing the original novel of a completely unknown author. The downside of this mechanism is that only the wildly popular fan stories are rewarded with contract proposals, not the unpopular gems, nor the masterpieces read by a few thousands (Jamison, 2013: 262).

But how exactly can fan fiction be published if it is a derivative, transformative literary genre? There is a motto in fandom terminology that describes this process, it is called “filing off the serial numbers.” This phrasing refers to the process of removing any element from a fan story that may lead back to the source text. Such elements include, of course, the names of the original characters and places that are to be replaced. Additionally, the author may distort any detail that may make the readers recall the source text (Jamison, 2013: 262; Fanlore, 2017).

Filing off the serial numbers is by far the only means to turn fan fiction into a publishable novel (Jamison, 2013: 262). However, the process is very delicate and the result might not gain the same acclaim that the fan story boasted, since much of the popularity that fan stories gain depends on the audience’s pre-existing knowledge of and attachment to the source text (Fanlore ‘Filing Off the Serial Numbers,’ 2017).

### **6.6.1 Past attempts of commercialization**

An infamous attempt at commercializing fan fiction has been made by a company called FanLib. The company was launched in May 2007, and aimed at commodifying fan fiction in a newly-created digital archive. It was clear from the beginning that the board of directors meant to reap the profits from the fan stories while leaving the authors' rights of fair use and transformative work out of the picture (Hellekson, 2009: 117).

Naturally, the reaction from fan fiction communities, small and big alike, was devastatingly negative, and the website closed in August 2008. The fans immediately noticed that the company did not emerge from any existing community, nor did it comprise members from different communities. On this point, Henry Jenkins comments: "They simply hadn't really listened to, talked with, or respected the existing grassroots community which surrounded the production and distribution of fan fiction" (Hellekson, 2009: 117). FanLib was a top-bottom, business-driven company, run by a board of directors entirely composed of men. This last element was not inconsequential in the negative reception of this company's endeavors, as the percentage of women fan fiction writers in modern media fandoms is astonishingly high and should not be overlooked (De Kosnik, 2009: 119).

Any day fan fiction authors risk that a similar episode repeats itself. Media studies scholar Abigail De Kosnik (2009) is of the opinion that fan fiction authors ought to commercialize fan fiction on their own terms before external, less like-minded forces seize this opportunity. De Kosnik argues that if fans took upon themselves the responsibility of carefully administering the commercialization of fan fiction, the amateur culture of fan works shall not disintegrate. After all, amateur and professional versions of any literary genre coexist with one another for the simple reason that amateurs are expected, to a degree, to make their work available for free as proof that the fruit of their efforts is worthy of monetary compensation (De Kosnik, 2009: 123).

Even if fan authors did not wish to commercialize fan fiction, they still risk that a company more resilient than FanLib will prevaricate them. If this happens, fan fiction is bound to be corrupted or deformed because any outsider entity that does not understand how fan fiction works and is unwilling to understand how fan fiction works, will end up promoting fan fiction for purposes that are entirely alien to its nature, while ostracizing any intervention from the authors (pp. 120, 123).

One easy way for fan writers to capitalize on their own production before corporations try to prevaricate them consists in self-published e-books. Many amateur authors already publish their first works via free or abysmally priced publications in the digital format. This is a preferred route for many authors because there are no production and storage costs to be recouped by neither the

author nor the publishing house, and the possibility of being paid for one's own work is just a few clicks away from the part of the readers. Jamison asserts that self-published e-books that do not derive from fan fiction are a good way to divert the attention of malicious outsiders from fan fiction to the author's other, original works (Jamison, 2013: 274).

However, any long-time members of fan fiction communities must have witnessed famous fan authors adapting their most popular fan stories to be published in the digital format. As joyous as such an achievement can be for the authors, this action sometimes brings the unfortunate consequence that the fan story is removed from its fandom's archive. Such events are very unfortunate for new fandom members who lose the opportunity to read well-crafted stories about their favorite characters, unless they contact their fellow fandom members for a clandestinely saved copy of the story.

## **6.6.2 Against the commercialization of fan fiction**

For all the fan writers trying to have their stories published, there are also writers who value the anonymity that fan writing offers so much that they never try to have their work published. Some authors may still strive to publish other narratives but not their fan fiction, no matter how popular their fan stories might be. This is because many authors are adamant in their belief that fan fiction should never be turned into publishable literature, and that publishing houses should stay away from any attempt at commercializing fan-authored works in general (p. 22).

The strongest argument against the commercialization of fan fiction claims that the social, the literary, and the political significance of fan fiction resides in the incredible freedom of its authors. The strongest threat to this freedom is financial disparity. Fan fiction writers can narrate the stories that they want to narrate without censorship or expectations about what is going to sell and what is not. Without this freedom, fan fiction will soon become corrupted (p. 282).

The lack of monetary compensation is also extremely liberating from an artistic point of view. The most popular stories in digital archives often accumulate high numbers of positive votes and read counts with the passing of time. This mechanism gives hope to any new writer that in time their stories might achieve the same recognition. In this scenario no author involved will suffer financial damage. There might be a measure of psychological damage, but the quality of life of both popular and unknown fan authors remains unchanged. Of course any published author may view a spike in popularity and become wealthier, but the psychological impact of wealth in real life is

much more drastic than fandom fame. From this point of view, the commercialization of fan fiction will negatively impact on the textual productivity of all fan fiction communities (Fiske, 1992: 39).

Along with the freedom of fan fiction, its principle of democracy and equality is also destabilized with the prospect of commercial publishing. Pugh calls fan fiction a “democratic genre” because fan fiction is a communal practice, but also because no matter the social status of a person in life, all fan authors are equal in front of their audience, they must prove themselves with their craft alone (Pugh, 2005: 126).

Another feature of fan fiction that is bound to disappear by commercialization is the above-mentioned gift culture. Fan fiction as gift is meaningful within the fannish economy of shared enjoyment and companionship. It is designed to create and consolidate social structures, but its form has no *raison d'être* outside of fandom life (Hellekson, 2009: 115).

### **6.6.3 Against the adaptation of fan fiction into commercial novels**

Apart from the simple commercialization of fan fiction, there are also strong arguments against the adaptation of fan stories into published novels. One of the main arguments against this endeavor is that explicit slash fan fiction is not suitable to enter the publishing market with favor. When ex-fan stories do cross over, if they are received with scorn and contempt, the general public will feel more inclined to make gross generalizations, such as claiming that the whole of fan fiction production is poorly-written homoerotic material (De Kosnik, 2009: 123).

