Fanfiction and the Author

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6. Conclusion

This study has established that statements from fanfic do alter the discursive formations of canonical media in fundamental ways, altering governing statements. However, fanfic's legitimation of othered properties frequently depends on the capital of the already-empowered White man, especially the author. We established this is in the first chapter, where fanfic legitimated the construction of femininity, emotion, the global East and the body via the figures of Sherlock and John, the archetypal Englishmen. This may be implicated by the problem some postcolonial critics recognize, of counter-narratives as ultimately reaffirming the primacy of the canonical author's voice through citation and reference (Jacziminski 2009; Singh 2012); but equally, they may be taken in a more postmodern spirit as undermining that primacy by showing up the gaps and absences of the ‘original’ (cf. e.g. Kraus 1985; Hutcheon 1988; Bhabha 1994; Anyinefa 2000; Bannet 2011), thus questioning its status. Moreover, fanfiction demonstrates that the intricate connections between the male body and its social position, in a way that canon elides. In accordance with Dyer’s arguments, Canon’s silence on the matter renders the supremacy of the White man natural and unquestioned; fanfic de-naturalizes it.

We saw less illustration of this in the authority chapter, where the word of the traditional White male author seems to exert quite significant power. Constructions of authority in fanfic are not drastically different from those of the series. Certainly, forms of feminine authority that are absent from canon are constructed and patriarchal structures illustrated as both fragile and brutal, yet on the whole the discursive formation is not as dramatically changed from canon as one might expect, particularly in its relative disinterest in authority of the commons. The strong authorial posture Martin strikes, hooking into the popular cultural discourse of authority, does seem to have some effect, particularly as parody tends to meet with a lukewarm response. Here fanfic is primarily ‘colour[ing] inside the lines’ (Booth 2015, p. 2) rather than transforming a picture, replicating and consolidating ideological statements from canon. Martin’s authorship is generally respected, but the authorship of Benioff and Weiss is not constructed in the same way; in a sense, the licence they have taken with the ‘real’ text seems to permit fans to take even more licence, in an illustration of what I have named textual provocation. That said, Martin’s author figure is not above rebuke: the authority of his text is gently mocked on the grounds of alleged poor style and the excessive killing-off of characters. This aligns
with theories of fan-text as corrective to canon (Jenkins 2006b, pp. 54–57; cf. Goodman 2015).

Fandom’s reconstruction of the Author and the Fan is both the clearest expression of the legitimation paradox, and also goes furthest to undermine it. Fics like The Chuck Writes Story; I’ll Take my Chances and Tons of Feels suggest, the primacy of the author and his text is an illusion to be deconstructed. However, the quantitative aspect of my methodology demonstrates that fics which uphold the author’s text as primary and the fan’s as secondary tend to be of highest impact in the formation. Nonetheless, fanfic is tentatively starting to de-construct the legitimation paradox, and in this way, the statements which fandom has contributed in all formations may begin to compromise the legitimation paradox, and the authorial position of the fanboy-auteur begins to be undermined. 10x05’s uptake of these statements demonstrates the paradox at its most acute: a simultaneous canonical approval of fanfic’s transformative capacity, approved and legitimated by the beneficent Author-God. This is also a concrete example of transformations enacted by fanfic taken up and broadcast in the public sphere. ‘Fan fiction’ explicitly addresses the question of authority over text, author-ized versions and fan versions, and validation—to an extent—of the fantext may well ‘generate different interpretative categories’ as Artieri described the transformative work of fic (2012, p. 463). Moreover, as the explicit discussions of gender and Oriental othering in regard to fanfic demonstrate, fanfic overlaps with and involves current social discourses with transformative effect. As fanfic becomes increasingly visible and easy to access, appearing even as noted on sites like Goodreads, there is no longer any reason we should treat its social potentials less seriously than any form of fiction.

By addressing the question of how fanfic transforms and upholds the discursive formations of a cult text, I have established a perspective that undermines both overly-celebratory readings of fandom (Jenkins 1992, 1995, 2006a; Bacon-Smith 1992; Costello 1999) and understandings of fandom as co-opted by industry (Andrejevic 2008; Russo 2009). By adding its own statements to discursive formations, undermining, contradicting and consolidating canonical constructions, fandom can and does work to legitimate what is culturally othered, including and especially itself. Through the collision of statements from varying discourses, fanfic begins to create new knowledge in fictional spaces, utilizing the gaps and possibilities of canon and reality to reveal basic assumptions and the possibilities they exclude. But, by the very fact that those transformations depend on a canonical source, the legitimation becomes paradoxical. The characters
that fic appropriates are White men, or women living in a world ruled by them. Fan writing is legitimated through the word of the author. However, in some cases, we are beginning to question and deconstruct that process of legitimation in terms of what is already legitimate, thus revaluing Othered properties like irrational fan-attachment on their own terms.

