

Fans of literature and the borders of a text

Šárka Bubíková

University of Pardubice

Abstract:

The contemporary phenomenon of fan fiction has triggered not only (renewed) discussions on the dividing lines between commercial and non-commercial activities, between subculture and the mainstream, professional and amateur literary productions and the non/importance of copyright in art in general, but has also presented new challenges to our understanding of the stability of a literary text and its boundaries. The paper aims at introducing the phenomenon of fanfiction, analyze some of its aspects, and focus on how the mere existence of fanfiction subverts the notion of a text as a stable artefact raising interesting questions about the character of human creativity.

I have started my research on the topic of fanfiction by asking my peers what first comes to their mind when I say “fans” and “fandoms.” The first associations were sports – they referred to football fans or ice-hockey fans or baseball fans. When I specifically asked about female fans my peers would admit that there exist fandoms surrounding a singer or an actor. Based on my improvised questionnaire, one would conclude that fans have nothing to do with literature. Until I asked my thirteen-year old son: “With what would you connect the word fan?” He answered without hesitation: “But of course with *Harry Potter!*” And his answer gets us right to the core of the matter – making it clear that speaking of literary fans and fandoms, we will “descend” into the realm of the popular, mostly into the genres of fantasy, sci-fi, horror and crime fiction because the majority of fandoms center around these popular forms. It also points to the fact that it is a predominantly contemporary phenomenon.

By literary fans we do not mean readers who very much like a particular literary piece, re-read it and/or discuss it with their friends but those readers who actively engage with the text and who seek the community of like-minded active readers. In the words of journalist and novelist Lev Grossman, literary fans “are not silent, couchbound consumers of media” (44). Fans create their fandoms, i.e. communities of fans devoted to a particular work, publish texts in magazines called fanzines (more recently in electronic format as e-zines), meet at various conventions (or cons). Fans’ engagement with the source text (in the fans’ vernacular – the fanspeak – called the canon) includes production of various art forms – fan art such as drawings, paintings and photo collages (called fanpic), fan games, videos, songs, and texts called fanfiction.

Fanfiction (also fan fiction), often abbreviated as fanfic, is thus any non-commercial derivative fiction created by fans (non-professionals) based on or related to an existing (usually recent) work of popular fiction (or film, TV series, video and computer game). It is created without the author’s (or the copyright holder’s) consent. It is non-commercial because it is written by fans for fans and shared for free in the fandom community. Typically, fanfiction is posted on the Internet where other fans can read it and provide the writer with feedback. Some readers, called beta-readers, even edit the text (they beta-read it) while others

may write a text in reaction to it. In such a way, they create a true literary palimpsest. The fanfiction community therefore represents a form of highly active, participatory readership. Sociological research claims that fanfiction is mostly a female domain.

Media studies scholar Henry Jenkins used the term poachers (1992) to describe the writers of fanfiction and has analyzed the phenomenon as a great example of cultural convergence by which he means “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (2006: 2). Thus (popular) culture is no longer seen in the dichotomy of producers and consumers (as for example in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1980, translated into English 1984) because the dividing line between production and consumption is significantly blurred. In fact, as Katherine Larsen and Lynn S. Zubernis claim, the potential for participation is an important factor in nowadays world of production: “In order for a media text to be a successful cultural attractor, there must also be a way in for fans, with meaningful ways to participate” (Larsen, Zubernis 3).

Fanfiction writers engage with their source text in a variety of ways: they may change narrative point of view, turn a minor character into a protagonist, add what happens before or after the original plot; they can also add events, characters, settings, entire subplots, and thus expand the original fictional world; they create new relationships between existing characters. They may move the fantasy (or supernatural) world of the original text into a realistic (natural) world and thus alternate between these worlds. In short, they adore, emulate, transform, parody, critique, and variously subvert the original. In other words, fanfiction creates variety of hypertexts to the original hypotext.

