

Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet

New Essays

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PART IV

MEDIUM AND MESSAGE:
FAN FICTION AND BEYOND10. Writing Bodies in Space
Media Fan Fiction
as Theatrical Performance

Francesca Coppa

ABSTRACT.—I argue that that fan fiction develops in response to dramatic, not literary, modes of storytelling and therefore can be seen to fulfill performative rather than literary criteria. By recognizing drama instead of prose as the antecedent medium for fan fiction, and by examining fan fiction through the lens of performance studies, three highly debated things about fan fiction become explicable: (1) fan fiction's focus on bodies; (2) fan fiction's repetition; and (3) fan fiction's production within the context of media fandom. Fan fiction, whether written in teleplay form or not, directs bodies in space: readers come to fan fiction with extratextual knowledge, mostly of characters' bodies and voices, and the writer uses this to direct her work. In theatre, there's a value to revisiting the same text in order to explore different aspects and play out different scenarios; in television, we don't mind tuning in week after week to see the same characters in entirely different stories. Similarly, fan fiction retells stories, but also changes them. If traditional theatre takes a script and makes it three-dimensional in a potentially infinite number of productions, modern fandom takes something three-dimensional and then produces an infinite number of scripts. This activity is not authoring texts, but making productions—relying on the audience's shared extratextual knowledge of sets and wardrobes, of the actors' bodies, smiles, and movements to direct a living theatre in the mind.

Introduction

I explore a relatively simple proposition: that fan fiction develops in response to dramatic rather than literary modes of storytelling and can therefore be seen to fulfill performative rather than literary criteria. This may seem obvious, as the writing of fan fiction is most strongly and specifically associated with the nearly forty-year-old phenomenon of media fandom,¹ which is to say, the organized subculture that celebrates, analyzes, and negotiates with stories told through the mass (mainly televisual) media, and whose crossroads has long been the annual MediaWest convention held since 1981 in Lansing, Michigan. But the importance of media fan fiction being written in response to dramatic rather than literary storytelling has been overlooked for at least two reasons: first, that fan fiction is itself a textual enterprise, made of letters and words and sentences written on a page (or, more likely these days, a screen), and it therefore seems sensible to treat it as a literary rather than an essentially dramatic form; and second, that media fandom has its origins in science fiction fandom, which is a heavily textual genre. Media fandom spun off from science fiction fandom as a direct result of the original *Star Trek* television series (1966–1969),² and although fans and scholars have catalogued many similarities (in fannish organization, jargon, and interests; even today, most media fans maintain a strong interest in science fiction and fantasy) and differences (most strikingly in terms of gender, but also in attitudes toward profit and professionalization) between the two fannish cultures, the impact of the switch in genre from prose to drama is rarely discussed or even noticed. But whereas fans of literary science fiction often take to writing “original” science fiction themselves, fans of mass media write fan fiction — which, I submit, is more a kind of theatre than a kind of prose.

In making this claim, I should note that I am defining *fan fiction* narrowly as creative material featuring characters that have previously appeared in works whose copyright is held by others. Although the creative expansion of extant fictional worlds is an age-old practice, by restricting the term *fan fiction* to reworkings of currently copyrighted material, I effectively limit the definition not just to the modern era of copyright, but to the even more recent era of active intellectual property rights enforcement. Although fans themselves often seek continuities between their art-making practices and those with a much longer history (Laura M. Hale starts her History of Fan Fic timeline with “0220 The Chinese invent paper”),³ this conflation of folk and fan cultures may blur important distinctions between them, not least of which is the relatively recent legal idea that stories can be owned. It is only when storytelling becomes industrialized — or, to draw upon Richard Ohmann’s definition of

mass culture, produced at a distance by a relatively small number of specialists — that fan fiction begins to make sense as a category, because only then are “fans” distinguished from Ohmann’s distant “specialists,” just as amateurs are differentiated from professionals (1996, 14; and see Garber 2001).

The line between amateur and professional writing is both sharply defined and frequently crossed in science fiction fandom, because science fiction is a literature itself written by fans of the genre; to be an amateur science fiction writer is therefore merely a step on the way to becoming a professional science fiction writer, and professional writers still go to conventions to hobnob. From this perspective, the professional is superior to the amateur, who is serving a kind of apprenticeship. Conversely, MediaWest prides itself on being a convention run by fans and for fans, without any paid guests (professional authors, actors, or producers), and fan fiction writers tend to be defiantly amateur in the sense of writing precisely what they want for love alone. In this schema, to be a professional is to write at the command of others for money. There are exceptions to this in creators like Joss Whedon or Aaron Sorkin, who are seen as relatively fannish auteurs trying to make personal shows within the confines of the industry. However, fans mostly shake their heads in bemusement at television shows that can’t keep track of basic continuity, or films that miss obvious dramatic opportunities; it’s understood that this is the by-product of creating a dramatic universe for profit and by committee. Bemusement can give way to an angrier sort of frustration when creators visibly command the resources and power necessary for good mass media storytelling and are judged to have botched it anyway (George Lucas and Chris Carter come to mind).

