

Slashing the Romance Narrative

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We, the women of the RSM, in an effort to form a really loose confederation of passionately uncommitted rational anarchists, accept no rules and no limits. We have no boundaries. We do not explain ourselves. We do not accept American Express . . . We reserve the right to slash anyone, anywhere, at anytime.

Suze

These lines are from the Manifesto of the Renegade Slash Militia (RSM), a group of slash writers and readers, and can be found on their Web page along with their fiction recommendations, a list of their members, and various sassy essays on fandom, listserv politics, and the writing process. Although not representative of slash Web pages, as the Militia includes no actual stories, this quotation does capture the playful transgression at the heart of the slash fan fiction community. The term slash fan fiction refers to stories, written by amateur authors (who are almost solely heterosexual women), that involve placing two television or film characters of the same gender, usually male, into noncanonical romantic relationships with each other. Although part of a long history of fan activities, slash offers its own particular challenge to normative constructions of gender and romance, as it allows women to construct narratives that subvert patriarchy by reappropriating those prototypical hero characters who usually reproduce women's position of social disempowerment. Whether these narratives actually can change the material conditions of women's lives, the fact remains that groups like the RSM are writing out a story that is radically different from standard romance traditions, and they are having a wonderful time in the process.

Slash fan fiction and fan writing originated in science fiction fandom (from "fan" and "kingdom": the group of people involved in the fan activities surrounding a particular film, television series, or book and the texts that they produce) around the works of Isaac Asimov and Jules Verne (Verba 1). Fan writing or fan fiction is the practice of using characters from a professionally published text (a source product) in an original story. Fan fiction is written by amateur authors and was originally published only in fanzines (or zines, fan magazines) that were compilations of fan fiction, poems, articles, and fan art whose price was set only high enough to recoup printing costs. In the zine publishing system, an author submits his or her story to a zine editor, and that story will be published only if it follows the theme of the zine, meets the structural standards of the editor, and follows the aesthetic tradition that has been established by previously published zine stories (Bacon-Smith 7-44).

During this zine publishing period, slash emerged from *Star Trek* fan fiction, although there is some speculation as to whether there may have been unpublished *The Wild Wild West* slash fan fiction even before *Star Trek* slash developed (Bright, Harmon, and Knight Smeg). Within *Star Trek* fan fiction, a tradition had been established wherein authors explored the deep friendship between Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock. These stories usually were labeled "hurt/comfort" because they involved one of the characters being physically or emotionally wounded and then receiving comfort from the other. These non-sexual friendship-based narratives are now called "smarm" to distinguish them from slash. Slash came about when authors began to use the hurt/

comfort narrative to make Kirk and Spock's relationship sexual. The term slash, therefore, comes from the "/" mark placed between the words Kirk and Spock (Kirk/Spock) at the beginning of a story to tell readers that it contains a sexual and romantic relationship between the two characters. As time went on, slash spread to other fandoms like *Starsky and Hutch*, *Blake's 7*, and *The Professionals* (Jenkins 288-306). "Slash" no longer referred only to Kirk/Spock, but to the more general "m/m" or "male/male" designation that could be used in any fandom.

Until the early 1990s, slash remained tucked away, a subculture within a subculture of *Star Trek* and a selected few other fandoms, but as personal Web pages and personal computers became increasingly accessible and commonplace, fan writing and slash fan fiction moved onto the Internet. By the mid-1990s, all types of fan writing had become, primarily but not exclusively, Internet phenomena. This move from hard-copy print publishing to Internet publishing had a profound effect on fan fiction and fan communities. First, it opened up publishing to a much larger number of writers. Although zines had always been nonprofit, they still could not be published in excess of demand, and demand was low because few people even knew of slash, let alone requested it. On the Internet, an author was able to publish as much material as she desired either by creating her own Web page or by submitting her work to an Internet fan fiction archive. The number of readers increased as well. It was suddenly possible for people to stumble upon fan writing and slash fan fiction from the privacy of their homes. Accessibility, combined with much lower cost (the cost of an Internet connection versus the cost of printing and binding), made fan fiction reading a much more desirable activity for a much wider audience than it had been in previous years.