The implications of this paradox and its development are applicable to all text that is self-consciously transformative, derivative, or secondary. Scholars could analyse how those texts are positioned in relation to their temporal predecessors, and whether their modes of citation are such that shore up the primacy of the original, or question the construction of that primacy and the concepts of authorship and originality inherent in it. How this paradox operates in different genres and contexts will be various, and require the study of scholars familiar with their histories and conventions. In the case of fanfiction, addressing absences and elisions in the ‘original’, or, from a more explicitly theoretical perspective, mix discourses that draw attention to the constructs and constraints of both authorial and fan production. Shoring up the concept of primacy might take the form of legitimating an Othered property via a White male character; or explicit deference to the originating author. We must be careful, though, not to fall into a false binary of ‘text that subverts original authority’ versus ‘text that confirms original authority’: all derivative or transformative text is, by its very form, both legitimating and critical of the primacy of its sources. This is why I have suggested we can ‘begin to deconstruct’ or ‘compromise’ the paradox, rather than employ liberatory rhetoric like ‘break free’ or ‘overcome’.

Different genres and contexts of production will produce their own possibilities. In a sense, the paradox is applicable to all text, being citation with difference, but has particularly relevance in contexts like fandom, women's writing, and postcolonial studies, being forms of text that have been Othered until relatively recently. The paradox and the issues it raises can be immediately applied to other fandoms and their fic for, as noted, cult television in general still privileges White male author figures and characters. Scholars could attempt to ascertain if there are factors in particular source texts and/or fan spaces which influence fanfic’s tendency to shore up or deconstruct the paradox, and how statements play out different settings and arenas. Does the written text, for instance, retain a greater aura of authority than the screen? Do the statements of other strong author figures restrain the productions of their fandoms? As we have seen, authorial statements may well be a limiting or restrictive factor in media characters’ afterlives, as Foucault’s author function theorized (1991). Does the kind of fanwork influence transformative statements—are cosplay and modelling, which
often serve a ‘mimetic’ function based on recreation of an original text at the denotative level (Hills 2014), typically more faithful to the discursive and ideological statements of their canon than written text or vidding? Scholars might attend particularly to the kinds of statements I have called textual provocation: acknowledgements of active audienceship that, though implicitly or explicitly derivative, provoke the production of more text.

Discourse analysis helped inform a method that has been attentive to the literary, televisual, fannish, academic and broader cultural discourses that inform fanfiction, an explicit practice of mingled citation with difference. This enabled me to note where the impact of statements from one discourse impacts the meanings of others, such as impact of fannish tropes on the characters of Sherlock and Watson, or the critique of rational academia from fannish statements of ‘feels.’ Foucauldian theory has helped me to identify the conditions of existence of discursive formations, formulate their rules of possibility, and perceive the governing statements that make further statements possible. This has been very useful in demonstrating where and how a practice as varied as fanfic alters canon’s constructions and where and how it solidifies them.

Fan subjectivities and psyches are not addressed by the orientation of this study. Indeed, a psychoanalytic method is explicitly at odds with discursive analysis, which operates as Foucault argued according to a ‘principle of exteriority’ (1981, p. 67). That is to say, it attends to surfaces and exteriorities in order to make demonstrable, empirical arguments concerning processes of change in action. If the founding principles of Critical Discourse Analysis—that language is taken active and effective, and that a statement is material event, an ‘incision into a discursive field’ (Young, p. 402; cf. Foucault 1989, p. 28), then intentions and motivations behind said statements are irrelevant. What matters is effect, and the range of possibilities that is enabled or closed down. Discursive formations deserve study in their own right, for as Fairclough and Fairclough have written, discourse is ‘on the one hand an effect of social life, and on the other, ha[s] effects on social life, both helping to keep existing forms in existence and helping to change them’ (2012, p. 79). Fanfiction studies lacks large-scale empirical studies with transparent methodologies, and I hope future scholars can take precedent from this work in accounting for their selection and reading of fan-texts. Yet, scholars more comfortable and accomplished in psychoanalytic theory could explore fans’ interpretations and awareness of the legitimation paradox in ways I have not done so. Whilst it may be harder to make arguments regarding cultural impact and change from this perspective, an exploration of fans’ *private* reception of statements, and how they uphold or subvert textual
authority and constructions, could add another qualitative dimension to the analysis of statement-impact that goes beyond a strictly textual study.