The reactions of canonic authors (the authors of the hypotext) to fanfiction are varied. Many professional writers are flattered by its mere existence because if their texts inspire fanfiction, it also means they are widely read and thus popular. So for example Rainbow Rowell, author of *Fangirl* (2013) said: “It leaves me awed to think that people are invested in my stories and my characters so much that they want to make their own art and their own stories about them” (as quoted by Chelsey Philpot). J.K. Rowling (author of the *Harry Potter* series, 1997-2007) or Stephanie Meyer (author of *The Twilight Saga*, 2005-8) are equally welcoming towards fanfiction. As Grossman pointed out fanfiction can after all act as “a viral marketing agent for their work” (45). Other writers oppose fanfiction or are downright hostile. Thus for example American popular fiction writer Anne Rice (author of *Interview with the Vampire*, 1976 and *The Witching Hour*, 1990) posts on her official website the following statement: “I do not allow fan fiction. The characters are copyrighted. It upsets me terribly to even think about fan fiction with my characters. I advise my readers to write your own original stories with your own characters. It is absolutely essential that you respect my wishes.”¹ Similarly George R. R. Martin (author of the *Game of Thrones*, 1996) declared during a November 2013 press conference that he would prefer writers to make up “their own characters and their own stories” (as quoted in Philpot).

As Jenkins points out, the picture gets more complicated when corporate copyright holders are involved: “I can’t think of very many cases where individual authors have sought legal recourse against fans. I can think of many where legal regimes become much tougher once corporations take over” (as quoted in Philpot). For example although J.K. Rowling has sent encouraging messages to the major *Harry Potter* fanfiction web sites and openly declared

that the existence of fanfiction is flattering her (Waters), Warner Bros releasing the *Harry Potter* films requested that the sites remove content and/or shut down. The studio's campaign, as Philpot claims, "resulted in domain names being confiscated, but they also caused a public relations disaster and uproar from fans threatening to boycott the films." In the early 2000s, when Warner Bros attacked Harry Potter fanfiction, the most popular fanfiction web site Fanfiction.net listed some 700,000 Harry Potter stories. Anupam Chandler and Madhavi Sunder record a similar instance where the Warner Bros issued a cease and desist letter to an Indian publisher who published a fanfiction story (sold for less than a dollar) in Bengali about Harry Potter's visit to Calcutta (610-11).

The various forms of fanfiction have their standard labels which give its readers a basic clue as to what to expect of the text. In that way, categories of fanfiction function as genre categories in fiction. Among the categories are for example the "alternative universe" (AU) which alternates the fictional world for example by creating a life for a character that died in the original; "alternative human" (AU/AH) where the fantasy (supernatural) world is changed into a natural one; "hurt/comfort" (H/C) stories in which a character gets hurt so that another one can comfort him/her; "sillyfic" or a short humorous text intended to entertain. A specific category and one which tends to draw non-fan attention the most is "slash" fiction presenting a homoerotic or homosexual relationship between characters that are heterosexual in the original. Among the first fanfiction slash pairing were two male characters from the *Star Trek* Kirk and Spock.

Fanfiction writers thus imagine all kinds of "what ifs" to the fictional world and its characters, or perhaps predominantly the characters, because, as psychologist Jennifer L. Barnes notes, "a variety of scholars have suggested that in fanfiction, character is king" (75). Veerle Van Steenhuyse in her analysis of fanfiction texts derived from the TV series *Dr. House* points to the high level of emotional involvement or immersion of fans in the lives of their characters. In fact, great emotional engagement is characteristic of fans in general, not only the literary ones. Therefore it is not surprising to find that not only *Dr. House* fanfiction but a vast majority of fanfiction surrounding any canonical text concentrates on the relationships between characters. Barnes thus concludes that fanfiction can be perceived as "means of gaining control over our parasocial relationships with characters" (75).