Moreover, many argue that fan fiction is a narrowcast, not a broadcast text, it is created to appeal to a specific audience. In fan fiction, most readers are attracted to the stories because of the spot-on characterization that they already love in the source text. A simple change of names during the process of ‘filing off the serial numbers’ is not sufficient to masquerade copyrighted characters, so the fan authors must change the personalities of the characters too. Once this happens, the plot alone remains to shoulder the quality of what was a mixture of many elements. Because of this, there is the possibility that the plot alone might not be as appealing as the whole story was, which is a risk that all publishing houses must face with ex-fan fiction (Fiske, 1992: 39).

## 6.7 Final considerations

This thesis comes to an end with these final considerations. This work was not written with the purpose of feeding any on-going debates amongst scholars of fan culture. Whether researchers of fan fiction may find arguments in their favor in the content of this work, this does not pertain to its original purpose. Because fan fiction is a new topic in academic literary departments, the primary purpose of this work consists in presenting fan fiction in a comprehensible and complete manner.

However, apart from the mere introduction of fan fiction, this work also concerns itself with breaching and discussing specific topics in fan fiction, such as questions of sexual identity and female empowerment, for instance. The presence of such specific topics undoubtedly hinders the introduction of the topic, as this function remains relegated to only a section of the introduction and two initial chapters. This shortcoming is excused by the need to introduce and analyze the minor, specific topics, which are meant to be read from the point of view of one ultimate goal: to prove that fan fiction is worthy of being discussed in academia.

It is of the utmost importance that the reader of this thesis understands how relevant fan fiction can be in modern societies, if not from a literary, at least from an anthropological and sociological point of view.

The sociological value of fan fiction resides in the total lack of inhibitions and censorship that fan writers can boast during the writing process. Because of this, fan fiction is a literary genre that faithfully reflects the human nature of its creators, as it is an unadulterated flow of conscious and subconscious thoughts in literary form. Paradoxically, by applying several boundaries in terms of characterization and sometimes even plot elements to the creative process, fan fiction writers can boast great liberty in pouring their individuality in their works in comparison to most of professional published authors.

In terms of literary potential, this thesis aims to be innovative and informative, not polemical. It is with the utmost respect for the great authors of the literary canon that this thesis offers the topic of fan fiction to the academic world. There is no intention to claim that fan fiction is crafted better than any other genre belonging to high or popular literature, for the simple reason that fan fiction is a genre, it is the collection of millions of stories written with different levels of craftsmanship. Therefore, the literary value of fan fiction needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis, and this paper pointedly does not make any comparison between any fan-authored story and any published novel. When adjectives indicating the quality of fan stories have been utilized, they refer exclusively to the story in question, and they are to be attributed to the subjective opinion of the writer of this thesis.

After all, even the literary canon is in constant dispute amongst literary scholars and critics. As there are greater and lesser works within any genre of high and popular literature, there are also greater and lesser narratives in any fan fiction community. It would be too dismissive to call all fan fiction garbage because it is a derivative product. It has been the aim of this thesis to demonstrate that this assessment of fan fiction is unjust and needs to be reconsidered on the basis of the numerous, sophisticated themes present in the genre. Some of these themes have been discussed in this work, others are being discussed by other scholars around the world, or will be discussed in the future, as the analysis of fan fiction will hopefully be continued inside and outside of academia.

## Appendix

### Opening note to the appendix:

This appendix has been compiled with ‘prototypical’ fan stories in order to offer a complete understanding of the subject matter of this thesis. A prototype, though, is the first or the most typical item of its kind, and to honor veteran fan writers from the 1980s and 1990s, the initial draft of this appendix included summaries of a couple of fan stories that had initially been published in fan magazines.

With the rise of the Internet, many fans have scanned and uploaded on the Web the most popular stories of their fandoms in order to prolong the life of these narratives. There are sophisticated novel-length fan stories in PDF format, which pages are the pages of the magazine, and the text is typed with a typewriter. Many of these early stories that have survived in a digital format are well-crafted novels, some are adorned with full-colored fan arts, and others even with illustrated book covers. However, there is a very small number of such stories available in their entirety online. Because fan magazines were normally circulated via hand-to-hand amongst the members of local fan groups, or at big events such as fandom-wide conventions, many magazines are barely legible, let alone fit to be scanned and read in the digital format. Moreover, since even expert editors spent one to two years for the publication of one issue of a fan magazine, the chapters of the stories are scattered through numerous issues and these were published in the course of several years. Because of this temporal and physical dispersion it is complicated and rare to retrieve a significant number of stories in their entirety. One fan story that was supposed to be added to this appendix is *Whisper of a Kill* (1987-1992), of the *The Professionals* fandom.

The first time Lois Welling’s *Whisper of a Kill* appeared in a fan magazine was in 1997, but there was only the second chapter. Fannish discussions in mailing lists claim that the original first chapter must have circulated as a circuit story in small fan groups amongst the author’s closest acquaintances. The publication of the complete story by the amateur Manacles Press in a stand-alone issue occurred in 1992 with full-cover art. The editor’s note confirms that the fan story had been published in installments over the course of five years. The story can be found in its presumed entirety online but the uneven path of the distribution of this story shall explain why there are so few stories from the 1980s and early 1990s that are available online (Fanlore ‘Whisper of a Kill,’ 2016).

The number of ex-hardcopy stories that are available online is very low. Since only widely acclaimed fan stories were bestowed with exclusive, stand-alone publications before the rise of print-on-demand services, good prototype stories from the 1980s and early 1990s available online in their entirety are extremely rare. Since the small number of scanned stories is not indicative of the

overall production of those years, this type of fan fiction shall not be taken into consideration for this appendix, especially when this number is compared to the number of stories that have been published on the Internet. This is why this appendix offers a series of prototype stories, but they are not prototypes because they are amongst the first of their kind, they are prototypes because they are ‘most typical’ of their kind, and most importantly, they have been chosen amongst a wide base of alternatives in their categories.

## **Gen: When they finally come to destroy the earth (they’ll have to go through you first)**

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/366745/>

**Title:** When they finally come to destroy the earth (they’ll have to go through you first)

**Author:** AlchemyAlice

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Category:** Gen

**Fandoms:** Marvel Comics, Marvel Cinematic Universe, DC Comics, DC Cinematic Universe

**Relationships:** Steve Rogers/Tony Stark, Tony Stark & Bruce Wayne

**Published:** 20/03/2012

**Chapter:** one-shot

**Word Count:** 5468

**Original Summary:** In which Tony Stark went to boarding school with Bruce Wayne, and the road to becoming a superhero is not smooth.