In the infamous “Get a Life” (1986) sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, William Shatner framed his involvement with *Star Trek* as purely professional: “You’ve turned an enjoyable little job, that I did as a lark for a few years, into a colossal waste of time!” Shatner’s professionalism is tied to his refusal to take mass media storytelling seriously. But what of the fan who does take mass media storytelling seriously? What response is available to her? The science fiction fan may challenge her literary forerunners by becoming a professional writer, but the media fan is less likely to become a producer, screenwriter, or director. Science fiction is produced from among “us,” but the mass media is still produced at a distance by “them.” Few fan fiction writers will ever have access to the means of production for mass media storytelling. The bar is much higher; the funds needed are enormous; one still has to move to Los Angeles or Vancouver; the odds of writing a show you like, as opposed to one you’re assigned to, are small; until relatively recently, the gender bias in Hollywood was astounding. There is, in short, a very small chance of a fan fiction writer becoming a professional

mass media storyteller, even if she was inclined to do so. Defiant amateurism in this case is both realistic and structurally smart, but that doesn't stop some science fiction fans from scoffing at the media fan's refusal to write something potentially salable.

Not only has "derivative" fiction been scoffed at within science fiction fandom, but drama has historically been a belittled category as well.⁴ Despite the popular sense of science fiction as a genre with space battles, laser guns, and voyages to the moon, these dramas have been traditionally scoffed at by science fiction writers, whose allegiance is to idea-based narrative fiction. Magazines and novels are at the heart of science fiction fandom, not stage, film, or television (Ohmann 1996; Zimmerman 2003). In January 1976, an essay by Harlan Ellison appeared in the Science Fiction Writers of America newsletter urging the membership to take drama, and the SFWA's Nebula Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, more seriously:

We haven't been quite as concerned with the Drama Nebulas as with the more familiar categories, chiefly because a small percentage of our membership has been employed in the areas that Nebula touches, and so it has been something of an illegitimate offspring. But sf films and tv shows and stage productions and sf-affiliated record albums reach a much wider audience than even our most popular novels and stories. And to a large degree the public image of sf is conditioned by these mass-market presentations [Ellison 1984, 82].

Ellison pointed out the historic "snobbishness on the part of our older, more print-oriented members toward film and tv" and noted that "everyone else seems to understand the power of film/tv. SFWA doesn't" (84). However, when the group chose not to award a Nebula for drama in 1977, Ellison resigned from SWFA and gave a speech in which he berated his audience for "worrying about a lousy 5 cents a word" while ignoring the much more lucrative fields of stage, television, film, and audio recordings (87–98). But Ellison's concern was for the strategic and financial importance of drama, not for drama's artistic value. In fact, Ellison is blatant about his allegiance to prose: "Tragically, the illiterates keep multiplying, and the audience for books *must* be kept alive! ... Books are *my* first interest, books should be *your* first interest. They count. But the way to support the writing of books is to get some of that film and TV money" (93).

This is hardly an enthusiastic defense of performative storytelling; Ellison merely argued that SFWA members should profit from the current boom in dramatic science fiction—1977 being, of course, the year *Star Wars* was released. Ellison not only wrote the hands-down most popular episode of *Star Trek*, "City On the Edge of Forever," but is now also famous as a fierce defender of writers' intellectual property. However, the snobbishness against drama Ellison was fighting in the 1970s is still alive and well in the new

millennium. Orson Scott Card (2005) celebrated the recent (and surely temporary) death of the *Star Trek* franchise by attacking the original series as mere visual "spectacle" for people who weren't readers of science fiction, although he does end by granting that "screen sci-fi has finally caught up with written science fiction." This is offensive to the female sf fans who created *Star Trek* fandom in the late 1960s; as Justine Larbalestier (2002) has shown, women were always present as readers of sf, though they weren't always visible on the zine letter pages that were the public face of the sf fandom (23–27). In fact, the subset of female sf fans who founded *Star Trek* fandom had multiple literacies and competencies: like many readers (and writers) of science fiction, they were likely not only to be avid readers but also to have advanced degrees in the hard sciences at a time when this was much less common for women (Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," this volume).

Most media fans still maintain at least a (ritual) allegiance to print over film; the two most recent large-scale media fandoms—*Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*—are listed at the multifandom archive site Fanfiction.net under "Books" rather than "Movies" even though both fandoms grew exponentially only after film versions appeared. Ask a fan, and she'll generally express a preference for the book over the "movieverse," but over and over, dramatic, not literary, material generates fan fiction. Although creative fan-nish practices have become familiar enough to be applied to practically every genre of art—fanfic exists about books, movies, television, comics, cartoons, anime, bands, celebrity culture, and political culture—it's only when stories get *embodied* that they seem to generate truly massive waves of fiction.

It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that fan fiction is an inferior art form and worthy of derision—oh, for kids, maybe, sure, to get them reading and writing, but writing fan fiction is nothing that any respectable adult should be doing. Fan fiction, from this point of view, is neither art nor commerce. Instead, it is charged with being derivative and repetitive, too narrowly focused on bodies and character at the expense of plot or idea. That may sound like failure by conventional literary standards, but if we examine fan fiction as a species of performance, the picture changes. Fan fiction's concern with bodies is often perceived as a problem or flaw, but performance is predicated on the idea of bodies, rather than words, as the storytelling medium.