In addition, the number of fandoms and pairings represented in fan fiction in general, but especially in slash, increased dramatically. Although a few other slash pairings, *Starsky/Hutch* most prolifically, did emerge from the time of slash's inception until its rebirth over the

Internet, Kirk/Spock slash from *Star Trek* remained heavily dominant as the most common pairing, with a number of less common pairings in short supply. Once on the Internet, slash pairings sprang up in almost every science fiction, fantasy, or police drama imaginable. Currently slash pairings include, but are not limited to, Picard/Q from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Blair Sandburg/Jim Ellison from *The Sentinel*, Benton Fraser/Ray Vecchio and Benton Fraser/Ray Kowalski from *Due South*, Kim/Paris from *Star Trek: Voyager*, Duncan MacLeod/Methos and Methos/Richie from *Highlander: The Series*, Skinner/Mulder and Krycek/Mulder from *The X-Files*, Hercules/Iolaus and Ares/Joxer from *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, Xena/Gabrielle from *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Angel/Xander from *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, Obi-Wan Kenobi/Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi/Darth Maul from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, Jack O'Neill/Daniel Jackson from *Stargate SG-1*, Logan/Scott Summers and Charles Xavier/Eric Lensher from *The X-Men*, Josh Lyman/Sam Seaborn from *The West Wing*, Maximus/Commodus from *Gladiator*, Tyr Anasazi/Dylan Hunt from *Andromeda*, and Clark Kent/Lex Luther from *Smallville*.

Given the huge amount of expansion and production that took place when access to fan fiction increased and cost decreased as publishing shifted to the Internet, slash fan fiction seems to be fulfilling a desire that is either extremely extensive or cannot be fulfilled elsewhere. What parts of our society leave us empty? Which individuals are particularly satisfied by slash fan fiction? Why are fan narratives written at all?

In an essay entitled "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin writes that there is nothing in the present age that "benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information" (89). We are overwhelmed by news, which constitutes the absolute interpretation of events, leaving no room for retelling or multiple accounts. The consensus press provides the public with one definitive version of an occurrence that assumes the position of truth, leaving little space for personal

perspectives, extrapolation, and recapitulation. In this model, the supposed objectivity represented by news replaces the former importance of individual reports of personal experiences. This leaves individuals dependent upon the mass media as their primary source of “truth,” and personal narratives, oral traditions, and folk music traditions are trivialized. As written by Benjamin, people lose the ability to communicate their own experiences, although it could be added that these experiences are still communicated, but are relegated to a position of relative frivolity (83). In short, Benjamin argues that in the present era, we are starved for personal storytelling, mysterious events that have not been interpreted, and magical acts that cannot be explained.

Given this set of circumstances within the realm of actual occurrences, it may be argued that the same attitudes are also present in our interactions with the commodified “storytelling” provided by movies, television, and books. These professionally published entertainment products generally inspire two reactions: formal appreciation and superficial enjoyment. A particular set of entertainment products is selected by the cultural elite—namely academics, professionals, and reviewers—as “art objects,” a status that raises them above those entertainment products that remain simple commodities intended for the vulgar pleasures of the masses. These “art objects” receive “formal appreciation,” but they may be studied and analyzed only by those professionals who have an adequate educational background, and it is generally understood that their analyses and commentaries will be completely inaccessible to the average individual who lacks a similar educational background (Jenson 9-29).