### **Summary:**

The short cross-over *When they finally come* is a good prototype for a Gen story, and also for an uncommon writing style. The story narrates the long-time friendship between Marvel’s Tony Stark (Iron Man) and DC Comics’ Bruce Wayne (Batman). This unlikely friendship begins in the protagonists’ childhood, during their stay at the same private school, where they bond over their common loneliness because their superior intelligence sets them apart from their peers, but more precisely because of their troubled family background. Bruce, an orphan, recognizes in Tony a kindred spirit when he spots bruises of abuse on Tony’s arms and offers companionship in support.

This is a Gen story, and true to the category, there are no explicit depictions of physical or psychological violence, nor of sexual intercourse, even though there are brief mentions of abuse of minors, mortal diseases, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The author errs on the side of caution in the story's labels, mentioning Tony Stark and Steve Rogers as a pairing even though there is only a brief, subtle scene at the end. The author also adds "Tony Stark & Bruce Wayne" to the labels, but their names are accurately separated by the symbol '&' rather than by the slash, because this is how fan authors and readers distinguish friendly relationships from sexual ones in most fan fiction communities. It must be noted that novice fan authors may not know about this distinction, thus pairings and friendships divided by either symbol indiscriminately can be found. This is obviously very confusing and it is not the norm. Fan author AlchemyAlice, though, shows adequate knowledge of the mores fan fiction communities.

The author utilizes an uncommon writing style in this story. *When they finally come* does not follow a linear chronological order of events, for neither the Marvel's nor the DC Comics' characters. The author shifts the narrative from a random moment in Tony Stark's life, to a random point in Bruce Wayne's life, although most of the narration is written from Bruce's point of view. The author offers seemingly random numbers at the beginning of each section of the story, without explaining the correct sequence. This might appear confusing to outsiders, but fan fiction readers seem to be quite at ease with such plot devices, since fan readers necessarily approach fan stories with a certain degree of knowledge of the source text. More precisely, the readers already possess a background outline of the plot and characterization, thus fan authors can experiment with various writing styles, including non-linear plots, without troubling their readers excessively.

*When they finally come* is a good prototype for the Gen category, because even though there are hints of dark themes throughout the plot, there is no graphic description of violence, nor of sexual intercourse. While the story does include a nod to a pairing, the main focus is on the friendly, rather than sexual, relationship between the protagonists, which is what Gen stories are supposed to focus on.

## **Slash: World Ain't Ready**

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/2306315/>

**Title:** World Ain't Ready

**Author:** idiopathicmile

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Category:** Slash

**Fandom:** Les Misérables

**Relationships:** Enjolras/Grantaire, background Courfeyrac/Jean Prouvaire

**Published:** 14/09/2014 – 12/04/2015

**Chapters:** 16

**Word Count:** 185796

**Original Summary:** Enjolras presses his lips together. He already looks pained, and Grantaire hasn't even opened his mouth yet. That's got to be a record, even for them.

"I need a favor," he says at last.

"With what?" says Grantaire. "Ooh, are you forming a cult? Can I join? I'd be awesome at cults, I just know it." He ticks off his qualifications on his fingers. "I love chanting, I look great in robes—"

(High school AU. Grantaire the disaffected stoner is pulled into a cause bigger than himself. Or: in which there are pretend boyfriends for great justice.)

## Summary:

This story is set in a completely Alternate Universe (high school settings), written through a third person autodiegetic narrative voice in the present indicative. The chronology of the story is linear from beginning to end.

With 185000 words, *World Ain't Ready* is a testament to the creativity of fan authors who do not spare novel-length stories only for the most popular fandoms. The *Les Misérables* fandom might not count hundreds of thousands of stories like other communities, but its fan authors seem to be steadfast dedicated in keeping the politically engaged spirit of the source text alive in the fan production. Even though there are millions of slash fan works, *World Ain't Ready* was chosen as a slash prototype because the author focuses on the theme of homophobia, which is rarely bestowed such a central role in slash fan fiction.

*World Ain't Ready* is set in a conservative, mostly homophobic high school. At the beginning the reader learns that Grantaire is an artistic young man who drinks and smokes a lot with his childhood friend Eponine when he doesn't break school rules for fun, regularly ending up in detention, which is where he meets Enjolras for the first time. Enjolras serves his first detention because he warned his teacher that the lack of gender neutral restrooms contributes in turning the school into an unsafe social environment. This is how the readers learn that Enjolras is very opinionated and out-spoken about human rights, gender equality and queer people's rights. He goes

as far as creating an extra-curricular club to fight for such rights with the only dozen students brave enough to openly show a desire for social change.

The story's main plot starts with the introduction of Jehan (Jean) Prouvaire, a slim soft-voiced student who is flamboyantly queer, and is constantly bullied and ostracized because of it. While Courfeyrac is a loud drama student who bravely enters a romantic relationship with Jehan. In order to avoid having their homophobic school-mates constantly harassing the happy couple, Enjolras asks Grantaire to fake a relationship with him so they can divert the school body's attention towards themselves.

Most of the story plot revolves around this fake relationship and the genuine, growing feelings that both Enjolras and Grantaire develop for each other. There are many small and big episodes of homophobia, harassment, bullying and violence as the two protagonists try to navigate their feelings in secret while pretending to be obnoxiously in love for the greater good.

Thanks to the considerable length of the story, the author successfully develops a few sub-plots. The main sub-plot follows Eponine, Grantaire's troubled friend, who regularly hides with her younger brother in Grantaire's house to avoid her abusive parents. Eponine's sub-plot intertwines with the main plot when her parents burn down their own house in a desperate attempt to receive the insurance money. With nowhere to go, Grantaire brings Eponine and Gavroche at Enjolras' house, where the latter breaks their confidentiality and involves his own parents in the matter. Eponine represents a strong woman character that perfectly fits in the argument of female empowerment in fan fiction. She always manages to keep a level-head, planning ahead and anticipating her abusive parents' moves, succeeding in taking care of her younger brother.

The main plot ends peacefully with the prom ball at the end of the school year and well after the date when Grantaire's and Enjolras' initially agreed to end their fake relationship. During the prom scene, Jean and Courfeyrac dance together in the middle of the room with nobody bothering them, and the two protagonists confess their romantic feelings in the climatic ending.

