Judith May Fathallah

Fanfiction and the Author

How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts

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Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence

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Contents

Introduction

Fanfiction, the unauthorised adaptation and re-writing of media texts, is the fastest growing form of writing in the world (Mirmohamadi 2014, p. 5). Fanfic is typically freely shared, makes no money and, though it has an analogue history, now exists primarily on the internet. Early academic interest in the subject tended to be quite utopian, seeing fandoms as a democratic and socially progressive response to increasingly homogenized and corporate media industries. Gray *et al.* called this the 'Fandom is Beautiful' phase of academia (2007, p. 1). It is generally now accepted that fanfic is neither automatically transformative of media texts, nor a peacefully democratic and supportive community. It is a complex and contested arena of textual production with its own hierarchies, norms and structuring practices (Scodari 2003; Thomas 2005; Hills 2013, p. 149). Moreover, despite and because of the laissez-faire attitudes to fanwork by TV auteurs like *Buffy's* Joss Whedon and *Supernatural's* Eric Kripke, fanfic still negotiates a subordinated relationship to its canons (Scott 2011).

This book adapts discourse theory, developed from the work of the Michel Foucault, to address the question of how fanfic generates new statements that alter or uphold discursive formations from three of the most popular and influential franchises on TV today. Through the tools of discourse theory and network analysis, I hope to provide one answer to Artieri's timely call for investigation '*whether* and in *what ways*' fannish textual production can take 'forms that allow us to experience media contents differently as well as generate different interpretative categories of our society' (2012, p. 463). The shows chosen for study are the BBC's *Sherlock*, HBO's *Game of Thrones*, and the CW's *Supernatural*. This is partly due to their impact on popular culture, but, equally, some of the most prominent discursive formations in these shows relate directly to the cultural constructions of authorship and authority that lie at the heart of this argument.

The work of Suzanne Scott (2011) sets an important precedent here, identifying a gendered divide between legitimated and culturally approved work by fans, (primarily coded masculine, e.g. vid creation from licenced material) and fanwork that is scorned and devalued (primarily coded feminine, e.g. fanfic). Building on her recognition of the 'fanboy-auteur', who performs acceptance and legitimation of fannish production para-textually whilst retaining a position of economic and industrial power, this book is going to argue that fanwork is pervaded by and functions through what I call the *legitimation paradox*. Here, the legitimation and revaluation of the

Other—be it racial, sexual, or gendered—is enabled and enacted through the cultural capital of the White male. The formations selected for analysis build upon each other to demonstrate this construction: First, (White) masculinity in *Sherlock*; second, authority in *Game of Thrones*; and finally, authorship in *Supernatural.* In this clearest example, the fan's writing is legitimated by the TV-auteur, simultaneously empowered and contained as showrunners grant metatextual acknowledgement of and paratextual permission for fanfic. Derivative writing that changes popular culture is legitimated and empowered—*because and so far as the author says so.* By the final chapter, however, we will begin to see the deconstruction of the legitimation paradox at work, as the legitimacy of *authorship itself* begins to be questioned. From a similar standpoint, Paul Booth recently argued that 'media fandom is best understood as continual, shifting negotiation and dialogue within already-extant industrial relations' (2015, p. 1), wherein industry professionals and increasingly-visible fandoms are presently re-positioning themselves with regard to each other. I locate this work, then, as responsive to Louisa Stein's call for a 'third wave of fan studies' that 'recognize(s) the deepening relationship between fandom and mainstream culture' with attention to the political-economic and cultural factors that influence that relationship (2015, p. 11).

Firstly, I will situate this work in the context of Foucauldian approaches to text and authorship. I argue that a discourse analysis based on Foucault's theories of power as an 'open and capillary network' (Callewaert 2006, p. 87) is appropriate to the online context of fanfic today. Moreover, Foucault's (1991) theory of the author-function and the ability of discourse theory to account for statements from fictional genres, traditions and contexts provides appropriate tools for treating fanfic *as fiction*: something that previous commentators on fanfic have either elided (e.g. Jenkins 1992; Black 2008), or bracketed to the exclusion of social context (e.g. Pugh 2005; Kaplan 2006). Therefore, as I go on to summarize previous work on fandom and fanfic, I locate the contribution of this research as a discourse analysis that accommodates the networked context and fictional orientation of fic.

