

***Harry Potter* Slash Fanfiction and Women's Writing: (Re)Writing Desire into Canon**

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Abstract: This paper examines slash fanfiction based on the Harry Potter series as a form of women's writing. In doing so, it seeks to explore the ways in which slash fanfiction as a genre, with its queering of canonical content and often explicitly sexual narratives, represents an avenue for women to explore ideas of desire and sexuality while separating it from the female body. Considering the readership is also largely female, it also looks at whether slash fanfiction constitutes a form of pornography for women, by women, and therefore whether it holds any potential to be examined as feminist texts.

Keywords: slashfanfiction, 'Pottermania,' queerness, female sexuality, fandom,

The standard definition of fanfiction is that it is a body of writing created by fans based on a pre-existing media or literary text. The definition of the word fan is one that has been debated over time and gone over various permutations. Henry Jenkins suggests that rather than being "cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers," media fans can be understood as "active producers and manipulators of meaning" (Jenkins 23). The community of these fans, in which this work of production and consumption takes place, is referred to as 'fandom.' The work of Jenkins significantly emphasises that fans are not just consumers but producers of meaning, and through this act of "poaching" their favourite texts, they create new creative material, most commonly in the form of fanfiction.

Throughout literary history there have been unofficial versions of existing texts. In the early part of the twentieth century, for instance, fans of *Sherlock Holmes* formed a group called the Baker Street Irregulars, who wrote original stories and articles analysing his life and work, all taken from the perspective that Holmes and the events in Arthur Conan Doyle's stories were real. It was the Irregulars who gave the name *canon* to the officially recognized body of work from which they inspired themselves, a term with theological

origins that remains in fanfiction parlance to the present day¹. The scope of what falls under the term fanfiction has been debated over time. Before the advent of copyright laws, characters and plots from one text were free to be borrowed by other writers. Many of Shakespeare's plays, for instance, would fall under this category, as would works such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is an unofficial prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, or James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which sets Homer's *Odyssey* in Dublin.

It was, however, in the 1960s that modern fanfiction took hold, adjacent to the widespread advent of television that made available to the public a significant number of popular cultural texts, for instance the science fiction series *Star Trek*. The 60s saw the growth of amateur magazines referred to as 'fanzines,' which proved to be suitable vehicles for the creative expression of the followers of cult television series such as the aforementioned *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, among others. These 'fanzines' were created by fans for fans and operated on a purely non-professional and non-profit basis, and therefore because of high production and shipping costs, were generally read by middle-class women who had the free time and monetary resources to devote to reading and writing fanfiction. Many genres of fanfiction owe their origins to these early fanzines, and it needs to be remembered that by operating outside the institutional paradigms laid down by publication and distribution laws, fanfiction writers have been free to operate on their own terms. It is within this context that the emergence of the genre known as *slash* can be examined.

Slash fiction refers to narratives of romantic and/or erotic of relationships between two men. The name has its origins in the earliest stories of this kind, from the pairing of James T Kirk and Spock from Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek: The Original Series*, written as 'Kirk/Spock' or 'K/S', the '/' being used to differentiate it from stories that had 'Kirk & Spock' which implied a friendship rather than a romance. We can trace the first Kirk/Spock fan fiction to a 1974 fanzine called Grup #3. The first slash fan fiction was titled "A Fragment Out of Time", written by Diane Marchant, and it was not sexually explicit when compared to stories that followed it. Slash remained not only limited to stories but extended to comics and pieces of art as well, all produced as part of the fannish process.

Slash fan fiction continued to proliferate in the form of fanzines and other underground fan publications until modern technology allowed for an inexpensive and vastly more accessible means for fan writers to spread their work - the world wide web. The advent of the internet and its endless possibility for the hosting and sharing of data brought about the single largest revolution in the world of fan made works. Blogs and online archives of fan fiction and art from a variety of genres were created for and made available to a worldwide

audience. These internet archives became spaces where users could upload content in fandoms of their choice. Multi-fandom archives gave users the ability to self-publish fan fiction in an easily accessible common space that did not require insider knowledge to join, and at the same time allowed them to review works posted on the site. Another development is the fact that with the arrival of a free, open-access space for writers to inhabit on the internet, the fan fiction community became not just a space for adults with the resources to participate in fandom, but also for adolescents and teenagers who could write with unprecedented license and without the necessity for adult approval. This freedom meant that writers could write stories that contain explicit contents without the fear of censure.