## **Het: The Reluctant Queen**

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/2674541>

**Title:** The Reluctant Queen

**Author:** December\_Daughter

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Category:** Het

**Fandom:** Arrow (2012-)

**Relationship:** Oliver Queen/Felicity Smoak

**Published:** 26/11/2014 – 17/08/2015

**Chapters:** 24

**Word Count:** 77267

**Original Summary:** Oliver Queen's life is irrevocably changed the day Felicity Smoak sets foot in his office. And it has surprisingly little to do with the fact that the first time they meet, she's blackmailing him into a marriage.

The Bratva didn't prepare him for this (and Digg is never going to let him forget it).

## Summary:

*The Reluctant Queen* is a popular story in the *Arrow* fandom. With little more than 77000 words it is a suitably long story, and the main plot, the characterization (especially Felicity's), is very elaborate for this length. The story is written through two third person autodiegetic narrators in the past tense.

At the beginning of the story, Felicity Smoak is running from what will be later revealed to be her father, a boss of the Italian mafia. She blackmails Oliver Queen, CEO of his family's company with the information she hacked about his high rank in the Bratva, the Russian mob. Since the Italian mafia only recognizes a woman as a man's possession, Felicity demands Oliver to pretend to be her husband and eventually she makes him promise to help her mother escape her psychotic husband's clutches.

After the initial suspicion and wariness, Felicity adjusts to life in the Queen's family mansion. She befriends Oliver's personal bodyguard and best friend, John Diggle, and Oliver's younger sister Thea, albeit after some rough misunderstandings episodes. In order to avoid feeling hopeless in the new, unknown environment, Felicity takes advantage of the petite bodyguard that is assigned to her, Sara Lance, and receives a basic training in self-defense. This last endeavor builds a solid friendship between the two women, and gives Felicity a sense of security and self-confidence.

Felicity's father tries to forcibly bring her back by sending bounty hunters after her, so she chooses to follow Oliver to Russia for a meeting with other captains of the Bratva to benefit from his protection. At this point of the story, both Felicity and Oliver are secretly developing romantic feelings for one another.

During the meeting, Dmitri, a sworn rival to Oliver in the Bratva, takes to the meeting Felicity's father, who slanders her claiming that she is a mole of the Italian mafia in the Russians' high ranks, and demanding that she goes back with him. Without the support of the other Bratva

captains, Oliver has to comply and Felicity becomes a prisoner in her father's villa. The last scenes describe how Oliver and his team successfully rescue Felicity and bring her back home, where she becomes Oliver's legitimate wife.

## **Cross-over: Whispers in Corners**

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/1134255/>

**Title:** Whispers in Corners

**Author:** esama

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Category:** Slash

**Fandoms:** Harry Potter – J. K. Rowling, Sherlock Holmes – Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock (BBC, 2010-)

**Relationships:** Mycroft Holmes/Harry Potter

**Published:** [06/09/2011] 13/01/2014

**Chapters:** 10

**Word Count:** 64402

**Original Summary:** Everything started with a stumble - his new life in a new world as well as his surprisingly successful career as a medium.

### **Summary:**

Most cross-over fan stories usually turn out to be interesting reading experiences. With regular fan fiction, the readers are already acquainted with the canonical characterization, so this element does not constitute a major surprise. With cross-over fan fiction, however, the readers do not know what to expect, because the readers can only speculate about how the characters of a fictional universe will react in another. *Whispers in Corners* is not a perfect prototype for the cross-over genre. It casts only one character from a fictional universe, Harry Potter from the eponymous saga (1997-2007), crossing over to BBC *Sherlock* (2010-). The proportion is therefore different from the norm, but the intriguing writing style of the author and the rare pairing that was chosen for this story shall balance this exception out.

It must be noted, before proceeding to the actual summary of the story, that the original publication of the story occurred in the digital archive called FanFiction.net on July the 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011. For reasons unknown, the author deleted all their works from this archive and moved them all to the

website called 'ArchiveOfOurOwn,' where this story was published on January the 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. For the sake of accuracy, both dates have been reported.

With a moderate count 64000 words, fan author esama managed to spin a main plot and a couple of sub-plots, with plenty of twists and character development. *Whispers in Corners* is written through the point of view of a third person, autodiegetic narrator in the present tense. The tone of the narrative voice is very calm and put-together throughout the whole story.

Harry is the character who has stumbled from his dimension into *Sherlock's* universe during a mass-migration of the wizarding community due to a mysterious magical plague. Harry was the last person to pass through the inter-dimensional portal because thanks to the Deathly Hallows, he is now Master of Death and cannot die nor age. However, during the crossing from one dimension to another he 'stumbled' and arrived in the sherlockian universe.

As Master of Death, Harry has retained possession of the three hallows: the Cloak of Invisibility, whose power is self-explanatory, the invincible Elder Wand, and the Resurrection Stone, that permits its holder to see and communicate with the spirit of the dead. It is this last power that provides Harry with an income, albeit meager, in a dimension that does not host a secret wizarding society for him to live in.

At the beginning of *Whispers in Corners*, Harry works as a low-end medium in contemporary London, struggling to make ends meet. The main plot begins when Mycroft Holmes offers Harry a job to summon the spirit of an assassinated government employee. Since the dead cannot lie to Harry, he successfully retrieves sensible information from the spirit. Consequently Mycroft hires Harry, forwarding him a well-paying clientele in return.

Most of the story alternates between Harry's 'normal' clientele and Mycroft's cases regarding top-secret matters of national and international security. True to the BBC *Sherlock's* characterization, Mycroft is the most knowledgeable and influential man in Her Majesty's service without officially being a member of the government. Harry even becomes entangled in a few police cases, where the number of characters expands to include Inspector Lestrade, the morgue's registrar Dr. Molly Hooper, and even Dr. John Watson, who is mourning the death of Sherlock Holmes two years after the canonical events of *The Reichenbach Fall* (2012). The story intertwines with Arthur Conan Doyle's literary Canon when Harry tries to summon Sherlock's spirit, and the original Mr. Holmes appears instead.

Harry is kidnapped because of the top-secret information he possesses from Mycroft's assignments. Since Harry frees himself using the Hallows, Mycroft discovers that Harry wields more magic than any other medium he has known. However, he manages to retain a calm and

poignant attitude during the discovery, and more importantly, he does not abuse this new knowledge. This brings Harry and Mycroft close together until they eventually become partners.

