

Canon Compliance and Creative Analysis in Vorkosigan Saga Fan Fiction

Kristina Busse

The opening pages of Lois McMaster Bujold's *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen* (2016) surprise readers with the revelation that Cordelia and Aral's marriage was far from monogamous but instead had featured a polyamorous relationship through most of their lives together. This long-term love affair with Oliver Jole spans decades, both in narrative and discourse time: *The Vor Game* (1990) to *CryoBurn* (2010) cover about twenty years, from Miles's time in the Academy to Aral's death. There are diegetic and extradiegetic reasons why Aral's life-long love for Jole would be kept from both Miles and the reader for so many years. Some might even accuse Bujold of retconning, i.e., retroactively altering previously established facts to facilitate the current story line.

And yet one reader took the small mentions of Lieutenant Jole, military officer to Prime Minister Vorkosigan during the Hegen Hub war and one of the pallbearers for Aral's funeral in *CryoBurn*,¹ and extrapolated an extended love story between Jole and Aral, encouraged and supported by Cordelia. Fan writer Dira Sudis started her series 'The World That You Need'² after reading *CryoBurn*, and explains her polyamorous inferences by pointing out the specific placement and description of Jole's initial introduction in *The Vor Game*³ as well as his role as pallbearer:

Jole is introduced into both of these intimate moments [between Miles and Aral], just enough to say–hey look! he's there! ALSO HE'S THE PRETTIEST AND BEST. Also he expresses emotional

¹ Lois McMaster Bujold, *CryoBurn* (Riverdale, NY: Baen, 2010), p. 339.

² Dira Sudis, 'The World That You Need' (Archive of Our Own, 2010), <https://archiveofourown.org/series/4569>.

³ Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Vor Game* (Riverdale, NY: Baen, 1990), pp. 87–88, 321–22.

investment in Aral and/or Miles with those repeated backward glances. [...]

[And] look at the company Jole is keeping. Aral's other pallbearers are: his two foster-sons, his two oldest friends, Duv Galeni, whose personal and professional life is SO ENTWINED with Aral's and with the Vorkosigan family that he is functionally a nephew of some sort at this point, and-Jole. THAT is the degree of closeness being indicated here.⁴

Dira Sudis creates a canon-compliant reading and uses canon support for her Aral/Jole slash pairing: Aral's canonical attraction to soldiers, Cordelia's Betan background, Jole's meteoric rise to Admiral that suggests a powerful patron, and his choice, nevertheless, to be stationed at Sergyar. Her stories then offer her particular interpretation of the text, a creative expansion of the universe that nevertheless relies deeply on the existing novels and the canon facts and possible interpretation they offer. Like many fan writers, Dira Sudis uses fan fiction to share her specific readings of the text but, unlike hers, most fan interpretations and most fan fiction theories are not verified by one of Bujold's later novels.

Her body of work shows not only how fan fiction can anticipate potential plot developments but also that they may detect hidden and unwritten story aspects that had been canon all along. Her close reading illustrates one important aspect of fan fiction, namely the close reading and analysis of the main text as a basis to expand and interpret, to inter-and extrapolate the source text. In fact, Dira Sudis's detailed analysis and creative response offers insight in the relationship between Bujold's Vorkosigan series and fans' engagements with the Vorkosiverse.

In this essay, I suggest that a majority of Vorkosiverse fan fiction engages in critical readings of the source texts even as it creates radically new story lines, invents original characters, and explores non-established pairings. Nothing I argue about Vorkosiverse, its critical impetus, and its canon focus are exclusive to this fandom and its fiction, but it is certainly a fandom that illustrates the close ties between critical analysis and creative interpretation. Bujold was unusually welcoming to creative fan responses at a time when most science fiction authors were not, and her writing strongly resonates with fan fiction fans in her complex characters, expansive worldbuilding, range of genres, and themes that

⁴ Dira Sudis, 'I Was Right, Ask Me How', Apr. 6, 2015, <http://dsudis.tumblr.com/post/115697353364/i-was-right-ask-me-how>.

critically engage a myriad of social issues.⁵ She reads and contributes to the Bujold mailing list, a discussion group that repeatedly shows how love and lengthy meta, affect, and analysis are not only side by side but go hand in hand.

In the following, I look at several popular fan stories and series in order to closely study their relationships to the source texts. Specifically, I look at slash, Alternate Universe (AU), and Mary Sue fiction. These popular fan fiction genres are often criticized in other fandoms for their supposed non-canoncity, whereas in the Vorkosiverse they tend to interact intensely with canon ideas. In fact, the specific qualities of the genres are often used to enhance the direct engagement with the ideas and themes of the canon books. All the fan stories discussed here offer active interpretation of Bujold's fiction as they creatively engage with important themes and moments in the source texts.