While there is a significant amount of fan fiction based on a number of television, film and literary fandoms, this paper is going to focus on those based on J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. 'Pottermania' has led to fan sites, magazines, documentaries, a genre of music called 'Wizard Rock' and the single largest body of fan fiction dedicated to a single body of work found on the internet.

Fan fiction gives its writers the freedom to experiment with alternative modes of sexual discourse. A large portion of fan works are concerned with romance and sexuality, and a good percentage of them deal with homosexual relationships between the characters they portray. Slash is therefore one of the most popular genres of *Harry Potter* fan fiction, with numerous stories being published that contemplate on the possibility of homosexual love between characters in the series. On popular fanfiction sites fanfiction.net and archiveofourown, the most popular pairing in this regard is Harry Potter and his 'archnemesis' Draco Malfoy.

Henry Jenkins, author of *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, examines fan fiction as a form of deconstructive criticism. Fan fiction is, in essence, a reinterpretation of and commentary on the canon in question. It engages with the text just as literary criticism does; instead of critical essays that use text to respond to text, fan stories use fiction to respond to fiction. It is not hard to find all kinds of argumentation about interpretation woven through most fan produced stories. A good fan story is one that references key events or bits of dialogue within the original text to support its particular interpretation of the character's motives and actions. An example from the *Harry Potter* fandom would be stories based on a particular event from the books. The relationship between Harry and Draco Malfoy begins on a sour note when Harry judges the latter to be far too judgemental and classist to befriend, so when Malfoy holds out a hand of friendship

to Harry, he refuses. In the seventh book, Harry, in rescuing Malfoy from a room filled with Fiendfyre, reaches his hand out to him and Malfoy takes it. This, fans interpret, is the coming to full circle of their relationship, and leads the way to much more. The theme recurs in several stories to varying degrees, and is considered one of the significant moments in the progression of the pairing.

Jenkins sees slash fiction as not so much about sex as about creating complex emotional identities for beloved characters. It is the direct product of women consuming male-centric texts and consequently rewriting them to suit their own interests, “appropriating them into feminine paradigms of emotional realism” (Neville). Expanding this idea, and drawing on Michel de Certeau’s idea of Brownian Motion, Constance Penley says that in fanwork, particularly slash, which she views as a utopian genre, fans rewrite mainstream media through ‘guerrilla action,’ reconfiguring it in order to see the relationships that they want to see in the media. Slash, much like pornography that is made explicitly for women, can then be seen as “cracks ... [which] offer ... a space from which we can view women’s resistances and appropriation, where we can view women rewriting the narrative of the public and private and asserting their identity and agency in virtual spaces” (DeVoss 90). We can then see the act of creating pornographic texts, such as slash, by women, as both a kind of resistance and a kind of transgression, where women rewrite the narrative in a manner that is oppositional to the original modes of the text.

This brings us to the natural question of whether slash can be considered feminist, in that it is (predominantly) women’s writing that relies heavily on the ideas of resistance. In addressing this, the first thing to keep in mind is that if it has feminist elements, they must be latent, as fan writers rarely set out with a feminist agenda of resistance, rather the resistance occurs as they participate in the act of writing. In engaging with and questioning popular notions of sex, sexuality, pornography and romance, one can trace the feminist thought in the agenda of slash fiction.