Scholars of performance studies often refer to their object of study as "the movement of bodies in space," and the behavior of those bodies is never unique or "original"; all behavior, as Richard Schechner (2002) explains, "consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviors" (28). For this reason, Schechner defines performance as "twice behaved" or "restored" behavior (22), so a focus on the importance of repetition and combination as well as a focus on bodies is intrinsic to performance as a genre. As Schechner explains:

Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the casual systems (personal, social, political, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original “truth” or “source” of the behavior may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, contradicted—even while that truth or source is being honored [28].

This decontextualizing of behavior echoes the appropriation and use of existing characters in most fan fiction; in fact, one could define fan fiction as a textual attempt to make certain characters “perform” according to different behavioral strips. Or perhaps the characters who populate fan fiction are themselves the behavioral strips, able to walk out of one story and into another, acting independently of the works of art that brought them into existence. The existence of fan fiction postulates that characters are able to “walk” not only from one artwork into another, but from one genre into another; fan fiction articulates that characters are neither constructed or owned, but have, to use Schechner’s phrase, a life of their own not dependent on any original “truth” or “source.”

What better tool to apply to studying *Star Trek* and its derivative artistic productions than a form of criticism dedicated to explaining the semiotic value of bodies in space? By recognizing drama and not prose as the antecedent medium for fan fiction, and by examining fan fiction through the lens of performance studies, we are able to begin explaining three highly debated things about fan fiction: (1) Why does fan fiction seem to focus on bodies? (2) Why does fan fiction seem so repetitious? and (3) Why is fan fiction produced within the context of media fandom? What is the relationship between a fanfic writer and her audience?

Embodying the Geek Hierarchy

I begin a more detailed argument about the conflict between textual and embodied meanings with a quick close reading of the Brunching Shuttlecock’s “Geek Hierarchy” (Figure 10.1). The Brunching Shuttlecocks are an online comedy troupe popular among a broad spectrum of geeks, nerds, fans, programmers, and hackers. The “Geek Hierarchy” is one of their most circulated jokes, but a revealing joke, one that gets at something true about fannish hierarchies and social structure.

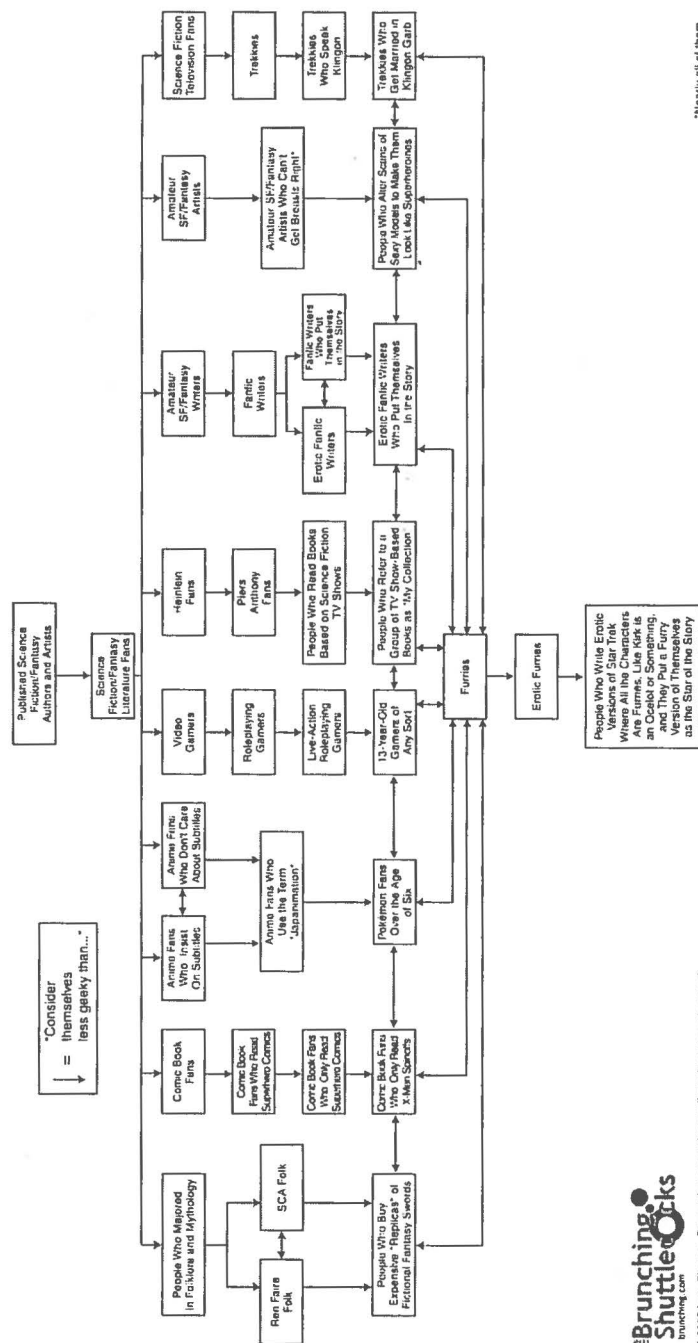
The Shuttlecocks place “Published Science Fiction Authors” at the very top of the chart, to be followed by “Science Fiction Literature Fans,” “Science Fiction Television Fans,” “Fanfic Writers,” “Erotic Fanfic

