OPEN SEASON:
FANFICTION THEORY BEYOND TEXTUAL POACHERS

A Thesis

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This thesis suggests that fanfiction—so often considered to be the realm only of the obsessed or juvenile—has shaken off the label of ‘derivative’ and emerged as an independent artistic medium. This emergence calls for a rethinking of fanfiction theory, as fan studies has relied heavily upon Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* for the last sixteen years, despite the fact that it was written well before the Internet stepped in to completely revolutionize the field. After establishing that 1) fanfiction can be accepted as a new artistic medium, and 2) it is in need of fresher theory, this thesis will then offer performativity as another way into the fan-written text. It will use a genre called “All Human” from the *Twilight* fandom as an example of how fan writers are breaking with the traditional conventions of fanfiction and revitalizing tabooed figures in order to access the performative potential of their medium.
“[.. .] Laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived.”

—Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*
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CHAPTER 1:
FANFICTION’S NEW MOMENT

medium \ˈmē-dē-əm\: 8a. A specific kind of artistic technique or means of expression as determined by the materials used or the creative methods involved.¹

In “Books Gone Wild: The Digital Age Reshapes Literature,” printed in the January 21, 2009 edition of TIME magazine, critic Lev Grossman warns that drastic change is afoot in the publishing industry. The books of the near and swiftly approaching future will, he says, bear little resemblance to the heavily edited, polished, and marketed books of today. So then, what will they look like?

In Grossman’s view? “Like fanfiction.”

Like fanfiction, these books “will be ravenously referential and intertextual in ways that will strain copyright law to the breaking point.”²

Like fanfiction, the focus of the industry will be production, not profit; POPs, not paperbacks.

Like fanfiction, agents and editors will no longer be an obstacle for the unknown author: Self-publishing will be the norm.


More and more, fanfiction is becoming the model for popular textual production, for the future of the book, and yet as a literary form it is given little credit, often dismissed as ‘derivative’ or ‘appropriative.’ The general public was first introduced to fanfiction\(^3\) (alternately ‘fanfic,’ or simply ‘fic’) as the product of dedicated Star Trek followers who, besides dressing up as Vulcans and sculpting detailed models of the Starship Enterprise, printed and circulated magazines\(^4\) stuffed with sprawling stories featuring their favorite characters doing what they, the fans, wanted them to do. It was a cult phenomenon, with stories physically, patiently passed among members of ‘mailing groups’ forced to rely on the postal system in order to forge their communities. These fan writers were smirked at, labeled “weirdos,” and were even told by Captain Kirk himself, William Shatner, in a Saturday Night Live skit to “move out of [their] parents’ basement” and “get a life!”\(^5\) Fanfiction only earned the attention of academics when it came to light that most of these fan writers were women, and that some were writing and distributing erotic fiction that posited a homosexual relationship between Kirk and his first officer, Spock.\(^6\) Suddenly, media scholars like Henry Jenkins were interested in what all these people in plastic ears were doing with their free time.

\(^3\) “Fan fiction” is also a commonly used variant. This thesis will retain the form “fan fiction” when citing another source, but will use “fanfiction” as the favored form.

\(^4\) Also known as ‘fanzines’, or ‘zines.’

\(^5\) See http://snltranscripts.jt.org/86/86hgetalife.phtml for a transcript of this skit.

\(^6\) “Though formal empirical survey proof does not exist, all published anecdotal and ethnographic evidence in both scholarly and fan literature suggests that heterosexual women overwhelmingly produce slash.” From P. J. Falzone, “The Final Frontier is Queer: Aberrancy, Archetype, and Audience Generated Slashfiction,” in Western Folklore 64, nos. 3/4 (Summer 2005), 246.
Fanfiction has, ever since, been the academic terrain of cultural analysts, the most influential texts on the subject being ethnographic studies of fan culture “with primary foci being genre [and] audience reception (and production).”\(^7\) Though fanfiction has recently been gaining credence as a means of literacy development for adolescents, and has been showing up as the subject of copyright law articles in legal journals, it is still a body of writing that suffers from its early associations. As Cathy Young notes in “The Fan Fiction Phenomena,” “fanfic remains a bastard child in the literary family, its very right to exist still in dispute in some quarters.”\(^8\) Though millions of pages (and counting) worth of fanfiction exist,\(^9\) and, if we’re to believe Grossman, it just might be the future of the book, fanfiction is still treated largely as an aberration of pop culture rather than a body of artwork whose development has made a significant impact on the process of textual production.

The continuing evolution of fanfiction has serious implications for anyone working with postmodernism and poststructuralism, vernacular theory, the history of the book, psychoanalytics, gender theory, queer theory, cultural theory—and the list goes on. I suggest not only that contemporary fanfiction is a legitimate and non-derivative form of writing, but also that it has reached the point at which it constitutes its own artistic medium, distinct from the other artistic and/or mass media with which it engages, warranting a reworking of the theoretical consideration it has been given thus far. Chapter


\(^9\) A Google search of the term “fanfiction” got 8,260,000 hits, as of 4/12/2009. The search term “fan fiction” brought up 7,520,000 hits on the same date.
1 will lay the groundwork for the interpretation of ‘fanfiction-as-medium,’ while chapter 2 will address the kind of theoretical reworking that may be appropriate.

The situation of fanfiction has changed dramatically since the first scholarly studies on it were published in the late 80s and early 90s; the critical models constructed then do not fit precisely the contours of fanfiction’s current moment. Fanfiction now goes beyond the level of other cultural access points to which it has been traditionally equated, like video games or theme park rides. It is an art that requires a particular skill set to write and a specific mode of interpretation to read and analyze, and acts upon other texts as much as it draws from them. Fan writers have developed their own body of self- and unself-conscious critical theory, and bestsellers have begun to become more reflective of fanfiction in ways beyond those detailed by Grossman.

Fanfiction may have begun as a pure product of fan culture, but the advent of the Internet has taken the concept of fan writing into what Francesca Coppa calls its “postmodern moment, when the rules are ‘there ain’t no rules’ and traditions are made to be broken.”\(^\text{10}\) The ethnographic research so foundational to fanfiction studies can no longer be trusted as appropriately reflective of the current moment. It should be noted that the Internet has made determining in any empirical way the demographic of the fanfic reader and writer even more difficult than it already was. But from the information that can be gathered, it can be concluded that the fans are now younger, and their texts, more transient. As Rebecca Black observes in Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction, “the demographics of fan fiction have shifted from a majority of adults producing hard-copy

print zines to large numbers of tech-savvy adolescents who are writing and publishing fics on fan and personal Web sites as well as in online archives.”  

And where once fandoms—or groups of fans focused on one media text—were insular and limited in their means of communication, the Internet has opened up fanfiction to “a global and multilingual population of writers and readers” who have made fanfictions for just about every book, video game, television series, and movie imaginable, hopping from one universe to another without missing a beat. In a moment of such radical change and growth, the rhetoric used to handle fanfiction on scholarly terms needs to be reevaluated, for, as Gail Derecho notes in one of the few recent articles to offer a new theoretical reading of fanfiction:

> What we [scholars and critics] lack . . . are concepts that would enable us to think more critically about how this enormous amount of artistic output called fan production works as art, and what they signify for broader culture—not just on a political level, in terms of whether they serve as adequate forms of resistance to the culture industries or are merely forms of cooperation with media corporations, but on a philosophical level.”

We can begin to form these concepts only after acknowledging that fanfiction is a postmodern medium in its own right, able to be considered in ways beyond analyses of consumer culture or fan psychology. It is admittedly not a form of writing characterized by a high-quality of artistic production—but in terms of legitimacy, the debate should not be one of quality versus quantity. Fanfiction has opened up a space for unbridled textual

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11 Black, Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction, 11.

12 ‘Fandom,’ singular, is also used to refer to fan culture as a whole.

13 Black, Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction, 11.

manipulation that disregards norms of law and taste, boundaries between high-, middle-, and lowbrow subjects, and standards of authorship and publishing. Fanfiction has the power to transform the place of writing in society; its progression from cult activity to active medium is a glimpse of what the future holds for literature—or, perhaps more appropriately, “literature.”

1.1 Definitions

Fanfiction is a constantly evolving artistic form—and, accordingly, its definition can vary from study to study, depending on the needs and opinions of the author. To start simply with the broadest strokes, fanfiction is a story written using the characters and/or settings of an already existing work, intended for readers already familiar with that original work. Author/critic Sheenagh Pugh suggests that “people write fic because they either want ‘more of’ or ‘more from’ a story”; they are unsatisfied with some aspect of a text, and are either still hungry, or are craving a more nuanced reading for their more refined palate.15 For example, a fan of the book series *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling could, if they wanted *more of* the book, write a fanfiction about what happens to the characters after the seventh and final volume of the series. If they wanted *more from* it, on the other hand, they could switch the perspective of a scene already written in the book, speaking in the voice of a secondary character rather than remaining attached to the hero as Rowling does. As Henry Jenkins notes in *Textual Poachers*, “fan writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing

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unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored.” The idea behind fanfiction is not replication, but rather reinterpretation.

So, at its widest point of entry, fanfiction can be read as a variation of the oral tradition, in the vein of other literature that retells legends and folktales. Yet, as Pugh observes, “many [. . .] would quarrel with defining Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* or Scott’s *Ivanhoe* as fan fiction, merely because they use material from a common myth-kitty.” Therefore, while it is possible to defend placing the origins of fanfiction as far back as the time of Homer, it is not productive in developing a definition pertinent to its modern practitioners. Instead, writing like Tennyson’s can be considered ‘prehistorical fanfiction,’ in that it shares a common spirit with the fanfiction of today. How many times has the saga of King Arthur been told and retold, manipulated and reinterpreted? What would T. S. Eliot have written had he refused to draw from this ‘myth-kitty’? The whole of Modernism should obviously not be classified as fanfiction, but the necessity of an informed audience in order to read a text like *The Waste Land* or Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and the proliferation of allusions in such texts, reflect the tactics fanfiction picked up on decades later.

One way to make a distinction between fanfiction’s prehistoric form and its contemporary one is to refine the definition, applying the label ‘fanfiction’ only to stories that use characters, settings, or situations from already existing texts with named authors. While Tennyson is now safe, this formulation still implicates everything from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Though, yet again, an argument can

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17 Pugh, *The Democratic Genre*, 11.
certainly be made for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* as fanfic, it will always be thought of first as a drama, a ‘new classic’ in the Western canon, and I am attempting to establish fanfiction as a very *particular* kind of writing that demands its own classification.

The definition can be narrowed further to apply only to stories that use characters, settings, or situations from already existing texts *still under copyright*, and whose author *does not gain profit* from its publication. Copyright law is, in fact, one of the major issues discussed in recent publications on fanfiction, and several popular authors, including Rowling and Anne Rice, have taken legal action against Web sites that archive fanfiction (see: Stendell 2005; Chander, Sunder 2007; Chilling Effects Clearinghouse). Some would object to restricting fanfiction to those stories based on copyrighted texts because it would exclude popular fandoms whose primary texts are in the public domain, like the Jane Austen fandom. But such works are not required to remain in cyberspace; there are *legal* publications based off of Austen’s books, like Emma Tennant’s *Pemberley: Or Pride and Prejudice Continued* (1993) or Linda Berdoll’s *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife: Pride and Prejudice Continues* (1999, as *The Bar Sinister*). There is also literary fiction that walks the same line, like Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The fact that it violates current copyright law is one of the elements most significant in developing the contemporary fanfiction community online, and therefore should be a part of its definition.

Copyright and profit are intimately linked; if it’s not under copyright, you can legally profit from it. Though this paper does not focus on the economics of consumption, fanfiction’s presence outside that economy is one of its distinguishing features, affecting everything from authorial motivation to story content to reader response. I will explore this idea in chapter 2 of this thesis, when activities of paperback romance novel readers
are contrasted with those of writers of romantic fanfiction. In terms of excluding the for-profit novelizations, like those published for *Star Wars, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and *Doctor Who* (often called “profic” in online communities), the reason isn’t necessarily one of *money,* but of *source.* Authorized novelizations necessarily have stricter limits on their subject matter and language, their content must be approved of by the copyright holder, and their appeal must be one for mass-market sales—therefore precluding any kind of narrative experimentation on the author’s part. They are still immersed in the economy from which most fanfiction is blissfully free—or, at least willfully ignorant.

Some scholars would object to this quick glazing-over of fanfiction’s history; of course the debate is more nuanced than presented here. But for my purposes, what fanfiction *was* is not the critical question. Whether it began in 1421 with “The Siege of Thebes”—John Lydgate’s continuation of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*—or in 1998, when FanFiction.net, the Internet’s largest hosting site for all categories of fanfiction, went online, is irrelevant.¹⁸ So many pages have been dedicated to sorting through fanfiction’s past; it is now more important to try to determine the potentialities of its contemporary moment. Accordingly, my working definition applies only to current *fanfiction;* it is not one that can or should be retrofitted. I consider fanfiction to be stories that use characters, settings, or situations from already existing texts under copyright, whose fan author does not gain profit from its publication, and which are published *online.* As noted earlier, the world of fanfiction was once dominated by fanzines, and though they are still available, zines are a niche product. The evolution of fan culture is happening on the Internet; fanfiction is coming into its own as a medium online.

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¹⁸ See Appendix A for a reproduction of Miriam Segall’s “History of Fan Fiction” timeline.
A particularly popular example of a piece of fanfiction that fits this definition is Lori’s “The Paradigm of Uncertainty” (PoU) series, hosted on Yahoo!Groups and FictionAlley.org. PoU is classified as a FutureFic, picking up Harry Potter’s life after Hogwarts. It was written before the final books in the series were published, so it takes liberties with the part of Harry’s life that was, at the time, unknown. In this story, Lori pairs an adult Harry Potter with an adult Hermione Granger; formerly roommates sharing a house with several of their friends, they awaken to their feelings for each other and embark upon a deep emotional and sexual relationship. Though there is also a very complicated plot involved, the relationship between Harry and Hermione is the core of this fic. On FictionAlley alone, the three-part series has been read over 675,000 times (though not necessarily by discrete readers), but Lori makes no profit from it at all. PoU is also an eternal Work In Progress (WIP)—the third story in the series, “Hero With a Thousand Faces,” was last updated on March 31, 2008—which, while it does not belong in a strict definition of fanfiction, is, much to the chagrin of readers, a common characteristic of fanfiction. Lori’s work also embraces the dominant spirit of contemporary fanfiction. In writing PoU, Lori has taken a bestselling book series aimed at children and young adults and transformed it into a complex and sexy adult series that uses the original text as a source for backstory and basic characterizations, but otherwise bears little resemblance to Rowling’s creation. While PoU is dependent upon Harry Potter, it also stands independent as an artistic creation in its own right.