Some fanfiction writers insert their (often idealized) alter ego into the story in order to interact with the characters. And although this practice is often refused by fanfiction communities as narcissist and is pejoratively labeled "Mary Sue",² Chandler and Sunders (2007) effectively argue that the method represents a powerful means of empowerment and subaltern critique. Fanfiction writers often give voices to the margins; they valorize and revalue their place within social space. The above mentioned example of a fanfiction story bringing Harry Potter to Calcutta is a great example of cultural adaptation; one which includes Bengali traditions and setting into a fictional world that was originally and predominantly white and British. A Czech fanfiction story similarly places an alternative subplot of *Harry Potter* into a distinctly Central European setting in order to counter a rather stereotypical presentation of Slavic characters in the original and includes supernatural characters from Slavic folklore. Since many popular works have featured predominantly white main characters, there is a need among the fans to supply more racial and ethnic diversity or simply characters with which non-white fans can identify. There is even a web site dreaming-in-

color.net dedicated to fanfiction “about characters of color” (2009). A lot of fanfiction centers on strong, active female characters. For example, various Harry Potter fanfiction stories focus on the character of Hermione, turning her into the protagonist (not just a helper of the protagonist), making the story *her* story and in that way they offer an antidote to the Hogwarts world where male characters (be them students or teachers) lead. Fanfiction stories inserting a powerful female character/s appear particularly in connection to those popular works where original female characters are either just sidekicks or powerless victims or are mostly missing (*Lord of the Rings*, 1954-5, serves as a good example here).

Fanfiction as part of popular culture has been studied for some time now – fandom studies exist as a specialized discipline with scholars focusing on variety of issues. For example John Fiske studied the role of class and gender, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse fan’s identity formation and the role of fandom in the process, Kurt Lancaster the performative and role-playing character of fandoms. Henry Jenkins and Larsen and Zubernis represent a new kind of fandom scholars because they are scholars and fans at the same time (aca-fans as the term has been coined) who aim at studying the phenomenon from within the fan community or as insiders rather than detached outsiders.³

Despite the growing amount of scholarship, fanfiction is still an under-researched field. Therefore it mostly remains, as Grossman puts it, “the cultural equivalent of dark matter: it’s largely invisible to the mainstream, but at the same time, it’s unbelievably massive” (44). This fact may contribute to an unfavorable image fanfiction sometimes gets. Emma Cueto, for example, argues in the *Bustle* that the term fanfiction gives the activity a bad name because it “conjures up images of rabid, crazy-eyed teens so obsessed that they just have to have more even if they must write it themselves.” She thus suggests a better term, “inspired fiction as in the sense that it’s a story inspired by another story,” even if in many case “it can still stand on its own”. Larsen and Zubernis similarly complained that they are “frustrated by media coverage that seemed to misrepresent and pathologize fans” (6) therefore causing a lot of shame among them. “The tenacity of this uncomfortable emotion seems particularly unexpected at a time when the economic power of fans has become an accepted (and much-courted) force” and thus their economic force alone “should garner [them] a more favorable place in the culture” (Larsen, Zubernis 6). Still, they conclude, the fan remains persistently seen as the other.

And yet, the existence of people enthusiastic about a particular literary work does not date in the twentieth century just as works inspired by or referring to other works are not a contemporary phenomenon. The club of Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts is usually considered as the first unofficial fandom, gaining the form of an officially organized fan society in 1934, when Christopher Morley founded the Baker Street Irregulars, later publishing what we could call a fanzine *The Baker Street Journal* (and now having their official web site www.bakerstreetirregulars.com). The Baker Street Irregulars jokingly treated Holmes and Dr. Watson as real people. Morley commented: “The whole Sherlock Holmes saga is a triumphant illustration of art’s supremacy over life” (as quoted in Brown). The first extra-canonical text on Holmes that could be, in modern terminology, labeled as fanfiction, was anonymously published in *The Speaker* as early as 1891 (Green 7). As Arcadia Falcone states on the Harry Ransom Center blog, “many of the early extra-canonical Holmes sightings crop up as brief, humorous episodes in newspapers or periodicals.” In the contemporary fanspeak,

such stories would be called sillyfic. Just as fanfiction nowadays, the phenomenon of Sherlockian extra-canonical texts (called by their contemporaries as parody or pastiche) soon expanded internationally. Falcone cites a German newspaper writing in 1908 “it is certain that contemporary Europe is suffering from a disease called Sherlockismus [*sic*], a literary disease similar to Werther-mania and romantic Byronism,” while *The Bookman* diagnosed Paris with “what may be described as a bad case of Sherlockitis.”