Adrienne Rich, in her 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” points out that female sexuality is regulated by socio-legal punishment and sexist ideologies discouraging autonomous assertions of desire. Also, male concepts of sexuality are forced upon women through the idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature and the media (Rich 638-639). Fantexts destabilize this social narrative by emphasizing homoerotic potential. Through questioning and reconceptualising ideas of sexuality, sex and romance, slash writers end up fulfilling what can be defined as a feminist agenda in their work. Furthermore, there is the idea of the community as a safe space – one that, as

we have established, is supportive and accepting of most of its members. This feeling of community is important to women when dealing with sexually explicit material. “Asides from the fact that such a community offers writers an invaluable opportunity to receive constructive feedback on their writing, it also serves to help all members explore their own feelings about sex and sexuality in a safe and supportive environment.” (Neville 110) Open discussions about sexuality in fan spaces have often been conducive to young people who are trying to understand it and lack opportunities to discuss it openly outside of the internet. A fan community becomes a “dynamic space allows women to participate in issues of female sexuality and identity such as bisexuality, homosociality and other modes that contest the hierarchised heterosexual paradigm.” (Nagaike 99) The fan ‘sisterhood’ that writes and encourages others to write is a space for women to take their own libidos into their own hands without fear of being outcasts or misfits. They are free from the guilt that they would otherwise face as a result of the reactions of society in general, and their own psychologies in particular. Slash is a space for the exploration of the “inexhaustible female imaginary”, as Cixous would put it. The encouragement to write that members of the fan community give each other are similar to what Cixous says in “The Laugh of the Medusa” when she exhorts women to write, even if it is to “take the edge off”, paralleling writing with the act of masturbation, implying that women writing feel a similar sort of guilt. “Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man... and not yourself.” (Cixous 426) This, Rosi Braidotti theorises, is what the feminist project and feminist theory should really be about.

What the feminism of sexual difference wants to free in women is ... their desire for freedom, justice, self-accomplishment and wellbeing: the subversive laughter of Dionysus as opposed to the seriousness of the Apollonian spirit. This political process ... does not aim at the glorification of the feminine, but rather its actualisation or empowerment as a political project aimed at alternative female subjectivities. (306)

It is therefore possible to say that a great part of the appeal of slash fanfiction lies in the ability for women to take charge over the right to express their own sexuality without any lingering Freudian guilt, to play with texts and worlds that were thus far closed to them by virtue of they being within the domain of male domination and due to an inaccessible erotics, and subvert societal expectations of innocence.

Female sexuality has been expressed in the form of fiction outside of slash as well, in mainstream romances published for female consumption under the label of erotica, famously exemplified by the existence of Mills & Boon and Harlequin Romances. These heterosexual narratives that emphasise the virtues of marriage and monogamy were for

many years considered to be the only kind of erotica that was appropriate for women to write or consume, although the explicit sexuality of these stories is a recent development. While there are many theories behind the popularity of romance novels among women, one of the most widespread ones is that they represent women's "insatiable appetite for love in all its guises" (Camp, 1997) Ann Snitow, in her analysis of mass market romances, delineates their dark aspects. She shows that the heroine is not allowed by social mores to acknowledge sexual desire honestly and has to do "a lot of social lying to save face, pretending to be unaffected by the hero's presence while her body melts or shivers" because she has to save her virginity for marriage (125). Distance between the sexes is glorified and the sexual inexperience of the heroine adds to excitement (426).

...What is the Harlequin romance formula? ...All tensions and problems arise from the fact that the Harlequin world is inhabited by two species incapable of communicating with each other, male and female. It is pleasing to think that appearances are deceptive, that male coldness, absence, boredom, are not what they seem....In spite of his coldness or preoccupation, the hero really loves the heroine and wants to marry her. (Snitow 424, 426)

In wanting to repair the broken hero and see beyond his façade of masculine coldness, the romances seem to be teaching women readers the feminine values of "of nurturing, of aspiring, of following your heart, and of finding success or rewards" (Camp 47). The study of the popularity of slash would require a different set of parameters.