1.2 Terminology

19 Series available at: http://www.fictionalley.org/authors/lori/. This story is written for adults, and contains mature content.
Reading and *fully understanding* stories like *PoU* requires not only a knowledge of the source text, but also a familiarity with the online terminology the author uses to identify their work. Conceptually, fanfiction as a practice relies on two beliefs: that “(a) fictional characters and universes can transcend both their original context and their creator and (b) the said creator cannot claim to know everything about them.”20 From there, fanfiction dissolves into countless genres, with fan writers and readers relying on a specific set of terminology to categorize, identify, and assess individual stories—as is the case with other artistic media, like photography, painting, or theatre. Depending on how a fic is described by its author, a reader will pick and choose to their personal tastes and adapt their interpretive approach accordingly; the reader *must* know the proper code in order to have the most rewarding reading experience. Though its lexicon is always growing, as words are created and/or changed over time to fit the medium’s needs, there are certain terms fundamental to the construction and discussion of fanfiction texts.21 I will review the terms most commonly used in the fanfiction community, and those most pertinent to the ideas put forth in this paper.

The relationship between the terms “canon” and “fanon” is one of the concepts most essential to the medium, and is therefore the necessary starting point for a discussion of fanfiction terminology. Canon in this context refers to the primary media text, or the original book, film, or television series on which the fanfiction is based; oftentimes, authorized novelizations are *not* considered to be part of canon. Canon provides the common source point for information used in fanfiction, whether that be a

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20 Pugh, *The Democratic Genre*, 222.

21 See Appendix B for a compiled glossary of fanfiction terms.
particular character’s personality or manner of speaking, or the name of the drink So-and-so had in the pilot episode of the series. It establishes the general structure of knowledge from which fans of different genders, ages, and nationalities can begin discussions with one another. As Pugh explains, “canon is a framework to write against, [which] contains inherent restrictions.”

A particular source text is an “open canon” if the show or book series is in progress (e.g., ABC’s television drama *LOST*) and therefore requires fans to continually update their ‘databases’ of canon knowledge if they want to write or read fanfiction. A “closed canon,” on the other hand, is based on a text for which no new official information can be provided, like Joss Whedon’s short-lived but cultish television series *Firefly* and its film companion, *Serenity*. Interestingly, *Firefly* was considered a closed canon until *Serenity* was released three years after the series finale, so there is always the possibility of unexpected additions to canon. In fandoms, canon is held in almost biblical respect; someone who writes something “out of character,” based on canon, is labeled a “character rapist,” and those who wish to deviate intentionally and significantly from canon must label their stories Alternate Universe/AU (“what if this, and not that, had happened”), or Crossover, if they are blending two canons (What if *The West Wing*’s President Bartlet had to be treated by *House*’s eponymous Dr. House?).

When there are both print and film adaptations of a text, the distinction must be made between the “bookverse” and “movieverse” canons. *Lord of the Rings (LotR)* is the best example of this phenomenon, as fan writers must choose whether to structure their Middle Earth on the descriptions in Tolkien’s original texts, on Peter Jackson’s film adaptations, or a combination of both.
trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003)—or on a synthesis of both. Though *Lord of the Rings* was always one of the most popular literary fandoms, it was the release of Jackson’s *Fellowship of the Ring* that, as Amy Sturgis notes in “Make Mine ‘Movieverse,’” launched “an unprecedented explosion in a distinctively twenty-first century incarnation of Tolkien literary fandom: the online production, dissemination, and critique of fan fiction.”\(^{24}\) Thus arose the clash of fan authors who have different visions of the *LotR* universe. Some are purists, working only from the characterizations and situations in Tolkien’s text, and insisting on writing in his unique style, complete with the poetry and songs that pepper his novels. Others have only experienced the saga through Jackson’s lens, never making it through the books; or, even if they have read the series through, some prefer Jackson’s construction.

Sturgis explains that, unlike some bookverse/movieverse fandoms in which the books and films offer similar windows into the text (e.g., *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*), the literary and cinematic *Lord of the Rings* offer very different narratives:

Jackson’s trilogy diverges at times quite widely from Tolkien’s original text, and direct response from the late author about these changes is, obviously, impossible. Fans are left to draw inspiration from unresolved narratives that differ from each other in both fundamental outline and specific detail, sometimes to the point of outright contradiction.\(^{25}\)

For example, Liv Tyler’s elf princess, Arwen, has a considerably bulked up role in the movie—a move arguably made as part of a push to balance out the lack of developed female characters in Tolkien’s rendition, and to add a more traditional Hollywood love


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 285.
story to a plot that focuses heavily on the dynamics of male friendship. A fanfic working from the movieverse could, therefore, use the depicted relationship between the male character Aragorn and Arwen as its starting point; a bookverse fic would have very little to go on.

The film actors themselves also affect the movieverse fiction, their physical appearance and mannerisms inseparable from their characters’. As Sturgis notes:

A bookverse story about Frodo’s quest would begin with a rounded, middle-aged Hobbit bachelor as described by Tolkien in his books. A movieverse story about Frodo’s quest, however, would begin with a slender, youthful, wide-eyed Hobbit patterned on the performance provided by Elijah Wood for director Peter Jackson.26

This clash between bookverse and movieverse makes defining a single, cohesive “canon” difficult for those working in the LotR fandom, and fan authors must be very aware of which version they are “fic’ing.”27 Blending the two universes is risky business—with one version so strongly contradicting the canon of the other—and often results in writing that is intentionally tongue-in-cheek. Sturgis observes this phenomenon on Web sites that use images from the movieverse to supplement their bookverse fanfic:

[Some] fan fiction writers use descriptions of Jackson’s imagery, coupled with the genre of parody, to bring attention to the places where Jackson’s movies and Tolkien’s words most greatly diverge. These authors are not attacking the film trilogy in anger; on the contrary, they intend not to divide but to unify their readers by filling the space between Tolkien and Jackson with popular culture references and, ultimately, laughter.28

Self-conscious humor is, in this case, a necessary defense; any fan writer who unintentionally mixed canons would assuredly incite the ire of other fans, for, as Pugh

26 Ibid., 286–287.

27 To “fic” something is to write fanfiction about it.

28 Ibid., 292.
notes, “the unforgivable sin in any fanfic universe is getting the facts wrong, departing from the canon not deliberately but accidentally by giving someone an accent, appearance, or opinions that the canon plainly states didn’t belong to him.”29 Because of this, parody is a popular genre in fanfiction, and, in her article “Fanfic and Fan Fact: How Current Copyright Law Ignores the Reality of Copyright Owner and Consumer Interests in Fan Fiction,” Leanne Stendell asserts that all of “fan fiction deserves the same protection as parodies” because of their similar intentions and/or tactics.30

Though canon is the touchstone of fanfiction, many fics focus precisely on what doesn’t happen in canon. Because of this, a story is not considered OOC (Out of Canon or Out of Character, depending on the application) unless what it chronicles is completely implausible, based on the given facts or subtext of the canon. Even though a fic putting two heterosexual characters in a homosexual relationship may seem to be wildly OOC, a writer can defend their choice as legitimate by citing supporting moments in the source text, like the charged glance Frodo and Sam share on Mount Doom, or the consistent physical closeness and exchange of touches between buddy-cops Starsky and Hutch. However, no fanfiction story is considered to be part of canon either—or, to rephrase, part of the facts accepted and utilized by all other writers in the fandom.

Writers can, however, affect a particular text’s fanon, or those details found exclusively in fanfiction but acknowledged by other fans as a legitimate and/or enlightening addition to the established canon. As Pugh puts it, “now and again, a fanfic

29 Pugh, The Democratic Genre, 40.
writer’s addition to canon seems so apposite to other writers in that fanfic universe that it becomes ‘fanon’—i.e. although it was never part of the canon it is generally accepted and used by other writers.”31 For example, in the Harry Potter fandom—one of the Internet’s most dominant universes—it is fanon that Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter’s boy-wizard foil, enjoys wearing leather pants. This is thanks in large part to The Draco Trilogy, a series of novel-length stories by Cassandra Claire, whose writing was so popular that a group of her fans pitched in and bought her a new laptop when she blogged that hers had been stolen.32 In this instance, it was a “Big Name Fan” or BNF who formed fanon; however, fanon usually develops over time when a created piece of backstory or name is used consistently by several fan authors—“the sum of the community’s shared interpretive acts.”33

The give and take between canon and fanon is one aspect of fanfiction that complicates arguments labeling it a derivative form of writing, completely beholden to the original text. As Deborah Kaplan notes in “Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative,” “fan writers create texts that rely on the interplay between knowledge of the source text and knowledge of the fanon.”34 Fanfic writers are not merely rehashing scenarios already published or aired; they interpret their source texts

31 Pugh, The Democratic Genre, 41.

32 For an engaging account of Cassandra Claire’s rise and fall in the fanfic community, see http://www.fanhistory.com/index.php?title=Cassandra_Claire. She is now the prolific author of a bestselling Young Adult series (Mortal Instruments)—her Draco trilogy purportedly motivating an editor to ask her for an original manuscript—though she publishes under the name Cassandra Clare.


34 Ibid.
with a gusto even the most thorough critic would envy, and manipulate and extend them to fill in the gaps left by the original author.

One element of a fic that will almost always raise the red flag of OOC is the appearance of an alleged Mary Sue. Coined by *Star Trek* fan author Paula Smith in her 1973 parody fic, “A Trekkie’s Tale,” a Mary Sue is a fic character generally thought to be a highly idealized version of the fan author; it is also the term used to describe the genre of stories in which Mary Sue appears. As Camille Bacon-Smith defines in her seminal *Enterprising Women*, a Mary Sue is:

> a fan story in which a very young heroine, often in her teens and possessing genius-level intelligence, great beauty, and a charmingly impish personality, joins the heroes [of the source text]. . . . She generally resolves the conflict of the story, saves the lives of the protagonists who have grown to love her, but dies heroically in the process.  

Mary Sue is a derogatory term, “the most universally denigrated genre in the entire canon of fan fiction.” Labeling a story “Mary Sue” implies not only that the work is that of a weak, inexperienced writer, but also that the writer is using the story as a sort of masturbatory vehicle, and has made no effort to become acquainted with the fandom and its mores before posting their work. As Pugh notes, “the fear of committing a Mary Sue, and consequent avoidance of writing oneself into a story except with obvious ironic intent, seems to have gone very deep in fanfic.” Pugh connects the feeling toward Mary

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37 Ibid., 94.

38 Pugh, *The Democratic Genre*, 86.
Sue in fandom to the treatment of “chick lit” in the literary community, as both are positioned as shallow tactics of wish-fulfillment that offer no lasting meaning for the reader or writer.

A curious thing is happening to Mary Sue, though. Now that the demographics of fan writers and readers are changing, their products are changing as well. FanFiction.net is the most popular place for publishing fanfiction of any fandom or genre, but unlike many fandom-specific sites, the only policing of content occurs when something incredibly obscene or offensive is posted. Therefore, new writers are not automatically guided by more established members of the community; they can choose to seek out a “beta reader,” who will help them edit their work, but there is no system in place that tells them that ‘Mary Sue is wrong.’ The Twilight fandom—based on the bestselling series of Young Adult books by Stephenie Meyer—has a particularly rampant plague of Mary Sues, arguably because the series appeals to a younger audience, and the fandom exploded too quickly for the inexperienced writers to ‘learn the ropes,’ if you will, before they took to writing stories. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however, and can be considered an important step in the continuing development of fanfiction as artistic medium. Chapter 2 will explore how Twilight fan authors have developed their own approach to Mary Sue that pushes their stories to the edge of romance writing, and takes advantage of fanfiction’s performative potential to engage in identity- and world-construction.

Mary Sueing aside, another hot-button genre in fandom is that of “slash,” or stories that place two men—most often, two canon-heterosexual men—in a homosexual relationship. Slash earned its name from the orthographical mark used to designate the
linked characters; a story that puts Kirk and Spock in a homosexual relationship would therefore be labeled Kirk/Spock, or K/S. Slash ranges from the sexually explicit to the romantically innocent, but it is generally accepted to be the label for a man-on-man pairing; stories that pair two women are labeled “femme slash.” There are genre tags often related to slash, though which are not only applied to slash stories, like “hurt/comfort” (h/c), in which a main character is injured or ill and must be taken care of by a fellow character, oftentimes leading to a relationship between these two characters, and “angst,” which is exactly what it sounds like.

Though it has its vehement denigrators, “slash does, however, constitute a significant genre within fan publishing and may be fandom’s most original contribution to the field of popular literature,” as Henry Jenkins notes in *Textual Poachers.* Even J. K. Rowling acknowledged the prominence of slash when, at an October 2007 Carnegie Hall event promoting *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,* she announced to fans that the wizened wizard and Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore was gay and promptly laughed, saying, “Oh my God, the fan fiction.” While it is by no means the most pervasive genre of fic, a disproportionate number of studies about fanfiction focus exclusively on slash, scholars obviously intrigued by what some claim is nothing more than “normal female interest in men bonking,” and others suggest is a complex indictment of normative masculinity. As Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson note in

39 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers,* 188.