For its romantic sub-plot, *Whispers in Corners* retains its detached narrative voice, and does not accumulate an overt sexual tension between the protagonists. The transition is sudden and unexpected, the romantic relationship remains soft-spoken and the author is careful in maintaining a consistently collected tone in the narrative voice.

## **Drabble: Pink on Green**

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/1414105>

**Title:** Pink on Green

**Author:** ssssssim

**Rating:** Mature (M)

**Category:** Het

**Fandom:** Arrow (2012-)

**Relationship:** Oliver Queen/Felicity Smoak

**Published:** 04/04/2014 – 31/10/2014

**Chapters:** 101

**Word Count:** 236736

**Original Summary:** I see that drabble collections are a trend in this fandom. This is mine :).

## **Summary:**

*Pink on Green* is a good prototype story of a modern collection of drabbles. The fandom term ‘drabble’ normally indicates a story of exactly one hundred words (Hellekson & Busse, 2006: 15). However, less experienced writers may call drabbles extremely short stories of more than 100 words. This incorrect labeling irritates some readers, but many others do not consider the distinction important enough to warrant trying to correct the writers who call any short story a drabble.

*Pink on Green* is a good prototypical drabble collection not because the chapters are proper drabbles, but precisely because the writer uses this term incorrectly (for example, the first chapter alone counts 2921 words) and the readers do not actively try to correct this mistake. Therefore, *Pink on Green* is a perfect example not of a drabble collection in its traditional sense, but of the changing mores in fan communities about fan fiction terminology, in this case about the term ‘drabble.’ It was mentioned in the first chapter that fandom terms do not have fixed definitions that are valid for

all communities, instead every term is constantly negotiated and disputed amongst different fandoms but also amongst different factions in the same fandom.

*Pink on Green* is the first installment of a collection that is in its third part at the time of writing. There is no set of rules in this collection. The length of the stories, the rating, the themes, the secondary characters, everything varies from story to story. The readers can count on one element though, the main pairing of Oliver Queen (the Arrow) and Felicity Smoak, the IT specialist of team Arrow, feature prominently in every chapter. With such an infinite variety of possibilities, it is easy to find a story that corresponds to one's own tastes, especially amongst a high number of options, which is the main reason why the *Pink on Green* collection is extremely popular. No matter their preferences, most if not all readers in this fandom can read about their favorite pairing in any rating, settings, and theme they wish, in one place.

Another element that makes *Pink on Green* a prototypical ficlet (which is the proper term for short fan stories) collection, is that many stories have been written on demand. This means that readers submit writing prompts containing settings, plot elements, themes, pairings, any concept at all, to the author, then the author selects the prompt, fulfills it, and publishes the story as a chapter of the collection. This mechanism is very common in a wide variety of fandoms nowadays. It was fairly common in hardcopy fandoms too, but Internet-Mediated Communication eased the interaction between fan fiction readers and writers to the point that a reader may read a fan story based on their own prompt even a few days after they have submitted it. This short span of time was nearly impossible to achieve when fan fiction communities had to rely exclusively on the publication and distribution of hardcopy fan magazines.

Since *Pink on Green* is a collection of stories, and since there more than one hundred of them (actually more than three hundred if counting all the installments at the time of writing), it would be futile and unjust to summarize one or few stories.

However, it is worth noting that the ficlets in the *Pink on Green* series recall an argument developed in this thesis in the third chapter about female empowerment. The female protagonist of the stories, Felicity Smoak, is a babbling, awkward IT specialist in the Canon series, but she is also outspoken and firm in her resolve to help her friends in any way she can, even if this means putting herself in the direct line of fire. This fiery attitude swiftly turned Felicity into a fan-favorite character, and this affection is visible in the upsurge of *Arrow* stories featuring her, and in the way her character is favored in the vast majority of these fan stories.

*Pink on Green* is no exception. No matter how different the story's settings, in this collection of short stories, Felicity is a compassionate, strong-willed young woman with a healthy balance of self-abnegation and self-confidence.

## Alternate Universe: Leave No Soul Behind

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/187333/>

**Title:** Leave No Soul Behind

**Author:** whochick

**Rating:** Mature (M)

**Category:** Slash, Het

**Fandoms:** Star Trek (2009), Star Trek: The Original Series (1966-1969)

**Relationships:** James T. Kirk/Spock, James T. Kirk/Original Female Character, Leonard McCoy/Original Female Character

**Published:** 06/01/2010 – 19/04/2011

**Chapters:** 44

**Word Count:** 258951

**Original Summary:** If you're Starfleet, you spend your whole life wishing you never see an EPAS uniform right up until the moment they become your only hope. Whether you're dying a slow, cold death in space, or a long painful one on some godforsaken planet, they're going to come for you. So count your last breaths, son, and hold on tight. They leave no soul behind.

### Summary:

With a word count of nearly 260'000 words, *Leave No Soul Behind* is a novel-length fan story. The narrative voice is a third person autodiegetic narrator, the narrative tense is the present indicative, and the plot is mostly linear with two main flashbacks and several short time jumps. This story is a good example of the Alternate Universe category, even though the author did not add this label.

At the beginning of *Leave No Soul Behind*, Spock has refused both the Vulcan Science Academy's fellowship offer, as well as Starfleet's, and instead has joined the Emergency Personnel Ambulance Service (EPAS): a paramedic, search-and-rescue, semi-independent division of the Federation. Having lost interest in the high ranks of Starfleet, Jim Kirk also joins the EPAS division, where most of the characters of *Star Trek* already serve, as well as a handful of skillfully designed Original Characters.

In the alternate storyline of *Leave No Soul Behind*, since neither Jim nor Spock have worked together to eliminate the threat of the vengeful Romulan Nero, the villain of the 2009 reboot movie, many rescue missions of Spock's team take place in the aftermath of the battles between Starfleet and Nero. The plot pivots on the characters' struggles to eliminate this threat towards the Federation

planets, especially towards Earth. Kirk and Spock become increasingly frustrated with the military and diplomatic high ranking individuals, who are not willing to recognize that Nero comes from an alternate timeline and that the planet-obliterating weapon in his possession was originally designed by Spock Prime, from *The Original Series* timeline. This stubbornness prevents various organizations, among which the Federation and the Vulcan High Council, from cooperating with one another, leaving the protagonists to take matters in their own hands and pilot a modified version of the USS Enterprise in the final battle.