Writers,” and “Erotic Fanfic Writers Who Put *Themselves* in the Story” (all italics are my emphasis). To frame it another way, the Shuttlecocks rank the dramatic below the literary and the erotic below the dramatic. The hierarchy supports traditional values that privilege the written word over the spoken one and mind over body. The move down the hierarchy therefore represents a shift from literary values (the mind, the word, the “original statement”) to what I would claim are theatrical ones (repetition, performance, embodied action). As we descend, we move further away from “text” and more toward “body,” and, at least on the media fandom side of the diagram, toward the female body (because fan writers are likely to be women). At the very bottom of the hierarchy are the “furries,” or fans who enjoy media involving anthropomorphic animals. These fans indulge a fantasy of pure body that asserts a connection between our human bodies and animal bodies. The mainstream discomfort with that idea is straight out of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Even the Geek Hierarchy’s comparison between “Science Fiction Authors” and “Fanfic Writers” makes its distinction in terms of embodied action—because writing is a visible physical activity, a verb, while “authoring” (derived from the Latin *auctor*, “creator”) is something more complex. To author a text is to have power over it, to take public responsibility for it, regardless of whether or not one did the actual work of selecting words and putting them in order. Authorship is a sign of control rather than creation. This distinction is gendered, because there is a larger tradition of seeing the female writer in terms of body rather than mind. Consider, for instance, Hawthorne’s famous denigration of female authors as “scribbling women”; the slur conjures a picture of these women as engaged in frenetic activity, as if women’s writing must be more physical than mental. Scribbling women are like *skiing women, cleaning women, dancing women*—not minds, but bodies in space.

Moreover, Henry Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers* (2002), explains that one of the earliest uses of the word *fan* was in reference to “women theatre-goers, ‘Matinee Girls,’ who male critics claimed had come to admire the actors rather than the plays” (12)—or, to gloss the idea another way, bodies rather than texts, or to have given a somehow wrongful emphasis to the body in space. Similarly, Joan Marie Verba, in her 1996 history of *Star Trek* zine culture, *Boldly Writing*, notes that by 1975, ever-increasing numbers of fans saw *Star Trek* not as science fiction but “as a ‘buddy’ show, or as a heroic/romantic saga, in which Kirk and Spock were the focus.” She continues, “Many of these stories reminded me of the ancient Greek

THE GEEK HIERARCHY



*Nearly all of them

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Brunching
Shuttlecock

legend of Damon and Pythias, with Kirk and Spock substituted" (23). This allusion is interesting, because practically speaking, the legendary characters aren't so much "characters" as a set of actions, a behavioral script; to offer to exchange places with a comrade who is facing death is to *be* Damon and Pythias, and so this sort of fan fiction "casts" Kirk and Spock as the legendary friends in a performance of the myth. From this viewpoint, Kirk and Spock aren't characters firmly enmeshed in a narrative, but performers whose twice-behaved behaviors might (like Schechner's behavioral strips) be rearranged or otherwise reconstructed. The result of this reconstruction wouldn't be "original" behavior, however, because according to Schechner, there's no such thing. Rather, Kirk and Spock are well cast to perform Damon and Pythias. One set of twice-behaved behaviors is exchanged for another. This emphasis on character, behavior, and relationships is often framed as a female value; it's certainly a theatrical one.

We can see these theatrical and performative values in the very earliest creative contributions to *Star Trek* zines. The first *Star Trek* fanzine, *Spockanalia* (1967, edited by Devra Langsam and Sherna Comerford), included the creative artwork "The Territory of Rigel," by Dorothy Jones (Figure 10.2). In *Boldly Writing*, Verba describes this as a "poem," but it is, in fact, a song with an explicit stage direction that tells us it's a *ni var* to be performed by two voices and a Vulcan harp, no doubt influenced by the scene in the *Star Trek* episode "Charlie X" where Uhura sings while accompanied by Spock. Perhaps some readers actually sang the song with their friends, or perhaps the reader was merely supposed to direct the performance of the song in her head—but the key thing is that the reader of this song can do these things because she has an image of Leonard Nimoy as Spock with a Vulcan harp accompanying a singer. The performance of this song has already been cast; we know the behaviors of both singers and harpist. To read this song is therefore to supplement the written words with the mental image of the appropriate bodies. This "text" is overtly performative and relational; two voices, *ni var*, two people singing; as the songwriter explains, *ni var* means "two form," comparing and contrasting two aspects of the same thing (Verba 1996, 11). This *ni var* features two people singing, a third if the Vulcan harpist isn't one of the singers, and a fourth if you, the reader/director, isn't part of the performance. It's not a poem, it's a party; it's an artwork that implies a community.

Opposite Fig. 10.1. Brunching Shuttlecock's "Geek Hierarchy." Available at <http://www.brunching.com/geekhierarchy.html> (accessed June 1, 2006). Used with permission.

The Territory of Rigel

(A *ni var* to be performed by two voices and Vulcan harp)

First Voice

Rigel in the scanner,
blue-white and crystalline,
shining. Light
born in the corona
pours into space.

The instruments whisper,
the panel lights flicker.
The stars are still and clear.

Their song is deliberate,
long years to a cadence.

Dust in their paths
moves in their wake like water.

and Rigel shines.

The stars like ancient trees.
heavy with planets, blazing with life.

I wander the bright roads
whom no planet claims:
live in the open Galaxy

I have clarity before me,
and Rigel full of light.

