

Beyond Mary Sue: Fan Representation and the Complex Negotiation of Gendered Identity

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Geek representation has changed in the past few decades: eighties high school nerd and outcast Anthony Michael Hall has given way to *The Big Bang Theory*'s (CBS 2007–) eccentric but loveable Sheldon Cooper, and fannish behavior is mainstreamed in network and cable shows from *NCIS* (CBS 2003–) and *Leverage* (TNT 2008–2012) to *Castle* (ABC 2009–) and *Psych* (USA 2006–2014). Yet most of these positive fan and geek characters are male; in fact, women are either cast as objects of nerd desire or, if they are depicted as fans, often derided as obsessive, silly, and loveless. Within such a televisual landscape, it is often difficult for women to see themselves in the media with which they engage, allowing them few potential female objects of identification and even fewer that may be like them: smart and geeky. One way female fans write themselves into contemporary media is by creating alter egos who can experience these worlds and characters. Alternately, fans take the protagonists out of their fictional universes and insert them into the audience's worlds: detectives, space explorers, and pop stars become fan fiction writers, beta readers, and bloggers.

Fan writers effectively feminize hypermasculine characters, give them primarily female geeky interests and writerly preoccupations, and, in so doing, revert the voyeuristic gaze while projecting their actions and emotions onto the characters. Internal community debates about issues of representation indicate how important it is for many fans to be able to relate to show characters—both male and female. At the same time, visual attraction remains important, so that the idea of Captain America as a Tumblr user or Dean Winchester as a cosplaying comic fan allows fan writers to merge attraction with identification. I suggest that fan fiction not only offers particular modes of interpreting the source texts but also ways to discuss and analyze theories of audience reception, especially as they relate to gender and the insufficient representation of women. Looking at Mary Sue as a particular instantiation of representing identificatory desires permits us to behold self-insertion fics not only as part of a larger spectrum of fan fiction, but also as an exemplary way in which fans explore and engage with their favorite media texts, their own identities and desires.

One of the central questions in literature is how to relate author and text. Beyond the most steadfast New Critical reading, it is apparent that excluding the author entirely

will needlessly limit interpretations (Busse 2013b). At the same time an analysis that predominantly emphasizes the writer's conscious (or unconscious) thoughts and desires is equally fraught. Nowhere is this question more pertinent than when we look at the way fans represent themselves, other fans, and fandom in general. By design and necessity, this discussion is gendered. Mainstream media's more positive representation of male fans together with the larger number of female fan writers tends to create a scenario in which fans more easily notice and more quickly vilify female self-insertions.

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of community definition and responses to the Mary Sue trope. At once a character, trope, developmental stage, writing style, and all too easy dismissal of female characters, the Mary Sue has become all but useless as a descriptive or critical tool. In its stead, I look at the various ways in which fans represent themselves and their communities within fan fiction, both explicitly through self-insertion and implicitly by foregrounding crucial characteristics in protagonists. Whether fans cathect certain characters that share central aspects with them or project these aspects onto beloved protagonists, whether they create narratives in which fannish behaviors are played out or use the canon playing field to explore personal concerns, stories are always meaningful in ways that often also include its authors and their community.

Mary Sue: Definition, dismissal, defense

"Mary Sue" is a term coined by fan writer Paula Smith in her 1973 satirical *Star Trek* short story "A Trekkie's Tale." Initially only mocking a very specific type of female character insert, Smith responded to a type of fan fiction where the original female character would be exceptional in background, looks, and accomplishments, often sidelining the canonical characters or achieving a romantic relationship with the protagonist. As authorial self-insert, Mary Sue tends to be wish fulfillment, allowing the author (and, if successful, the reader) to enter the canon and participate in the action. Paula Smith describes the writer's faults as follows: "A story demands headspace, and the Mary Sue wants to come and occupy your whole head, so the writer gets the enjoyment and not the reader. It's a little too much like being used. I suspect that's why an awful lot of people agreed with our assessment" (in Walker 2011, 2.15).

What exactly constitutes a Mary Sue is widely debated, but its undesirability is generally acknowledged. Mary Sue is an easy insult that shorthands a variety of criticisms, but centers on the introduction of a non-canon infallible female character who takes over the action. As the term became more popular, fans tried to define it in various ways. Different groups use diverging definitions as they defend or dismiss the concept, but all of the definitions are equally limiting. If one defines Mary Sues as bad writing, then all Mary Sue stories are tautologically badly written. If one defines Mary Sues as a stage in most writer's learning process, then the immaturity is both cause and effect of the writer's developmental, if not biological, age. And if one defines Mary Sue as any female original character, then the critical specificity loses much of its power.