Spock Prime, from the storyline of the original *Star Trek* series, appears several times throughout the plot, having jumped not one dimension as in the 2009 reboot movie, but four. His capture by Nero prompts the second half of both the dramatic plot and the romantic sub-plot, which later intertwine near the end of the narrative.

The author's remarkable effort in outlining the plot discloses Kirk's and Spock's traumatic pasts in segments, after their relationship matures enough to allow this type of confessions. Spock chose the EPAS division to embrace his half-human, half-Vulcan genealogy, but in doing so he estranged his own mother, whom he never meets again after his enrollment. Whereas in his childhood, Kirk was left to live with his mother's partner Frank, as she preferred serving in inter-planetary missions in Starfleet instead of settling down. Frank physically and sexually abused Kirk, until the latter accidentally killed him. Even though they are revealed late in the plot, Kirk's and Spock's pasts greatly define their personalities.

There are several Original Characters in *Leave No Soul Behind* with varying degrees of relevance in the plot outline. No Original Character displays elements of being a Mary Sue, and they mingle well with the ensemble of characters from both the reboot and *The Original Series* universes.

## **Domestic: Let Nothing You Dismay**

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/2818349/>

**Title:** Let Nothing You Dismay

**Author:** montparnasse

**Rating:** Mature

**Category:** Slash

**Fandom:** Harry Potter – J. K. Rowling

**Relationship:** Sirius Black/Remus Lupin

**Published:** 21/12/2014

**Chapter:** one-shot

**Word Count:** 18993

**Original Summary:** There are a few things Sirius really didn't count on for Christmas of 1979. The extreme sexual confusion is one of them; Remus Lupin is approximately seventy-eight of the rest.

## **Summary:**

Montparnasse's story *Let Nothing You Dismay* was written for a gift exchange in the *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) fandom for the winter holidays of 2014. It is a short story of nearly 19000 words, narrated from one autodiegetic, third person point of view, in the present indicative. Sometimes the narrator's voice slips into a 'you' narrative but it still refers to the protagonist instead of the intended reader.

The story is set in the so-called 'Marauder's Era' of the saga. The year is 1979, Sirius Black is nineteen years old and living together with his ex-school mate Remus Lupin, of the same age. The young men's living situation is due to the fact that dividing the costs of living together in a tiny house in a small town is the only viable means that they currently have apart from imposing on their other friends. Remus is a werewolf, and thus he is the victim of heavy discrimination in the wizarding society, whereas Sirius, who is the heir to an ancient and noble pureblood wizarding family, has distanced himself from his conservative, hateful relatives.

The plot of the story pivots on Sirius' panicked moments about his sexual identity crisis. He knows that he likes women, but he thinks he is starting to like men too. This indecision stems from Sirius' strong emotions about Remus, childhood friend and now house-mate. In the author's words: "Sirius Black is a confused nineteen-year-old hormone cocktail with an injustice- and Remus-induced stomachache and no one to talk to."

On the contrary, Remus is well-adjusted in his homosexuality, has been for years, and Sirius does not ask his friend for advice for fear that he will reveal his feelings accidentally. This impasse causes no few hilarious, yet frustrating, domestic situations. Used to living in a boarding school before and in the a tiny house now, the Sirius and Remus are very close friends in and outside of their daily routines. They sit together for breakfast and dinner, help each other with house chores, do the shopping together, discuss together matters relevant for the house and general news. In all this seemingly blissful domesticity, Sirius tries to put some distance between himself and Remus in order not to accidentally blurt out his feelings.

To clear his thoughts about his sexuality, Sirius consults two lesbian friends of his who are both childhood friends and a couple. Despite Sirius' incoherence about his very confusing state of

mind, Marlene and Dorcas are very helpful and supportive. After this consultation, Sirius gathers the courage to admit his hazy sexual identity to Remus, and more domestic scenes ensue. The two friends plan Christmas together and occasionally discuss Sirius' situation and this newly-discovered knowledge of himself. It is during one of such discussions that the two friends act on their attraction.

The shift from a friendly to a romantic relationship occurs early in *Let Nothing You Dismay*, roughly in the middle of the story. The second part of the story is a whirlwind of conversations with friends, Christmas plans, semi-explicit scenes, heart-warming domestic situations, and the slow but steady realization from Sirius' part that his attraction for Remus is actually love. The climatic ending scene, the confession scene, occurs on Christmas morning to fit the context of the story's creation.

Arguably the best features of this story are the consistency in the half-panicked narrative tone to mimic Sirius' sexual crisis, and the ever-present, either described or evoked, domestic atmosphere.

## **Homophobia: Close to the Chest**

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/3898771>

**Title:** Close to the Chest

**Author:** darkmagicalgirl

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Category:** Slash

**Fandom:** Haikyuu!! (2012-)

**Relationships:** Kyoutani Kentarou/Yahaba Shigeru, Iwaizumi Hajime/Oikawa Tooru, Oikawa Tooru & Yahaba Shigeru

**Published:** 08/05/2015 – 02/06/2015

**Chapters:** 10

**Word Count:** 61185

**Original Summary:** It takes Yahaba thirteen years to realize he's different from the other kids, one to figure out how to hide it, and two more to learn to be happy just the way he is. Yahaba's journey ft. an extremely annoyed Kyoutani, best friend in the world Watari, and loads and loads of good senpai Oikawa.

## Summary:

*Haikyuu!!*, written and drawn by Haruichi Furudate, is currently one of the most popular sports manga (literally: collection of pictures, Japanese comics). Its popularity has been on the rise since its adaptation into an anime (literally: animation, Japanese cartoons) between 2014 and 2016, with new seasons to be released for the home video market. *Haikyuu!!* follows the life of Hinata Shōyō in his high school career, specifically his role as a player in his high school volleyball club.

*Close to the Chest* follows the life of a student of one of the rival volleyball teams that Hinata and his teammates encounter in *Haikyuu!!*. Yahaba Shigeru does not even feature prominently in the source text's scenes involving his team, so much so that one could call him a background character. This close attention to every character, even the least noticeable ones, is a staple of big fandoms, where the high number of members ensures that few to no characters go unnoticed in fannish discussions and reworkings.

*Close to the Chest* is a novella-long story, it is narrated through the point of view of a third person autodiegetic narrative voice, in the present indicative. At the beginning of the story, Yahaba is starting middle school, and he is deciding which club to join because his parents pressured him into doing so, and he chooses the volleyball club because he hears that it is relatively small and because his childhood crush urges him to. The beginning of the story is brief but informative because the readers are already informed about a few important aspects of Yahaba's personality: he is easily swayed by the opinions of others, by his parents and by his friend for example, and he is queer, his childhood crush is a boy.

