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Fan Fiction Tropes as Literary and Cultural Practices

Abstract

Fan fiction negotiates source text limitations and creativity as it uses metatextual markers to indicate fannish comprehension and community membership. Connecting specific stories and their attached tags with their larger interpretive communities allows researchers a way to acknowledge the literary aspects of individual narratives without ignoring the larger communities that are the primary audiences and help shape a fan fiction's given engagement with the source text.

1 Introduction

In 2016, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* came to the big screen, joining the ever-growing number of Austen derivations that include dozens of audiovisual adaptations, such as *Clueless*, *Lost in Austen*, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Death Comes to Pemberley*.¹ The last two are based on popular novels that themselves are among hundreds of published literary adaptations and tens of thousands of fan stories. Of course Jane Austen is but one author that audiences rewrite, satirize, expand, and continue. Recent years have brought us a wide range of adaptations, translations, and transformations – at times they use the source as a mere inspiration, at others they critically talk back to the text. Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair*, and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* showcase the former whereas Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Gregory Maguire's *Wicked. The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* exemplify the latter.²

1 *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* 2016; *Clueless* 1995; *Lost in Austen* 2008; *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* 2012–2013; *Bridget Jones's Diary* 2001; and *Death Comes to Pemberley* 2013.

2 SMILEY 1991; FFORDE 2001; CUNNINGHAM 1998; RHYS 1966; MAGUIRE 1995; and RANDALL 2001.

Unlike these examples, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* uses most of the original text but alters its context and meaning by adding zombies into this most famous Regency novel of manners.³ If he had used the 1936 novel *Gone With the Wind* as his source, he would have likely faced a law suit from the Margaret Mitchell estate for copyright infringement (as indeed Alice Randall did for *The Wind Done Gone* in 2001).⁴ With Jane Austen's novel in the Public Domain, however, Grahame-Smith's novel became a bestseller – even though 85 % of his are actually Austen's words.⁵ Ironically it is Austen's contemporaries who lay most of the foundation for copyright and its inherent connection of legal, commercial, and artistic ideas of ownership: the late 18th century reconceptualized intellectual property, established legal rights for authors, and revolutionized aesthetic theories.

This essay explores the tenuous connection between fan creations and their legal, cultural, economic, and aesthetic status. In order to talk about fan fiction in the now, I begin with a brief overview of the fundamental changes in the late 18th century, which created ideas that affect us today. It is at this moment of early Romanticism that law, culture, economics and aesthetics conspire to create what we now often consider the myth of the author. From this mindset, we have inherited the popular belief that continues to value originality even as we have long entered an age of mechanical reproduction where creativity often takes quite different guises.⁶ Not only has this myth affected the legal, economic, and cultural position of fan fiction today, it also affects our own aesthetic value system and, with it, the way many writers conceive of their creations. Laying out the history of an aesthetics of originality is meant to force us to reconsider these negative connotations and make us see the usefulness and function of tropes and repetition.

Fan fiction, at its base, is about processes of reading, and yet as readers become writers, they begin competing for authorial possession if not of the words, then of the ideas, characters, and tropes.⁷ Ownership and original creativity only make sense within a cultural context that understands author as original creator rather than transcriber or transformer (like the medieval *author*).⁸ Moreover, the very concept of fan fiction (as opposed to specific retellings and transformations of shared narratives and collective myths) only makes fully sense within an aesthetic literary system where ideas, tropes, narratives, char-

3 AUSTEN/GRAHAME-SMITH 2009.

4 MITCHELL 1936. See MURPHY 2002; and GROSSETT 2002.

5 See MACGREGOR 2009.

6 See BENJAMIN 1988.

7 I use trope here not so much in its meaning as a rhetorical figure of speech but rather as a recurrent theme and conceptual narrative shorthand.

8 See MINNIS 2009.

acter names can be owned.⁹ Fan fiction thus harks back to older models of creativity as it resists the idea that beloved characters or places could (or should) be owned. As such, it stands in direct opposition to the aesthetic ideas that gave rise to the copyright system whose much more widespread influence we now experience.