Given the overwhelmingly negative associations with the term, Mary Sue often simply describes characters and stories readers don't like, while those characters readers do enjoy are defended as transcending the Mary Sue trope.

In "150 Years of Mary Sue," Pat Pflieger (2001) establishes historical precedents for the Mary Sue character, whom she describes as "amazingly intelligent, outrageously beautiful, adored by all around her—and absolutely detested by most reading her adventures," and most often to be found in "fiction written by less-than-experienced writers." By expanding the term to include original stories, Pflieger foregrounds three characteristics: (1) the Mary Sue's extreme physical attributes, abilities, and, often, back story; (2) the reader's instant dislike; and (3) the writer's immaturity. If we add to this Paula Smith's characterization that Mary Sues take over headspace or, as fan writer *p_zeitgeist* describes, stories in which a "character den[ies] other characters the right to be central to their own stories" (LJ, May 21, 2005),¹ then we get (4) the story warps around the Mary Sue as the main character.

If, as Henry Jenkins (1992) suggests, at least part of the appeal of fan fiction is to "efface the gap that separates the realm of [the writer's] own experience and the fictional" (p. 173), and if we assume that a large number of writers identify to some degree with their characters (whether canon or originally created), then the question remains as to why the loathing and resistance is so particularly strong in regard to the Mary Sue. Fan fiction thrives on pulling beloved characters into new environments, turning them into werewolves and vampires, policemen and assassins, college professors and barista. It domesticates its intergalactic heroes and international spies by getting them married with children, buying curtains and homes with picket fences. Once the writer inserts a female avatar into the text, however, a line seems to be crossed. Jenkins describes this internal evaluation and policing: "So strong is the fan taboo against such crude personalization that original female characters are often scrutinized for any signs of autobiographical intent" (p. 173).

Given the vast number and diversity of fandoms, stories, and writers, there clearly cannot be a simple or singular explanation for any given fan fiction trends—not even the often seemingly unanimous derision of Mary Sue stories. And yet there may be some justifications and purpose for at least a number of Mary Sue stories that allow us to understand the vehement reactions many fans have against such obvious autobiographical inserts. Academic discussions of the Mary Sue trope are interested primarily in the psychological ramifications of the self-insert as a developmental stage and as romantic/sexual gratification. In one of the most positive descriptions of Mary Sue fiction, "Keeping Promises to Queer Children," Ika Willis (2006) looks at fan fiction's ability to respond to "a reader's desiring subjectivity" (p. 163) and its ability to allow (often younger) fans to create queer characters within their fiction where none may exist in the text.

Also looking at often younger writers, Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) reads Mary Sues as created by younger if not beginning writers, in that she "must be an adolescent, behaviorally if not absolutely chronologically, because she represents a transition in roles and identity specific to that period in a woman's life" (pp. 101–2). By contrast, Anne Kustritz (2003) understands Mary Sues as "idealized versions of the [authors] in

order to fantasize about sex with the male protagonist” (p. 380). In so doing, Kustritz argues, she “represents and reproduces the worst aspects of female competition for desirable heterosexual relationship partners” (p. 380). Both of those are effectively oversharing the writer’s personal issues without mediating and coding them properly. Generally, fannish negative sentiments toward the latter often expand to dismiss all Mary Sue stories, thus ignoring the fact that various forms of self-insertions are a central feature of fan fiction, if not fiction in general.

Canon Mary Sue: *Darcyland* and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

Considering the fear of creating Mary Sues, fans are often torn between not wanting to self-insert while also not wanting to be completely left out. Fan writers thus put themselves into the text by altering and shaping the characters to resemble them or by placing the characters in situations that allow them to play out the fans’ own needs, desires, and situations. Unsuccessfully done, the characters retain little recognizability to other fans: after all, it seems somewhat unlikely that forty-year-old astrophysicists will serenade their boyfriends with “My Immortal Beloved” or that bubblegum pop stars read *Finnegans Wake* in their off time. Fan fiction is always a tightrope walk between, on the one hand, adhering to canon facts and characterizations—however conflicted and subjective those may be—and, on the other hand, introducing different plots, themes, characters, and characterizations. If we accept that Mary Sue tends to describe an unpopular (or too individual and particular) tilt to the latter, there still are many ways in which fans can incorporate their own lives, backgrounds, and experiences; their beliefs, interests, and ideas; their cultural, sexual, and physical identities.