Tropes and Canon in Fan Fiction

Fan fiction serves a variety of purposes for its readers and writers, from close engagement with the source text that retains characters, plots, and worldbuilding, to creative adaptations and transformations of the characters and worlds to tell entirely new stories.⁶ While there are stories focusing on more traditional romance plots as well as fusions and AUs, the vast majority of stories engage Bujold's characters within the complex historical, political, and social circumstances provided by the books. It may be futile to conjecture what it is about this series that creates more canonical and canon-compliant stories than other fandoms. What is noticeable, however, is how even common fan fiction tropes

⁵ Amy Sturgis, 'From Both Sides Now: Bujold and the Fan Fiction Phenomenon', in *Lois McMaster Bujold: Essays on a Modern Master of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), pp. 16–26.

⁶ See Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Sheenagh Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (Bridgend: Seren, 2005); Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006); Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014); Francesca Coppa, *The Fan Fiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

often are used in the service of canon discussions and interpretations. Vorkosigan fans tend to privilege canon-compliant stories, not only because it is a medium-sized book fandom, but also because the source text features diverse complex characters, extensive worldbuilding, and addresses in text already many of the concerns fans often write into their stories.

Huge fandoms tend to draw readers and writers that may be more invested in the fandom and its creative output than the source texts themselves, enjoying their archetypal protagonists in myriad settings and plots. Often the specifics of the source text are set aside to confront the characters with entirely new environments, e.g. college, the military, coffee shops, or new time periods, e.g. Roman, medieval, futuristic. Popular tropes such as these often move across fandoms: many fans look through mega fandoms in search of their favorite tropes and to fulfill their narrative and erotic kinks; those stories may rely on specific shared community interpretations more than the text itself.⁷ Sometimes minor characters become part of a central pairing with little or no screen time between the two; sometimes tropes and genre conventions get imported from other fandoms.

In contrast, smaller fandoms, such as Vorkosiverse, tend to primarily engage people heavily invested in the canon text, often wanting to read more in this specific universe. In general, book fandoms (without tie-in film or TV franchises) tend to create smaller fandoms, often seeking stylistic verisimilitude, and requiring readers and writers to know the books in great detail.⁸ Moreover, the Vorkosigan series offers its fans a breadth of characters by switching points of views and including in-depth treatment of characters from different planets, of varying ages, and with very different outlooks and belief systems. Bujold's constant merging of genres and her willingness to change tone and theme entirely between books allows a variety of genres in fan fiction that all remain true to canon: adventure tales, political intrigue, murder mystery, courtly romance, and comedy are all aspects (at times dominant ones) in her books. Moreover, just like fan fiction, Bujold returns to earlier moments in her work, and she does not restrict herself

⁷ Milena Popova, 'Dogfuck Rapeworld: Omegaverse Fanfiction as a Critical Tool in Analyzing the Impact of Social Power Structures on Intimate Relationships and Sexual Consent', *Porn Studies* 5.2 (2018), pp. 175–91.

⁸ Bronwen Thomas, 'Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online', accessed Apr. 7, 2019, www.dichtung-digital.org/2007/thomas.htm; Veerle Van Steenhuyse, 'Jane Austen Fan Fiction and the Situated Fantext: The Example of Pamela Aidan's Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman', *English Text Construction* 4.2 (2011), pp. 165–85.

to novel-length works either. Thus, the canon all but invites readers to return to Miles's childhood or even pre-Cordelia Barrayar, because Bujold herself might do so again.

Finally, a lot of fan works directly intervene in the source texts to showcase its limitations, to include minorities and envision more progressive and diverse worlds, or merely to tell the particular story their writers want to read. As a result, fan fiction features more diversity in terms of race and ethnicities; gender and sexualities; mental and physical (dis)abilities; and social, economic, and religious backgrounds. As they read the canon against the grain and tease out their subtexts, these fans adhere to some parts of canon quite carefully even as they amend or ignore other aspects of the text.

Here the Vorkosiverse is at its most interesting: we may criticize some of the books' representations of race, gender, and sexual identity, but, comparing Bujold's early work in particular to its popular mainstream contemporaries, the books stand out in their unapologetic inclusiveness. In particular, the two themes of disability and reproductive rights, which fans often have to actively add and include into popular texts, are front and center in Bujold. Fans in other fandoms must use fan fiction to introduce tropes from wingfic and cyborgs to mpreg (male pregnancy) and genderswap; Vorkosiverse already features extreme body modifications and genetic manipulations as well as uterine replicators and Betan gender reassignment.