Second Voice

Dark and silent

is the field of space.

The bridge is empty.
The time, three hundred.

The instruments tell little.
The computer absorbs in silence
trivial patterns meaning nothing.

Three-twenty.
The night is very long.

In the dark gulf is the ship.
in the sleeping ship is the bridge
on the bridge am I,
silence upon silence,

as quiet as memory,
and dark as death.

I am far
from my beginning and my end.

Four hundred and the watch is changed.
I leave the bridge and go
from darkness into darkness.

Figure 10.2. "The Territory of Rigel," by Dorothy Jones, From *Spockanalia I* © 1967, edited by Sherna Comerford and Devra Michele Langsam. Available in Verba (1996, 2). Used with permission.

Similarly, some fan fiction has been written in script or teleplay form, often by fans who aspired to write for the produced show (and there is a perception among fans that a greater proportion of these script-writing fans have been men [Cynthia Walker and Laura Hale, personal communications, June 8, 2005]). An actual theatrical play based on *Star Trek* was put on at the Denham Springs Community Theatre in 1971; the fact was widely reported in zines, as was Gene Roddenberry's approving letter: "I have no

objection to plays similar to *Star Trek* or even identical to *Star Trek* if done by students or community groups on a non profit basis as long as the appropriate credit is given to the source material and individuals. Or as long as a production remains a community theatre venture" (Verba 1996, 6). Roddenberry's coda insists on the play's nonprofit status; then as now, to write in script form would be a sign of a writer's aspiring professionalism. Although some fan teleplays were probably written as spec scripts for the industry, others ended up published in zines, and when online fan fiction archives became popular in the mid-1990s, the fiction was categorized not only as "gen," "het," or "slash," but by such categories as "romance," "drama," "humor," "poetry," "filk," or "teleplay." But the script form has always been unpopular among readers, so a fan whose primary audience was other fans rather than the television industry was more likely to tell her dramatic story in prose. Arguably, the teleplay form declined as media fandom broke away from science fiction fandom, becoming more defiantly amateur as television writing grew more professionalized, but the current fracturing of the television market due to competition from cable, satellite, DVD, video games, and the Internet seems to be reversing this trend once again. Newer shows (and older shows that have had time to evaluate the creative and economic value of their fan base) increasingly invite the creative participation of fans, and many seem to want to blur the lines between amateur and professional, fan and specialist. As an example, the Web site for the television series *The Dead Zone*, a show helmed by longtime *Star Trek* writer and producer Michael Piller, offers to fans not only free copies of the aired scripts, but a writer's guide for the show and explicit instructions on how to send in your teleplay for professional consideration. In this climate, fans may become professional movie or teleplay writers while still maintaining their identities as fans and while writing fan fiction.

The existence of the teleplay and other performative forms helps to demonstrate fan fiction's roots as an essentially dramatic literature, but the larger part of my argument is that fan fiction directs bodies in space even when it's not overtly written in theatrical form. Readers come to fan fiction with extratextual knowledge, mostly of characters' bodies and voices. Jane Mailander (2005) argues that fan fiction is an ideal medium for erotica because "the audience knows the characters; they've walked that mile in their shoes, they are *primed*. The dynamic between these two people is clear to the audience." A fan fiction writer has "the challenge of expressing that dynamic, of taking it to a place that would make the producers blush—but a place that must follow logically from that baseline development." Mailander is talking about character, but she might as well be talking about bodies; we know who these characters are because we know the actors who play

them, and we bring our memories of their physicality to the text, so the reader is precharged, preeroticized. But the actor's body, as much as the words on the page, is the medium of even nonerotic fannish storytelling. In making her point that we come to fan fiction "primed," Mailander also identifies something we might correlate with Schechner's twice-behaved behavior. We're primed because we've met these characters already, and now we're seeing them again. In theatre, we call that a *production*, and it isn't a problem.

Repetition and the Derridean Supplement

From a literary perspective, fan fiction's unusual emphasis on the body seems like a thematic obsession or a stylistic tic, but in theatre, bodies are the storytelling medium, the carriers of symbolic action. Similarly, in literary terms, fan fiction's repetition is strange; in theatre, stories are retold all the time. Theatre artists think it's fine to tell the same story again, but differently: not only was Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a relatively late version of the tale (previous versions include the "Amleth" of Saxo Grammaticus, its translation by Francois de Belleforest, and the *Ur-Hamlet* attributed to Thomas Kyd), but we're happy to see differently inflected versions of the tale. Moreover, there's no assumption that the first production will be definitive; in theatre, we want to see *your* Hamlet and *his* Hamlet and *her* Hamlet; to embody the role is to reinvent it. We also want to see new generations of directors and designers recast the play without regard for authorial intent or historicity, putting *Hamlet* into infinite alternative universes. What if Hamlet was a graduate student? What if Hamlet had an (entirely ahistorical) Oedipal complex? What if Hamlet was a street kid in the Bronx? Hamlet has been portrayed as an action hero/medieval warrior (Mel Gibson, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1990), the avenging son of a Japanese CEO (*The Bad Sleep Well*; Toshiro Mifune, dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1960), an angry young man (Peter O'Toole, dir. Laurence Olivier, *Old Vic*, 1963), and a university student home on break (Alex Jennings, dir. Matthew Warchus at the RSC, 1997).