Attributing personal or community characteristics to characters ranges from the very specific to the very general. It includes characters reading or quoting beloved books, listening to one’s favorite artist, or having hobbies such as knitting. It includes assigning specific identities with the characters, which are often referenced as head canon, a particular interpretation the writer believes to be true, one they want to see represented more widely, or one they may share with the characters, such as ace!Sherlock, trans!Carlos, or autistic!Will Graham. Often such works include subtle differences that merely shade the shared worlds and its characters as a little more liberal, more feminist, more queer than the canon worlds. Fan Betty P. explains in an essay how she purposefully alters her characters “in a certain way, a little more thoughtful than they probably are, a little more genuine, a little more confused. I write them trying harder to get through life than I think they really are... I write the way I write because it produces a story that I like and not because I think it mimics reality exactly” (LJ, January 23, 2004).

In the remainder of the chapter, I want to look at ways in which fan writers follow Betty P’s model of making the characters “a little more”—thereby creating a story they like and readers, in turn, like as well. I begin with the most obvious and easiest form of self-insertion, namely choosing a character that invites fan identification. A popular

example of a self-insert is the character of Darcy Lewis in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Played by Kat Dennings, Darcy is first introduced in *Thor* (Marvel 2011) and reappears in its sequel *Thor: The Dark World* (Marvel 2013). She is a twenty-something political science graduate student who works as astrophysicist Jane Foster's lab assistant and mostly provides comic relief and commonsense commentary in this strange meeting of human science and magic. In fandom, Darcy quickly became an ideal point of view character that allowed writers to focus on a regular human getting to know both international spy organization S.H.I.E.L.D. and superhero group The Avengers. In a large number of stories, she joins S.H.I.E.L.D. and becomes an agent or gets employed by Stark Industries as a lab assistant or both, often serving as a form of babysitter for the Avengers and always bringing a commonsense mentality to the insanities of secret spy and superhero life.

As an ensemble text, MCU supports many pairings, but few characters get paired up as easily as Darcy does. There are dozens if not hundreds of stories each that have her romantically entangled with anyone from Jane and Loki to Hawkeye and Captain America. She is one of the few women to have become a "little black dress," a term originating with *The X-Files* (FOX 1993–2002)'s Alex Krycek and depicting a character who can be paired easily with multiple and various other characters. As an anonymous commenter describes: "she gets shipped with people she's never met because she's young and hip and likes cute things and has no powers, like the people who write her" (fail_fandomanon DW, October 01, 2014). And yet throughout most of these stories, the basic Darcy characterizations stay constant, some drawn and extrapolated from canon (social media savvy, quick-witted, and irreverent, but also smart, brave, and loyal), many becoming shared tropes within fandom (mostly related to her babysitting the Avengers, her general status as competent sidekick, and her extreme snarkiness). In fact, while the romantic aspects are certainly important in many Darcy stories, the focus is often on her coming of age and learning to fit into the Avengersverse in general.

Darcy thus fulfills two central roles for female fan writers and readers: she allows fans to imagine themselves, normal and ordinary, as they enter and become familiar with this world of exceptionally trained undercover agents and superheroes; and she allows fans to not only succeed in this world but also to find love with one of these heroes. Where it is difficult to imagine ourselves as a God, a multibillionaire, a serum-enhanced super soldier from World War II, a brainwashed assassin, a CEO of an international company, or a brilliant astrophysicist, Darcy is effectively fangirls everywhere: iPod listening, snarky, and big-busted, she looks, sounds, and feels like someone we might encounter on Tumblr or at ComicCon.