Salmon and Symons in *Warrior Lovers* suggest that while in Harlequin style heterosexual romance stories, the protagonists are drawn closer through their sexual attraction and it is through their sexual encounter that a bond is established between them, in slash stories it is often the inverse – the bond between the characters is already in place before the sex happens. Therefore in the case of many heterosexual romances, sex is what leads to love, and the development of a strong bond between the hero and the heroine, while in the case of slash, it is love (or perhaps the begrudging respect of a rival) that leads to sex. "Slash protagonists put their hands in the fire for each other long before romantic love or sex were on the horizon" (Salmon and Symons³). Slash is thus grounded on an intense M/M relationship, whether between friends or rivals. More importantly, a slash relationship is between men, and as such it is a relationship between *equals*: neither party is required to – as women traditionally are – compromise or drastically change their lifestyle or personality without negotiation. In the case of a couple such as Harry and Draco, who begin as rivals or enemies, the allure is even stronger, as part of the pleasure is seeing their negotiation of expectations of male aggression (rather than friendship) in terms of desire, a dynamic that is rarely seen outside of fanfiction. In pornography, according to Catherine Driscoll, "Not

only is characterization not the point of most pornography, it is even an obstacle to the efficiency of pornography....” (91). In contrast to the denial of the emotional consequences of sex in most porn, in slash sex always has direct and dramatic emotional ramifications. (Kustritz 377-378)

Is slash ultimately pornographic? In *The Other Victorians*, Stephen Marcus talks about how one of pornography’s most defining features is the construction of porntopias. which are essentially backgrounds for what is referred to in fandom as Porn Without Plot: they are set in locations that are nowhere in particular, “no place” that, if named, is irrelevant; time is only important to indicate how long the sex act or series of sex acts last; characters are only defined as participants in sex and the only climax present is the sexual one. Sex, therefore, is all that is significant in narratives of this kind.

All men in it are always and infinitely potent: all women fecundate with lust and flow inexhaustibly with sap or juice or both. Everyone is always ready for anything, and everyone is infinitely generous with his substance. It is always summertime in pornotopia, and it is a summertime of the emotions as well – no one is ever jealous, possessive, or really angry. (Marcus, cited in Pagliasotti 76)

According to Marcus, then, pornography is a utopian genre, a perfect world in which everything is eternal – from the weather to the virility of the participants in the act of sex. If this is the definition of pornography that we are to accept – with its lack of characterisation and lack of context – then slash is decidedly not pornographic. Even Porn Without Plot stories are still rooted in the fact that the readers go into these stories knowing everything there is to know about the characters, their personalities, and the context from their exposure to them in canon. Readers require there to be some form of a story to make the experience ‘worthwhile.’ As a result, in most fanfiction there is a privileging of romance and emotions over raw sex. It “wraps sex in the emotionalism of romance” as Snitow says. Her view on pornography is that there is a total sensory immersion in the experience and a desire for “complete, immediate gratification” If we are to accept a combination of both Snitow’s and Marcus’ views, then the worlds of even the most plotless PWP slash fic are porntopias where random, but intense, sexual encounters take place but they do not stand on their own, they are mostly supplemented with elements of story and character development to make them more appealing.

Slash fic foregrounds the female act of viewing a male homoerotic display, shifting the position of the woman from being the gazed upon object to the gazing subject while men become the object of the gaze. It is a representation of female desire from a scopophilic

perspective, making the women the viewers and voyeurs and therefore the ones who derive pleasure from the act of viewing. While this is subversive in the act of making the women the viewers rather than the viewed, introducing the female gaze and giving women the power to make men the objects of desire, it cannot be concluded that slash is an all pervasive solution to challenging the male gaze. This is because of the element of guilt that women experience when they take on this position of viewer.

Women have traditionally been separated from the realm of the erotic which was always a very phallo-centric space. There are also the psychological complexities associated with a sense of guilt. In “A Child is Being Beaten”, Freud defines the concept of female sexuality in terms of their inevitable feelings of guilt due to their unconscious (incestuous) desires. The guilt need not be uniformly due to incestuous desires, however. It can be theorised that women feel guilt and shame about identifying with female characters in pornography, who express pleasure and achieve sexual satisfaction by means of male penetration. To escape the guilt associated with the consumption of heterosexual pornographic material, women create slash stories with their narratives of male homosexual eroticism “in which female readers needn’t consider the disadvantages of exposing their eroticism, since the mystified female sexual identity that fetters women in other forms of society is excluded from the male homosexual narratives.” (Nagaike 84) In identifying with male characters rather than female characters and projecting their own sexuality onto them, female readers are capable of obtaining the “ambivalent and balanced status” of simultaneously identifying with and dissociating from the protagonists in a scene. This sentiment is echoed by Gunn, who said that it is because of the absence of women in m/m pornography that she doesn’t “feel bound into an ideological discourse about the misrepresentation of my likeness.” (336)