The second reaction, superficial enjoyment, is the prescribed, default viewing style associated with entertainment products that do not receive the special “art object” status. These products lack the formal or structural elements that would make them valuable in an academic setting. Instead, they are relegated to serve as amusement and distraction for common people. They are not to be taken seriously, they are not to be adored, and they are not to be critiqued. They are given little

or no cultural importance beyond their ability to hypnotize a crowd. The distinction is clear: the average individual is to passively accept both news information and the narratives provided by entertainment texts. As written by Michel De Certeau, the book, at least, provided a reader with physical margins in which he or she could write his or her own interpretation of the text, but television and film seem to be constructed even more firmly toward a spectator who receives messages but does not interact (31). Furthermore, the act of writing is itself a profession in which only a select group of people are allowed to publish, and these are again chosen by a cultural elite as artists or by publishing corporations as hypnotists whose work will create a profit on the open market. In sum, not only are most individuals not allowed to express their own versions of actual events, but they are also restricted from sharing their dreams, fantasies, and desires.

Fan fiction may be interpreted as a direct response to these problematic circumstances. Henry Jenkins, author of *Textual Poachers*, writes that fan fiction can be understood as a return to early communal storytelling practices. Jenkins cites sagas and epics like the Camelot stories in which tales pass orally from person to person, necessarily encouraging not only continual recapitulation, but also individual interpretation as the story’s usefulness shifts from one region or time to another. The minor changes that each storyteller adds to these tales leave a mark of their authorship on the narrative. These storytelling practices can be understood as interactive, because each individual may insert his or her own experience and perspective, but also as communal, wherein the sum of these minor alterations represents the story of a community in which each member has contributed to the corpus that will be passed on either to the next generation or to another geographical region.

Fan fiction, Jenkins suggests, works in a similar way. Cultural entertainment products reflect the dominant ideology of an era, and taken on their own, they remain the product of an individual interpretation. What occurs in fan rewrites is that these products are not merely accepted, but rather

analyzed with the same amount of care, appreciation, and religiosity that is otherwise only bestowed upon art objects. Fans discuss the narratives and characters provided for them by the mass media, and then alter those hegemonic messages to reflect their own needs, experiences, and desires. Peripheral characters like Uhura of the original *Star Trek* may take center stage to more accurately represent the lives of African-American women, or transgressive characters who are ultimately punished, such as Tasha Yar from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, may escape their eventual demise (Jenkins 152-84). Fan fiction offers individuals lacking the necessary educational background to enter the discussion or production of art objects (and those who are unable to write a narrative that easily enters the realm of mass consumption) the chance to critically interpret and rescript the hypnotic entertainment objects that were meant to be a part of their reproduction as patriarchal, capitalist subjects; they may question the representations around them and offer counter-representations that reflect the material conditions of their own lives.

In addition, those television series and films most often modified by fan fiction authors are those that incorporate the elements that Benjamin particularly cites as absent from modern life, namely unresolved mystery and magic. With some exceptions, these films and television programs generally fall under the fantasy and science fiction genre and are often low-budget productions. Fans are usually drawn to their “source products” (films, television series, and books that are rescripted by fan fiction authors) because they are fascinated by the concept behind the program (immortality, vampires, space travel, karma, aliens, mutations, deities), or taken in by the characters who populate the screen world. It is only as time goes on that they become what John Fiske, author of *Understanding Popular Culture*, would term “excessive readers”—those who place great importance on culturally insignificant texts. At some point, fan writers come to the conclusion that the concept and characters are not being fully exploited by the source product, but unlike many

viewers who accept these deficiencies, fan writers cling to the magic—the program’s potential—and write out what they could have been if the conditions of entertainment production were radically different. Source products drawn upon by fan writers are full of contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities. They present a fascinating idea, but their potential is never realized within the professionally published text. Movies, television programs, and books intended for a wide audience are marketed and constructed to capture the attention of an audience with an increasing attention deficit, but not long enough to lose the interest of those who are easily drawn to change the channel. Within these constraints, it is difficult to imagine that any character could be fully tested, or any concept fully explained. Fan writers fill in gaps, replace hurried narratives, and extrapolate beyond the bounds of the published text.