In theatre, there's a value to revising the same text in order to explore different aspects and play out different behavioral strips; similarly, in television, we don't mind tuning in week after week to see the same characters in entirely different stories. We don't mind new versions of *Hamlet* the way we don't mind new episodes of *Star Trek*. We don't say, "Oh, *Star Trek* again? We had *Star Trek* last week!" We don't mind if Kirk and Spock visit—as they did on the aired series—a planet based on Roman gladiator culture, or Native American culture, or America during the Great Depression. Most

people happily watch televised repeats—identical replays of dramatic action. How much more interesting would different performances of the same scripts be if the actors and directors explored the limitations of the text and tried to elicit different readings, different embodied meanings? And because fan fiction is an amateur production accountable to no market forces, it allows for radical reimaginings: plots, themes, and endings that would never be permitted on network television. One could imagine *Star Trek* by David Lynch, *Star Trek* by Stanley Kubrick, *Star Trek* by Woody Allen—and what I'm getting at here is that that's what fan fiction is.

But you don't even have to attend multiple productions to understand doubling and repetition in theatre. Most productions were scripts first: theatre is an art form where we read something with the goal of making something else out of it. The script isn't the final product in theatre; in fact, one of the questions that theatre theorists have had to debate is the location of the work of art. Is it in the author's original script? Probably not; the original script goes through innumerable changes in performance and is rarely seen outside of library archives. The published script of a theatrical or teleplay is usually a postproduction draft that takes into account changes that were made during production by actors, director, and designers; far from being evidence of a single authorial vision, a published play is one of the most collaborative genres in existence. And most theatre works never result in a published script at all, so it's difficult to argue for text as the central object in a theatrical art experience.

Far from being a sacred text, a play's script is more like a blueprint for a production—a thing used to make another thing. Like any architectural blueprint, a script provides the directions for building something three-dimensional and situated in space. But one can't point to theatrical production as the center of dramatic art either, because the question then becomes: which production? A script isn't simply directions for building something in space, but also in time—not just a single production, but a potentially infinite series of productions. Marvin Carlson (1985) theorizes the complicated relationship between all the multiple and vastly different works of art that can be associated with a single dramatic story in terms of the Derridean supplement, and the supplement also serves as an excellent model for fan fiction as well (see Derecho [this volume], who uses the Derridean term *archontic* to describe this same supplementarity).

The best way to explain a supplement is by pointing to a concrete example of one; Roger Laport used a French dictionary, but let me substitute for that the more familiar example of an encyclopedia. When you buy an encyclopedia, you buy a complete set, volumes A–Z. But the world keeps progressing, and knowledge keeps expanding, and so this "complete" set

of encyclopedias is outdated the second you buy it; it doesn't include today's news and discoveries. So when you buy an encyclopedia, they generally also include a yearly supplement—2005, 2006, and so on—that you can slot into your bookcase after “Z.” So with that image in mind, consider what the supplement does: it reveals the original thing, the encyclopedia, in this case, as incomplete, but also prophesies future supplements. In fact, a supplement suggests that completeness is actually impossible, as the presence of a 2005 supplement suggests the need for one in 2006, 2007, 2008, and on into the future, indefinitely.

We can apply this concept to theatrical performance, and then to fan fiction as performance. In theatre, a working script becomes a staged performance, but as Carlson explains, “A play on stage will inevitably display material lacking in the written text, quite likely not apparent as lacking until the performance takes place, but then revealed as significant and necessary. At the same time, the performance, by revealing this lack, reveals also a potentially infinite series of future performances providing further supplementation” (1985, 10). Fan fiction works much the same way. Once a story supplements canon—giving us something the original source did not by filling in a missing scene, getting inside a character's head, interpreting or clarifying or departing from the story as originally told—future supplements become inevitable, and they aren't any more redundant than multiple productions of *Hamlet*.

A conservative critic might argue that Shakespeare can support that level of interpretation and invention, whereas your average—or even better than average—television show simply can't. We tell certain stories over and over because they're brilliant and continue to be relevant. I don't share that point of view. I agree with Alan Sinfield when he argues that Shakespeare seems relevant because he is constantly interfered with (1994, 4–5). It is Shakespeare's endlessly creative fans—be they theatre practitioners carrying the stories on their bodies or literary critics teasing out new textual interpretations—who keep Shakespeare going. An endless number of Shakespearean productions supplement the texts, adding meanings that Shakespeare never intended and making them meaningful to twenty-first-century audiences. There's no reason not to see this as a perfectly valid artistic activity; and if it is so for theatre, why is it not for television?

Before a Live Audience

The third theatrical quality I want to discuss in terms of fan fiction is the need for a live audience. A live audience has always been a precondition for

fandom. Longtime fanzine editor and archivist Arnie Katz (n.d.) explains that science fiction magazines—particularly their letter pages—were essential to the genesis of science fiction fandom. As Katz notes, “Science fiction and fantasy were widely available for many years before fandom erupted.... Those who wanted to be more than readers couldn't do much while books remained the main delivery vehicle for science fiction. It's hard to interact with a book, other than to write a letter to the author in care of the publisher.” Science fiction fans have a saying: “fandom is a way of life”—which is to say, science fiction literature fandom is more than a celebration of texts; it's a series of practices. This may be why most academic works on fandom are ethnographies, or analyses of social organizations and cultural performances. As Katz points out, fandom is essentially interactive in a way beyond the traditional reader-writer relationship.