41 See “‘Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking’: Selections from The Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows,” edited and introduced by Shoshanna Green, Cynthia
the introduction to their recent collection of essays, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, “the history of fan fiction studies, for the most part, is a history of attempting to understand the underlying motivations of why (mostly) women write fan fiction and, in particular, slash.”[^42] In fact, three of fan studies’ most influential pieces of scholarship are either about slash or devote a considerable number of pages to it: Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women*, Constance Penley’s “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture,” and Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers*.

1.3 Research Trends

It is almost fitting that the field of fan studies has its own cult of personality, particular theorists and particular works that are as foundational to the field as is *Star Trek*. Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women*, Penley’s “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture,” and Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* are staple texts, showing up in almost every scholarly treatment of fanfiction. All three were published in 1992, and all three are important to gaining an understanding of fan studies and the trajectory it has taken over the last decade-and-a-half. Though, as previously noted, recent works published on fanfiction have begun to shift focus to its implications on copyright law and its application for literacy-building in adolescents (see: Jenkins 2006; Thomas 2004), “these three texts set the stage for more than a decade of fan fiction studies that mostly used their various approaches—media studies, anthropology, and psychoanalysis—to

apply their theories to particular texts or fandoms.\textsuperscript{43} Enterprising Women and “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture” are anthropological and psychological studies, respectively, that probe the issues of gender and slash, while Poachers takes a more varied approach to media fandom, including chapters on critical theory and folk culture as well as ones on gender and slash.

1.3.1 Camille Bacon-Smith and Constance Penley

In Enterprising Women, Bacon-Smith emphasizes the gendered aspect of fanfiction, focusing on the fan community as “a conceptual space where women can come together and create—to investigate new forms for their art and for their living outside the restrictive boundaries men have placed on women’s public behavior.”\textsuperscript{44} She identifies fanfiction as an activity of risk, of subversion, in which women who do not generally tread outside the metered boundaries of society participate in order to “explore the dangerous subject of their own lives.”\textsuperscript{45} The discourses they enter into through the media text allow them to experiment with identity by proxy. This is, perhaps, the first step to using the performative possibilities of fanfiction, which I will look at in the next chapter. Bacon-Smith elevates slash and hurt/comfort in particular as genres into which this self-examination is filtered and played out. Slash is, in her interpretation, a means by which women can express their oppressed sexualities:

Heterosexual women, like lesbians and gay men, are constrained to silence by Western masculine culture. Interacting with that masculine culture, they find it difficult to publish when they write, difficult to gain an audience when they

\textsuperscript{43} Pugh, The Democratic Genre, 19.

\textsuperscript{44} Bacon-Smith, Enterprising Women, 3.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 204.
Any interest women express in an erotic life outside of the monogamous heterosexual relationship classes them immediately as degenerates.\textsuperscript{46}

And so, these women write and rewrite. They use fanfiction not only as an outlet for the silenced voice of female sexuality, but also to reconstruct the masculine ideal. The subjects of slash fiction are often the most stoic, walled-off male character in the media text, and his closest male friend. Engaging in a homosexual relationship with each other does not \textit{ungender} these characters—at least in the way they are treated in the stories. Rather, it allows these ‘traditional’ masculine figures to tap into their more emotional, sensitive, \textit{feminine} side. It is not that slashers are necessarily interested in gay sex; in fact, Bacon-Smith writes that, of the female slash writers she interviewed, a “very small number [. . .] had prior interest in gay male literature, and few have extended their interest beyond the community once exposed to it.”\textsuperscript{47} It is instead that, in the media text, the two male friends offer the closest chance for an ‘equal’ relationship, socially and physically. As Pugh notes during her consideration of slash fic:

It is difficult, in any sex scene involving penetration, to make the two participants completely equal and avoid any hint of dominance. In a slash partnership you can, which is one reason many slash writers try not to get into the habit of letting one partner be permanently on top, either physically or emotionally.\textsuperscript{48}

Constance Penley also focuses on the women who practice slash fanfiction in the short essay “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture” (expanded in \textit{NASA/Trek} 1998), but takes a more sexual and psychological approach to the subject. She writes against theorists who label female interaction with popular culture as “a fantasy of

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 247.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 248.

\textsuperscript{48} Pugh, \textit{The Democratic Genre}, 110.
pre-Oedipal regression,” positing that the Kirk/Spock slash community is a model for a more complicated kind of fantasy that allows for the creation of multiple subjectivities and points of contact. Penley’s characterization of the slash community is very similar to the one established by Bacon-Smith in *Enterprising Women*. As Penley encountered it in 1992, the slash fandom was small (“not more than 500 active, core fans”), private, and heavily reliant on conventions to bolster their activities. She notes that, while the fan authors with whom she spoke were interested in her research, they were “wary of having their activity revealed to the outside world” because the popular conflation of “‘obscenity’ and ‘homoeroticism’” would lead the “mundanes,” or non-fans, to misunderstand their activities. But where Bacon-Smith is most interested in the creation of a community of women via fanfiction, Penley focuses on the way these women negotiate (or avoid negotiating) the gay politics involved in slash writing.

As one of the first pieces to approach slash from an academic standpoint, Penley’s essay is primarily trying to find out the motivations of fan authors. Why are women writing and illustrating explicit stories about man-on-man sex between two heterosexuals? Why are they borrowing their characters from *Star Trek*? Are the writers gay? Do they consider their characters gay? Are the fan authors sexually aroused by what they write? Penley does not find the answers to many of these questions—even the fan authors themselves are unclear about “why they are so drawn to fandom and why they

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50 Ibid., 483.

51 Ibid., 485.
love reading and writing erotic stories about two men together”—but she does offer some provocative insights.  

In “Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love (1985),” Joanna Russ observes that in slash fiction, women authors can often get the details wrong: “[C]haracters leaping into anal intercourse with a blithe lack of lubrication [. . .] makes it clear the authors are thinking of vaginal penetration, both men approaching orgasm with a speeded-up intensity of pelvic thrusting, and multiple orgasms.”  

Penley expands upon that idea, concluding that this confusion between vaginal and anal penetration means that fan writers really do not want Kirk and Spock to be having homosexual sex; they see the relationship instead as linked with “an idea of cosmic destiny: the two men are somehow meant for each other and homosexuality has nothing to do with it.”  

Penley does counter this idea by admitting that there is a small but growing trend of fan writers who do not hold onto the improbability that the two men having sex are heterosexual, but rather are gaining “a kind of political self-consciousness about that scenario and a new willingness to let them be gay.”  

Yet these writers are still the exception rather than the rule, Penley says, because identifying the two men as lovers and as heterosexual allows the women writers to identify with and desire both characters in the scenario: “In the fantasy one can be Kirk or Spock (a possible phallic identification) and also still have (as sexual objects) either or both of them since, as heterosexuals, they are not unavailable to women.”  

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52 Ibid., 484.


54 Ibid., 487. Emphasis in original.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 488. Emphasis in original.
suggests that, because of this simultaneous identification with and desire for, slash is a new form of “female appropriation of, resistance to, and negotiation with” mass culture, necessary because contemporary feminism is not letting them express what they need to express.\(^{57}\) She ends the article by challenging feminism and its scholars to take the risks that the slashers take, and, quoting Star Trek, “to explore strange new worlds . . . to boldly go where no one has gone before.”\(^{58}\)

In Textual Poachers, Jenkins does address the concerns of gender and slash brought up by Bacon-Smith and Penley, devoting a chapter to each idea (“‘It’s Not a Fairy Tale Anymore’: Gender, Genre, Beauty and the Beast,” and “‘Welcome to Bisexuality, Captain Kirk’: Slash and the Fan-Writing Community”) and mentioning them both throughout. However, it is not these discussions, but rather Jenkins’ reapplication of Michel de Certeau’s theory of ‘reading as poaching,’ that make Poachers such an essential text in fan studies.

1.3.2 Henry Jenkins

As fanfiction’s most unabashed academic supporter, Jenkins has, over the past two decades, earned the reputation of the go-to citation for anyone writing on the subject—or, as Jenkins himself put it in an interview with Fan Cultures author Matt Hills:

I get people quoting my words as if they were biblical and as if they had this enormous authority and certainty behind them, as if things that I tentatively put

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 492.
forward were well-established and proved once and for all: all you have to do is turn to Jenkins and quote it, and that’s the end of the story.\textsuperscript{59}

He is, in some respects, rightly “horrified”\textsuperscript{60} at the sacred status his theories have been granted, but Jenkins is nevertheless a force to be reckoned with. Though he has authored and edited numerous books and articles in the last sixteen years, \textit{Textual Poachers} (1992) is arguably his most influential work, as it opened up fanfiction to theoretical inquiry. Because the book established one of the field’s foundational theories (fan writers as poachers, as borrowed from de Certeau), it is not often critiqued. But in order to understand fanfiction’s evolution into an independent medium, it must be.

In the rapidly evolving world of fanfic, \textit{Poachers} is painfully outdated; sixteen years is a century online. If the Internet was barely accessible at its time of publication, and the Internet is currently the overwhelming means of textual production for fanfiction, how can \textit{Textual Poachers’} insights still be fresh and applicable today? Jenkins notes that his “worst nightmare” is that scholars “go back to \textit{[Textual Poachers]}, as if that was the right tool to unlock the present moment without regard to the fan community, the text, the historical moment, the medium of expression.”\textsuperscript{61} Though the theoretical approach \textit{Poachers} offers up is still a useful way to frame the discussion of fanfiction, it is a work whose position is “historically specific in the development of the field, the history of

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\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 36.
\end{flushleft}
fandom, and [...] on the eve of the Internet explosion in fandom which changed almost every‐thing [Jenkins] talk[s] about, one way or another.”62

In Poachers, Jenkins applies the models of ‘reader as poacher’ and ‘reader as nomad,’ as detailed in de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life (1984), to the fan author. De Certeau’s original theory refutes the equation of reading to passivity, the idea that “to write is to produce a text [and] to read is to receive it from someone else without putting one’s own mark on it, without remaking it.”63 He suggests instead that a reader engages in an act of “silent production” made possible by “the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance.”64 But because the reader can never claim full ownership of the text—able to possess only the physical object of the book, “which is no more than a substitute (the spoor or promise) of moments ‘lost’ in reading”65—he66 is forced to poach on the author’s property, making it so that, for a transient moment, a “different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place.”67 For de Certeau, the reader exists in a kind of liminal space, neither fully active nor fully passive; he is a nomad, “wandering through an imposed system”:

62 Ibid.


64 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, xxi.

65 Ibid.

66 de Certeau genders the reader as “he,” so when discussing his work, I will follow suit.

The reader . . . invents in texts something different from what they ‘intended.’ He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings.68

Even without any further explication, it is not difficult to see how Jenkins connected these ideas to fanfiction. The force of Jenkins’ argument lies in the opening-up of the consumer-producer dichotomy at work in de Certeau. Fans are in some respects the ultimate consumers, taking pieces of mass culture and gumming them dry of all possible uses and interpretations; but in doing so, they position themselves against the dominant standards of consumption. For Jenkins, “poaching” most accurately describes the position of fans in the cultural hierarchy:

De Certeau’s term, ‘poaching,’ forcefully reminds us of the potentially conflicting interests of producers and consumers, writers and readers. It recognizes the power differential between the ‘landowners’ and the ‘poachers’; yet it also acknowledges ways fans may resist legal constraints on their pleasure and challenge attempts to regulate the production and circulation of popular meanings.69

Fan writing challenges the social norms, undermining copyright law and blurring the distinction between high and low culture. Fans employ “reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading, etc.) acceptable in confronting a work of ‘serious merit’ [but which] seem perversely misapplied to the more ‘disposable’ texts of mass culture.”70 For a form of writing that is, as detailed earlier, so dependent on the concept of canon, fanfiction pays little attention to what scholarship has declared part of ‘Western canon,’ and what it has not; the Bible is no more deserving of close reading than The X-Files. Fanfiction.net does, in fact, have a category for Bible fanfiction, which

68 Ibid., 169.

69 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 32.

70 Ibid., 17.
archives a particularly good example of the lack of distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘popular’ texts: “What If Jesus Went to Hogwarts?”

Jenkins makes several qualifications of his use of the term “poachers,” however, noting that de Certeau’s vision limits the reader to “meaning-production [that] remains temporary and transient, made on the run, as the reader moves nomadically from place to place.” Jenkins’ poachers, however, do not simply consume—they also produce and create: “Fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides” They are examples of what anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss calls “the bricoleur,” or:

someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous—and so forth.

I do not disagree with Jenkins; his concept of poaching fit well with the fan community of the late 80s and early 90s. But as he himself writes, “we should change our theory every five thousand miles just like we change the oil in our cars.” Before the Internet was widely and cheaply available, fandoms were tightly-knit groups that carried

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71 teh gr8 authur, “Jesus goes to Hogwarts,” available online at: http://www.fanfiction.net/s/1560633/1/Jesus_goes_to_Hogwarts.

72 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 32.

73 Ibid., 44–45, 49.


with them an aura of the ‘underground.’ Membership was restricted both by level of knowledge, as well as by willingness to engage in all aspects of fan life. The slash community was especially careful about exposing itself; it was “open to anyone willing to participate, but closed to anyone who might jeer, or worse, blow the whistle.”

Even though Jenkins asserts that he uses the term ‘poaching’ without insult, its connotations persist nevertheless, and parallel the popular stereotype of fans as “emotionally unstable, socially maladjusted, and dangerously out of sync with reality.”

But the status and mores of fandom have evolved, and now, as I argue, fanfiction constitutes its own artistic medium. It no longer stakes its claim on someone else’s property, but has carved out a material niche of its own. Fans now range from the diehard to the n00b, with staggered levels of textual knowledge; the “casual fan” is now the norm. Though fandom-specific sites still set generally high standards for fan knowledge, and many have a selection and editorial process in place, umbrella sites like FanFiction.net encourage limited and multifarious fandom engagement, removing the expectation that new fans should be intimately familiar with canon before they dare subject their work to the community’s critical eye. For example, a Jan. 2009 fic called “Alone,” posted by “Horcrexhexer” in FanFiction.net’s section for USA Network’s television series *Psych*, begins with the disclaimer: “I’ve only seen the three most recent episodes of *Psych* so I’m kinda in the dark of what really happened with everyone’s

76 Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 3.