As a result, a large majority of Vorkosiverse fiction forcefully engages with the text, offering close readings in its creative interpretation. Fully immersed in the original world, it tends to provide readers with more: more worldbuilding, more character interaction, more drama and adventures. Those stories tend to inter- and extrapolate the canonical narrative, often expanding on an original moment, filling in missing scenes, or setting stories that could have happened given the facts and characterizations in the source text. Canon, the collected source texts as well as their dominant readings, is very important in this category of stories and fans use the term *canon-compliant* to describe their endeavor to not create scenarios that are directly contradicted canon. However, even within those creative constraints, fans can expand the worlds in many ways, imagining narratives that are just not covered in the texts, inventing motivations where none are given, or figuring futures not yet written.

Missing Scenes, Points of View, and *Aral Vorkosigan's Dog*

Given the value of canon compliance to the fandom, there may be no story in the Vorkosigan fandom more recommended and favorably compared to books as Philomytha's *Aral Vorkosigan's Dog* (AVD).⁹ This novel-length fan fiction tells the events of *Shards of Honor* (1986) from Simon Illyan's point of view from his first meeting with Aral Vorkosigan after being imprisoned for treason when Cordelia escapes from the General Vorkraft, and ends with Aral accepting the role of Regent. As such, AVD is entirely dependent on its reader having read *Shards of Honor*, as very few scenes from the novel are retold and, when they are, the point of view shift alters the narrative substantially. Simon appears in virtually all the novels yet we never get his point of view directly. Philomytha offers readers a Simon with an ailing mother, difficulties adapting to his chip, and a desire for space ship duty, just like any other Barryaran officer.

More importantly, she allows us to see yet another version of Aral Vorkosigan, not through the outsider who will eventually marry him, or through the son who spends his life trying to live up to his father. Though Aral is already larger than life as the Hero of Komarr, Illyan encounters him as a disenchanted and distrustful middle-aged career officer who has suffered from the political intrigues of the Ministry of Political Education. AVD gives readers the machinations and deals that lead to the war on Escobar, although throughout Illyan is an unreliable narrator because, while recording every moment of Vorkosigan's actions, he is not privy to Ezar and Negri's overarching plot to kill Serg. The novel details the ongoing battle between Vorkosigan and the Political Bureau, the complex emotional relationships with Serg and Ges Vorrutyer, and the friendships and adoration that Aral generates in fellow and subordinate officers.

Like canonical fan fiction at its best, AVD uses small asides and minor references in the source text and gives them weight and depth. It colors and shades the most passing references so that the entirety is richer but not ultimately changed. More than one fan has commented on the lines that 'we should just print out AVD and stick them in the middle of *Shards*'. This suggestion is especially interesting given that *Shards* is already told from two different points of view and that the expansiveness of the Vorkosiverse allows Bujold to add small moments of information later on, such as, for example, back story for Illyan's chip, in *Memory* (1996).

⁹ Philomytha, *Aral Vorkosigan's Dog* (Archive of Our Own, 2010), <https://archiveofourown.org/works/135363>.

If *Shards of Honor* is the story of Aral and Cordelia falling in love against an intergalactic war, then AVD is the foundational narrative of Aral and Illyan during that same time frame: how they meet and slowly learn to trust one another; how Illyan begins to understand the complexity of Aral's situation and repeatedly steps in to help him, culminating in the moment when he puts his hands between Aral's; how Illyan realizes that Aral knew about the plasma shields and believes him to be a traitor; and, finally, Illyan's epiphany that trusting and following Aral rather than Negri's instructions was the secondary mission of his assignment. Bujold names Illyan 'Aral Vorkosigan's Dog', but Philomytha details how this relationship could have happened.

Of course, AVD is only one way it could have happened. There are other stories telling other versions of these events, giving other justifications. But Philomytha's version succeeds in taking hints from the source text and creating plausible narratives in the interstices of the source text that can easily merge with the canon. Within a close-knit fan community, certain material can move from the collective fan consciousness to seem like part of canon. Often dismissively called *fanon*, this critical synthesis of details culled across multiple novels actually illustrates the generative power of creative readings, whether using additional comments by the author, convincing interpretations on mailing lists, or an enticing reading in a fan fiction.

One example of the power of fan interpolation is Ges and Aral's lengthy affair after Aral's wife dies. There is clear textual evidence of Aral's bisexuality (even before *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen*) and some textual suggestions that Ges and Aral were lovers, but nowhere is a lengthy intimate relationship stated. In his encounter with Cordelia, Vorrutyer tells her he has embraced Aral;¹⁰ Cordelia discovers a sketchbook with drawings of Aral's first wife and a young Ges;¹¹ and, in *Barrayar* (1991),¹² Cordelia describes Ges as 'still obsessed with a love affair that was over eighteen years ago' when Vordarian tries to bait her by mentioning Aral's bisexuality. Fans tend to extrapolate from these scenes a strong emotional intimacy between Ges and Aral, and fan fiction writers sometimes explore or reference their early days. AVD explores the tension hinted at in *Shards of Honor*, showing Ges both obsessed with Aral and loathing the other man's disinterest: 'Vorrutyer. Illyan's memory flickered instantly to the mentions of the man in Vorkosigan's file. They'd been lovers for years, and the details in the

¹⁰ Lois McMaster Bujold, *Shards of Honor* (Riverdale, NY: Baen, 1986), p. 7.