Women use slash to express their own gendered or sexual experiences and desires, and slash transgresses the norm just by existing because fans, through writing and reading, critique and respond to cultural norms within canon through their own, often marginalized and neglected experiences. Through the medium of slash fic, women have been able to express their innate sexual desires and their ‘kinks’ in narratives that are suitably distanced from themselves through the absence of the female body. Unlike the readers of the romances Janice Radway interviewed in her seminal text, the readers of slash are less reluctant to reveal their kinks and their propensity for reading highly sexual works of fiction. In fandom spaces, it is as common for readers to compliment writers for well written pornographic scenes as it is for a piece of plot exposition. Fandom participants also speak openly about how it is through exposure to smutty fan fiction that they have been able to understand various forms of sexuality, especially with regard to homosexuality. For

many, it is through slash that they overcome internalised homophobia. “Fan fiction as a means of communication and a fictional framework has clearly demonstrated that traditional romance literature does not reflect sensual experiences of women in modern western societies. It does not reflect either their degree of sexual awareness, or their need for sexually-oriented texts.” (Samutina, 19) The popularity of a series like EL James’s *50 Shades of Grey* is testament to the fact that women readers are increasingly gravitating towards romances with explicit sexual content.

The appeal of slash does not stem from the sexual content alone, but more from the romantic, emotional content. There is a sense of monogamy between the characters in most stories, and the appeal of this is heightened with the ‘pure love’ underlying the relationships. “Establishing an ideal harmony between the sensual and the emotional, achieving wholesomeness of sexual and spiritual communication is a desirable outcome of an emerging relationship and a popular convention of fan fiction – in this notion of love Utopia, fan fiction fully concurs with basic forms of melodrama.” (Samutina 20) Joanna Russ points out the role that fanfiction plays in helping women in figuring out their sexualities. In adding tropes like hurt/comfort to the erotica, it is the emotional bond that is exemplified, love prevailing over other issues. Taking off from her examination of Star Trek Kirk/Spock fanfiction, it is possible to say that writing and reading fanfiction, regardless of how explicit, is not necessarily a *guilty* pleasure but one of the self: an acceptable, valid interest.

The problem with an essentializing statement such as saying that all slash writers are women, or even white women, is that a) it is nearly impossible to confirm as surveys can never cover the entirety of a fan space and people may lie, and b) it is equally impossible that there are no slash readers or writers who do not identify as female. In fact, many studies have shown that slash is created and consumed by people who belong to a multiplicity of races and gender/sexual identities, and that there is a great number of openly queer women creating slash. It is also true that the very idea of creating sexually explicit material – regardless of the queer content of said material – for other women can be considered a queer enterprise in itself. Darlene Hampton theorises that the production, reading and discussion of fanworks –under the anonymity of internet pseudonyms and personas – can be considered to be performing queerness as well, through the directing of bodies and desire in ways that are contrary to the legitimate, ‘canonical’ interpretations of the original text.

Therefore, as a space of women's writing, the act of creating fan fiction allows for erotic exploration and an engagement with desire that would otherwise not be accessible to them. As slashers continue to take stories and bend them to their own wills, exploring and widening the gaps in the text and creating works that reflect multiple possibilities of identity, they find erotic pleasure and a sense of empowerment in the act of subversion. Harry and Draco may therefore be doomed to be forever locked in mortal combat or in a passionate embrace – the possibilities are, as far as slash writers are concerned, endless.

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In a 1911 essay 'Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes,' Ronald Knox jokingly compares the Sherlock Holmes stories to the Bible. Early fandom took to referring to the collected works as 'Canon,' implying sacred writings.

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