Fan fiction, too, is a cultural performance that requires a live audience; fan fiction is not merely a text, it's an event. Whether published in a zine, on a mailing list, to an archive, or to a blog like LiveJournal.com, there's a kind of simultaneity to the reception of fan fiction, a story everyone is reading, more or less at the same time, more or less together. Over the years, technology has allowed television viewers to reconstitute themselves as an audience; now, you can watch television while you post to the boards at TelevisionWithoutPity.com, or sit in an IRC channel, or send updates to your mailing list; you don't have to wait for the next issue of a zine to be mailed. Similarly, fandom gathers together a live, communal audience for stories, and fans have adopted and adapted every mode of communication in an effort to ensure that fan fiction quickly reaches its target audience.

Compare this to John Ruskin's definition of a “true” book:

A book is essentially not a talked thing, but a written thing; and written, not with the view of mere communication, but of permanence. The book of talk is printed only because its author cannot speak to thousands of people at once; if he could, he would—the volume is mere multiplication of his voice.... But a book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it [1985, 259–60].

Most books—including most mass market fiction—are not “true books” by this standard. Most books merely convey the storytelling voice to an audience that cannot be gathered together to listen simultaneously, as they do in theatre. A book's audience is generally dispersed over both space and time; people in different places read a book at different times, and reading is—at least in the last hundred or so years—a pretty solitary activity. This didn't used to be so; the line between reading and theatre was thinner in the days when a family patriarch might read aloud to his family after dinner, or a group of middle-class women might stage a tableau based on a

favorite text. Ironically, the rise of literacy and the greater availability of printed matter are largely responsible for fracturing the communal reading audience and encouraging the solitary consumption of stories. Consider Isaac Asimov's prophetic description of "the perfect entertainment cassette":

A cassette as ordinarily viewed makes sound and casts light. That is its purpose, of course, but must sound and light obtrude on others who are not involved or interested? The ideal cassette would be visible and audible only to the person using it.... We could imagine a cassette that is always in perfect adjustment; that starts automatically when you look at it; that stops automatically when you cease to look at it; that can play forward or backward, quickly or slowly, by skips or with repetitions, entirely at your pleasure.... Must this remain only a dream? Can we expect to have such a cassette some day? We not only have it now, we have had it for many centuries. The ideal I have described is the printed word, the book, the object you now hold.... Does it seem to you that the book, unlike the cassette I have been describing, does not produce sound and images? It certainly does.... You cannot read without hearing the words in your mind and seeing the images to which they give rise. In fact, they are your sounds and images, not those invented for you by others, and are therefore better [quoted in Ellison 1984, 51–52].

Asimov, writing years before VHS, let alone DVD, frames the book as an improvement over other forms of dramatic storytelling ("sounds and images") precisely because it's more individualized ("visible and audible only to the person using it"). Asimov's prophetic description illustrates how the book, taken as a technology, anticipates the virtual reality so feared by those who worry about the effects of video games and the Internet on children; it's interesting that those same parents are often keen to encourage immersive reading of the kind Asimov is valorizing. But immersive reading is generally not the kind encouraged by literature departments, which teaches students to attend to language. To read critically is to see a text not as "sounds and images" but as specific words placed on a page in a particular order; to closely read a text is to make meaning out of those particular words and no others. To look at, rather than through, the specifically defined words on the page is to see a story as a written rather than a "talked" thing.

Fan fiction is Ruskin's "talked" thing, or Asimov's "perfect entertainment cassette." Fan fiction writers generally use a relatively transparent style of prose conducive to an immersive reading experience. There are marvelous exceptions: many fan fiction writers are great prose stylists or even poets. But historically the fan fiction writer has tried not to get in the way of the reader's view of the characters, and in this, fan fiction writers are part of a more general literary trend. In an article in the *Washington Post*, Linton Weeks (2001) complains about the "No-Style style" of many best-selling authors and quotes book reviewer Pat Holt as noticing that "the

style of commercial fiction has shifted over to a television mentality," with "short paragraphs, a lot of switching of locations and lots of dialogue," without ever questioning to what extent this might make it not simply "inferior" prose but prose put to a different and nonliterary purpose. In her introduction to the forthcoming *Reconstructing Harry: "Harry Potter" Fan Fiction on the World Wide Web*, Jane Glauberman observes J. K. Rowling's "transparent" prose style without judgment, concluding that "the impression of transparency must stem in part from continuities with visual culture" and these continuities "call on devices ubiquitous in commercial media that themselves aspire to transparency." Certainly, Rowling's visual style may explain why the *Harry Potter* books were adopted by media fandom; they share fan fiction's theatrical values. For instance, Glauberman notes the unusual extent to which Harry was embodied in Rowling's text: "An awareness of the body is everywhere in these books.... Rowling expresses [Harry's] feelings somatically, 'his heart twanging like a giant elastic band,' 'as though he'd just been walloped in the stomach.' ... By giving us immediate access to his sensations, she contributes ... to the effect of transparency."