¹¹ Bujold, *Shards*, p. 15.

¹² Lois McMaster Bujold, *Barrayar* (Riverdale, NY: Baen, 1991), p. 7.

file grew increasingly unpleasant until Vorkosigan had left Vorrutyer for ship duty.¹³

Philomytha thus explores and spells out a textual inference that has become an important facet of fan fiction fans' shared interpretation. It is these aspects where the story uses shared interpretations and expands upon them and fills in specific details that create the feeling of not only canon compliance but canon itself: repeatedly, readers praise the way the story fills in the moments they would have liked to have seen or how AVD exceeded their own imagination that had filled in the moments not covered in Bujold. Several readers describe how they often are not certain if they recalled a detail from *Shards of Honor* or AVD.

Slash, Canon Compliance, and A Deeper Season

Fans often use the terms canonical and canon compliant to distinguish between stories expanding on dominant readings and those that take an aggressive approach to the text that nevertheless only contradicts shared interpretations and possibly intended meanings, not actual text. There clearly is no clear line between the two terms and, just like subtext, much of it lies in the eyes of the beholder.¹⁴ Canon compliance is a useful term to describe fan fiction that refuses established and shared interpretations yet nevertheless can co-exist with the text. Betan society, for example, tends to be read by most readers as closer to our democratic values and social ideals than the aristocratic, misogynist Barrayar. Yet there exists a (textually supportable, or rather canon-compliant) interpretation in which Beta Colony is effectively a dystopia. After all, we know procreation is highly controlled and, in *Shards of Honor*, it appears that therapy can be used forcefully to change critical citizens. Such a reading is possible because the Vorkosiverse only gives us limited information about Beta Colony, all filtered through characters shaped by their own cultural backgrounds. But even if we disagree with this interpretation, we can see how it does not contradict the text itself.

Popular discourse often depicts fan fiction as variations of shipping, in particular its same-sex variety, slash. Vorkosigan fan fiction, like many smaller book-based fandoms, skews heavily general, [AQ15] expanding on the canon events and mostly including canonical pairings, like Aral/Cordelia or Simon/Alys. There are a few popular pairings

¹³ Philomytha, *Aral Vorkosigan's Dog*.

¹⁴ See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

that extrapolate from emotional intimacy to romantic entanglements, especially for male pairings. Barrayaran homophobia is addressed and explored in *Shards of Honor* and *Barrayar* in particular, thus offering critical readers the justification to interpolate a love relation between the events depicted in the books. Given that Barrayar follows fairly rigid codes regarding gender and sexuality and that all the books are written in limited point of view, it is thus possible to imagine relationships among characters who are not explicitly connected in the text while nevertheless remaining canon compliant. After all, Aral has now canonically had a male lover for several decades without the texts ever once acknowledging that.

Fan fiction is notorious for hooking up any and all characters with ‘infinite diversity in infinite combinations’. There can be little textual support for these pairings, which sometimes bring together characters who have not met or do not exist in the same universes. Often, however, fan writers extrapolate existing friendships and intricately plot their stories to show how relationships might develop in the interstices of canon. Bujold’s tight point of view permits potential romances between canon characters to be possible when not explicitly contradicted. Thus, even though we see Miles romantically attracted to women and not interested in Bel Thorne, there is nothing in the text specifically rejecting the idea that Miles, like his father, could be bi. In fact, Bujold offers us insight into his romantic self-delusions and his inability to be faithful to the woman he seemingly wants to marry. It is certainly not contradicting canon to imagine a Miles before *Komarr* (1998) falling passionately in love again – even with a man. Lightgetsin and Sahiya’s *A Deeper Season* encompasses a series of twenty-four stories of close to 400,000 words.¹⁵ In the series, Gregor is in love with Miles, though he hides it in canon until the events of *Memory*. After Miles’s death, however, he decides to speak up and confess his love. The romantic relationship forms the backdrop to various action plots, not unlike Bujold’s stories. In fact, the structure, style, and tone of these fan stories resemble Bujold in a way that makes it easy for readers to place the stories as potential sequels rather than alternative readings.