Chapter 2, the methodology, explains in detail the processes by which I found, coded and analysed relevant fanfic. As Evans and Stasi have argued (2014), fan studies has not always been sufficiently rigorous and transparent in presenting its methodologies. Some of this resistance comes from a reluctance to engage with problematic notions of objectivity and truthfulness (pp. 8–9), particularly when quantitative methods are concerned, but this project combines an autoethnographic lens with a mixed methods approach, which I hope can balance rigour with accountability on behalf

of the researcher. I will be paying specific attention to the means by which fandom hierarchizes, silences and disciplines its own texts via feedback, including praise and recommendation, insults and mockery; for, as Foucault has argued, discourses are constrained and ordered not only by external forces, but by powerful internal mechanisms of regulation (1981, p. 56). This is the first extended project to analyse the receptive, interactive, networked context of fanfic in web 2.0. Network analysis seeks to chart and analyse connections between nodes not simply in their functional capacity, but the capital and de/legitimation they confer (see Beaulieu 2005; Rebaza 2010), and the affiliations they indicate. A node, in this sense, simply means a definable point on a network, 'such as people, organizations, web pages, or nation states' (Hogan 2008, p. 143). Unsurprisingly, it has been frequently applied to studies of blogs, websites and social media. Yet, it has not been applied to fanfic before now. I address this gap; for, as Bronwen Thomas wrote in a stimulating article whose implications deserve more follow-up, these 'new modes of user involvement for online narratives [...] mean that we cannot [properly] analyse *what* is produced without analysing *how* it is produced and made available to others' and 'fanfiction cannot be understood in isolation from the network culture' (2011, pp. 206–207) facilitated by the structures of Web 2.0. I take specific note of link and recommendation networks as an indicator of the impact works of fanfiction make in their context.

Chapters 3–5 present the results of the research, treating the discursive formations in turn. The case studies of *Sherlock, Game of Thrones* and *Supernatural* have been chosen for several interlocking reasons. Firstly, each is presently an influential cult text with a productive, active online fandom. Moreover, the creators and owners of these texts have taken ex-plicit notice of fandom, making strong contrasting paratextual statements on their attitudes and policies towards it. At one extreme, George R. R. Martin initially sought to prohibit fanfic utilising his characters, though his stance has necessarily softened with the adaptation of his work to HBO and the introduction of new author figures in showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. At the other, Eric Kripke and the writers of Supernatural have gone to unprecedented lengths in the acknowledgement and address of their fandom, up to the inclusion of fanfiction and fan culture in the canon text. The *Sherlock* franchise operates somewhere in the middle, neither seeking to prohibit fan activity nor precisely embracing it, and its showrun-ners contradictory statements of attitude towards it. A discursive analysis that addresses these authorial paratexts before going on to discuss fanfic's transformation of the canon benefits from these contrasting cases, casting

light on how authorial positioning may or may not inflect the discourse (re) construction. Finally, three prominent discursive constructions in these texts and the consequent (re)constructive work of their fandoms connect intrinsically to the traditional figure of the White Male Author which still holds sway in popular imagination. (White) masculinity is addressed in *Sherlock*; the formation and fragmentations of authority in *Game of Thrones*; then the study culminates with an explicit address of authorship in *Supernatural*. First, the discursive construction in and around the texts are analysed, taking account of statements by showrunners and other author figures; then, consolidations and transformations by fandom are presented. The formations build upon each other: first, the BBC's construction of White masculinity in *Sherlock* is shown to be essentially conservative and rooted in the Victorian heritage of the character. It is predicated on the hierarchical division of mind and body and the superiority of White masculinity over other races and genders. Fanfic is shown to transform this discourse construction dramatically, yet in illustration of the legitimation paradox, these transformations are legitimated by and through the authorizing figure of the White man. Fandom's transformative reconstruction, then, paradoxically depends *what is already culturally author-ized*: the White male hero, and frequently the White male author figure behind him. This is the first illustration of the legitimation paradox, and accords with Booth's argument that whilst specific fan practices may well be resistant and transformative of mainstream ideologies, and underlying connection to and identity with the canonical source means that fanworks are 'in an always liminal state between resistant and complicit (2015, p. 3). Occasionally, we find the paradox working inversely, so that criticism of for example violence is not well received when it entails criticism of the author-ized White man. Fan writing can be made legitimate through the White male figure, and there is some resistance to attribute him with qualities that would make his authority less legitimate. Then, in Chapter 4, the fragmented and tenuous construction of authority in *Game of Thrones* is shown to be at odds with the traditional author figure of George R. R. Martin, and informed by broader cultural discourse on the conflict and connections between authority and power. Writing any kind of fanfic for *Game of Thrones* is a challenge to the construction of author as sole font of knowledge and the guardian of 'correct' meaning, as Martin has stated explicitly his dislike of the form and attempted to prohibit it for his book series. Perhaps in an ironic kind of deference to these wishes, fandom's transformations of the authority construct are quite subtle, constrained to a degree by the author-function as the limitation on 'proliferation of meaning' (Foucault 1991, p. 118). The

structures of authority in the text are not dramatically transformed, and where they are, this tends to operate again through channels that are already constructed as culturally legitimate within the diegesis of the canon. The most distinct transformation fanfic makes is the attribution of authority to women. Yet again, a certain deference to the concept of a 'real' text and the wishes of the 'real' author(-function) complicate the transformative impulse at work, and fan texts are sometimes praised in terms of their authenticity or faithfulness to the author figure's canonical statements. We observe the legitimation paradox at work both diegetically and extra-diegetically at the same time: as characters in fanfic enact transformation of the system by and through traditional forms of authority, fanfic transforms the discourse through self-conscious appropriation of Martin's text.