I look briefly at the debates of authorship historically, in order to establish how legal, commercial, and aesthetic discourses simultaneously began to construct originality and authorship as central and valuable. Challenging this supremacy of originality, I propose a focus on intertextuality, tropes, and repetition as an aesthetic mode that is worthy in its own right and important for its associated affective reception. Drawing on the deep interdependence of such texts on other works of art, I suggest that deemphasizing originality and the singular role of the author allows us to focus on the cultural aspect of the text and its collective creations. As a result, I use fan fiction and its shared tagging practices to discuss its use and transformation of tropes. Shared tags not only organize and categorize vast story collections but also facilitate collective fan creations. In so doing, fan fiction communities and discourses offer a challenge to traditional aesthetics and showcase new (or possibly resurrect older) forms of reader/writer engagements.

2 Authority and Originality

One of the more commonplace truths held in contemporary literary studies is that the 18th century invented the Author.¹⁰ Certainly not all writing before was collective or anonymous, but the particular relationship between an author and his work underwent substantial changes during that time. Much of this is directly correlated to the shifting economic situation of artists and a need to legally protect one's creations. In a world of patronage, artists were supported by their patron and, in turn, could create and share their creations. In literature especially, the origins of the words were not directly correlated to patronage. Support was more general – not an essay by essay, word by word reimbursement. By the early 16th century, governments also regulated dissemination of printed works by granting printing privileges, which could provide another form of support to writers, but those were neither automatically given nor did they necessarily lie with the authors.¹¹

9 See WILLIS 2016.

10 See WOODMANSEE 1994; PEASE 2003; and BENNETT 2004. Opposing arguments have been made for earlier dates: FLECK 2010; DUTTON 2000; and DOBRANSKI 2005.

11 See BORCHI 2007, S. 4–6.

However, with changing market economies and a rapidly rising middle class readership, the 18th century writers increasingly started living off their works and thus demanded legal protection and economic reimbursement. The 1710 'Statute of Anne' was the first authorial copyright law in the Anglo-American context, and with its 14-year exclusive authorial copyright, it shifted legal and economic power to the creators. Authorial copyright offered writers a way to establish ownership over their words and the possibility for a livelihood. It is not surprising then that copyright embraced and in a way needed an aesthetic theory that emphasized the individual creation. Nor is it surprising that in an era that foregrounds the individual and his rights and abilities, these two ideas – original genius and intellectual copyright – came to the fore. In order to theoretically justify the ownership of his literary creations, this new concept of the author made him the sole creator and owner of the words in his book and established the law of author's rights as a natural law.

In the early 1800s British Member of Parliament Thomas Noon Talfour, an early proponent of copyright extension, found an unlikely ally in his attempt to change copyright protection from twenty-eight to sixty years after the author's death: William Wordsworth, British Romantic and Poet Laureate. Not only was William Wordsworth one of Talfour's prime examples of "true original genius", Wordsworth also supported his endeavor to provide lasting copyright protection, in particular to authors who create works of "enduring merit".¹² Wordsworth created a Romantic aesthetic theory that focused on imagination and originality. Even where he acknowledges external stimuli and inspiration, the poetic genius remains central in creating and shaping the artistic work. In the 1815 Supplement to his seminal Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth defines the genius as "the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe".¹³ As such, he defines as most valuable a thinking and writing that is radically new and different, that is original rather than transformative of older ideas. And he clearly needs such a definition in order to establish authors as owners of ideas – ideas as commodities that can be owned and sold. Talfour and Wordsworth's collaboration on the political stage indicates connections between the legal notion of copyright, the economic notion of ownership of ideas, and the artistic notion of original genius.

On the continent, German Romantics likewise debated the question of perpetual authorial ownership. In his 1793 *Beweis der Unrechtmäßigkeit des Büchernachdrucks* Johann Gottlieb Fichte argues for a distinction between material and intellectual aspects of the book: "Wir können an einem Buche zweierlei unterscheiden: das *Körperliche* desselben, das bedruckte Papier; und sein

12 SWARTZ 1992, S. 482.

13 WORDSWORTH 1911, S. 104.

Geistiges".¹⁴ Whereas the physical copy of a book may be sold and purchased, Fichte tries to single out the inalienable right of the author. In a second step, he thus distinguishes between ideas and form, i. e., whereas the ideas of a publication might eventually be attained by a careful reader through work and effort, the form of presentation remains specific to its author: "die Form dieser Gedanken, die Ideenverbindung in der, und die Zeichen, mit denen sie vorgetragen werden".¹⁵ As a result, Fichte separates shared ideas from their specific articulations that are particular to a given author and should remain his continued property. Fichte's distinction between ideas and their expressions entered "the seminal German copyright legislation of the nineteenth century", and it remains influential in contemporary copyright law.¹⁶