78 Internet jargon for “newbie,” or new member of the fan community.
families and everything.” \(^{79}\) This author has also written for five other fandoms, and follows four more. Such an admission would be utterly taboo in the mailing-group community of the 80s and 90s, with the author written off as a dabbler and chided for wasting the other fans’ time. But the instant gratification of cyberspace ensures that not only can Horcrexhexer post and read as many fics as she wants, but also that she will receive encouraging—if not always constructive—feedback from other fans.

1.3.3 Scholar-Fans and Fan-Scholars

Changes in the structure of fandom are reflected in the seesawing relationship between “scholar-fans” and “fan-scholars,” as the more traditional hierarchy of officially recognized theorists is exchanged for a more community-oriented discussion and development of theory.

Even when Henry Jenkins was first published, just one year out of graduate school with his academic career was on the line, he made no attempt to gloss over his personal relationship with fandom. He was and is a longtime fan, and considers that an important part of his approach to fan culture. In the introduction to *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins writes that “approaching popular culture as a fan gives [him] new insights into the media by releasing [him] from the narrowly circumscribed categories and assumptions of academic criticism and allowing [him] to play with textual materials.” \(^{80}\) Jenkins is a “scholar-fan,” an academic who is a fan and therefore “draws on their fandom as a badge of distinction within the academy,” as opposed to the “fan-scholar,” a

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\(^{80}\) Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 5.
“fan who uses academic theorizing within their fan writing and within the construction of a scholarly fan identity.” 81 To try to make the distinction clearer—though the line is admittedly blurry—a scholar-fan can be thought of as a professional academic, trained in academic discourse, who is personally engaged in fandom but also writes articles on fandom intended to be thought of and analyzed within that academic discourse, and publishes them in ‘legitimate’ scholarly journals or books. A fan-scholar, on the other hand, is a fan not trained in academic discourse, and/or does not engage with the specifically demarcated sphere of official scholarship. They do, however, produce theoretical discourse about fandom that mimics official scholarship but is not intended for scholarly consumption; the fan-scholar posts their essays online for other fans to read. The fan-scholar’s theorizing helps them determine their own position within fandom, and contributes to the development of the fan community.

Jenkins’ self-identification with the scholar-fan set a precedent for the scholars who followed him into fan studies; now scholar-fans are the rule, not the exception. The relative subjectivity of the scholar-fan is, to everyone outside of fan studies, a flaw: How could Jenkins appropriately analyze the writers of slash if he knows them personally? Social sciences have always demanded an unbiased observer, and therefore “academic practice . . . typically transforms fandom into an absolute Other.” 82 It demands a separation between the rational, trained community of academics and the supposedly

82 Ibid., 5.
irrational activities of the non-scholar and their “improper subjectivity.” But somehow the detached scholar is, in fan studies, not the preferred model. But why not?

Matt Hills debates this question in the introduction to his 2002 work, *Fan Cultures*, suggesting that the hybridity of the field is what calls for an openly hybrid scholar, simultaneously part of academia as well as fandom. But the scholar-fan is so fiercely advocated in fan studies that it goes to the extreme opposite of those ivory tower intellectuals. Hills calls Jenkins’ defense of fandom in *Poachers* “polemical, […] creating a moral dualism” that labels fans ‘good’ and non-fans ‘bad.’84 In Jenkins’ construction, the fan is deemed to be unfairly ridiculed, and therefore “cleansed of aberrant psychology, while the ‘bad’ non-fan [is made] responsible for reproducing negative stereotypes of fandom.”85 While freeing the fan and scholar-fan from the “fan-as-obsessed-weirdo stereotype,” Jenkins implicates the non-fan, especially the scholar non-fan, and in turn stereotypes them as elitists unable to free themselves from their entrenched views of fandom.86

While subsequent examinations of the scholar-fan have not been so dualistic, the foundational role Jenkins’ work plays in the field has made it almost a necessity for scholars to ‘come out,’ if you will, as fans. In the preface to their 2006 collection of essays, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson immediately announce their position as scholar-fans:

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83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., 8. Emphasis in original.

85 Ibid., 9.

86 Ibid.
Both of us [Busse and Hellekson] have PhDs in English, but whereas Kristina teaches, Karen does not. Both of us enjoy slash fan fiction: Karen writes it and runs a mailing list and a related fan archive, and Kristina reads and critiques it. Kristina is a fannish butterfly, lurking in every fandom and reading voraciously; Karen is a monofannish, selective reader.  

Busse and Hellekson make no pretensions of distanced observation and also point out that “all the writers [in their essay collection] tend to be fans as well as academics.” The scholar-fan debate has clearly not died down in the last fifteen years, and those working in fan studies are still expected to declare themselves as fan or non-fan. While it is not necessarily detrimental for these scholar-fan confessions to be the norm—fanfiction does require a certain amount of open-mindedness, given the rough, unedited, and occasionally ungrammatical quality of some stories—they drift dangerously close to the realm of apologetics at a moment when academics should not need to justify their interest in fan studies.

Even though the scholar-fan still has prominence in the academic sphere, its oft-ignored little sister, the fan-scholar, is gaining power in the online arena as fan writers use the unique communicative values of the Internet to more deeply engage with their art form and their peers. As previously noted, the fan-scholar is characterized by their activities of conscious theory-making within the fandom rather than for any outside scholarship. This thesis holds that the proliferation of fan-scholars is one thing we can point to as indicative of fanfiction’s growth into an independent artistic medium. There is a wealth of fandom self-theorizing, called “meta,” through which fans construct critical frameworks for themselves and their texts and interpret the surrounding fan culture. Meta

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88 Ibid.
is rarely formal, and currently, the most popular model for meta is a discursive, community-blog format (see: Metafandom,\textsuperscript{89} self-described as a “newsletter community”). Meta deals with a wide variety of issues, from the etiquette of reviewing fanfiction to the racial politics that can be involved with writing in some fandoms. Meta is organic, the growth of fanfiction as a medium requiring the parallel development of a body of critical thought through which the community can define and redefine itself. There is no single voice that dictates the theories with which fans and fandoms self-criticize; rather, they are honed over time through discussion, as well as through the actual practice of writing fanfiction.

Meta can be found everywhere from individual fan sites to large umbrella archives, and likewise addresses topics ranging from writing within specific fandoms to general discourse on the ideas of canon. On her personal Web site “KatSpace,” Kathryn Andersen posts her self-authored meta alongside fanfiction from many different sources. Andersen’s meta falls under the “general” category, as she addresses topics like “Why do we write fanfiction in the first place?,” “What makes a good crossover,” and “Why does everyone hate Mary Sue so much?” In one particular piece of meta, Andersen lays out what she considers to be “The Ten Commandments of Fan Fiction.”\textsuperscript{90} These include: “Thou shalt have no canon but Canon”; “Thou shalt not take the name of the Prime Authors in vain, for verily, thou art playing in their sandpit”; and “Keep the stories free to sanctify them. Make thou no profit upon your labour, for profit is a thing of the land of Copyright and Trademark, and will put you in the power of their Lawyers.” In

\textsuperscript{89}“Metafandom,” http://www.journalfen.net/community/metafandom/.

\textsuperscript{90}Kathryn Andersen, “The Ten Commandments of Fan Fiction,” available online at: http://www.katspace.org/Fiction/Essays/TenCommandments.
(humorously) laying down the laws that guide her own fanfiction writing, Andersen is constructing and sharing own foundational theory of the medium. Other fans are open to agree or disagree with her formulation, and are encouraged to leave a comment about it on Andersen’s LiveJournal. Comments range from darkehart’s “Excellent! I’m a newbie to the whole fanfic genre, and am slowly discovering the ins and outs of same [sic]. Your site helped clarify a few things for me,” to fpb’s “I am one of the minority who does not think that “Show, don’t tell” is an absolute commandment. […] When we speak of the masters of a visual narrative medium, we cannot pretend that it is crudity or ignorance that makes them tell a story in words instead of pictures if they think right.” New authors can use Andersen’s theories as guidance within the brave new world of fanfiction, while more experienced writers can serve as objecting (or assenting) theorists. Meta, even on the small, personal scale, thus fosters the continued growth and evolution of fanfiction as medium.

In Textual Poachers, Jenkins observes that “organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism,” counting the rereading practices involved in writing fanfiction as the primary form of this criticism. Fanfiction is itself a form of critical theory, but unlike meta, it is not necessarily self-conscious theory, and is therefore the realm of all fan writers, not just the fan-scholars. In Thomas McLaughlin’s Street Smarts and Critical Theory, slash fanfiction is cited as an example of vernacular theory, or “theory that would never think of itself as ‘theory,’ that is mostly unaware of

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92 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 86.
the existence of the discipline.”\textsuperscript{93} Vernacular theory, for McLaughlin, is not necessarily inferior to academic theory; while its practitioners may suffer “from the blindness that unself-conscious language creates, [. . .] they manage in spite of their complicity to ask fundamental questions about culture.”\textsuperscript{94} According to McLaughlin, slash is a means through which society’s sexual norms are questioned, as slash writers transform “what the producers of the series intend as a nonsexual relationship into an idealized vision of sexual equality and community, projected onto two male figures because such equality makes sense only where gender-power imbalances do not exist.”\textsuperscript{95} Fanfiction as an art form is, then, criticism through transformation rather than dissection.

Why is fanfiction such an effective medium for developing and conveying critical theory? What is it about the form that makes it a particularly strong example of vernacular or unconscious theory? In “For a Theory of Literary Production,” Pierre Macherey writes that “the recognition of the area of shadow in or around the work is the initial moment of criticism.”\textsuperscript{96} That is precisely what the fan author latches onto in order to construct her stories: the area of shadow, of ambiguity, in the media text. Macherey continues:

When the critic speaks he is not repeating, reproducing or remaking [the text]; neither is he illuminating its dark corners, filling its margins with annotation, specifying that which was never specific. When the critical discourse begins from the hypothesis that the work speaks falteringly, it is not with the aim of


\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 17.

completing it, reducing its deficiencies, as though the book were too small for the space occupied. [. . .] Theoretical inquiry rejects the notion of the space or site of the work. Critical discourse does not attempt to complete the book, for theory begins from that incompleteness which is so radical that it cannot be located.97

Fanfiction “does not attempt to complete the book,” or the television series, or the film, as the case may be. Instead, it opens up a universe in which what Jenkins calls the “meta-text” (not to be confused with meta)—the ‘ideal’ version of a media text constructed by combining the original source material with the critical commentary and fanfiction developed by the fan community—is a continual work in progress.98 There is no way to finish the meta-text, no way to concretely locate any point in its continuum; fanfiction cites, not sites, a work.

The proliferation of meta grounds fanfiction as an independent artistic medium because it requires its readers and writers to create their own theoretical structure to supplement those offered by literary or cinema studies. And the existence of fanfiction itself as a means of conveying critical theory, as a form that encourages the creation of an endless text, allows us to go beyond de Certeau and place fanfic in the context of theorists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

1.4 The Theory Behind the Practice

In founding Textual Poachers on de Certeau’s theory, Jenkins was encoding the unfamiliar—fanfiction—with the accepted—literary theory—so as to legitimize the scholarly study of fanfic. And though fanfiction ultimately begs for its own theory, it is important to build a structure of literary criticism around it. Fanfiction is not precisely

97 Ibid., 704. Emphasis in original.
98 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 98.
literature, but the two share critical roots. In order to think further on the theoretical underpinnings of fanfiction, it is important to expose these roots and discover the extent to which fanfiction can be considered the realization of poststructuralist thought.

‘Fanfiction studies’ is not a field to be studied in isolation. As Hills observes, when academics set up rival fields, like ‘film studies’ against ‘television studies,’ and seek “to validate and valorize specific media as objects of study, [they] immediately cut themselves off from the transmedia and multimedia consumption of fans.”

Fanfiction as an art form that embraces all forms of media, with stories that bring the printed characters of *Harry Potter* together with the televised characters of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or fan-made trailers for fanfics based on the movieverse *Lord of the Ring* that are posted on YouTube, so it would be unwise to unduly limit the theory applied to it.

By now, the death of the Author has been shouted from the rooftops, and its application to fanfiction almost amounts to stating the obvious. Just as Barthes ominously declared in his 1967 essay, “The Death of the Author,” the reader has slipped in behind the (capital A)uthor’s retreat. Where once the Author’s voice was the most important contribution to the text, it is now quiet, the text speaking through the reader instead. As Pugh notes:

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100 See Sarah Lila F’s “Harry Potter and the Scoobies,” available online at: [http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2563958/1/Harry_Potter_and_the_Scoobies](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2563958/1/Harry_Potter_and_the_Scoobies).