Within slash fan fiction communities, these activities usually involve filling in the motivations, emotions, and personal histories of the main male characters, or rescripting and replacing those elements of the characters’ emotions and actions that were provided in the source product. Jenkins refers to fan fiction as “repairing the damage” done by the mass media. His comments are directed toward the rewriting of female characters, such as the assistant on *Doctor Who*, who are provided with low responsibility roles within the professionally published narrative. However, his characterization of these fan narratives seems particularly suited toward slash fiction narratives as well. The characters used by slash writers are usually a source product’s protagonists, or “heroes.” These characters reproduce numerous patriarchal norms, including an understanding of masculinity as unfeeling, unmoving, masterful, and impenetrable. This can leave the characters emotionless and inexpressive. Recent characters that fit this model include Maximus from *Gladiator*, Obi-Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, and AD Walter Skinner from *The X-Files*. In order to fill predetermined masculine archetypes, these characters are brutally limited, but they are given new life in fan

rewrites. In a story called “New Scars,” author “Melinda” explains why *Gladiator*’s Maximus is so terribly constrained in the film by filling in a painful event of Maximus’s childhood:

He could feel guilt and shame washing over him in droves, knowing that he had let powerful emotions take control, nearly causing the death of another human being needlessly. He vowed he would never allow these emotions to cloud his judgment again. (Melinda)

Thus the extremely withdrawn character we are presented with in the film no longer represents an image of masculine perfection, but rather becomes a particular individual whose brooding is not a sign of strength, but of fear and fracture. Fan writers “repair the damage” done to these characters at the hand of the writers and producers of the source product by making them into real people with personalities, faults, needs, illogical desires, and weaknesses.

This process is reminiscent of John Fiske’s theorization of ripped blue jeans and wrestling spectatorship practices. He states that entertainment products are designed around a class system in which lower-class spectacles require interaction and upper-class arts demand appreciation. The tradition behind certain spectator practices of the lower classes has always encouraged audience participation and an associated constant display and defense of clothing and gestures. Upper-class entertainment consumption, on the other hand, is incredibly fleeting, as spectatorship is encapsulated in the production of attending and being seen in attendance (Fiske 129-58). In this manner, it is rare, if not unheard of, for someone to bring back a tee-shirt from Paris with the words “Eat at Le Grande Vifour,” or to observe an individual at the opera vocally cheering on the villain during the performance. However, it is commonplace to hear screams of rapture during a rock concert and to see half the female population of a junior high school dressed in exactly the same clothes as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, or whichever teenybopper idol is currently gracing the pop stage.

Fan writing allies itself with this tradition of fan involvement and the carrying of spectacle into everyday life, but it goes further. These examples encapsulate a type of completely worshipful audience. They create a picture of an audience that is entirely taken with the entertainment products provided by corporations for frivolous enjoyment. As disempowered members of society, they seem to have bought wholesale into the ideals of the very system that ensures their subordinated social position, and because of their heavy investment in these popular icons, they face public ridicule (Jenson 9-29). William Shatner, the actor who played the often-slashed *Star Trek* character Captain Kirk, encapsulated society’s general feelings toward these excessive spectatorship practices in his now infamous *Saturday Night Live* line and biography title “Get a Life!” (Jenkins 9-49; Shatner). Being a fan is clearly not the type of life one is supposed to lead. Both the news media and the entertainment industry would have us think that we know exactly what fans are like. They provide us with a very limited interpretation by insisting on infantilizing, pathologizing, or criminalizing fan activities. Fans scare us because they are so unreasonably involved in their source product that they can no longer comprehend that the characters and settings they love are not real, which leads them to live out their lives in a fantasy world, or possibly to kill or kidnap actors or actresses. Alternatively, fandom is an activity shared by the very young or by underdeveloped adults who are sorely lacking in the social skills that would allow them to lead a “normal” life.