Throughout, the idea of originality became central in order to "conceptualize a new kind of property authors could claim in their texts".¹⁷ More specifically, Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno articulates the moment of the genius as concurrent with the rise of modernity and related to concepts of originality and newness: "Because of its element of something that had not existed before, the genial was bound up with the concept of originality: thus the *Originalgenie*".¹⁸ Yet the complex aesthetic and philosophical arguments were not the only thing at stake here as they were deployed to undergird a clearly economic interest. Juxtaposing Romantic ideology and Enlightenment philosophy with earlier artistic practices where material was easily repurposed, Adorno emphasizes the historical element of the concept of originality and its socio-economic connections insofar as originality is "enmeshed in historical injustice, in the predominance of bourgeois commodities that must touch up the ever-same as the ever-new in order to win customers".¹⁹ Here the concept of the new is intricately bound up with economic concerns in the same way copyright laws establish aesthetic criteria for the purposes of settling economically relevant issues. In fact, there are clear parallels between the public commons that were moved into private ownership with the enclosure movements of the 18th century and an intellectual commons that suddenly ascribed ownership to ideas previously commonly shared.²⁰

To complicate matters even further, this increasing valorization of creativity and originality is heavily gendered. It is a truth universally acknowledged that the English novel was not invented by Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding

14 FICHTE 1846, S. 225.

15 Ibid., S. 227.

16 KAWOHL/KRETSCHMER 2009, S. 214.

17 BIAGOLI 2011, S. 1847.

18 ADORNO 1984, S. 172.

19 Ibid.

20 See BOYLE 2008.

but that there was a much longer history of women writing.²¹ William Warner indeed suggests that Richardson and Fielding recovered a genre that previously had been defined through its “aura of sexual scandal and consequent negative discourse: When Richardson and Fielding convinced many [...] that they had given modern fiction a more valuable range of purposes, the way was cleared for novels to become the object of literary criticism and literary history”.²² It was not until men began to write novels that the domestic hobby became a public profession. Martha Woodmansee describes the aspects of female authorship that made it antithetical to the newly created author as original genius: “In its amateur origins and rather narrowly defined utilitarian purpose the novel would seem to lack the earmarks of literary ‘art’. The product of idle hours, it is intended not for sale to a reading public but strictly for domestic use”.²³ In other words, the way women created art was wrong on several counts: they did not do it for money or to share in the public space and the emphasis was on craft and amateur status rather than any sense of original genius. Their work effectively had to be ignored because the ideological context in which it was created spoke directly against the aesthetic models men needed to create, in order to justify owning and selling their words.

3 Repetition and Transformation

All of this history serves as a background to fully understand the arbitrariness and constructedness of the aesthetic theories that we still are employing – theories that have shaped us for at least the past two centuries. But this myth of the original genius is neither universal nor disinterested: different periods of literary and philosophical thought place emphasis more strongly on either continuity or originality, though most use elements of both. Aesthetic theory is in constant flux between these two extreme positions – neither of which by itself is ultimately useful. And yet the Romantic aesthetics of privileging originality and artistic genius created a value system that still affects the landscape of contemporary culture. In fact, modernity has tended to favor aesthetics that heavily relies on originality and difference; in turn, as a fan scholar and as a fan, I have a vested interest in foregrounding the inherent aesthetic values of repetition. Rather than replacing an aesthetics of originality with one of repetition, however, I merely want to draw attention to the interplay between these two seemingly opposing forces that both are central to any creative process.

21 See GALLAGHER 1995.

22 WARNER 1998, S. 4.

23 WOODMANSEE 1994, S. 106.

Repetition, after all, can serve a variety of functions that may indeed be necessary for creative works and their reception. Language can only ever be meaningful if it is recognizable, i. e., if it is repeated.²⁴ That is true on the level of the letter, the word, and the sentence but it is true even on the level of narrative itself. Just like pure difference on the linguistic level would resemble speaking in tongues, a story that does not engage any recognizable generic narrative (whether by following or defying specific expectations and tropes) would create a story difficult to parse for the reader. Complete originality, with all familiar and recognizable narrative conventions removed, may engender a narrative so incomprehensible that the reader cannot understand, let alone aesthetically appreciate it; in contrast, stories that employ familiar themes and narratives establish a groundwork of comprehension within which they then can challenge or subvert these shared paradigms. As such, recognizing familiar themes is an important step when approaching and categorizing texts, especially within so-called genre literature.²⁵