101 See RazberriTwist’s “A Daughter of Kings Trailer #2,” available online at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgtqH8t89PM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgtqH8t89PM). It is interesting to note that the trailer is made up of clips from *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy as well as clips from Joe Wright’s 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* film adaptation.
Even if fan writers aren’t deliberately killing the author, their practice shrieks that they don’t believe interpretations of canon are nothing more than attempts to retrieve what the canonical writers intended.\textsuperscript{102}

Another commonly cited theoretical justification for fanfiction—used by three of my most prominent sources: Jenkins, Pugh, and Busse/Hellekson—comes again from Barthes, but this time, from his 1970 text, \textit{S/Z}. In what becomes an analysis of Honoré de Balzac’s short story “Sarrasine,” Barthes presents his approach to reading and analyzing a ‘starred’ or coded text. The element of this essay most important to fanfiction studies is Barthes’ distinction between the \textit{readerly} and the \textit{writerly} text. \textit{Readerly} texts make up the mass of what has been and will be written; it is a “classic text” that plunges the reader “into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, \textit{serious}: [. . .] he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text.”\textsuperscript{103} The \textit{writerly} text, on the other hand, is Barthes’ \textit{ideal} text, where the value in literary production should reside. “Why is the writerly our value?” Barthes asks; it is because the writerly text changes the role of the reader, and “the goal of literary work . . . is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.”\textsuperscript{104} The writerly text is a plural text, a networked text:

\begin{quote}
In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{102} Pugh, \textit{The Democratic Genre}, 152.
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\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
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dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.\textsuperscript{105}

The writerly text is distinguished by its multiple points of access and infinite chances for development and recoding, with which the reader can actively engage. Fanfiction relies upon the existence of such texts. The media readers, the fans, treat the source material as a writerly text—regardless of how sophisticated that text actually is. They also treat it as their text, as if they weren’t poachers on someone else’s property, therein overcoming what Barthes calls “the problem facing modern writing: how breach the wall of utterance, the wall of origin, the wall of ownership?”\textsuperscript{106}

In their practice of claiming full access to a media text, of entering it from many angles and manipulating it endlessly, fanfiction writers are making a writerly text of the original work, of what is most often a readerly text; the fanfiction they create forms around its source the ‘networks’ and ‘galaxy of signifiers’ Barthes describes above. Fanfiction then is not only founded on the belief of the writerly text, but its practitioners engage in the conscious production of writerly texts. It is in this way that “fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readers”; it is the reader who creates and shapes the ideal text, rather than the ideal text necessitating an active reader.\textsuperscript{107} Fanfiction blurs the line between the readerly and writerly; it is possible, in this medium, for a piece to engage with both aspects simultaneously. The actual stylistics of a fanfic and its source text can be readerly, while the method by which the fic is circulated and with which it is engaged can introduce an element of the writerly.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 5–6.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{107} Jenkins, \textit{Textual Poachers}, 284.
In *S/Z*, Barthes also comments on the practice of rereading—a staple of fan activity, and one that also contributes to the formation of the ideal text. For Barthes, rereading is what frees the text and allows entry to the active reader. As Jenkins notes in *Textual Poachers*:

*[Barthes’ theories about rereading] focus on ways that rereading alters the priorities of the narrative and allows readers to bring it more fully under their own control. [In fandom] repeat viewers play with the rough spots of the text—its narrative gaps, its excess details, its loose ends and contradictions—in order to find openings for the fans’ elaborations of its world and speculations about characters.*⁠¹⁰⁸

Rereading “multiplies [the text] in its variety and its plurality” and creates a reading environment “no longer [of] consumption, but [of] play.”⁠¹⁰⁹ This is not ‘play’ in the childish sense, in the sense most often associated with fan reading. Rather, it is a kind of Derridean ‘play,’ the limitless recombination that occurs in a centerless structure, or around a text not considered sacred and inviolable, but plural and accessible.

As Barbara Johnson explains in “Writing”:

*Derrida sees signifying force in the gaps, margins, figures, echoes, digressions, discontinuities, contradictions, and ambiguities of a text. When one writes, one writes more than (or less than, or other than) one thinks. The reader’s task is to read what is written rather than simply attempt to intuit what might have been meant.*⁠¹¹⁰

That ‘signifying force’ is given a life beyond the reader’s mind in fanfiction, where, as noted earlier with Macherey’s observation, the gaps and shadows of a text are pressured and played out. In “Ellipsis,” Derrida suggests that the book can never be finished; that

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¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 68, 74.


“the closure of the book [is] not a simple limit.”111 To be able to write “beyond the book,” we must place ourselves in constant reference to the book, must “[come] back to it unceasingly [and draw] all our resources from it.”112

1.5 Moving Forward

In this chapter, the overarching goal was to piece together the developments in fanfiction over the last decade-and-a-half and establish a mode of interpretation that allows fanfiction to be considered an independent artistic medium. It was important to create this foundation before moving forward and taking on a specific case study because fanfiction has always struggled with legitimacy, and will continue to struggle as long as it is burdened with the title of “derivative art form.” Even though fan authors rarely write like Hemingway, what they’re doing with texts has the possibility to—as Grossman’s TIME piece hints—revolutionize books as we know them. They are taking the ideas of theorists like Barthes and Derrida, who spoke of endlessly networked texts and a new kind of literary play that defies hierarchy and embraces relativity, and unconsciously, unpretentiously putting them into practice. And those fan writers who are conscious of what they’re doing are self-theorizing, and putting these theories into dialogue with the rest of the fan community. Fanfiction is in a new moment as an art form—which also signals a new moment in all artistic expression.

Chapter 2 will try to offer what fan studies lacks: A new theoretical approach. It will look at one of fanfiction’s newest fandoms—the Twilight bookverse and


112 Ibid.
movieverse—and how its fan authors are reviving the long-tabooed figure of Mary Sue in order to tap into fanfiction’s performative potential. *Twilight* is ranked low on the scale of intellectual hierarchy, which makes this a prime case study. Performativity is not a perfect theoretical model, but it emphasizes the ways in which fans are continually pushing the medium of fanfiction forward, and developing it as an art form that encourages the construction of new identities and new worlds.
CHAPTER 2:
A SECOND CHANCE FOR MARY SUE

Fanfiction has its own history, its own tradition, its own theory—and now, has evolved beyond its humble beginnings and can enter into discourse with other media as a discrete medium. It is a distinctly postmodern medium, engaging with texts in a way that is simultaneously intimate and critical, cobbling itself together from seemingly disparate bits and textual pieces. As an art form, fanfiction has reached, as quoted earlier from Francesca Coppa, its “postmodern moment, when [. . .] traditions are made to be broken.”\(^1\) Fanfiction has always, in part, defined the fan identity, and the hard-and-fast rules of the genre reflect the cohesiveness and specificity of the fan community. As Jenkins notes in *Textual Poachers*, “part of the process of becoming a fan involves learning the community’s preferred reading practices.”\(^2\) But fan culture is changing, as was suggested in chapter 1; the demographic of the ‘fan’ is now all over the map. Accordingly, the ‘preferred reading practices,’ the once inviolate standards of fanfiction—especially the anathema of Mary Sueing—are no longer the pillars they were. The direction of fanfiction is shifting with the needs of the fan community.

Chapter 1 critiqued the continued unquestioning application of Jenkins’ theory of ‘fan writing as poaching.’ Fanfiction was once seen as a subversive form, so de Certeau’s

\(^1\) Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” 57.

\(^2\) Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 278.
poacher was a useful model. Now that it has shaken the label of ‘derivative,’ fanfiction requires a new theoretical approach, a model that offers an analysis of where the genre is, not only where it was. This chapter will suggest that using a model of performativity is a more fitting way to approach the relationship between today’s fanfiction and its writers. The ‘traditional’ fan identity has a firmly established niche in the process of cultural production; from the beginning there was an element of theatrical performativity involved in being a fan, as illustrated most aptly by the costumed groups at *Star Trek* conventions. But the new wave of fans is made up of those not previously engaged in cultural manipulation, who would not characterize themselves as ‘diehards,’ but who are using the performative possibilities of fanfiction to explore the characters within their favored media texts and to extend these characters’ identities beyond that which would previously have been accepted under fandom convention.

This thesis will use as a case study the fanfiction generated for the bestselling Young Adult book series (and now companion movies) *Twilight*, by Stephenie Meyer. It is arguably the fastest growing fandom on FanFiction.net; only four years after the first book in the series was published, there are over 74,000 fics (as of April 2009) housed in FF.net’s *Twilight* category, far outstripping the 41,000 *Lord of the Rings* fics. Before *Twilight* was released, *Lord of the Rings* was the second most popular book/movie fandom on FanFiction.net, behind *Harry Potter* (with 395,000 fics on the site as of April 2009). Yet *Twilight* is a fandom very different from those we’ve encountered before.

Subjectively, the quality of the *Twilight* fanfiction available on FF.net is consistently

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115 On FanFiction.net, fandoms that include both a bookverse and a movieverse are filed under their original medium of publication (usually ‘book’), and there is an option within the category to sort the stories between “Book World” and “Movie World.”
lower than those of *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, suggesting a demographic of less-experienced writers unconcerned with or unaware of the common emphasis in fandoms on editing and beta reading before a story is posted, in order to ensure the highest quality product for the audience. Twilight fanfiction also overwhelmingly adheres to canon pairings, any forays into slash or non-canonical pairings the rare exception. This stands in contrast to *Harry Potter* fanfiction, in which Harry has been paired with almost every conceivable character, from his canon-girlfriend Ginny Weasley, to his Potions professor Severus Snape, and even to the ghost that haunts the school toilets, Moaning Myrtle; and *Lord of the Rings* fanfiction, which, because of the marked lack of male/female romance in the books, is heavy with slash.

But what truly sets *Twilight* fanfic apart is the prominence of both Mary Sue stories and what can be considered the reimagining of Mary Sue: All Human, or AH fics. *Twilight* is, very simply, a book series about a vampire (Edward) who falls in love with a human girl (Bella), and tries to protect her from the perils of the supernatural world to which he has exposed her. As such, many of the main characters are vampires or werewolves. The crux of the saga is Bella’s desire for Edward to turn her into a vampire, Edward’s refusal to ‘change’ her, and his constant angst over the dangerous situations she ends up in because of her involvement with him. AH circumvents this problem by making every character human. What results is fiction that bears a resemblance to *Twilight* only in character names and basic personalities. I posit AH as the transformation of Mary Sue into a productive, performative genre. Through these stories, the fan authors play out various personal fantasies, and create what are ostensibly mass-market romance

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116 These observations are drawn from my own survey of fanfiction from the three named fandoms; there is no strictly empirical evidence for these claims.
novels, with the added benefit of textual play. Many of these stories also transform Bella into a stronger female character, more akin to the fiery Harlequin heroine than Meyer’s clumsy, shy creation.

In her 1984 book *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway studied a group of women who were avid readers of romance novels, analyzing the role these books played in the women’s lives and rethinking how their rabid consumption of these texts positioned them within consumer culture. I present the *Twilight* fandom as an extension of Radway’s study group, except that these fan authors have latched onto the performative possibilities of fanfiction in order to reposition themselves as cultural producers. Just as Radway cites escapism as one of the major draws of romance reading, *Twilight* fan authors write AH fanfiction as a means of performing the identities about which they fantasize. The age and experience range of the *Twilight* fic authors is wider than that of the women in Radway’s study, and, though romance novels are not generally considered “high-quality” writing, their official publication results in more consistently edited material than found in *Twilight* fics. Thus, what we have with *Twilight* fanfic is the relatively unschooled rewriting of a text, using the conventions of what Barthes might have considered the most ‘readerly’ of all genres: romance.

As it’s presented, *Twilight* AH fanfiction seems to be the antithesis of the writerly, perhaps warranting sociological study for its community-building properties, but certainly not any close textual and aesthetic readings. That sort of thinking is, however, incredibly unproductive. It is precisely because these works are not products of the literary marketplace that makes them ripe for study. Unlike in the books by authors of “high merit” in academic circles—say, Salman Rushdie or Kate Chopin—that are often
shaped very intentionally by theory, when notions of identity-formation surface in *Twilight* fanfiction, it is largely unintentional—or at least unconscious—on the part of the author. Studying the ways that fan authors interrogate selfhood in their texts is, to make a rather tongue-in-cheek comparison, akin to observing animals in their natural habitat, their ‘identity performance’ still largely untouched by the shadow of Western theory.

### 2.1 Fanfiction and Performativity

Any discussion of performativity naturally has to grapple with the term’s two competing discourses: “that of theater on the one hand, and of speech act theory and deconstruction on the other.”117 In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that “the stretch between theatrical and deconstruction meanings of ‘performative’ can seem to span the polarities of nonverbal and verbal action,” opening up a paradox around the term.118 It is difficult to speak of performativity in one sense (theatrical) without somehow evoking it in the other (speech-act); they are distinct ideas with indistinct boundaries. Theatrical performativity involves the physical and visual ‘acting out’ of a different identity, a different character. Speech-act performativity, as made famous by J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words*, involves action through words, or the use of language to put something into being, as in the common example “I thee wed.” Both kinds of performativity have great implications for the philosophies of identity-formation—or more specifically, as Sedgwick notes, on the “queer” identity.

Performativity is a productive force; it is, for theorists like Judith Butler, at the heart of

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118 Ibid.
all of our social interaction. Selfhood can be seen as a performance of both types: a theatrical event involving costume and actions; and a constant putting-self-into-words, of being queer, or female, or black.

The difference between theatrical performativity and speech-act performativity is even stickier online, when performance is always already mediated by several layers of language. The fanfiction featured in this chapter involves both sides of performativity; it is performance through language and the exploration of personal and social identity through the manipulation of theatrical figures. I will therefore work with a looser definition of performativity, embracing the ambiguity of the term: an awareness of audience and character, as found in theatrical performance, with an element of the self-construction described by Sedgwick and Butler. Fan authors are not only performing a character in their writing, but also have the ability to perform themselves, to create and explore through language the reality of their social identity, of how their sexuality or desires can be lived in relation to other people and their needs. Fanfiction is a medium that allows for both masking and unmasking, and fan authors are learning to deviate from the script, to use these performative properties to satisfy the dual need for creating fantasy and determining selfhood.

The idea of fan fiction as a performative platform is not an entirely new. In “Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance,” Francesca Coppa suggests that “drama instead of prose [is] the antecedent medium for fan fiction,” and that scholars should apply a “performative rather than literary criteria” to its study.  

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According to Coppa, scholars have been thinking of fanfiction in terms of literary theory because it is “itself a textual enterprise,” and has its roots in science fiction, which is a heavily textual genre. However, fandoms based on the primarily visual media of television and film are now prominent in the fan community, and those that still do focus on books often have a complementary movieverse with which to work, like *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*. Coppa’s argument does not rest on the dramatic form—the script is a surprisingly unpopular way to write fanfiction—as much as the theatrical spirit. She notes that fanfiction is, for an art form that exists in the transience of cyberspace, intensely concerned with bodies. Slash fiction can be deeply emotional, but what defines it is its interest in the male body and the consequences of sexual action. The genre of hurt/comfort is also about the path to recovery and consolation, but it is first and foremost dependent on the destruction of the character’s physical body. And the common currency in most visual-media fandoms is the physical description of the characters; as Coppa notes, a “live audience” of “readers come[s] to fan fiction with extratextual knowledge, mostly of characters’ bodies and voices.” Though the performance is happening in the mind of the reader, the fan author is nevertheless directing bodies in space. Coppa goes so far as to say that “fandom is community theatre in a mass media world; fandom is what happened to the culture of amateur dramatics.”