The only other MCU character who has a similarly mundane background and thus can function as an everyman character with whom we can identify is S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Phil Coulson. Unlike Darcy, however, this middle-aged professional male has clearly been recognized by the showrunners in this function. In fact, Coulson's role has expanded throughout the Marvel Cinematic Universe, beginning with brief appearances as the obligatory man in black in *Iron Man* (Marvel 2008) and *Thor* to becoming a hero in his own right in *The Avengers* (Marvel 2012) to, finally, frontlining the TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC 2013–). So whereas Darcy Lewis's inclusion in

and interaction with the Avengers remains purely in fan speculation, Phil Coulson's has become canonical, in effect creating a fannish stand-in within the canonical universe itself. Moreover, whereas Darcy may become an easy figure of identification for female Millennials due to her specific interests and behaviors, Coulson is canonically a fanboy in *The Avengers*. Director Joss Whedon describes Coulson as "an everyman who people can relate to [with] a man crush on Captain America" (Wilding 2012). Coulson reveals his long-term obsession with Captain America when he confesses to an embarrassed Steve Rogers that he watched him sleep and then asks him to sign his mint condition Captain America cards. In fact, these bloodied collector's items are a central plot point when they become testimony not only to Phil Coulson's belief in the Avenger Initiative but also to his ultimate sacrifice.

Fans take Phil Coulson's canonical fannishness and use it to self-insert and project their own fannish experiences. Rageprufrock's "User Since" (AO3, October 21, 2013) uses and extrapolates Phil Coulson's canon characterization to ultimately tell a story about fans, fan communities, and fannish connections. The online epistolary story is a collection of posts, letters, emails, and texts by members of a fictional Captain America fan community, the Howling Commandoes, cofounded by Phil Coulson. It begins in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of New York, the culminating battle in *The Avengers* during which Coulson gets killed by Loki. The first post in the story is a general check-in post after the battle, but soon members are trying to figure out why their "fearless forum head mod" is missing. The story follows group's inquiries and subsequent memorial at Arlington, where they meet to read letters of Phil's online friends. One community member emailed Captain America, who ends up attending the service with all of the Avengers and many of Coulson's S.H.I.E.L.D. colleagues. The story concludes with Coulson's online profile, including his 100K+ posts and the final two lines: "**User since:** June 1998; **Last post:** May 3, 2012."

While the story may be about Phil Coulson's death and mourning by his online friends, it clearly taps into shared online fan experiences. The beginning check-in is a common enough occurrence whenever a disaster strikes. Given the ability of Internet communities to draw from widespread geographic locations, friends may be anywhere on the globe and a bombing in London, an earthquake in California, a tsunami in Japan may affect us equally because there are friends who live there. Louisa Stein (2002), for example, observed *Roswell* fan communities to discuss this phenomenon after 9/11, and describes how "*Roswell* fans drew on pre-existing online fan forums and on repertoires from *Roswell* fandom to mourn, to cope, to give support, to debate, to question and to organize community social action" (p. 478).

On a more personal level, the story resonates with fan experiences of losing loved online friends and often feeling helpless by not being there, challenging in particular the oft-repeated false dichotomy between online and real lives and friends. The immediate outpouring of grief and love after a fan passes is always staggering, and the last lines of the story recall the possibility of LiveJournals to be given Memorial status, which will preserve a journal and protect it from deletion. Often fans will get together to donate to a cause important to the deceased, rescue her fan works, or create fannish scholarships in her name. One reader addresses the actual get-together in the story

as well as the commemorative letters in particular when friendships are created at a distance: “I think sometimes that distance helps those that have trouble connecting up close make real relationships for the first time. This is a very sweet piece about honoring someone’s memory, both Phil’s and Captain America’s, and not just using words, but also actions to do it” (Basaltone AO3, October 22, 2013).²

Readers clearly responded to this parallel. Throughout, commenters referenced specific friends they had lost and their collective mourning. One reader describes how the story captures “how someone you’ve never met in person can be someone you care about so deeply and touch your life so thoroughly and the rest of the world can have difficulty understanding that” (daisydiversion AO3, October 25, 2013); while another explains “This fic is devastating for anyone who’s ever been part of a close-knit fandom community or had friends they’ve never met online: the fear, the grief, the horrible separation of those experiencing Coulson’s death from afar just hits so close to home” (emilianadarling AO3, November 4, 2013). Many comments praise the story for being gorgeous and beautiful if heartbreaking, and nearly every one mentions tears and crying.

Readers thank rageprufrock for relaying this experience and capturing these feelings via Coulson and these original fictional characters. Because while the story may be set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it ultimately is about the original characters: fans who work for big tech companies and universities, who change their babies’ diapers, and who have gay partners tolerating their odd online hobbies and friends. Caltha accurately describes:

I love that this isn’t about the Avengers, not really.... It’s about Coulson, and a bunch of people who cared about him, and about the community they’d built, and about a world where attacks like these are a little more common and the fannish infrastructure has adjusted a little in response. (Caltha AO3, October 22, 2013)

“User Since” may draw out most clearly the parallel between fanboy!Coulson and online fan communities, but “Fanboy Phil Coulson” is a tag on dozens of fan works at the Archive of Our Own, and many more employ the trope without necessarily tagging it.