Where paratextual material offers the reader a host of information before even beginning a story, generic tropes create clear expectations throughout the text that the reader will expect to be fulfilled to a certain degree at least. Janice Radway's audience study of romance readers, for example, describes how "repetition is the rule, not the exception".²⁶ Reading in that sense becomes a form of re-reading, and readers "exhibit fairly rigid expectations about what is permissible [...] and express disappointment and outrage when those conventions are violated".²⁷ Paratexts and genre categories come together in commercial genre classifications: urban paranormal young adult romance, a popular genre category for teen girls in particular, promises a specific set of characterizations, settings, and plot developments. And publishing houses (and film studios) rely on such patterns, selling readers books similar to the ones they enjoyed, offering variations on familiar generic tropes and characterizations.

This appeal of repetition with a difference applies even more so to fans, whose entire experience is about repetition. Fans re-watch favorite shows to get to all the nuances, but they also re-watch simply because they enjoy reviewing certain scenes and spending time with favorite characters. On a more crucial level, fan fiction celebrates repetition on all levels: its *raison d'être* is a repeat engagement with the worlds and characters. In their interpretive and analytic encounters, fans will return to a particular moment in the source again and again, telling the story over and over again, playing out every possible minor variation, feeling,

24 See DERRIDA 1982.

25 Studies that trace, organize, and debate genre elements include TODOROV 1975; CAWELTI 1976; and ALTMAN 1999.

26 RADWAY 1986, S. 196.

27 *Ibid.*, S. 63.

and response.²⁸ For Francesca Coppa, the repeated retelling of the same story, ever so slightly different, situates fan fiction closer to drama than fiction: “in literary terms, fan fiction’s repetition is strange; in theatre, stories are retold all the time”.²⁹ Finally, of course, fans reread and revisit their favorite fannish transformations. Just like fans will rewatch the same episode, the same crucial scene dozens and hundreds of times, they will read (and reread) stories that revisit and analyze and interpret and expand upon certain scenes or episodes or story lines.

In their celebration of media texts, cultural contexts, and other fan creations, fan works are deeply intertextual. They appropriate, sample, mashup, and remix freely, embracing repetition and generic categories as features rather than bugs. Indeed, as fans rework and reshape popular texts, emphasizing and foregrounding their intertextuality, fan texts offer a cultural counterbalance to ideologies of originality. Fan fiction by definition is not only intertextual with but also bound by the source text and, in most cases, by community expectations. Rather than limiting fans, however, these restrictions produce ingenuity and playful engagement: “Fannish creativity thrives not only because of the sense of pleasure of play within limits but also because of a sense of productive freedom borne of transformation”.³⁰

Creative constraints are a fundamental aspect of art, from various poetic forms and stage design requirements to the limits of particular instruments and the materiality of sculptures. In *Exercises in Style*, proto-postmodernist and later Oulipo founder Raymond Queneau takes a brief story of an accidental meeting on a bus and retells it in 99 different ways, altering styles, typography, and narrative presentation.³¹ In so doing, it celebrates repetition and showcases the possibilities of fine-tuned alteration. Fan fiction writers similarly celebrate repetition as they tell the same story again and again, while setting themselves limitations of style, length, or narrative device. At times, these limitations are explicitly articulated and formalized, such as the 100 word requirement of the drabble, time-limited writing exercises, or prompts that feature certain plot ideas. The central idea all these examples share is that strong limits (whether structural, thematic, or technological) challenge artists with the possibility of play – both in the sense of ludic pastime (Spiel) and in the sense of latitude (Spielraum).