The title narrative features a wild scientific plot coverup involving three planets and various interested parties with Miles, of course, at the center. Like Bujold’s work, the central plot not only serves the narrative function of progressing the action of nerve disruptor fights, diplomatic subterfuge, and crazy shenanigans, but also showcases one of the social

¹⁵ Lightgetsin and Sahiya, *A Deeper Season* (Archive of Our Own, 2005–), <https://archiveofourown.org/series/1516>.

issues the Vorkosiverse raises in terms of reproductive technologies and its effects. In placing reproductive technology at the center of their narrative, the writers not only expand on an important theme in the Vorkosiverse but also facilitate their own narrative direction, namely that this technology will allow Miles and Gregor to create an heir for the Imperium, anticipating one of the main objections against Gregor entering a gay marriage. The other, of course, is Barrayar's extreme homophobia, which the series also addresses. There are gay couples and poly families throughout Bujold's Vorkosiverse but, until *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen*, her principals tend to be paired off in straight couples. Lightgetsin and Sahiya's inter- and extrapolation of the source text changes that fact, using Gregor's canonical resistance to getting married to establish his love for Miles as a potential and canon-compliant explanation. The most difficult challenge for the writers might have been the fact that Miles has not expressed same-sex desire in any of the novels that feature his close third point of view. Given that Barrayaran culture is deeply homophobic, however, it is not unlikely that a bisexual Miles would simply default to women. As such, they let the relationship develop slowly, allowing Miles to worry and doubt, the surrounding friends and relatives to be surprised, and all in time to come to terms with this challenging political and social relationship.

Gregor declares his love for Miles in a scene that illustrates the way the series relies on reader's knowledge and understanding of Vorkosiverse culture yet extrapolates it powerfully:

I want someone who will want me in return, who would want me with or without the Imperium. I want someone who could be my equal. I want to know someone as deep as the soul, and be known in return. I want [...] I want to lay my hands between another's, for the first time [...].¹⁶

When Gregor then 'slip[s] his own hands' between Miles's, the reader, like Miles, understands how outrageous and powerful a gesture this is. Bujold repeatedly tells and shows us how important and meaningful a relationship is created and embodied with the oath of embracing a sworn liege's hands. In *The Warrior's Apprentice* (1986), Miles explains the Barrayaran liege relation to Betan Arde Mayhew, emphasizing that not only the reciprocal responsibilities but also that it embeds Arde in an entire complex hierarchy. Miles tells him that 'legally you'd be like a

¹⁶ Lightgetsin and Sahiya, *A Deeper Season*.

part of my body'¹⁷ a physicality of Barrayaran laws that likewise exists in marriage vows and the role of the Imperial Auditor (who speaks with the voice of the Emperor). Gregor, of course, is the ultimate embodiment of the Imperium, holding all liege relations directly or indirectly, and thus his gesture is one of ultimate dedication and submission.

The second novel-length part of the series, *What Passing Bells*, features an assassination attempt on Gregor that instead ends up with Miles slowly dying of poison. In exchange for an antidote, the conservative conspirators demand that Gregor break off all galactic connections and resign. Again, the writers take up themes that recur throughout Bujold's novels where the conservative forces on Barrayar resist social, political, and also technological, progress: democratic values, gene cleansing, gender reassignment surgery, and other ideas challenging the traditional military masculine Vor traditions. Another reason ADS resonates so strongly with readers is the way it deftly uses moments and plot points from the Vorkosiverse. It draws from everything from *Borders of Infinity* (1989) and *Memory to Ethan of Athos* (1986) and *Cetaganda* (1995): Benin and Haut Pel play a central role, as do the Duronas and Count Vormoncrief. Escobar and Athos are important settings, as are Silvy Vale, the Star Bridge, and Caravanserai. Even though the stories stand on their own and are read by fans without knowledge of the Vorkosiverse, the layers of references and allusions to characters, places, and themes heighten this story and mark it as exemplary in its balance of plot and character, its simultaneous adherence and bold expansion of canon, and its sensitivity to Bujold's style and voice.

Next to AVD, *A Deeper Season* is one of the most highly recommended fan works, often with an emphasis on how much it matches Bujold's voice and subject matters. Hundreds of recs and feedbacks repeatedly foreground how the characters sound true to themselves, how the universe is authentic, and how it sounds like Bujold's voice. For fans of canon-compliant fan fiction those are, of course, the highest compliments that can be given. In fact, comments on both stories often emphasize how they forget that they are reading fanfic, how they feel this could be an additional Bujold novel, and how they often forget whether a scene is from Bujold or the fan fiction. In what may be the highest fannish compliment, fans repeatedly ask the author whether they are not Bujold in pseudonym. In fact, many fans tell the writers that they print out the stories to shelve next to Bujold's novels, suggesting an equality rather than subordination of the fanfic.

¹⁷ Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Warrior's Apprentice* (Riverdale, NY: Baen, 1986), p. 80.