The process of fanfiction writing is also inherently theatrical, according to Coppa. There is no objection in theatre to the staging and restaging of the same text; in fact, the

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120 Ibid., 226.
121 Ibid., 235.
122 Ibid., 242.
challenge is often to come up with a new way to perform staples like *Hamlet*. Fan authors engage in the same kind of rereading and rewriting with their source material. And when they create their stories, fan authors are turning a visual production into “an infinite number of scripts. *This activity is not authoring texts, but making productions.*” As such, writing becomes a performative act in the context of fandom. And even with such a strong emphasis on the theatrical, Coppa concedes to the element of the performative speech act involved in fanfiction. Referencing Barthes’ Authorial death knell, Coppa argues that the original media text contains within it infinite interpretations, all of which are out of the author’s control, and as such, “we should look at writing as a separately existing linguistic performance that does/says more than any one person ever could.”

Coppa does not, however, fully articulate the theoretical significance of classifying fanfiction as a performative space. If each new fic is a theatrical production in its own right, if the authors and readers enter into a give-and-take that results in a unique ‘performance,’ what sort of interpretive dialogue is being formed? As noted earlier, slash is used to pressure traditional constructions of gender and sexuality—and it does so in an arguably theatrical manner. But how does this engagement with performativity affect the identities of the reader and author? Does a direct, personal involvement allow them to explore their individual identities as well as broad ideas of social norms? I will attempt to answer these questions in the context of the *Twilight* fandom.

Fanfiction could also be considered “performative criticism,” a method Gerry Brenner describes in *Performative Criticism: Experiments in Reader Response* (2004).

123 Ibid., 225. Emphasis added.

124 Ibid., 242.
Brenner considers performative criticism to be a type of criticism that is composed “from the inside,” that “requires participating in the realities and experience of the text critics are writing about, becoming or impersonating a character in or close to a text so that the criticism becomes [...] a performance in which an audience can become as emotionally engaged.”

Through the voice of the character, says Brenner, the critic is to explore the text’s deeper ideological issues. It would be too extensive to quote Brenner’s description here, but his explanation of the process of performative criticism is uncannily similar to the process of writing fanfiction. Though Brenner is advocating the use of this method as a very conscious form of academic engagement, fanfiction does meet much of his criteria. His “primary aim is to create—or re-create on the page—a world whose characters and issues become a theater wherein literary criticism comes to life”; is that not precisely what fanfiction does, even if it is, at times, only on an unconscious level?

Though it is tempting to bring the fan-scholar’s production into this conversation, meta represents a different form of critical engagement than the type ascribed to performative criticism. Though the fan-scholar is, in some respects, performing the role of the academic scholar, what distinguishes performative criticism is the way in which it inhabits and manipulates a preexisting character, someone else’s creation. When writing meta, fan-scholars are not writing through a source text; fanfiction authors, however, must fully embrace the identities of their favorite characters in the creative process.

Brenner’s method acknowledging the performativity at the heart of fanfiction’s process, and the opportunity for critical construction that comes from it. When thinking

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126 Ibid., 10.
about fanfiction in relation to performative criticism, one of the most intriguing points of conflict comes when the fan author creates a Mary Sue. When this occurs, though the author is using a fictional character as her mouthpiece, it is the author’s own voice, the author’s own desires, that are being voiced. Instead of being used to work through the text’s critical issues, the character is simply a costume for the author that allows her the freedom to perform and explore her own identity in a more controllable, comfortable, idealized world.

2.2 Mary Sue and Identity Performance

In fandom, Mary Sue has always been the enemy. She may be the most talented, beautiful, heroic character in a given story, but her appearance is the surest way for a fan author to get ‘flamed,’ or harshly criticized. In the normally open-minded fanfiction community, the Mary Sue story is one of the few that automatically warrants a negative evaluation. Or, at least it was. In up-and-coming fandoms like *Twilight*, or simply on sites like FanFiction.net that lack a strong source of guidance and correction, Mary Sue is appearing consistently and is subject to far fewer negative responses. In fact, the actual published text of the *Twilight* series by Meyer has itself been labeled a Mary Sue by those inside and outside the *Twilight* fan community. The entry for “Mary Sue” at UrbanDictionary.com—a community-created slang lexicon with over 3,800,000 definitions—is tagged with “stephenie meyer,” among other *Twilight*-related terms, indicating that the users of this source see a link between the two.¹²⁷ Though calling *Twilight* a Mary Sue does not frame it in positive terms, it indicates that Mary Sue can be

the popular girl in school and in the literary marketplace. So perhaps it is time to revisit Mary Sue, and see what she offers to the performative space of fanfiction, now that the taboo against her has started to fade.

In her essay “On Female Identity and Writing by Women,” in Elizabeth Abel’s *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Judith Kegan Gardiner suggests that the female author often uses her characters to explore aspects of her own selfhood:

> [T]he women writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process of involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character. Thus the text and its female hero begin as narcissistic extensions of the author.\textsuperscript{128}

What Gardiner is describing here is, in fact, what fandom calls a Mary Sue. But Gardiner gives this identification process more power than is usually associated with Mary Sue, tapping into psychological research on the formation of female identity. She notes that as the female author develops her characters, she too develops and begins to distinguish between the heroine and herself; “thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero.”\textsuperscript{129} The relationship between the female author and her associated character can therefore be positive, as the writer comes to identify herself *with* and *against* her heroine. The process of creating a Mary Sue and carrying her through a story can thus be equated to “learning to be a mother, that is, learning to experience oneself as one’s own cared-for child and as one’s own caring mother, while simultaneously learning to experience one’s creation as other, as separate from the


\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
Gardiner’s discussion opens up the possibility of reframing Mary Sue and rethinking the impact that performing Mary Sue through writing fanfiction has on fan authors.

Anupam Chander and Madhavi Sunder advocate the rehabilitation of Mary Sue’s image in “Everyone’s a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of ‘Mary Sue’ Fan Fiction as Fair Use.” Published in the California Law Review, their article defends the legality of Mary Sue fanfiction, in the face of those who condemn it under copyright law. According to Chander and Sunder, the Mary Sue story is an example of a “derivative use[] that challenge[s] the hegemony of the original,” and therefore may fall under the legal auspices of fair use. In order for a work to be considered ‘fair use,’ three essential questions must be answered: “(1) Why not write your own entirely original story? (2) Why not license the original? (3) Won’t liberal recoding of icons destabilize popular culture?” Though Chander and Sunder take the time to answer each question in detail, their argument revolves around the idea that the social importance of Mary Sue relies upon her injection into a preexisting text, and that through her, fan authors are delivering a necessary commentary on popular media stereotypes.

The article rejects the notion of Mary Sue as a narcissistic figure with no productive power, and instead turns her into a figure of empowerment. Chander and Sunder reason that, considering that many of the texts into which Mary Sues are inserted uphold a traditional masculine hierarchy, “Mary Sue is in fact a figure of subaltern

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130 Ibid.


132 Ibid., 617.
critique, challenging the stereotypes of the original.”\textsuperscript{133} Mary Sue allows women and minorities to rewrite popular narratives to include themselves as the heroes, the saviors, the forces with which to be reckoned: “Mary Sue re-imagines our cultural landscape, granting agency to those denied it in the popular mythology.”\textsuperscript{134} Through Mary Sue, the author can reposition herself within culture, converge with and change texts in order to create her ideal identity. *Twilight* Mary Sues have the particular ability to rework the female figure, as the series supports many conservative views of the role of woman as wife and mother.

Mary Sues are the means by which the writer investigates the constructed narrative world of the media text as well as the world around her. Paula Smith—creator of the original Mary Sue parody story—observes that Mary Sue is such an idealized character because it is through her that young women writers explore “their brand-new power over the big bad world—the power to stir men sexually. [In a Mary Sue] the writer is obviously fascinated by the fact that, in the real world, a reasonably presentable young girl can cause some guy or guys to act much differently than normal.”\textsuperscript{135} As Mary Sue’s talents are celebrated and she becomes central to the fanfic, “the author gains vicarious recognition of her own innate power: erotic, intellectual, redemptive.”\textsuperscript{136}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{133} Ibid, 597.
\bibitem{134} Ibid.
\bibitem{135} Pat Pflieger, “Too Good to Be True: 150 Years of Mary Sue,” paper presented at the American Culture Association conference (March 31, 1999), available online at: http://www.merrycoz.org/papers/MARYSUE.HTM. Pflieger cites an e-mail exchange between herself and Paula Smith as the source of this quote.
\bibitem{136} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
As both a character as well as a device for exploring sexuality, Mary Sue bears a strong resemblance to the heroines of mass-market romance novels. Romance readers can experience emotional and sexual fulfillment by imagining themselves as the novel’s leading lady. As Pat Pflieger notes in “Too Good to Be True: 150 Years of Mary Sue”:

> Despite appearances [. . .] readers of romance fiction aren’t identifying with the heroine of the work; their real focus is on the hero, with the heroine holding open a spot in the novel into which the (usually female) reader can slip mentally. Though this argument may seem simplistic in regard to romance novels, it does seem the basis for the Mary Sue: she holds a place open in the story for the author—and presumably for the reader.¹³⁷

By writing themselves into the story by way of Mary Sue, fan authors are constructing and performing an idealized identity, and perhaps, as Gardiner suggests, discovering a more viable identity for themselves in the process. In *The Democratic Genre*, Pugh supports Pflieger’s equation of romance novels and Mary Sue by observing a common vein of criticism between Mary Sues and chick lit. She notes that both genres are derided “for the fact that [they act] as a mirror rather than a window, reflecting the lives of [their] readers and writers rather than showing them other lives.”¹³⁸ But the comparison between ‘trashy novels’ and Mary Sue fanfiction cannot hold up under scrutiny. Mary Sues are, if anything, Alice’s magic mirror, which not only shows her reflection but also acts as a portal into another world. Because romance novels are often written from a pre-processed formula—or at least with a prescribed model in mind—romance authors cannot be given the same agency as fanfiction writers. They are too enmeshed in the economy of book consumption to have the freedom to use their writing as a means of identity formation. It

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Pugh, *The Democratic Genre*, 85.
is the romance reader who experiences the text as the heroine, and the fan author who does so through the process of writing a Mary Sue.

2.3 Reading the Romance

If Mary Sue’s closest relative is the heroine of romance fiction, the romance novel reader can serve as a means of comparison for the Mary Sue writer. The traditional opinion of the fan community would equate the two; whether written or read, the Mary Sue was deemed an inferior and unproductive genre. But in truth, the reader and writer experience very different things during the process of identifying with the Mary Sue. Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* is an in-depth study of the motivations of the romance novel reader, and the relationship between the fantasy heroines and the real women readers. Through interviews with female fans of romance novels, Radway attempts to bridge the gap between the publishers and the readers, the “contradictory interpretations of the meaning of romance and of the motives giving rise to its reading.”[^1] Her big question is *why*: Why are romance novels so popular? Why are they so appealing to this demographic? Why are some types of romance preferred over others? These questions shouldn’t be unfamiliar for those working in fan studies.

Radway’s text works to legitimate the act of romance reading in the way that Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* tries to legitimate fan writing. From questionnaires and discussions about the reading habits of a group of Midwestern women (called the Smithton women), Radway begins to reframe the romance novel and how it acts on its readers. Romance novels are often derided for reinforcing the standards of patriarchy by

presenting stories in which female fulfillment is achieved only through marriage and submission to a man. But what Radway discovered is that it wasn’t so much the traditional storylines that drew the women to the books again and again—though the Smithton women did have a strong preference for stories with happy endings—but rather the act of reading itself. This surprised Radway, as she observes: “The early interviews [with the Smithton women] were interesting because they focused so resolutely on the significance of the act of romance reading rather than on the meaning of the romance.”

The act of romance reading involved the Smithton women in the act of world construction as they negotiated the space between the fantasy world of the book and their real lives. Radway notes that the readers approach the language of the romance as simple signification; the words take on the meanings (and only the meanings) that the reader gives them. As she explains:

> What the women really do when they read is to link or associate linguistic signifiers with meanings they understand or take to be their necessary significations. They rely on standard cultural codes correlating signifiers and signifieds that they accept as definitive. It has simply never occurred to them that those codes might be historically or culturally relative.

For example, the descriptors common to romances—‘handsome,’ ‘spirited,’ ‘defiant’—often mean only one thing to the woman reading them. “Thus the romantic heroine becomes their version of an ‘independent’ and ‘intelligent’ woman,” a character into whose position the reader can more easily slip. Through this process the reader “adopts the text’s language as her own” and enters into a fantasy that, while still recognized as

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141 Ibid., 190.

142 Ibid.
fantasy, is constructed in the same way as the reader’s world. By reading, the woman is therefore able to compare the two realms—the romance and the reality—on an equal plane. “The women may in fact believe the stories are only fantasies on one level at the very same time that they take other aspects of them to be real and therefore apply information learned about the fictional world to the events and occurrences of theirs.”

As Radway elaborates, “The activities of reading and world construction, then, carry meaning for the reader [. . .] in the sense that they repeat and reinforce or alter and criticize the nature of the world as the reader knows it.”

In this way, the processes of reading romance and writing fanfiction are similar, both engaging in a kind of world construction that puts them in charge of the narrative. The readers transform the heroine into a Mary Sue-esque figure, a placeholder for themselves in the text, in the same way that fan authors do. The difference comes in part because of the performative potential of writing fanfiction—the way in which the writer can not only identify with the Mary Sue, but can also manipulate Mary Sue in ways that allow her (the author) to play with her personal identity. The romance reader must rely on what the publishing industry produces for her, and as Radway notes, “the shift to professional production has reduced self-storytelling substantially, [and] there is no sure way to know whether the narratives consumed by an anonymous public are in any way congruent with those they would have created or themselves and their peers had they not

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143 Ibid.
144 Ibid., 187.
145 Ibid.
been able to buy them.”\textsuperscript{146} Free from the confines of the publishing industry, fanfiction writers are able to dictate the narratives they want, and shape their texts in the way that most benefits them.