28 See JENKINS 1992.

29 COPPA 2006, S. 236.

30 STEIN/BUSSE 2009, S. 195.

31 QUENEAU 1981.

4 Tropes as Fan Fiction Building Blocks

In fan fiction even the building blocks of source materials tend to value generic repetition and tropes: fannish source texts tend to be genre shows: science fiction, fantasy, horror, and crime procedurals. Knowing the source text as well as other texts and conversations circulating in fandom allows readers to understand and situate new stories. This creates an actual implementation of Fish's interpretive community that values shared readings of characters and events.³² I have argued elsewhere: "Unlike Fish, for whom interpretive communities denote a collection of interpretive strategies rather than actual readers, fan fiction readers and writers create *actual* communities".³³ Members of interpretive communities anticipate events and characterizations and enjoy both the familiarity of these events coming to pass or the surprise of expectations being subverted. In fact, the whole of a fandom (or a given interpretive community within) tends to be much larger than the sum of all its stories and discussions. Even a cursory glance at some of the more popular fandoms will show a preponderance of generic tropes, with some of the most beloved stories seem to be highly generic and quite predictable. I would argue that their appeal is not in spite but because of that predictability.

Stories that are too original, too different, may actually fail in a most central sense – not as stories but as fan stories for their audiences. To function as *fan* fiction, certain expectations must be met, be they characters, setting, or, in fact, narrative tropes and story lines. Fan fiction thus is a field which epitomizes genre conventions and expectations. Tropes are important for our conversation not only because they are used in fannish shows and because fans employ them in their fan works, but also because the very structure of fan creation mirrors the cultural logic of genre tropes. In other words, if genre tropes shape cultural productions, fandom and its fan creations are an almost exemplary case study where production, dissemination, and reception is shared and negotiated via tropes and reshapes our approaches to genres in turn.

Giandujakiss's multifandom fanvid *Hourglass* showcases the constructive use of repetition within, among, and beyond genre source texts by exploring the use of one particular trope.³⁴ The time loop trope, also called *Groundhog Day* trope after the 1993 film, exemplifies repetition with a difference: every morning the character wakes up to exactly the same scenario, time having reset with only

32 See FISH 1980.

33 BUSSE 2013, S. 58.

34 GIANDUJAKISS 2008. Fanvids are a form of video production, in which media use short clips from one or several media sources and arrange them to celebrate television shows, analyze ideas or characters, or create specific narratives or arguments.

them remembering the previous repetitions.³⁵ And yet the narrative progresses through the subtle changes and shifts, both in the protagonist's perception and understanding and in their changing actions. The vid uses more than a dozen genre shows, each of which has featured its own time loop episode. Like the characters progress through the iterations of their loop day, so do the viewers, reifying the repetition not just within a TV show but between the different series. The trope is popular in fan fiction as well, with nearly a thousand stories tagged as time loop stories on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), a multifannish fan works archive.

Hourglass is a reminder that repetition is not actually a full reset – after all, the memories of every previous instantiation remain, most often to help the protagonist reach an insight or epiphany. Fan fiction likewise foregrounds how repetition changes perception and interpretation: in the way the same crucial moment in the text can be revisited again and again; every new story is pleasurable both in the way it repeats what is already known and in the way the stories alters that; and in the way fans revisit and reread stories just like they rewatch shows. I do not want to suggest that we substitute the value placed on difference with one that emphasizes sameness but rather acknowledge and admit (in theory and possibly practice) that difference and sameness cannot exist without one another. Thus, it might behoove us to occasionally shift from studying and analyzing one to looking at the values of the other. In the end, then, it is never clear where repetition ends and difference begins, and in fan works, which play with and thrive on generic tropes and their meaningful repetition, we should remain aware of how important a role tropes and repetition play.

5 Tagging as Shared Semantic Practice

Fans not only use a variety of shared narrative tropes, but also formalize that use via headers, recommendation lists, and bookmarks to create a contextual web of genre information. The use of content labels showcases how communities define their own taxonomies to advertise stories as well as warn for certain contents. One way to illustrate fannish comprehension and community membership is the use of shared metatextual markers. Headers are the most obvious – and perhaps the most contested – site of such category negotiations: title, author, show, rating, pairing, genre, warnings, summary tend to be used in many fandoms with greater or lesser consistency.³⁶ Originally created on early 1990s Usenet newsgroups, headers quickly became all but indispensable for fans and are used on most fan fiction

35 *Groundhog Day* 1993.

36 See RILEY 2015, S. 44–63.

archives.³⁷ Using a well-organized archive or rec (recommendation) list, a reader can thus easily find all the *Les Misérables* contemporary college alternate universe stories, the Harry Potter stories where Sirius did not die and instead lived happily ever after with Remus, or the stories where Darcy Lewis from *Thor* shares a soul bond with Bucky Barnes from the *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* films.³⁸ On the AO3, for example, each of those categories yields hundreds of stories that then can further be searched by other modifiers.