A major flourishing of fanfiction dates back to the 1930s to the advent of sci-fi and fantasy. Sci-fi fans rank among the most active, organizing their annual international meetings Worldcons since 1939, giving awards and publishing various fanzines. But generally, the year 1967 is seen as the beginning of the contemporary fanfiction. It was inspired into existence by the series *Star Trek*. Its fans called themselves Trekkies and published fanzine *Spocanalia*. The boom of fanfiction, however, is closely connected to the advent of the Internet which enables the posting, reading, commenting, editing of fanfiction in an unprecedented manner and speed.

If we disregard the sociological and psychological dimension of the fanfiction phenomenon (i.e. the fandoms) and focus on the literary level only, fanfiction fulfills what we have come to define as literary postmodernism. Employing parody, pastiche and collage, fanfiction *is* a form of intertextuality, a true cultural palimpsest, a paratext of its own. What then distinguishes fanfiction from professional postmodern writing? Many examples of the fanfiction show that some fanfiction writers are excellent writers in terms of their writing skills (style, characterization, narrative strategies, etc.) thus the difference is not simply in the quality of the works. Fanfiction and postmodern writing employ similar techniques yet we would not label Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as Shakespearean fan drama nor Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* as a Jane Austen fanfiction, nor, for that matter, any re-writings of Biblical, mythological or folklore stories as fanfiction. Is the only difference the non/existence of a copyright to the original texts? Or does the difference rest in the emotional immersion of the writer in the text? Of course, there is no way we can assume that a commercially published postmodern writer of a text inspired by or derived from an already existing text is less emotionally involved in his/her writing than a fanfiction writer.

But perhaps one difference is in the way fanfiction writer and a postmodern writer who alludes to and re-writes somebody else’s text, work. While the latter works individually, the former works in connection with others. Fanfiction is a collective, communal and participatory activity. As such it is in fact closer to the way mythology or folklore was created. Thus, perhaps paradoxically, the democratization of cultural sphere, the widespread literacy and the advent of digital technologies widely enable forms of literary production and communication that had existed traditionally albeit in a much limited scope. Studying fanfiction makes us reevaluate notions of human creativity because it seems that it is to a great extent collective rather than individualistic. Maybe our understanding of literature is too deeply rooted in the modern times’ obsession with copyright and profit. Fanfiction writers disregard both. Their communities operate on gift economy principles. Fanfiction shows that contrary to the romantic idea of the uniqueness of the inspired artist (often working outside society, in social isolation) artistic creativity is a social activity. As such, literary creation is never complete; a text is not solidified calcified product but a subject of constant reworking. Literary text turns into a conversation. Or, as a fan’s button says: “the story’s never over”.

Notes:

1. Her claim that her characters are copyrighted is interestingly discussed (and challenged) from legal point of view by Aaron Schwabach in his 2011 book *Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outside Works and Intellectual Property Protection*.
2. The phenomenon is named after character Lieutenant Mary Sue, a character in a 1974 *Star Trek* fanfiction story by Paula Smith. Mary Sue, the female protagonist of the story, commands the Starship Enterprise and earns the Vulcan Order of Gallantry, all of this of course in times when no female character commanded a starship and would not for many years to come. Therefore Paula Smith filled in the void in the *Star Trek* universe and challenged the period's stereotypes of gender roles. See Paula Smith, *A Trekkie's Tale*, 1974, reprinted in Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
3. See Jenkin's blog at: <http://henryjenkins.org/aboutmehtml> and Katherine Larsen and Lynn S. Zubernis's 2012 book *Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame And Fan/Producer Relationships*.

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Šárka Bubíková is Associate Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. Specializing in Anglophone literatures, her research interests include children's literature, the Bildungsroman, ethnic writing and popular fiction. Publishing numerous articles and book chapters, she has also authored books on American literary canon (2007), on childhood in American literature (2009), and co-authored *Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature* (2008). She writes fiction, too. In 2010 she was a Fulbright scholar at Amherst College, Amherst, MA, and in 2012 a researcher at the University of California, Santa Barbara, CA. She is the Secretary of the Czech and Slovak Association of American Studies.