In this way, they are using the familiar platform of romance novels to create a personalized world for themselves through fanfiction. They have internalized the conventions of both worlds—of genre fiction and fanfiction—and therefore have the ability to combine the two. There is an attraction to the romance genre, but there is also something lacking, a space that exists between the reader and the heroine with which she relates. The experience of writing fanfiction closes the gap.

The differences in the ‘staging’ practices of romance reading and fanfiction writing also separate the two experiences. When a fan writer creates and posts a fanfiction, she does so with the awareness that she has an audience, that the audience expects certain things from her ‘performance,’ and that she expects the audience to provide a coherent critique at the end of the reading. Fanfiction is staged in a ‘live’ community, and this public staging allows the writer to embrace the performative aspect of the Mary Sue. The romance reader, on the other hand, is “mediated by the distances that characterize mass production and the capitalist organization of storytelling,” isolated from her peers and unable to “share the experience of imaginative opposition.”\textsuperscript{147} The act of world construction occurs only in her head, in relation to the book, and as such it lacks the performative engagement afforded by fanfiction.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 212.
Though this chapter focuses specifically on the *Twilight* fandom, I will pull an example from the *Harry Potter* universe to show this theory’s wider application. “Ashley Cherrywood” by DraculasSpawn is a completed *Harry Potter* Mary Sue fic that mimics the trajectory of the romance genre, specifically the ‘boy-hating tomboy transforms into beautiful, happily married woman’ trope. Because DraculasSpawn wrote sixteen chapters of the story with only one review, it can be reasonably intuited that she is writing for her own pleasure, rather than from encouragement or the obligation to update. In “Ashley Cherrywood,” the heroine—Ashley Cherrywood—is a fifteen-year-old tomboy who hates “everyone treating [her] like a fragile doll and [is] always trying to prove [she is] strong and tough and not as innocent as [she] look[s].” Shockingly, she is transferred from Gryffindor (Harry Potter’s dorm) to the notoriously evil Slytherin. There, she befriends Draco Malfoy, who is alternately kind and mean to her. Two years later, Draco realizes his love for Ashley and tells her, but she forces him to court her in order to prove his love:

First [Draco] flirted with you which didn’t really count, second he would spend loads of time with you which you really enjoyed cause you got to know him way better, he took you riding on his broom all the time, he defended you against some bullies, he broke their noses (he didn’t get in trouble cause of his father) and he carried your books for you to class everyday.

Ashley acknowledges that Draco’s love is real, and agrees to go to a dance with him.

Everyone is stunned by how beautiful she looks in her gown, and Ashley finds that she

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148 DraculasSpawn has three other Mary Sue fics posted on Fanfiction.net; they haven’t received a single review.


actually *likes* wearing dresses and being “girly.” Draco is so entranced by her beauty that he *must* sleep with her that night. Shortly thereafter, they get married, have two children, and live happily ever after.

With little concern about keeping to canon and using established character personalities, the focus of “Ashley Cherrywood” is very clearly to stage a performance in which the unknown heroine—the author’s stand-in—is the one who gets the guy. It’s more important for the success of this story that the author follows a traditional romance plot and gets the desired ending than it is for her to get reviews or get ‘more from’ the *Harry Potter* universe. But DraculasSpawn has gone beyond the level of romance reading, even if her story has not, by publishing her story online and engaging in the creation of a Mary Sue that allows her to slip actively into the text.

In the *Twilight* universe, fan authors have gone beyond this brand of Mary Sueing. Many are actively rethinking and making the Mary Sue genre an integral part of their fandom, using a character from the original source text as the template for their Mary Sue, rather than adding an original—and more obviously OOC—character.

### 2.4 *Twilight* and the New Mary Sue

The *Twilight* saga by Stephenie Meyer is a book series about the desperate love between the centuries-old vampire, Edward, and the young human girl, Bella, and all the obstacles that get in their way. But despite the supernatural tone, it is, at its heart, very much a “throwback” in comparison to many contemporary romances. It is touted as a ‘romance lite,’ a return to the more conservative love story. Orson Scott Card (author of the bestselling *Ender* series) elaborates on the draw of *Twilight* in a blurb for *TIME* magazine:
In an era when much of the romance genre has been given over to soft porn, and dark fantasy is peopled with one-dimensional characters bent on grim violence, many readers have become hungry for pure romantic fantasy—lots of sexual tension, but as decorous as Jane Austen. [. . .] Who’d have thought it? Today Mr. Darcy is a vampire.\footnote{Orson Scott Card, “The 2008 Time 100: Stephenie Meyer,” available online at: http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1733748_1733752_1736282,00.html.}

If the romance novels read by the Smithton women were accused of supporting patriarchal stereotypes and social norms, \textit{Twilight} can be read as an even more diehard supporter. Unlike most mass-market romance novels, \textit{Twilight} is an advocate of abstinence. Meyer is an avowed Mormon, and according to Caitlin Flanagan in “What Girls Want: A Series of Vampire Novels Illuminates the Complexities of Female Adolescent Desire,” “the attitude toward female sexuality—and toward the role of marriage and childbearing—expressed in these novels is entirely consistent with the teachings of [the Mormon] church.”\footnote{Caitlin Flanagan, “What Girls Want: A Series of Vampire Novels Illuminates the Complexities of Female Adolescent Desire,” \textit{The Atlantic Monthly}, Dec. 2008, 117.} Like the Victorian novels in which vampirism represented the dangers of lust, \textit{Twilight} is about keeping the inner-monster at bay.

Edward is constantly tempted to ravage Bella, to drink her blood and change her into a vampire, but he fears for the fate of her soul if he does. As Flanagan puts it:

\begin{quote}
The Twilight series is not based on a true story, of course, but within it is \textit{the} true story, the original one. \textit{Twilight} centers on a boy who loves a girl so much that he refuses to defile her, and on a girl who loves him so dearly that she is desperate for him to do just that, even if the wages of the act are expulsion from her family and from everything she has ever known.\footnote{Ibid., 111–112.}
\end{quote}

In terms of reader-fantasy, Edward and Bella hit all the right notes. Bella is a plain but pretty girl, an irredeemable klutz who is in constant need of someone to catch
her when she falls, and a danger magnet often in need of saving. She lives with her father, and the reader is granted many opportunities to witness Bella being wonderfully domestic as she cooks dinner, washes the dishes, and does the laundry. Edward, on the other hand, is a most gorgeous creature; Bella compares him to a Greek god. As a vampire, he is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and yes, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. He composes music for Bella, watches her sleep every night, and constantly comments on her fragility—frequently picking her up and carrying her in his arms. They *are* the ultimate fantasy couple, the perfect knight in shining armor and his delicate damsel in distress. Of Mary Sues, Paula Smith observes, “if [. . .] characters start worrying endlessly about her, or go all gooey because she’s just so darn cute or smart . . . the girl’s a Mary Sue.” That is, in fact, a fairly accurate description of Bella’s role in the book series—so much so that in meta discussions about Mary Sue, it is not uncommon to use Bella as an example of the stereotypical Mary Sue. Fanfiction.net user Lozrii spells out the argument for Bella-as-Mary-Sue in a forum topic titled “Mary-sue curiosity”:

1) [Bella] has no likable qualities no talent no nothing yet every guy loves her for no reason. 2) She is very popular for no reason at all which in no way reflects what Meyer wishes her high school years were like at all. *voice oozes sarcasm* 3) She is what I like to call a self insert. Though generally found in the worst fanfiction self inserts are characters that are basically the person making them selves a character in their own story so that they may live out their fantasies. Self inserts are usually found in but not limited to *Harry Potter* fanfiction, *Eragon* fanfiction, *Naruto* fanfiction, and other popular series or books. In this rare case Meyer has made her own world for the fantasy self insert. 4) Her clumsiness is another form of Mary Sueing known as a Moe weakness. It is so far to the extremes that it is no longer a weakness but something used to make the character look cute and innocent. Though generally found in anime or cartoon shows it can also be found in books. Bella is a prime example of this.

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154 Pat Pflieger, “Too Good to Be True: 150 Years of Mary Sue
And that, I’m afraid, is why Bella is a Mary-Sue.¹⁵⁵

Because the heroine is herself a Mary Sue—and because of the particularly young (read: inexperienced) demographic that came out in droves for the book and movie release—the Mary Sue genre is alive and well in the Twilight fandom. The most popular premise is for an incredibly gifted, ravishingly beautiful female vampire to suddenly appear and join Edward and Bella’s coven. She is mysterious, has some hidden cache of inner-pain, but ultimately proves her worth in battle. This is the traditional type of Mary Sueing, with the potential for performative play but not always the realization.

Twilight has also been accused of being bad fanfiction, especially the final book of the series, Breaking Dawn, released in summer 2008. In the following dialogue, fan authors Roo and Marcy from the popular site Twilighted.net discuss the “crackfic,” or intentionally outrageous, story that they began co-writing before the release of Breaking Dawn called “Pregnant Vampire Bella Joins the Army.” After Breaking Dawn’s release, however, the two could not continue writing the story: Breaking Dawn was so absurd, and yet took itself so seriously, that Marcy and Roo’s story could no longer be read as a parody:

Roo: We thought that we had a hilarious joke going on.
Marcy: The worst plot idea imaginable.
Roo: “Pregnant vampire Bella joins the army.”
Marcy: Stephenie Meyer outdid us, crackfic wise.
Roo: She gave us “Pregnant human Bella gets a half-vamp mutant torn from her womb as Edward chews through her placenta before turning into a vampire and defeating the army.”
Marcy: That makes our story look pretty tame and believable.
[. . .]

Roo: The staff at “Twilighted” [the Web site on which Marcy and Roo published their story] said that if someone had submitted *Breaking Dawn* as a fanfic that they would have put it in the “Alternative Universe” or “Crackfic” sections.

Marcy: Probably “Crackfic.”

Roo: So anyways . . . there’s not really a point in continuing this story any more now is there?

Marcy: Probably not. We’ve been outcracked.  

Because crackfics are intentionally ridiculous, often written as parodies of bad fanfiction, to call Meyer’s fourth and very straight-faced entry into the *Twilight* canon a “crackfic” is a rather sharp insult. Altogether, there are many things about *Twilight* that made the more experienced fan community unhappy, so, as fans are wont to do, they began approaching the book in a new way. As noted, Mary Sue is a notably prevalent genre in *Twilight*, but some fan writers have found a way to make the Mary Sue genre more productive, to take what is ostensibly Meyer’s Mary Sue fic and use it as a stage, a set piece that can be rearranged and manipulated. They do this through what are called All Human, or AH, fics.

AH takes the supernatural element out of *Twilight*, leaving just the characters—the stock characters that play into traditional stereotypes—without the obstacles vampirism poses. There is also, unlike the book series, quite a lot of explicit sex in the majority of these stories, thusly labeled as “lemons.” Such stories are phenomenally popular for a fandom based on a novel that advocates abstinence and relies on the supernatural: The top *Twilight* fanfiction site with an editorial and submission process, Twilighted.net, houses 1,581 stories, 499 of which are AH. An example of an actual, and

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157 A fandom term that originated in anime, supposedly because of a particularly sexual story called “Cream Lemon,” written in 1984.
very typical, AH summary is the following from “Save You,” by socact: “Edward is a brilliant, troubled doctor who uses medicine to escape his past, until he meets a beautiful patient whose mysterious, debilitating disease challenges everything he knows about life and death. Can he save her? Can she save him?” It all sounds uncannily like the Harlequins of Radway’s study—and, appropriately, Twilighted.net has a sidebar of featured romance novelists on their home page, updated frequently.

Limona’s AH work-in-progress “Hiding in Plain Sight” is one of the ten most reviewed stories on Twilighted.net, and is a prime example of a fan author combining the tenets of romance, Mary Sue, and fanfiction to construct a world in which she can play. According to her Twilighted profile, limona is “Mom of one toddler. Wife. CPA. Writer. Reader. All in roughly that order.” Though not the typical demographic for the Twilight series, she does fall into the romance novel target audience. Her writing is of a much higher quality than most within the Twilight fandom—“Hiding in Plain Sight” could very easily pass as a mass-market romance—so her story is not one that would be immediately classified as “Mary Sue” in an online community that still uses it as a form as insult. Limona’s Bella is, however, very much a Mary Sue, through whom the author can play out personal fantasies while, to refer back to the Chander and Sunder, empowering a character that plays into many popular stereotypes.


The main plot of “Hiding” is as such: Marie is a woman who was recruited out of college to work for shadowy, international, mob-type organization named Volterra—though she thought they were a legitimate company at the time. As years passed, she realizes the true nature of Volterra, and, as the daughter of a cop killed in the line of duty, decides that justice has to be served and agrees to testify against Volterra. Volterra, however, wants her dead, and her witness protection agent Emmett is having a hard time keeping her safe. After trying several different placements, Emmett finally realizes that Marie—now using the name Bella—will be safest in his wealthy (and incredibly handsome) brother Edward’s home, which, because of Edward’s past stalker issues, is decked out in maximum security. Edward agrees to let Bella pose as his fiancée, and, for the safety of their family, only he and Emmett will know her true identity. After a requisite makeover courtesy of Edward’s fashion-crazy sister Alice, the shy but gorgeous Bella is dragged to all of Edward’s fancy business events, and must navigate this newfound world of the rich. Edward and Bella have a growing attraction, but Emmett has forbidden Edward to get involved with the “innocent” girl, and Bella is turned off by Edward’s violent mood swings.