These additional modifiers tend to appear in user-generated metadata, so-called tags, which authors can freely assign to their story.³⁹ Where fixed taxonomies limit users to pre-established categories, folksonomies suffer from a lack of consensus, which makes it difficult to easily organize. In order to maintain a shared fixed base vocabulary yet permit user creativity in tags, AO3 uses a “curated folksonomy” that mixes user-defined and controlled vocabulary, and “volunteer classification workers sort and connect user-created tags to alleviate the worst shortfalls of a pure folksonomy.”⁴⁰ We can see how popular genre-based reading patterns are by looking at the vast collection of thematic rec lists and the popularity of certain tags. This is true whether the theme is general, such as alternate universes, animal transformation, and amnesia or whether the trope is fandom specific, such as aliens made them do it, souled vampire, or fawnlock (where Sherlock is indeed a young deer). AO3 connects similar tags, so that a search returns a variety of stories whose themes are internally connected. The tag “disability”, for example, includes among its dozens of synonyms, including “adjusting to a disability”, “Canon Disabilities”, “Handicap”, and “Permanent Injury of Main Character”. It will also return all stories tagged with any of its sub categories of specific disabilities. Tracing thematic tags, such as soul bonds, male pregnancy, time travel, or slave universe, can illustrate not only the popularity of certain tropes, but also the way tropes travel across fandoms.

Thus, observing this ever changing yet all but mandatory taxonomy offers a way to study how fandom as a community appropriates, applies, and alters specific tropes over time. Moreover, looking at tags and categories shows how popular many generic story lines are: generic stories are often collected and requested on search communities, and when we look at bookmarking sites, recs, and comments, some of the most beloved stories seem to be highly generic and quite predictable. Fannish tags become additions to the larger fan text just as creative pieces and commentaries add to a larger interpretive and creative fan text. In particular, the more playful and imaginative Tumblr tags generate a

37 See DEKOSNIK 2016.

38 *Les Misérables* 2012; ROWLING 2003; *Thor* 2011; and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014.

39 See TRANT 2008; JOHNSON 2014; and FIESLER et al. 2016.

40 BULLARD 2015, S. 6.

folksonomy that illustrates quite specific interpretations that organize but at the same time also generate creative interpretations. Connecting specific stories and their attached tags with larger fan interpretations and the interpretive communities they create allows researchers to connect literary readings of individual narratives with the larger communities in which they are embedded and that help shape them. The preponderance and repetitive use of specific labels shows the mutual influence of writer and community as it illustrates how fannish genre tropes not only categorize stories and affect readings but also actively generate creative responses.

6 Fan Fiction as Collectively Created Texts

The interplay between readers and writers is one of the most important aspects of fan fiction. Often readers engage with writers at every stage of the creative process: from prompting the writer and talking through ideas for a specific story to beta reading and commenting on chapters to recommending and feedbacking the final product. Moreover, a story may generate feedback in form of creative responses as well: cover art for a story, audio recordings in which fans read the stories aloud, or other stories drawing from and transforming the original fan work.⁴¹ Popular stories with welcoming authors can generate dozens of added fan works. Fan writer Speranza for example, maintains a site for all the fan works created within the fan universe of her *Stargate Atlantis* story “Written By the Victors”: a fictional Amazon site that features all the fictional academic works in the story; songs composed in the fictional language of the series by one fan and sung and recorded by another; a fan vid; a recording of the story featuring dozens of different fan voices; as well as fan creations of the multiple fictional documents referenced in the text.⁴² In her close reading of the fanvid inspired by the story, Anne Kustritz describes how “[e]ach of these expansions and re-interpretations adds to the audience’s understanding of the whole”.⁴³ A specific fannish universe thus replicates in small general fandom behavior: a myriad of complementary and even contradictory transmedia texts that together create a large interpretive complex narrative. At times, the fan-created universe can become more popular than the one initially spawned by the source text: Mog’s “A Birthday in the Present” is a contemporary alternate universe story for the 1990s Western TV show *The Magnificent Seven*, where the protagonists are

41 See BUSSE/FARLEY 2013.

42 *Stargate Atlantis* 2004–2009; and SPERANZA 2007.

43 See KUSTRITZ 2014.

Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) agents.⁴⁴ Fans liked this setting enough to write stories within Mog's universe, making the ATF universe as popular, if not more so, than the original Old West one and warranting its own archives.