Making them us: Fandom as storyverse

Even when the canon does not offer a ready-made stand-in for fans, writers will create stories in which they recast the main characters as media fans themselves. This “they are fans” trope effectively inverts the Mary Sue self-insertion: rather than projecting fans into the fictional world of the show, the stories take the source text’s protagonists and directly immerses them in the fannish world. Some “they are fans” stories use random canon references to seamlessly extrapolate the show characters as also being fan fiction fans. Especially in Real People Fiction, the film, music, or sports star may find fan fiction about their friends and begins shipping them. More often, however,

the story functions fully as an alternate universe, where the characters do not occupy their canon roles. The main pairing thus becomes an easy stand-in to explore and expose the intricacies of being an online fan, drawing much of its action from familiar interactions and drama.

In the popular anonymous *Merlin* (BBC 2008–2012) story, “Pairing Pendragon/Merlin” (merlinkinkmeme LJ, January 19, 2011), Merlin Emrys and Arthur Pendragon are two British media fans of the show *Merlin*, who end up in a beta relationship and after slowly flirting online finally meet at a con and fall in love. While Arthur is a Big Name Fan, Merlin represents the more common anxieties and excitements that fan writers report again and again as they worry about popularity of their fan works and try to negotiate the complex social hierarchies of online fandoms. While each specific fandom may have its own idiosyncrasies and popularity and fame are usually relative and fleeting, the underlying emotions are often quite similar among different fan communities. “Pairing Pendragon/Merlin” expertly describes the anxieties, hopes, and desires of the social interactions with strangers online where a few random feedback comments and a beta request leads to long hours of instant messaging, a crush on an online friend’s erotic writings, and an eventual meet-up that leads to a relationship.

The fact that the story was created as a Work in Progress on an anon meme increased the sense of parallelism between fans within and without the story. In feedback and recommendations alike fans repeatedly foregrounded the way the story mimics the interactive aspects of online communication and how it effectively fictionalized their own experiences. In particular, the form of multimedia rings true to many fans for whom social media networks are their central mode of fannish interactions: “I liked how a lot of the story is told through IM, lj posts and google docs, and it really gives the feel of being in fandom for me” (epic-recs LJ, October 11, 2011). Fan writer Pandarus captures the emotional resonance that the story quite clearly generated when she describes:

It’s terribly disarming, with its sense of fannish squee, and euphoria, and the whole hothouse atmosphere of fandom. Who hasn’t been over the moon when a writer or artist they admire says something nice to them? This is a fic about that whole starstruck sensation, and about the ridiculousness of fannish prestige and hierarchy, and about the contrast between fandom and RL. (Pandarus LJ, January 18, 2011)

All of these are fannish interactions that occur regularly within slash spaces in particular, which bring together a shared passion for the source text, the intense intimacy of online social platforms, often strongly erotic writing, and a large number of queer women. The story thus enacts the realities of fan experiences and fan interactions from the erotic interaction between readers and writers (Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006), the performativity of online sexuality and sexual identity (Busse 2006), and the real sexual engagements that often follow (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007). BBC *Merlin* is, in fact, a particularly fertile canon source, because it features a narrative that already exist in dozens of literary versions, from Goffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Mallory to

Mark Twain, T.H. White, and Marion Zimmer Bradley, adapted into many more TV and film versions. Likewise, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Victorian detective Sherlock Holmes is often considered to have spawned the first fandom, but most recently, it has generated an immense fandom in the Moffat/Gatiss BBC version *Sherlock* (BBC 2010–). The existence of multitudes of stories allows readers to not only pick their own versions to shape and alter, but also grants implicit permission to do so.