Yahaba's sexuality is just hinted at in the beginning because the author implies this without stating so outright. When Yahaba realizes and admits to himself that he is queer, he panics. His parents have already established his path in life: he is to become a white collar employee, get married and have children. Yahaba cannot tell his teammates about his sexuality, because he has developed a crush on one of them. He swears to himself that he will "act normally" and avoid attracting attention to himself. It is thus evident to the readers that Yahaba is a victim of internalized homophobia. He prefers to be deemed too shy and even scared of girls because he does not flirt with them or speak of them with interest. In this initial phase of the story, the author takes the time to unravel Yahaba's inner terror at the prospect of being bullied and ostracized in school for his sexuality.

Yahaba's future partner is actually introduced at the beginning of the story, but he does not feature as prominently as Yahaba. At the end of his middle school volleyball career, Yahaba meets Kyoutani Kentarou, same age, another volleyball player who is brazenly rude to his upperclassmen, and who arrogantly thinks he is the best spiker in the team because of the incredible force of his

spikes. Yahaba and Kyoutani unknowingly enter the same high school and the main part of the story, indeed the main plot of the story, follows Yahaba's and Kyoutani's tentative friendship developing into romantic feelings.

The author handles the delicate topic of school-wide homophobia very well. For instance, Yahaba struggles to keep up with his best friend's discussion about his favorite type of girls, and tries to suffocate his crush on a fellow school mate as soon as it grows. As far as Yahaba's interactions with Kyoutani go, since Kyoutani has a very brazen, aggressive personality, Yahaba shrugs off his usual meekness to meet the other boy head on. This frankness in their interactions will bring them close together as the plot unravels.

The main plot twist occurs when the boy that Yahaba is infatuated of, spreads rumors about Yahaba's queerness. The school body reacts to this discovery, damaging school property with obscene insults, and actively ignoring and isolating Yahaba, in class and outside. The scenes of homophobia are not much prolonged though. The volleyball team captain Oikawa Tooru immediately claims that he is perfectly at ease with Yahaba's sexuality, and encourage him to remain in the team, whose members Oikawa vouches for. The main reason why Oikawa is so accepting, welcoming and protective of Yahaba is because he is secretly in love with the team's ace and childhood friend Hajime Iwaizumi.

Since Oikawa's and Iwaizumi's long-time friendship is a fan-favorite bond, the author of *Close to the Chest* dedicates a sub-plot to the duo's crisis after graduation. Being separated for long periods of time for the first time since they were children, Oikawa and Iwaizumi finally realize their feelings for each other and re-connect, also thanks to Yahaba's help.

The second half of the main plot is more focused on the dynamics between Yahaba and Kyoutani than the first half. This is where the author develops the shift from a tentative friendship into a growing romantic feeling. In the last scene, Oikawa and Iwaizumi walk into their ex-high school gym hand in hand to compliment Yahaba on his role as the new captain of the team, and to check Kyoutani's progress as the new ace of the team.

## **Hurt/Comfort: Home**

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/3195734/>

**Title:** Home

**Author:** TheTypewriterGirl

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Category:** Slash

**Fandom:** Teen Wolf (2011-2017)

**Relationships:** Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski

**Published:** 19/01/2015 – 27/06/2017

**Chapters:** 18

**Word Count:** 167178

**Original Summary:** January seventh. Seven days since the start of 2015, and seven days since his father's death.

The bastard, he thinks bitterly. The past year Derek Hale had made it blatantly obvious that he hated his scrawny guts, taking every given opportunity to shove him up against a wall, growl threats in his ears and roll his eyes whenever he stepped into the room, muttering some snide comment about how spastic or idiotic he was.

So why did he fucking volunteer to take him in?

## **Summary:**

Fortunately, the author of *Home* finished the story in time for the writing of this thesis, because *Home* is an excellent prototype of the Hurt/Comfort genre. With little more than 167000 words, it is neither a short nor a very long story, and as mentioned it is a well-crafted sample of its category. It is narrated through two third person autodiegetic narrative voices, in the present indicative. Like many other fan-authored stories, *Home* is interspersed with fan art, art drawn by fans about copyrighted material. In this story the illustrations are digitally-created, and they are much more numerous than what is customary, there are from 2 to 5 in every chapter, and the illustrator's level of artistry and accuracy in portraying the original cast is objectively very accurate.

The Canon material is titled *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017) it is a television series produced by MTV, loosely based on the 1985 eponymous movie. The main plot pivots on the life of high school student Scott McCall, who is bitten by a rogue werewolf in the woods around his hometown, Beacon Hills. The protagonists of *Home* are Scott's hyper-active best friend Stiles Stilinski, whose mother faded away to cancer before the beginning of the Canon plot, and Derek Hale, one of the very few surviving members of Beacon Hills' ancestral family of born-werewolves.

At the beginning of *Home*, Stiles has just lost his father, the last remaining member of his family, in a fight against an invading pack of werewolves. On top of being an orphan, Stiles is an unsupervised minor, so he loses his home and he cannot be taken in by any other pack member but Derek, who has partially renovated his old family mansion and is wealthy enough to provide for Stiles. Of course, having lost his beloved father, Stiles is devastated. The usually cheerful Stiles is

replaced by a crestfallen, rapidly thinning young man, who always sleeps to avoid the tragic flashbacks, who forgets basic daily actions such as showering and eating, and who panics at the sight of raw or bloody meat.

The plot of *Home* revolves around the process of healing, which is the underlying principle of the Hurt/Comfort genre. If there is no healing phase, the story should be called a Darkfic. In *Home*, the first plot twist that prompts the healing phase occurs when Stiles avoids food to the point that he collapses. Then, Derek realizes that Stiles is not strong enough to pull himself back together like Derek had to do when he lost his own family, so he assumes the responsibility to help Stiles find his way back to living a full life again.

In the first few chapters of the story, Derek barely tolerates his new house-mate, but he intervenes to help him when necessary. Even though he is frustrated by Stiles' presence, Derek is thoughtful towards Stiles' wellbeing, as visible in kind gestures such as cooking, reminding him of personal hygiene, and even inviting Stiles' friends so that the teenager does not isolate himself in his mourning. These scenarios may lead to thinking that Derek is well-adjusted in his own personal grief, however, this is not true. Derek himself admits that he still suffers from traumatic flashbacks and panic attacks about his tragic loss, and he often lashes out to Stiles when he is reminded of it. Therefore, the healing phase concerns both protagonists of the story.