Fan-created universes are often based on particularly popular stories or enticing tropes, but other times they are a clear indication for what fans are missing in the source text. I want to end with a particularly interesting community creation that was spawned in response to a great fan frustration and anger. *The 100* is a popular teen science fiction: the show follows a group who survived the nuclear fallout on a spaceship but had to return to a post-apocalyptic Earth and face various contentious factions who had been left aground.⁴⁵ The show created a strong dynamic between main character Clarke and her sometimes ally, sometimes nemesis Lexa, the leader of the humans who had been left on Earth. Fans began shipping the two, and the third season looked like it would feature this strong lesbian pairing. In March 2016, the two characters finally had sex but only a couple of minutes later, Lexa is killed by a stray bullet. Clarke/Lexa fans were outraged by the fact that yet another gay character had been killed, thus repeating the problematic trope of "Bury Your Gays", the near-requisite killing of queer characters in much of TV and film history.⁴⁶ This was exacerbated by the fact that the show's production team had repeatedly assured everyone that the character would not be killed off even though Lexa's actress, Alycia Debnam-Carey, had a main role in *Fear the Walking Dead*.⁴⁷

Fans of a character or pairing sometimes abandon a show after their favorite has been killed or written off, either in protest or simply because their reason for watching the show has disappeared. Clarke/Lexa fans stands out, however, because they did not just abandon *The 100* but instead shifted allegiance to *Fear the Walking Dead* to follow Debnam-Carey in a "mass queer migration from one series to another".⁴⁸ Moreover, in a collective move, fans created a brand new fan character to join the *Fear the Walking Dead* cast in fan stories. This character, who would obviously be played by *The 100*'s Eliza Taylor, was named Elyza Lex (a play on the names of both actresses and their characters). Bridges describes how "social media users brainstormed to agree on what Elyza would be like [...] and Elyza Lex emerged fully formed after a weekend of discussion and online brainstorming, mostly taking place on Tumblr".⁴⁹ Bringing Elyza Lex into Alicia Clark's universe of the zombie apocalypse allowed fans to revive the Clarke/Lexa love story by reuniting the two actresses in the fan imaginary.

44 *The Magnificent Seven* 1998–2000; and *Mog* 1999.

45 *The 100* 2014ff.

46 See YOHANNES 2016.

47 *Fear the Walking Dead* 2015ff.

48 BRIDGES 2016.

49 *Ibid.*

Given the initial impetus of rejecting the killing of a queer character Lexa and destroying the queer Clarke/Lexa relationship, fans began to call their particular version of the show *Queer the Walking Dead* (QTWD). Tags on Tumblr and archives soon featured QTWD, Elyza Lex and the portmanteau Lexark (for Elyza Lex/Alicia Clark). All three tags denote the creative merging of the two shows and their actresses to create their happy (and alive!) pairing. Using these tags, fans created around a hundred stories on AO3 in the first three months alone, collectively expressing their anger at the show and their love for the characters.⁵⁰ In particular, these tags showcases how tags not only signpost narrative tropes but also generate material through their very existence. After all, the tags helped gather and disseminate fannish discussions and creative works featuring Elyza Lex.

Fannish affect here turned the anger and frustration of Lexa's death into the shared creation of a fan universe, allowing disappointed fans to come together and explore their love for this pairing in new and creative ways. Lesbian zombie hunters Elyza Lex and Alicia Clark are a far cry from the women of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombie*, less because they are not populating a Regency novel and more because they truly illustrate the power of fan creativity. Grahame-Smith took a literary classic, transformed it by adding zombies, and then gained popular and economic success. With Elyza Lex, fans took their disappointment in queer mainstream media representation and created a collaborative shared alternate universe. Theirs is a testament to fan imagination and shared creativity. Readers have always talked about books they loved, shared stories with others, and imagined further adventures for favorite heroes and heroines. In fan fiction, we see this active reading practice flourish: readers express their loves and frustrations as they interpret and analyze, extrapolate and alter the source texts. Often the discussions, if not the actual writing, are collaborative; they create new worlds, often a little more feminist and socially just, a little queerer, and a lot sexier for the many women who defy an ideology of authorial ownership and collectively rewrite their worlds.

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50 The longest story is over 260 000 words, which amounts to the length of the first three Harry Potter novels combined.

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