At times, they rank the story with Bujold's novels as amongst their favorites, at other times not really reading fanfic (or not reading slash) yet loving this series.

Mary Sue, Original Characters, and Petyaverse

In fandoms with strong worldbuilding, some fan writers use the setting to tell their own stories using their own characters. Original characters (OCs), especially female OCs, are often dismissed as Mary Sues, a term derived from a brief parody story in *Star Trek*.¹⁸ One of the biggest points of criticism about OCs is that they take the story away from the actual protagonists, twisting the world so that everyone and everything focuses on and reflects them. However, a new character, like the expansion of an existing one, may be used to shed light on all the existing characters and the historical, political, and social contexts in which they function. Lanna Michaels's Petya is such an original character.¹⁹ Born to Aral and his first wife, he is raised by his grandfather during the years before *Shards of Honor* during which Aral first drowns his sorrow in alcohol, and Ges Vorrutyer then conquers Komarr, and finally is demoted and on ship duty. Virtually an orphan, Petya is politically and socially shaped by his grandfather Piotr but cannot escape becoming a pawn of his father's enemies. As a result, he learns early to be aware of political undercurrents and the intricacies of Vor policies: in 'Party Politics', which covers the events of *A Civil Campaign* (1999), 'Petya takes off his gloves and reminds people that he might not be puppet-mastering half the government the way Uncle Aral used to, but he's still a Vorkosigan and he knows exactly what he's doing.'²⁰ Later in the story, Ivan jokes

¹⁸ See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Ika Willis, 'Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts', in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, pp. 153–70; Cynthia W. Walker, 'A Conversation with Paula Smith', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 6 (2011), <https://doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0243>; Kristina Busse, 'Beyond Mary Sue: Fan Representation in Fiction and the Complex Negotiation of Gendered Identity', in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, eds. Paul Booth and Lucy Bennett (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 159–68.

¹⁹ Lanna Michaels, 'Petya 'verse' (Archive of Our Own: 2010–), <https://archiveofourown.org/series/4657>.

²⁰ Lanna Michaels 'Party Politics' (Archive of Our Own, 2011), <https://archiveofourown.org/works/199732>.

to Petya: 'You had the Vor family tree as a mobile over your crib, didn't you?'²¹ The series repeatedly emphasizes that Petya neither likes the attention nor enjoys the politics that comes with the position of being future Count Vorkosigan, but it is also obvious that he has long learned how to play the roles expected of him.

While Petya is certainly a character in his own right, with his own career, love affair, and emotional foibles, he also serves as an investigative tool into the politics of high Vor society. Bujold repeatedly emphasizes the complicated web of Gregor's potential heirs (when Salic descent is taken into account) with Aral, Miles, and Ivan leading the list. Petya constitutes a potential threat on all levels: he is young enough, seen as allied with his grandfather's conservative forces, related on both sides to high Vor society, and does not share Miles's teratogenic damage. In fact, his entire life is shaped by his continuous attempts to avoid political involvement, especially after his father becomes Regent: 'I try to be neutral. My grandfather is a staunch conservative, my father is suspected of being a progressive, my step-mother is Betan. No matter where I stand on politics, I am standing against someone who holds my loyalty.'²² Petya is characterized as a quiet boy and a self-contained man, a diplomat by nature and training, thus functioning as a foil to all the headstrong Vorkosigan men.

In his relationship with prole Guy Allegre, Petya educates him on the many details of Vor society and protocol. When they first meet on Earth, for example, at a Komarran party, Petya has to explain what messages different clothes might send:

Vorkosigan had spent some time explaining the difficulty to Guy; it essentially came down to a choice between potentially insulting some of the Komarran-sympathizing guests by wearing his House uniform, misusing the uniform by wearing duty uniform to an event not openly part of his duty, or disappointing everyone by being a Barrayaran while not wearing any kind of uniform.²³

Lanna Michaels thus takes a central theme of the source text and similarly places it at the center of her stories: the Vor class with its military valorization, its social and political aspects, its complex familial relations and the thereby created inheritance lines. The Vorkosigan

²¹ Lanna Michaels, 'Party Politics'.

²² Lanna Michaels, 'Earth Duty' (Archive of Our Own, 2010), <https://archive-of-our-own.org/works/127805>.

²³ Lanna Michaels, 'Earth Duty'.

family line, decimated through historical events – the Cetagandan Occupation, Yuri’s Massacre, and, finally, Vordarian’s Pretendship – centers the Vorkosigan series: Piotr, Aral, and Miles’s political and military achievements often form the background, if not the central narrative, of the books. Moreover, the dangers implied by Aral’s position as a potential heir to the throne thread throughout Bujold’s novels.