Most of the healing process in *Home* pivots on domestic actions in a shared living space, such as going grocery shopping together, knowing each other's schedule, eating together, talking about common interests, meeting friends, and so on.

## **Deathfic: Alone On the Water**

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/210785>

**Title:** Alone On the Water

**Author:** Mad\_Lori

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Category:** Slash

**Fandom:** Sherlock (2010-)

**Relationships:** Sherlock Holmes/John Watson

**Published:** 12/06/2011

**Chapter:** one-shot

**Word Count:** 7725

**Original Summary:** Sherlock Holmes never expected to live a long life, but he never imagined that it would end like this.

## **Summary:**

Although rated Gen (General Audiences), *Alone On the Water* is a Deathfic. It is debatable whether this categorization is correct in this case. Fanlore claims that the Gen category is considered a genre that does not picture gore, violence, coarse language and most prominently sexual themes. From a strictly fannish point of view, the author's categorization of *Alone On the Water* is correct. But since the category of Gen comes from the Motion Picture Association of America's 'General Audiences,' which motto is 'suitable for children,' there is room for arguing whether the slow, painful death of the protagonist is a suitable reading for young readers. Although the author demonstrates to be considerate of this fact and lowers the chances of triggering the readers by adding the proper warnings including 'Euthanasia,' 'Deathfic,' and 'Grief.'

*Alone On the Water* is a brief story of nearly 8000 words, written through a first person autodiegetic narrative voice, John Watson's, in the present indicative.

The story follows the last month of Sherlock Holmes' life, who is diagnosed an inoperable brain tumor and asks John to give him only painkillers until the end of the month, when he ends his own life with an overdose of pills. The author does not drag the story for very long like many other Deathfic authors do. However, the succession of acquaintances and colleagues that Sherlock receives ensures that this short narrative is as grim and heart-wrenching as any other novel-length Deathfic. Sherlock's death is crowned by his and John's realization and confession of their affection for each other. This scene is a very cathartic and painful moment, with Sherlock hanging onto life until his last breath.

Unlike many other Deathfic authors, the ending of *Alone On the Water* is therapeutic because John becomes Sherlock's legacy. By assisting Inspector Lestrade in a few cases, he becomes increasingly more apt at interpreting the evidence and deducing the sequence of the events of the crimes. Finally, John leaves his medical career and continues Sherlock's work as a consultant detective.

## **Time Travel / Fix-It: if you try to break me, you will bleed**

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/8102932/>

**Title:** if you try to break me, you will bleed

**Author:** Dialux

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Category:** Het, Femslash, Gen

**Fandoms:** A Song of Ice and Fire – George R. R. Martin, Game of Thrones (2011-)

**Relationships:** Jon Snow/Sansa Stark, Robb Stark & Sansa Stark, Jon Snow & Robb Stark

**Published:** 21/09/2016 – 10/12/2016

**Chapters:** 6

**Word Count:** 96676

**Original Summary:** It had been a slash across her chest from a White Walker's sword that finally ended her life. Sansa'd landed in a puddle of her own blood, and she'd died quickly, quietly.

And then she'd awoken with a gasp, trembling, in a bed that had burned under Theon's betrayal.

## Summary:

Long Canons where sudden plot twists abound are prone to inspire a number of Fix-It stories. In the Fix-It genre the authors deviate from a point in Canon to 'fix' the plot with their own version of how the events should have gone. George R. R. Martin's saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) prompts a high number of Fix-It stories, most likely because of the saga's long and sophisticated canonical plot, extremely sudden plot twists are common. Because of this, many fan writers have the opportunity to adjust the original plot at numerous points in time.

With almost 10000 words, *if you try to break me* is one of the most popular Time Travel, Fix-It stories in the *ASOIAF* fandom. The story is written through a third person autodiegetic narrative voice and in the present indicative.

The original summary explains the premise: during a battle against the White Walkers, Sansa Stark is mortally wounded, but she wakes up in the past, at 9 years of age. Sansa is a naive girl at the beginning of *ASOIAF*, so in this story it is refreshing to see her utilize the knowledge of her previous life to her advantage. She immediately takes matters into her own hands: she trusts her older brother Robb Stark and later her illegitimate brother Jon Snow with the truth behind her recent change in demeanor, and she makes them train her and learns how to defend herself.

When the story reaches the initial events of *ASOIAF*, Sansa is ready to navigate through expected and unexpected accidents in the capital city, and delivers her father, brother and sister back home in the North without any major character deaths.

Before the second half of the story, Sansa confesses the events of her previous lifetime to the rest of her family and from here on the author truly steers the story into a complete Alternate

Universe scenario. The characters that in *ASOIAF* have wronged or harmed the Stark family are neutralized, while secondary characters who helped or who could have helped the northern family are given prominent roles. For instance, while Robb, newly crowned King of the North, wins several skirmishes in southern lands, the author masterfully stages a battle for the young heiresses of the northern families. In fact, the lords of the northern families have sent their daughters in a small but well-fortified citadel to keep company to Sansa and her younger siblings. In this fort the young ladies are meant to be safe, away from the dangers of the skirmishes.

Ironically, while the men of the citadel ride out on a hunting trip, a traitor to the North leads a group of Lannister men, a southern rival house to the Starks, to the citadel, thinking that the hundreds of women and young girls will be easy hostages. The author shows remarkable skill in narrating how the young noble-girls prepare for battle and win against a hundred trained, armed men. There is a deep sense of female empowerment in the scene after the battle where the noble-girls crown Sansa and Arya Queens of the North.

After Sansa's eldest brother Robb wins the final battle in the capital city, conquering the Iron Throne, he follows Sansa's revolutionary suggestion, based on the horrors she has witnessed in her previous life, and he melts the Iron Throne of Westeros because it is deemed to drive kings and queens mad with power. This is an innovative insight by the fan author, because the Iron Throne is the epicenter of most, if not all, the bloody battles and intrigues of the canonical saga. As Sansa administrates the bureaucratic minutiae of the disintegration of the capital's royal court, she divides the kingdom into eight small kingdoms. Sansa judges the new kings and queens not based on their gender or seniority but based on their intelligence and sense of responsibility and most of all, on the protectiveness that they display towards their subjects.

The end discloses Sansa's musings about the future of her children, whom she hopes will fight to mold their own destiny, as she did, in a final note befitting of the serious, courtly tone of the story.

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