The crucial moment in the story is Bella’s decision to give up her virginity. Realizing that she may not survive the Volterra trial, she draws up a sort of ‘bucket list’ with the help of the young gardener Jake. She had been saving herself for marriage, but she comes up with a rather twisted stream of logic that would give her back some sort of agency in her life, if only she were to lose her virginity:

If I lived through this whole trial experience and somehow did manage to find my Prince Charming, I might regret not having saved myself for marriage, but at least I’d be alive to regret it. And in some twisted kind of way, the logic worked out.
With my luck, I would live to regret it. And I would much rather live to regret something like sex with Jake than die because the Volturi killed me.161 Bella is caught before she can have sex with Jake, at which point Edward offers to be the one to take her virginity:

“You’re truly committed to this ridiculous idea that if you do something you would live to regret, it will tip the scales so that you’ll actually live to regret it?”

I looked away, unable to say that I agreed aloud, but unable to deny it. I knew it was irrational, but I was scared. And if doing something stupid would keep me from dying, I was all for it. And if I did die, well, I hadn’t wanted to die a virgin anyway. Lost in my thoughts as I was, Edward’s next words caught me completely off guard.

“If I offer to have sex with you, will you promise to stay away from [Jake]?”

[ . . .]

“What makes you think I would want to sleep with you?”

His green flashed again in the dim light, but this time it wasn’t anger. “Let’s just say that since you’ve waited this long, I don’t want you to throw away your first time on some over-eager kid.”162 Bella does, in fact, take Edward up on his offer, and he delivers a romantic evening—candlelight dinner and all—topped with a very pleasurable, attentive bout of lovemaking. Bella couldn’t have asked for more: It is the fantasy first-time

This is not your typical ‘empowerment’ narrative. Superficially, limona appears to be buying into stereotype, but she is actually rewriting the source text of Twilight into a more progressive narrative forwarded by Bella’s agency, not Edward’s. In Meyer’s Twilight, Edward and Bella can do no more than kiss, for fear that Edward will lose


control and kill Bella with his vampire strength. But by the fourth book, *Breaking Dawn*, the couple has brokered a deal: Bella wants to become a vampire, but first she wants to have sex as a human; and Edward will only agree to both on the condition that they get married first. The patriarchy is still in place; the sex must be sanctified by marriage. Bella is even punished for her desire to have sex while still human by conceiving a half-vampire child that almost kills her—and yet she still follows a conservative morality by refusing to have it ‘taken care of.’ As Flanagan observes:

> In the course of the four books, Bella will be repeatedly tempted—to have sex outside of marriage, to have an abortion as a young married woman, to abandon the responsibilities of a good and faithful mother—and each time, she makes the ‘right’ decision.  

Limona’s Bella is not wrangled into marriage in order to have sex; she makes the conscious decision to give up her virginity, and is not wracked with guilt and tragic consequences afterward. Limona also alternates writing in Bella’s and Edward’s point-of-view—while, until the fourth book, Meyer remains attached to Bella—so the reader gets to see the respect and desire Edward has for Bella, as opposed to just Bella’s reasoning and insecurity. If there were any doubts that he was taking advantage of her situation, these sections dispel them.

In “Hiding in Plain Sight,” limona has what would otherwise be considered a typical romance story, but the medium of fanfiction transforms it into a double-coded text. In engaging Bella as a Mary Sue, limona gets to play out her more traditional fantasies while rewriting the dissatisfying presentation of Bella in the original series. And in doing so, limona is shaping her own identity as she uses her Bella to interrogate questions of morality and sexuality and establish her own position on the issues.

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Despite its AH status, “Hiding in Plain Sight” manages to stay very close to canon character personalities. In “Just One of the Guys,” however, sorceressc irce takes more liberty with her Bella, making her an even more obvious stand-in for the author. Sorceressc irce’s Bella is a card-carrying, World of Warcraft-obsessed, hoodie-and-Chuck-wearing guy’s girl. She and Jasper (one of Edward’s covenmates in the series) are best friends who live together; they are strictly platonic, and Bella has major issues with men because of a horrible-yet-sofar-undisclosed past experience. So when Jasper and his new girlfriend Alice (a canon-couple) convince her to go on a sort-of double date with them and Alice’s gorgeous brother Edward, she is skeptical. They assure her that Edward, like Bella herself, is not looking to date anyone, so she doesn’t have to worry about him doing anything that would make her uncomfortable. Of course, as these stories go, once Bella and Edward set eyes on each other, they’re head-over-heels. He’s the protector who wants to save Bella from the pain of her past; she’s the hurt little girl who wants to hide her vulnerability. He quotes John Donne for her, she plays Alice in Chains for him, and they’re both smitten—though each assumes that the other isn’t interested.

Regardless, Bella invites Edward over for a marathon of Mystery Science Theater 3000 (MST3K), because she quotes it constantly and is horrified that he’s never seen it. She charms him with her quirky interests: “I [Edward] loved that she was into so many things—Donne, World of Warcraft, MST3K, the Renaissance, Neil Gaiman, comics . . . and I’d only started getting to know her.”164 And when he actually sees her playing World of Warcraft, his passion reaches a higher level:

“Remember we’re starting at Kael’thas tonight, so leads, make sure your people know their roles. Tanks have their assignments[,” Bella said.] Something about her voice, so strong and sure and in control, went straight to my crotch, and I felt myself harden slightly.\(^{165}\)

Though sorceresscirce does not have a user profile on Twilighted.net, based on her level of comfort with writing about *World of Warcraft* and *MST3K*, readers can conclude that these are her own personal interests, and she has made Bella a reflection of herself. She has intentionally gone off-canon in order to insert herself—and girls like her—into her favorite media texts. This kind of self-insertion can be read as a tactic to combat cultural stereotypes—Bella is gorgeous, gets the man, and plays *World of Warcraft*—or the author’s need to work out or justify that part of her identity. “Just One of the Guys” presents a counternarrative to popular imaginings of the ‘nerd girl’ and her (non)social life.

AH writers are taking a book already accused of being a Mary Sue romance novel and turning into an even more stereotypical romance novel—why? By doing this, they pick out the most empowering parts of the Mary Sue and the romance genres and combine them. Like Radway’s romance readers, the familiar language of the romance novel gives writers the freedom and security to construct their own world through the created text; and like the oft-criticized Mary Sue fan authors, they also open a space in this constructed world for *themselves*, to act on their world not only as a writer, but as a character. They engage in the performativity inherent in fanfiction, but which is rarely taken advantage of because the writer is confined to a space outside the text. In an AH fic, the writer is there in Bella, the Mary Sue, the romance heroine, but the writer is also

outside, directing the performance. By tapping into the performative aspect of fanfiction, the AH fan author can use her text as a means through which to explore questions of identity, of stereotype, of sexuality in a way more intimate than that of other fanfiction genres.

The performing of identities in the AH Twilight fanfiction is not unlike the exploration of female identity through slash fic Bacon-Smith observes in Enterprising Women. However, Bacon-Smith’s emphasis is on the risk involved, the women’s need for a safe space in which to feel out their place in society without fear of reprimand. It was closer to the idea of the women playing with toys, confining any ‘risky’ identity questioning to the fan text. AH writers, however, dive into the fanfiction; they are not dressing up Barbie, but rather costuming themselves.

AH is a break with traditional fandom. It embraces Mary Sue and relishes sappy romance. It is unapologetic for an approach normally only excused in new writers. And it signals the flourishing of fanfiction’s new moment—its ‘breaking dawn,’ if you will. AH is only one example of what is happening in fandoms across the Internet; though it is not widely applicable as a specific model, the basic performative theory may hold true. As fan writers get even more intimate with their media texts, and as they want more from the artistic practice of fanfiction, the need to find new ways of releasing fanfiction’s performative potential will only grow. Each fandom will work through this process in a different way, each revealing more about the possibilities that can be mined from fanfiction as a medium. In Twilight, that tactic is the AH fic; other emerging fandoms might take a different route. The new Star Trek movie, for example, will, without a doubt, draw newcomers into the fandom. These newcomers will bring with them the
standards of other fandoms, and possibly a *tabula rasa* in terms of *Star Trek* canon. Perhaps the sexy young cast of the new film and the influence of fandoms like *Twilight* will push the *Star Trek* fandom away from slash dominance and balance Kirk/Spock with hetero- or multi-sexual relationships. Or perhaps the fandom will draw even farther away from a textual base and tap into the performative potential of YouTube creations.

And as these fan writers find new ways into the text through old doors, it is the responsibility of academics to keep up. Fans are not poachers anymore, sneaking into Hollywood backlots to filch off pieces of *Star Trek* when no one’s looking. Though Jenkins’ *Poachers* is not altogether empty of value, it is no longer a sufficient theoretical imagining for the present and future states of fandom. Fanfiction is fast becoming one of the most dominant and easily accessible forms of artistic and cultural expression, and theory that thinks only of fans as borrowers and bricoleurs will not keep up with the medium. It is officially open season on the media text, and fanfiction writers are eager to catch their fair share; scholars need to be prepared to follow them in the hunt.
APPENDIX A:

HISTORY OF FANFICTION

- **1421:** John Lydgate, one of the most famous authors of the fifteenth century, writes “The Siege of Thebes,” a continuation of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*.

- **1710:** Considered by many to be the first copyright law, the Statue of Anne was the short title for “an Act for the Encouragement of Learning, by vesting the Copies of Printed Books in the Authors or purchasers of such Copies, during the Times therein mentioned.” It was named after Queen Anne of Britain, during whose reign it was enacted.

- **1790:** First copyright law is put on the books in the United States. It was signed by George Washington on May 31.

- **1869–1930:** Fans begin to rewrite, parody, revise, and draft alternate endings to the works of Lewis Carroll. Some of his more famous “fans” include authors Christina Rossetti, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and E. Nesbit.

- **1920–1930:** Jane Austen fan fiction gains popularity.

- **1930:** The Sherlock Holmes Literary Society is founded to promote the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

- **1967:** *Spockanalia* is the first Star Trek fanzine. The original Star Trek series would be canceled in 1969.

- **1972:** First Star Trek convention in New York.
• **1973**: The term “Mary Sue” is coined by fan author Paula Smith in her parody “A Trekkie’s Tale.”

• **1975**: *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* stories distributed by hand as “fannish” community is isolated and unorganized.

• **1976**: *Star Trek: The New Voyages*, the first commercial compilation of fan fiction that had appeared in the *Star Trek* fanzines, is published by Bantam Books.

• **1980**: Usenet, one of the first public, net-based gathering places for fans to post their writing and discuss fan fiction, is founded.

• **1992**: The World Wide Web is “created.”

• **1998**: FanFiction.net goes online

• **1999**: LiveJournal, a popular blogging software, is founded.

• **1999**: “Harry Potter and the Man of Unknown” by “Gypsy” becomes the first Harry Potter fan fiction posted to FanFiction.net.

• **2005**: Crackdown by the Motion Picture Association of America for copyright infringement.

**Source:**

APPENDIX B:
GLOSSARY OF FANFICTION TERMS

**Acid pairing**: These pairings take two (possibly more) characters that, under normal logic, would never be romantically involved. Generally done in humor and parody fan fiction.

**All Human (AH)**: Fics within the *Twilight* fandom that turn all the supernatural characters into humans.

**Alternate Universe (AU)**: Story which at some point deliberately departs from the canon on which it is based.

**Beta-reader**: Someone who reads and comments on stories before the author posts them to a wider public.

**Big Name Fan (BNF)**: A fan whose writing has generated a large following of fans in its own right.
**Canon:** The ‘official’ source material upon which fanfiction can be based. A canon is **open** if the source text is still being expanded, and **closed** if there will be nothing new added to the source text by its originators.

**Character rape:** Fiction in which the canon characters are made substantially different from their originals, doing things that seem out of character for them.

**Crackfic:** A deliberately outrageous story, often written for humorous or parodic purposes.

**Crossover:** When characters from one story exist in (or are transported to) another pre-existing story’s world, or more commonly, when characters from two or more stories interact.

**Deathfic:** Story in which a major character dies.

**Drabble:** Story of exactly 100 words, named for Margaret Drabble.

**Fandom:** A collective term used to describe all fans and their activities. Also used to describe individual groups of fans dedicated to one media text—e.g., the *Twilight* fandom.
**Fanon:** Factors or situations, especially those that are used frequently in fanfiction so as to become seen by many as an extended part of the canon.

**Fen:** Frequently, fandom’s preferred plural of the word “fan.”

**Fic:** A piece of fanfiction writing.

**Fluff:** A light story that usually seeks to make a tender emotional impact rather than put forward a plot.

**Gen:** Story suitable for a general audience—i.e. no sex or no explicit sex. Most slash, regardless of its inclusion of sex, is not considered gen.

**Hurt/Comfort (H/C):** Genre in which one character is given a hard time physically, emotionally, or both before being consoled/rehabilitated by another.

**K/S:** Kirk/Spock, the original slash pairing.

**Mary Sue:** The general name for any new characters (usually female) who is an idealized version of the writer: she’s beautiful, has amazing skills/powers, gets into a love affair with an existing character, or (usually) all of the above. The male version of Mary Sue goes by many names, like **Marty Stu,** but is a rare find.
**Meta-text:** The ‘ideal’ version of a media text constructed by combining the original source material with the critical commentary and fanfiction developed by the fan community.

**Missing scene:** Story that focuses on something which was not shown in canon but could or must have happened. If the missing scene takes place immediately after the end of a television episode, it is referred to as an **episode tag**.

**Movieverse:** Fanfiction based on movies of original works of fiction; as opposed to **bookverse**.

**Mpreg:** Story (commonly a slash fic) in which a man gets pregnant.

**Mundanes:** Non-fans, people outside fan culture.

**Original Character (OC):** Character not in the original canon.

**Plot bunnies:** Fanfiction ideas demanding to be written. Read: “My plot bunnies keep multiplying! I have too many to deal with! Does someone want to adopt one of my bunnies?”

**Profic:** Fiction written for money.
Plot? What Plot (PWP): Story in which character interaction, not plot, is the point, often a sex scene with no vestige of plot as an excuse.

Real Person Fiction (RPF): Fiction written about real people such as actors, politicians, athletes, and musicians.

Slash: Story supposing a homoerotic or homosexual relationship between two characters that was not present or not spelt out in canon.

Glossary compiled from the following texts:


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