Discussions of Salic descent, i.e., inheritance of the regency through matrilineal lines, feature more than once as the means by which Aral, Miles, and Ivan are potential claimants to the throne. As Xav’s descendants, their claim to the throne is matrilineal, but, as Miles points out to Ivan, some factions claim that that the Salic bar does not hold on Barrayar, either through law or custom.²⁴ Bujold repeatedly foregrounds that, without Gregor Vorbarra, various Vor family could claim right to the Imperium, but that no one’s claim is as strong as that of the grandson and great grandsons of Xav Vorbarra. That is one of the reasons why the Vorkosigans so strongly support Gregor’s Regency and then Imperial reign. Miles explains: ‘Like, my survival. I like my job very well. I don’t want Gregor’s.’²⁵ All of his relatives clearly endorse Gregor’s marriage not only for his own sake, but also because Gregor’s children will create a clear Imperial line of inheritance. Miles, for example, spells out the need directly to Ivan: ‘The more little heirs Gregor and Laisa can put between you and me and the Imperium, the safer we’ll be. Us *and* our families.’²⁶

A Civil Campaign focuses at length on Vor society and its inheritance rules: the emotional climax of Ekaterin’s marriage proposal to Miles occurs in the Council of Counts during the vote on two different inheritance contests, Lord Dono’s claim to the Vorrutyer Countship and Count Vorbretten’s defense against a challenge. Gene scans and genealogies are always present in Vorkosiverse, but they become central in *A Civil Campaign*. This obsession is equally foregrounded in the Petyaverse: Aral sends Petya his gene scan to prove that Petya is indeed legitimate. The gene scan, however, shows Petya not only that Aral is indeed his father but also his entire complex genealogy:

There’s knowing he’s excessively inbred, that he’s his own third cousin, so closely related to himself that his name properly should have been Piotr Pierre, and even more than that, related to himself another half-dozen ways, but then there’s seeing it written out. He’s

²⁴ Bujold, *Shards*, p. 263.

²⁵ Lois McMaster Bujold, *A Civil Campaign* (Riverdale, NY: Baen, 1999), p. 118.

²⁶ Bujold, *Campaign*, p. 25.

no mutie and he is Aral Vorkosigan's son, but his gene scan scares him in a way nothing else has. He wonders if he could get away with marrying a galactic like Prince Xav did. Except that Prince Xav was never supposed to be the father of Emperors, and Petya is supposed to father a Count Vorkosigan.²⁷

Here, Lanna Michaels reflects the anxieties over genetic inbreeding expressed by Miles in *Memory*:

Gregor's even more closely related to Mad Emperor Yuri than I am. And, um ... he knows more about his father, the late unlamented Crown Prince Serg, than I think my parents might wish. He has these historically well-founded genetic paranoidias about – well – paranoia. And about Vor inbreeding. He'd never let himself fall in love with another Vor.²⁸

The role of inheritance is one of the many facets Lanna Michaels takes from the source and explores in depth in her series. Rather than creating an original character and making everything about them, Lanna Michaels constructs Petya as all but defined by Barrayaran society, giving us further insight into the Vor. Where Miles is a model in contradictions and exceptions, experiencing and surviving even more fantastic and outrageous experiences than his parents, Petya cherishes his low profile or, as he describes it: 'I'm one of Aral Vorkosigan's footnotes.'²⁹ But beyond being Aral's first son, Ges Vorrutyer's nephew, Cordelia's stepson, and Miles's older brother, Petya is also the future Count Vorkosigan, a child raised by his grandfather Piotr. By shifting the point of view to Old Vor ideology, the series succeeds in imagining more directly many of the potential repercussions of the Vor system. After all, Bujold mostly depicts Barrayaran society through its outsiders, whether Cordelia or Miles. Where the Vorkosiverse catalogues the planet's social and political changes through those who engender and support it, the Petyaverse offers readers a fictional insider's view. With Petya, Lanna Michaels creates a character who illuminates the world rather than one around whom the world must bend itself.

²⁷ Lanna Michaels, 'Lord Piotr' (Archive of Our Own, 2010), <https://archive-of-our-own.org/works/119034>.

²⁸ Bujold, *Memory*, p. 127.

²⁹ Lanna Michaels, 'Earth Duty'.

Conclusion

What is noteworthy in all the examples I have looked at here is that, regardless of how far the premise seems to steer the story into original waters, the central concerns remain firmly within the universe Bujold created. We see few stories that take characters and situate them in ancient Rome or as baristas in contemporary United States, or that create an original character to make the story theirs and twist the world around them, or that remold Bujold's world to fit fan fiction genres and popular tropes. Even tropes such as time travel, body swaps, or college AUs tend to remain tethered to if not immersed in the central ethos of Bujold's Vorkosigan stories. And while this is true to a degree for the use of generic tropes in all fandoms, the specificity of Vorkosiverse paired with its wide range of canon tropes, creates a body of fan fiction that is mostly tied to the books even as it engages in ideas shared within the interpretive community of Vorkosigan fans and brings in plots, themes, and tropes from other fandoms.

