

Slash

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Homosocial bonds and their homoerotic interpretations go as far back as Homer's description of the deep attachment between Achilles and Patroclus, the Biblical love between David and Jonathan, and the intimate friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Even contemporaneous interpretations such as Aeschylus's *The Myrmidons* and Plato's *Symposium* debated the exact nature and meaning of the intense same-sex warrior bonds. Modern media, of course, is full of stories featuring male partners working and fighting side by side, be they detectives, spies, or space explorers. And the stories that fans tell one another about these heroes is not unlike the oral folk narratives of preprint days. Slash describes creative fan works that take characters from existing texts and feature them in male/male romantic and sexual relationships. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between those shared heroic tales and contemporary corporate media properties that constitute the sources for most current creative reimaginings: where Greek playwrights could retell the Iliad and medieval artists reimagine Biblical scenes, a *Star Wars* love story may result in Lucasfilm threatening copyright infringement litigation. As a result, slash is not only a genre descriptive of homoerotic fan fiction but also must be understood as a historical, social, and economic category.

Contemporary fan culture is fundamentally a response to corporate ownership of ideas, worlds, and characters. According to fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins, media fan works are "a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk" (as cited in Harmon, 2002). Fan works, the unauthorized interpretations and extrapolations of copyrighted worlds, plots, and characters are not necessarily a recent phenomenon. Their specific modes of creation, dissemination, and reception, however, rely on the democratization of media production. Mimeographs, copy machines, and computer printers have allowed for the ever-easier replication of text and images while video-recorders and computers have permitted video editing.

Beginning in the late 1960s a group of primarily female *Star Trek* (1966–1969) fans began building fannish communities focused on creative textual engagements. Replicating traditional science fiction's fannish infrastructures, media fandom created fanzine and organized fan conventions, with a focus on characters and relationships. *Star Trek's* primary characters shared a heroic warrior bond, repeatedly and sacrificially saving one another's lives. Fan fiction writers quickly interpreted their close emotional ties as romantic, and by the 1970s homoerotic stories shared the pages with other interpretations of the characters and their imagined worlds. Authors would add "Kirk/Spock" in the paratextual material to clearly distinguish their homoerotic stories, and this convention translated to other fandoms where pairings were marked

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accordingly. Generically, fan works depicting two same-sex media characters in romantic and sexual situations were shorthanded as male/male (m/m) or, following the virgule separating the names, as *slash*. Accordingly, female/female (f/f) pairings were called *femslash*, with *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) as its first huge fandom (Jones, 2000; Russo & Ng, 2017).

When fan fiction moved online, so did its conventions: fan fiction headers would precede the story and include fandom, genre, rating, and romantic pairings, functioning simultaneously as advertising and warning, and allowing slash readers to pick out same-sex stories. Many slash fandoms curated their own mailing lists and archives, such as “Down in the Basement” for *The X-Files* (1993–2002), “852 Prospect” for *The Sentinel* (1994–1999), “Due Slash” for *Due South* (1994–1999), and “Smallville Slash Archive” for *Smallville* (2001–2011). With fandom’s expanding demographic reach on the Internet, the mainstreaming of gay rights throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and the popularization of fan fiction through popular media, slash moved from the heavily warned and age-limited zines, which were sold under the table at cons, to widely shared online fan platforms, which are now acknowledged and catered to by media producers.

The enormous success of the Harry Potter book series and film adaptations introduced an entire generation of teens to fan participation, including the awareness, if not love, for Harry/Draco. And where before sexual thoughts about one’s favorite band members might have been shared with a trusted friend only, smart phones and easy blogging and archiving platforms have allowed easy and immediate publication of these fantasies and stories. Today, there hardly exists a media character or public celebrity that does not feature in at least one slash story. Popular slash pairings such as John/Sherlock (Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories and adaptations), Dean/Castiel (TV show *Supernatural*), Bucky/Steve (Marvel comics and Marvel Cinematic Universe), Enjolras/Grantaire (book and musical *Les Misérables*), Axel/Roxas (video game *Kingdom Hearts*), Sidney/Evgeni (National Hockey League players), Harry/Louis (music band *One Direction*), or Dan/Phil (YouTube personalities) have tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of stories about them shared on the Internet—from 100 word drabbles to 1.5 million word series.

Slash fan fiction has long been an object of academic study in an attempt to explicate how a group of nearly all women, many if not most straight-identified, would be drawn to writing and reading same-sex romance that sometimes featured explicit gay male sex. Early slash in particular had strong textual support: after all, the structure of most TV shows and films at the time privileged the male leads’ emotional interactions. Female characters, by contrast, would be framed as marginal, or function as exchange objects within an erotic triangle. As a result, fan fiction would primarily focus on the male protagonists, including potential romantic involvements.