Harry Potter comes to us as the embodied protagonist of a series of stories that retell Harry's adventures during a series of school years. By the time of the fourth installment, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the simultaneous, worldwide release of the book was the occasion for something very like a public festival, with people coming out at midnight, sometimes in costume, not simply to purchase the book but also to formally constitute themselves as an audience. The ongoing series of novels was then made into an ongoing series of films. In all of these ways, the *Harry Potter* books resist the status of "finished literary text" made up of particular words in a particular order, and instead construct themselves as the open-ended inspiration for future performative supplements that will allow its audience to reconstitute itself on a regular basis. *Harry Potter* has already resulted in numerous translations, four sequels, three films, and, as of June 13, 2005, at least 190,994 fan fiction stories—so far.

Why stop there? *Can* it be stopped there? This is no longer a phenomenon within a single author's control; "Harry Potter" is now an entire creative universe within which millions of people are writing, reading, drawing, reporting, discussing, analyzing, criticizing, celebrating, marketing, filming, translating, teaching, theorizing, playacting. Although Rowling may be responsible for putting together a initial series of words in a particular order, only in the legal sense is she the "author" of all of these other creative productions. Or, to put it another way, she's the *author* in the sense of taking responsibility for these productions, but she's not the *writer* of those specific other expressions of the idea of a boy wizard at

school. There are other creative players involved, some paid (the artists who illustrated the text; the scholars who are writing the critical studies of the series) and some unpaid (the fans who participate in heated analytical discussions on *Harry Potter* Web sites or mailing lists, fan fiction writers). Similarly, a film like *Star Wars* or a television show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have become rich art worlds quite apart from the authorial or auteurial efforts of George Lucas or Joss Whedon.

One last word about the complex relationship between the author, these other creative writers, and the audience: in traditional literary studies, the author is dead, and has been for some time. The phrase alludes to Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" and to Barthes's argument that "as soon as a fact is narrated ... the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (1977, 142). From this perspective, language always means more than an author intends, and we cannot evaluate writing as an expression of a "person's" ideas or thoughts. Rather, we should look at writing as a separately existing linguistic performance that does/says more than any one person ever could. Barthes concludes by saying that what meaning there is to a text is made by the reader, and "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148).

But not the writer. In fandom, the author may be dead, but the writer—that actively scribbling, embodied woman—is very much alive.⁵ You can talk to her; you can write to her and ask her questions about her work, and she will probably write back to you and answer them. She might enjoy discussing larger plot, style, and characterization points with you if you engage her in critical conversation. You can tell her that her story is bad and hurt her feelings, or you can flame her as someone who shouldn't be writing at all. Moreover, the writer may well have worked with a team of editors or beta readers; the fiction might well be not only derivative of an author, but written collaboratively by a group, or crafted as a birthday present for a fellow fan—in short, the writer is part of an interactive community, and in this way, the production of fan fiction is closer to the collaborative making of a theatre piece than to the fabled solitary act of writing.

I believe that fandom is community theatre in a mass media world; fandom is what happened to the culture of amateur dramatics. In the days before television, people often made theatre in their homes, for fun, and in fandom, we still make theatre together, for fun, except we cast the play from our televisions sets. Theatre—actual, three-dimensional theatre that moves bodies in space—is expensive and requires tremendous social capital; you've got to have the power to make those bodies move under your direction and at your command. We discover women's poetry in attic trunks and women's novels written under male pseudonyms, but we still find that women are

underrepresented in the roles that orchestrate and dictate the actions of (male) bodies in performance. Consider the ongoing underrepresentation of women playwrights, composers, directors, and symphony conductors. If traditional theatre takes a script and makes it three-dimensional in a potentially infinite number of productions, modern fandom takes something three-dimensional and then produces an infinite number of scripts. This is not authoring texts, but making productions—relying on the audience's shared extratextual knowledge of sets and wardrobes, of the actors' bodies and their smiles and movements—to direct a living theatre in the mind.

Notes

1. Media fandom, although probably best the known and most studied as a result of the popularity of the mass media it is based around, is not the only kind of fandom. Comics, anime, and gaming each have well-established fandoms with different histories. However, the Internet has encouraged crossover among these groups.

2. Or possibly as a result of the double whammy of *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964–1968), another television series that was hugely popular with science fiction fans; see Walker (2001) and my own "A Brief History of Media Fandom" (this volume).

3. When possible, I have chosen to cite the online work of fan-critics and fan-historians rather than the published scholarly works of professional academics. As a fan, I am wary of "distanced professional expertise," even my own; the position of the media fan is one of defiant amateurism. In that spirit, I therefore note that fandom has always done an excellent job of explaining itself to itself, producing its own canon of theoretical literature, its own roster of fannish scholars, and its own critical apparatus for reviewing, analyzing, and recommending fan fiction.

4. Although the social value of live theatre has historically been greater than that of mass media dramatic forms, both have been marginalized. Literature and theatre are often grouped together as "high art" against film and television, but in practice, textual values are often opposed to performative ones. Drama has been seen as appealing to the working classes, women, children, and illiterates; also, until recently, there was no way to record and distribute it. In the specific context of science fiction, plays like Karel Capek's *RUR* (1920), which introduced the word *robot* into the world's languages, are often left out of the sf canon, even though they antedate the rise of prose magazine fiction.

5. I am indebted to my conversations with Georgina Paterson for these insights.

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