The final research chapter demonstrates the paradox most explicitly. Here, fanfic as a practice is legitimated yet contained by its presence in the show. By inclusion of fanfic about the show's own characters (*Supernatural* 5x01; 10x05), this writing has been sanctioned by the fanboy-auteur. Notably, as Newman and Levine have argued, the industrial construction of a televisual author-figure is itself a legitimation strategy, comparing television with traditionally legitimate art forms like the novel and later film (2012, p. 198). Fan discourse, then, takes the next step, frequently legitimating its own production in terms of the auteur's word. Paratextually, showrunner Eric Kripke professes to 'love' and 'welcome' fan production (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, p. 214). However, the manner in which fanfic is initially presented, as the work of the silly, obsessed, nymphomaniac fangirl, is a powerful discursive gesture of containment. Moreover, as a contrast, the author appears as a character in the text (*Supernatural* 5x01, 5x09, 5x22), either a prophet or, it is audaciously implied, God Himself. Whilst the second episode to feature fanfic mitigated this construction, fandom was reconstructing the author/fan relationship long before it aired, and this perhaps produces the most radical change to a discursive formation. Often, the primacy of the author and his text is affirmed. However, some fic, combining statements from the discourses of academia, literature and fandom to produce new knowledge, here begin to deconstruct the terms of the paradox in which the fic is only legitimated through the author. Assertions of a primary or original discrete text, a text that exists apart from the reader and/or fanfic writer, begin to be deconstructed. This, I suggest, is the means by which fanfic can compromise the legitimation paradox. Fanfic can thus be understood in postmodern terms, not only as a response or tactical counter to its predecessors, but as deconstructive of the *concept* of original, essentialist texts authored by God and White men,

and *Supernatural's* re-(re)integration of that argument *back* into canon demonstrates the effect of these statements on media. Other postmodern art forms, especially the postcolonial, are already understood as deconstructive of this concept (see e.g. Kraus 1985; Hutcheon 1988; Bhabha 1994; Anyinefa 2000; Bannet 2011), even as they may problematically reaffirm it through citation, reference or the stance of tactically opposing a great predecessor (Jacziminski 2009; Singh 2012). Moreover, these meta-textual statements take highly self-conscious forms, demonstrating alertness within fandom to the problematics of the legitimation paradox, and wariness with regards validating one's work through what is already culturally legitimate (cf. Booth 2015, p. 11).

Supernatural's construction of its fandom has been double-edged. The first writing fangirl introduced onscreen was Becky Rosen (5x01), a hyperfeminine, slash-obsessed young woman who was permitted her onscreen pleasures at the cost of a degree of mockery. Johnson names this practices 'fan-tagonism': a form of discipline by discursive containment, in which the text displays the fan to herself in controlling forms (2007). Fan-tagonism supposedly de-legitimates certain kinds of fandom—notably the excessive and feminine—by exposing, exaggerating and shaming (pp. 295–299). Yet, if discursive containment was the aim here, it has the opposite effect: a large body of fic (re)appropriates and transforms both Becky and the character of the author. I prefer the term *textual provocation* to describe the construction of fandom by canon and author figures. The double meaning in the term is intentional: such statements can be provocative in the sense of baiting, but they also provoke the production of more text, which potentially alters the formation. We will note instances of textual provocation in the paratexts around *Sherlock* and *Game of Thrones,* but the theory comes to full fruition in the final research chapter. Indeed, when *Supernatural* next introduced fangirl characters in 10x05, *Fan Fiction,* their construction was dramatically modified. These creative girls were fans, certainly, and ultimately still deferent to the diegetic the author figure, but they were, nonetheless, capable and creative writers in their own right, producing their own version of the text according to their desires. Here, we may see a concrete example of how fanfic has changed canonical popular text.

Chapter 6 concludes with a summary, a discussion of the limitations of this study and implications for further research. I suggest that the legitimation paradox could be utilised to study how other kinds of text negotiate their reference to an author-ized predecessor, and the points where, through deconstruction of that concept, they might compromise the paradox. For the construction of the author is powerful; but it is still a discourse formation.

As the alteration of discursive formations by powerful new statements from fanfic will demonstrate, discourse formations are always malleable and subject to change. Moreover, as the Foucauldian method illuminates, discourse analysis is concerned with what is thinkable and sayable, in particular cultural contexts. As fandom's visibility and impact on popular culture increases, transformative work becomes a practice that may, as Artieri put it, 'generate different interpretative categories' (2012, p. 463) that reach beyond fandom and canon into broader society. If, as Booth (2015) and Chin (2013, p. 88) argue, big media producers are engaging with fan audiences in increasingly innovative and visible ways, the discursive transformations and consolidations constructed through fanfic hold increasingly higher stakes.