Slash explores idealized relationships of equality which are impossible in existing heterosexual pairings. Lamb and Veith (1986) argue that, in slash, both male partners are given traditionally male and female characteristics and thus that it offers a romance within which both partners can be fully equal. Slash also offers noncommercial erotica: Joanna Russ (1985) focuses on its explicit sexual aspects, suggesting that women are rarely the intended audience for commercial pornography; instead of porn catering to men, slash is produced and read by women. Constance Penley (1992) adds

the suggestion that the m/m scenario allows women to have and be the man, that is, slash stories allow simultaneous identification with and desire of both men. Acknowledging its semblances to both pornography and romance, Catherine Driscoll (2006) foregrounds the way fan fiction uses both in the pursuits of readerly pleasure.

If one important aspect of fiction is pleasure and fantasy, another is identification and catharsis. With her particular attention to slash depicting torture, accidents, illness, and their aftermaths, Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) suggests that there are complex identificatory processes at work that allow writers (and readers) to work through personal trauma via fiction. The fact that the characters—as men but also as warriors—are so unlike, the fans themselves offers a necessary distance. As young, fit, white, cis, straight-presenting, conventionally attractive guys, these characters are effectively unmarked. Their difference to the readers and writers contributes to their appeal, allowing writers to mold and alter them to their own desires, torture and maim them, or have them find passionate and lasting love. Francesca Coppa (2018) argues a structural similarity between slash and drag where both create spaces to articulate otherwise impossible to articulate meanings for both subject and object in their overdetermined cross-gender performances.

Slash has faced criticism from various corners: source text creators and some fans take issue with its explicit depiction of gay sex and its normalization of gay romance, often citing the main characters' straightness. This presupposes the very default heterosexuality slash fans challenge, and vilifies the erotic pleasures explicit fan fiction can offer women in particular. At the same time, some gay fans criticize the representation of same-sex (male) sexuality as a colonization of male bodies for the purposes of women's sexual fantasies. Not only is slash's focus on men seen as disrespectful of gay representation, but it also can be read as implicit misogyny that ignores the ever-increasing number of interesting women characters in mass media. And yet while slash fiction all too often focuses on putting white, straight, cis male characters into conventional monogamous gay relationships (Jones, 2002; Hunting, 2012), the slash community itself is surprisingly queer (Green, Jenkins, & Jenkins, 1998; Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2007).

Discussing the relationship between slash and queer culture, Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian (2017) propose three waves. The first wave of early woman-centric slash that uses male bodies onto which to project emotional and physical fantasies shifted in the 1990s toward a second wave of realism with an awareness of gay culture. By the 2000s third wave slash fandom began to address multiple genders and sexualities with a clearly queer sensibility. All these approaches exist simultaneously but general cultural trends as well as changes in media production have altered viewer expectations and interpretations. Whereas early slash fiction often needed to address the supposed textual straightness of its characters, current stories may assume bisexuality as default. Popular early tropes such as overcoming internalized homophobia, military prohibition of homosexuality, and ignorance and inexperience in gay sex have given way to new themes such as trans narratives, asexual or aromantic characters, and polyamorous relationships. Early slash's often concerted absence of a gay identity in favor of the special bond of the slash pairing gives way to (canonically) gay characters living openly, often within a queer community.

In fact, if slash is narrowly conceived as an amateur genre that queers TV and film characters, then we might be able to mark an eventual end of slash. An ever-increasing pro male/male romance market offers commercial outlets for the type of female fantasy previously only created within slash fandom. More on-screen gay characters and canonically gay storylines blur fan fiction's genre lines: a non-explicit Ron and Hermione adventure does not need a "het" marking, so it is presumptuous to expect a "slash" label on a non-explicit Jace/Alec (*Shadowhunter* 2016–) or Clarke/Lexa (*The 100*, 2016–) story. In fact, fandom increasingly sees m/m and f/f pairings as not fundamentally different from any other storylines—thus lacking the incentive to insulate them from other fan fiction. If slash is not just a descriptive term for male/male fan fiction but the politically subversive intervention into popular culture that many early academics saw it to be, then possibly the biggest success would indeed be a fan fiction culture that no longer generically separates stories by the characters' gender or sexuality.

SEE ALSO: Fan Girls; iegmc011; The Yaoi/Boys' Love/Danmei Audience; Zine Culture; Participatory and Networked Cultures; iegmc084

iegmc010
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ABSTRACT

Slash describes creative fan works featuring same-sex romantic and sexual relationships, often expanding on homosocial bonds in the source texts. Broadly, it can be used as a general descriptive genre of homoerotic transformative art, but more commonly it means a specific historical, social, and economic category connected to media fandom, the creative primarily female fan communities of live-action Western TV shows from the 1960s onward. Slash fan fiction has been a central focus of fan and audience studies: its primarily female readers and writers as well as its explicit homoerotic prose defies easy explanations of women's genres and media receptions. Moreover, its often-aggressive alternate readings of popular media texts exemplify reception models of resistant readings. Following greater visibility of queer characters and relationships on screen, slash continues to be popular especially in its exploration of non-normative sexualities and sexual identities.

KEYWORDS

fan fiction; homosociality; media fandom; media reception; transformative works