As has been noted, Foucauldian methodology up until now has lacked analysis of reception. This project goes some way to address that lack, via documenting and analysing reviews, but despite the fact that internal mechanisms of regulation were in evidence it is likely that the fannish norms of praise over criticism prevent some resistance from taking textual form. Again, a psychoanalytic methodology using interviews or focus groups could supplement this picture. Moving beyond fic, the legitimation paradox could be used to explore how fans affirm and accept othered aspects of their identities, activities and desires through relation to and appropriation of their canons and author figures. The concept might be usefully applied to a whole range of fan activities sourced from favoured texts, from role-playing to crafting to game modification. Quite likely, methodological tools that attend more closely to visual semantic content will be needed in those contexts, though the principles of discursive analysis, at the level of the statement, transformation and consolidation of discourses need not necessarily be applied to the written word only. Researchers wishing to read the fanart, vids, and music mixes that exist within these same networks will need to bring their own academic background to reconceive my reading of ‘statements’. One potential weakness of this book is that it is very much the work of a literary scholar. Whilst in my situated experience, fanfic is strongly invested in literary capital and conventions, it is still part of a multimedia network involving other kinds of text. This limitation could only be overcome by a team of scholars trained in reading various arts; lacking that, the present researcher can only be explicit concerning her biases, and hope that the example provided in this work can stimulate further study.

By utilizing tools from internet studies and network analysis, the methodology of this study demonstrated a quantitative and qualitative way to read texts in a networked, new media context, enabling the researcher to make empirically-based statements concerning impact and alteration. I have not attended only to fanfic, but the contexts in which it appears, the number and type of responses, and the ripples of impact it makes in other sites. Demonstrating the range and average number of comments/reviews, I have been able to evidence what is meant by terms like ‘high impact’ or ‘insignificant’. I have attended also to the qualitative aspect of responses, as mockery and derision can reduce the status of fic as much as praise can raise it. There was a slight margin of error here, due to a) some fic being locked, and b) the fact that, as described in the methodology, common author-names and titles had to be searched in only one pair of
quotation marks. A researcher with better computer literacy than I may be able to improve upon this. In addition, the precision of impact measurement would be improved if software became available to count links and recommendations for fic from Tumblr, a platform that was increasing in popularity at my time of writing. The overall method should be transferrable to other fandoms, as fic is typically archived and networked in similar ways, according to social and technological structures that existed before these fandoms and will exist after their cultural moment is over. Though I have made my processes as transparent as possible, there is necessarily a danger that the frames drawn by any given researcher may artificially separate one formation from another, or connect them in ways biased by personal and intuitional context.

The transposition of fan texts into an academic context can be ethically conducted where a) permission is sought and drafts shared and b) the researcher accounts for her position in an academic network as well as a fannish one, especially the power imbalance that may be entailed therein, and draws attention to fact that research and presentation of discursive formations to an academic audience itself plays a role in their consolidation. As the analysis of my own fic demonstrates, I have not exempted my own writing as an object of analysis, but in following the methodology, addressed it and the discourse it is implicated in as I would any other fic. Relatedly, I hope that I have demonstrated that it is possible to conduct a full scale research project into fanfic with full knowledge, awareness and consent of the fans quoted, and that this consideration is appreciated by fans. There were certainly cases in which the writer could not be reached, but in every case I made a good-faith effort, as described in the Ethics section. I respected all requests for anonymity and the omission or inclusion of links; and conversely, honoured some fans’ requests to be quoted by their real names. Academics who choose to quote texts intended for limited circulation, without permission, must work harder to justify that choice, and with it, the fannish identity they afford themselves.

As world’s fastest-growing form of writing (Mirmohamadi 2014, p. 5) the increasing visibility and influence of fanfic on popular culture demands innovative tools of study. The uptake and to an extent promotion of fanfic by big media producers, as we have seen explicitly in Supernatural especially, means it can no longer be considered a hidden subculture, but a contemporary mode of writing with demonstrable impact on media culture. As I hope this work has demonstrating, this rapidly expanding, rapidly changing phenomenon demands serious study, both as a means of transformation and resistance, and as a means of consolidation of contemporary cultural discourse.