One popular story in *Sherlock* is “The Theory of Narrative Causality” (falling_voices LJ, July 31, 2011), which places Sherlock and Watson as media fans who are paired in a Big Bang, a collaborative exercise where artist and writer work together on a project. Like with Merlin, *Sherlock* lends itself to the conceit of both men being in their own fandom, so to speak, and the story they create, it turns out, happens to be the plot of the BBC series, a present-day AU to the Victorian detective series. In her book *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*, Anne Jamison (2013a) uses the story as a metonymy not only for fan fiction but for its show as well. After all, *Sherlock* itself is effectively a contemporary Alternate Universe of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, which creates a weird recursivity that Jamison foregrounds when she describes how “Theory” is “a fanfiction about fanboys writing fanfiction, and the fanfiction they write closely resembles the fanboy-penned (legal, professional) fanfiction of a television show that ‘Theory’ is fic for” (2013b, 11). What neither Jamison nor the story address is the way in which the BBC show and its creators engage in fan fictional pursuits yet also generate a level of authority not permitted the fan writers.

In contrast to Jamison's celebration of how the multifaceted narrative mirrors the actual show's online presence, some have criticized *Sherlock* for the way it distinguishes the fan fictional pursuits of its (male) authorial team from its (primarily female and heavily affective) fan fiction fandom. Matt Hills (2012b) argues that the “great game of fandom played via the production discourses of Gatiss and Moffat remains, finally, in the service of professional, authorial distinctions, while textually-disciplined codings of affectively flat fandom imply that fan passions should be kept under masculinized control” (p. 40). It might not be coincidental that both “Pairing Merlin/Pendragon” and “The Theory of Narrative Causality” feature male characters and pairings as stand-ins for female fandom. Slash theory, both within fandom and academia, cites many reasons as to why a primarily female viewership identifies with male characters, ranging from the more readily available complex male characters with often already existing male/male homosocial friendships and the ability to represent truly equal power relations to an identification with and desire for both protagonists by straight and bi women and the emotionally safe territory of unmarked bodies.

Mary Sue: Fan fiction par excellence

Given the variety of self-insertions, the continuous derision of Mary Sue stories may be surprising; however, popularity and general disdain are not mutually exclusive. Much fan fiction that could be labeled as Mary Sue fiction is repeatedly read, clearly beloved, and heavily commented upon. As long as the stories and its protagonists are not called

Mary Sues, various self-insert fiction remains ever popular. After all, the concept of personal and often quite specific head canons is more popular than ever and kink memes and Tumblr collaborative challenges often tailor to very specific and personal desires, clearly indicating the desire for finely tuned characterizations that often share important aspects with readers and/or writers.

Because for all the ways in which fiction can expose us to new ideas, beliefs, and worlds, there is comfort in familiarity, and self-inserts of the various sorts I've discussed allow readers easy entry and access to the narratives. Whether writers pick a canon character or create their own, whether they shape the characters or the worlds around them, the ultimate desire underlying all these self-insertions remains attempts to merge our own lives with that of the fictional universes, to address our own experiences and emotions within the worlds of our favorite texts. Moreover, by connecting the canon worlds with our own lives, fan writers often can address current and personal issues through their writings. And it is this resonance with current affairs and personal concerns that make fan writing an important but ultimately very intimate and specialized form of writing.

Mary Sue fiction at its extreme may only appeal to its author, but that it is also one of fan fiction's central virtues. While some stories appeal to many fans of a franchise or even cross-fannish boundaries in their readership, at heart fan fiction is a labor of love with an often understood small audience. In fact, one of the biggest fanfic exchanges, the yearly small fandom exchange Yuletide focuses specifically on smaller fandoms, unusual pairings, and the willingness of fans to gift its recipients the very story that they—and at times only they—always wanted to read. Likewise, when we look at kink fiction, it is obvious to its fans (and its nonfans alike) that a particular story may only appeal to a minuscule subset of the show's fandom, and yet it is all the more cherished for its fringe status.

Rather than focus on the failure of Mary Sue stories, we might more usefully behold its identifying feature of very particular and specific personalization as a characterizing feature of fan fiction. In other words, where critics of Mary Sue writing condemn its singular focus on the writer's specific identificatory desires that excludes other readers, we could simply understand that as a more extreme, less successful variant of what defines most fan fiction, if not fiction: the ability of the writer to translate their own fears and hopes, disgusts, and desires onto the fictional characters in order to share them with others.

Notes

- 1 I do not link fan works and commentary directly, but instead reference parenthetically with name, site, and date. Sites include Livejournal (LJ), Dreamwidth (DW), and Archive of Our Own (AO3).
- 2 This and the following quotes are comments to "User Since" and can be accessed on AO3, where the story is archived.