One of the reproaches that fan studies has recently faced from within is that it focuses too much on analysis and cerebral engagement, ignoring instead the affect that is at the heart of being a fan. Meanwhile, in the wider world of academia as well as in public discourse, fan analysis is often dismissed as useless, if not childish. Of course, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. An arbitrary division between cerebral and aesthetic pleasure, between critical engagement and fannish feels, between analysis and affect refuses to acknowledge and embrace one of the fundamental ways in which fans read and watch, love and engage. Quotes and discussions and stories and drawings all come together to affirm fannish love for the text, celebrating it through affirmative and transformative fan engagements. This love may be most clearly articulated in the many fan fiction stories that give readers both insightful interpretations of favorite characters and the worlds they inhabit, as well as permit more time with them through space adventures, romantic relations, and political intrigues. At its most provocative, fan fiction engages in a constant conversation not only with the source texts but also the shared fan conversations, be they academic essays, reader meta, or the stories of other fan writers. Vorkosigan fans showcase this ability to imagine and create even as they analyze and interpret in every single meta essay, fan fiction, and (canon or fanon) conversation.

Works Cited

- Bujold, Lois McMaster. *Barrayar*. Riverdale, NY: Baen, 1991.
- . *A Civil Campaign*. Riverdale, NY: Baen Books, 1999.
- . *CryoBurn*. Riverdale, NY: Baen Books, 2010.
- . *Memory*. Riverdale, NY: Baen Books, 1996.
- . *Shards of Honor*. Riverdale, NY: Baen, 1986.
- . *The Vor Game*. Riverdale, NY: Baen Books, 1990.
- . *The Warrior's Apprentice*. Riverdale, NY: Baen Books, 1986.
- Busse, Kristina. 'Beyond Mary Sue: Fan Representation in Fiction and the Complex Negotiation of Gendered Identity'. In *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, edited by Paul Booth and Lucy Bennett, 159–68. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- . *Framing Fan Fiction*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017.
- . 'Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse'. In *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking over the World*, edited by Anne Jamison, 288–94. Dallas, TX: BenBella, 2013.
- Coppa, Francesca. *The Fan Fiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.
- Dira Sudis. 'I Was Right, Ask Me How'. Apr. 6, 2015. <http://dsudis.tumblr.com/post/115697353364/i-was-right-ask-me-how>.
- . *The World That You Need*. Archive of Our Own, 2010–2015. <https://archiveofourown.org/series/4569>.
- Doty, Alexander. *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Hellekson, Karen and Kristina Busse, eds. *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.
- . eds. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.
- Jamison, Anne, ed. *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*. Dallas, TX: BenBella, 2013. [AQ16]
- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Lanna Michaels. 'Earth Duty'. Archive of Our Own, 2010. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/127805>.
- . 'Lord Piotr'. Archive of Our Own, 2010. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/119034>.
- . 'Party Politics'. Archive of Our Own, 2011. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/199732>.
- . 'Petya 'verse'. Archive of Our Own, 2010–. <https://archiveofourown.org/series/4657>.
- Lightgetsin and Sahiya. *A Deeper Season*. Archive of Our Own, 2005–. <https://archiveofourown.org/series/1516>.
- . 'A Deeper Season'. Archive of Our Own, 2010. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/33383>.
- Philomytha. *Aral Vorkosigan's Dog*. Archive of Our Own, 2010. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/135363>.

- Popova, Milena. 'Dogfuck Rapeworld: Omegaverse Fanfiction as a Critical Tool in Analyzing the Impact of Social Power Structures on Intimate Relationships and Sexual Consent'. *Porn Studies* 5.2 (2018), 175–91.
- Pugh, Sheenagh. *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*. Bridgend: Seren, 2005.
- Sturgis, Amy. 'From Both Sides Now: Bujold and the Fan Fiction Phenomenon'. In *Lois McMaster Bujold: Essays on a Modern Master of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Janet Brennan Croft, 16–26. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013.
- Thomas, Bronwen. 'Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online'. Accessed Apr. 7, 2019. www.dichtung-digital.org/2007/thomas.htm.
- Van Steenhuyse, Veerle. 'Jane Austen Fan Fiction and the Situated Fantext: The Example of Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*'. *English Text Construction* 4.2 (2011), 165–85.
- Walker, Cynthia W. 'A Conversation with Paula Smith'. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 6 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0243>.
- Willis, Ika. 'Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts'. In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 153–70. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.