Thus fans are presented in the guise of psychotic killers as in *Misery*, as children such as Aguilera or Beatles fans, or as social misfits like the technologically adept but socially clueless *Star Trek* fans in the *Trekkies* documentary (Jenkins 9-49; Jenson 9-29; King; Nygard). Fans lead lives in which trivial, mass produced commodities take on meanings that are usually reserved for religious relics, art objects, or workplace financial achievement, and their representation shows that these deviant behaviors are clearly poor substitutes for the fact that they are inadequate individuals who

cannot manage or prosper in the “real world.” Church leaders, academics, politicians, economists, and William Shatner all stand firm against fans’ devotion to pop ideals. Images of fans give us an extreme against which we can measure our own normativity, and they provide a glaringly gauche example of inappropriate levels of commitment to popular entertainment products. “Get a Life!” implores that we are to love Shakespeare and Puccini quietly, or love nothing at all.

There may be, however, alternative types of fan activities besides wholesale adoration. Fiske continues his analysis by characterizing torn or altered blue jeans as the “excorporation of the commodity into a subordinate subculture” (15). When hippies in the 1960s and “punk” youth groups of the 1980s tore, patched, and slit blue jeans, they did it not to exalt and reproduce those meanings that had already been associated with jeans, but rather to create something new. Excorporation refers to the appropriation of commodities in order to make new, resistant meanings. As jeans represent wholesome America, or the rugged individualism of the American West, their disfigurement and alteration questions those meanings (1-22). Fan writing preys upon characters who reproduce traditional masculinity, traditional class and race hierarchies, and traditional relational scripts and reconfigures them into tales of communal societies, racial equality, and sexual transgression.

This model applies particularly well in slash fiction communities, which are made up almost exclusively of overeducated but underemployed heterosexual women who are oppressed not only by patriarchy but by their employment status (Adder). According to user polls, these women overwhelmingly rate themselves as mostly to totally heterosexual, between the ages of twenty and forty, and in computer related fields or in graduate school (Demona; Sockii). In one user poll, almost ninety percent of respondents had a completed a college degree (Sockii). They are not children, they are not social misfits, and they are not mentally ill. They are most often secretaries, technical consultants, or students who are frustrated by their lack of status in both the social

realm and on the job. Unlike the images of fans propagated by the media, they do not simply love the source products that reproduce their subordinated social position; they are also highly critical of them, and of the implications of the rewrites provided by themselves and by others within the fan community (Adder).

The men captured and rewritten by slashers are changed in very particular ways. As described previously, screen men are often wonderfully suited to this endeavor because they are so poorly filled out within the professionally published narrative, but they are also suited to rescription because they embody many of the things that are wrong with the patriarchal system of traditional romance. According to psychoanalytic film theorists like Laura Mulvey and Steve Neale, the original rhetorical purpose of heroes like Captain Kirk from *Star Trek*, Qui-Gon Jinn from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, Hercules from *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, and Duncan MacLeod from *Highlander: The Series* is to represent an ideal masculine self that male spectators can aspire to be. These characters win the love of an uninteresting, mysterious, or exotic but always helpless heroine by vanquishing the enemy. They are in perpetual control of the narrative, the camera, and the other characters. By remaining dominant, impenetrable, and masterful, they gain the admiration of other men—often represented by the sidekick or “buddy”—and the devotion of women who often fight each other to achieve the honor of becoming their possession. However, even within this narrative, before fan intervention, there are cracks in the hero’s armor.

“Real men” are supposed to be self-sufficient, emotionless, and independent, but one may note the startlingly common presence of the sidekick or “buddy,” a presence so pervasive that some inside and outside of fandom have taken to calling programs and films that fit this pattern “buddy shows.” The “buddy” appears as a foil to the hero’s philosophies and often acts as a partner in police dramas like *Starsky and Hutch*, or as a fellow warrior or soldier as in westerns, the *Star Trek* series, and war films. Women in these narratives come and go in order to reinforce the

male protagonists' heterosexual identities and to propel the plot, but they inevitably depart through a heroic, sacrificial death, or as femme fatales who ruthlessly use and then abandon the protagonist. This leaves the wounded, bitter, and grieving protagonist to be comforted by his "buddy," who is always available, constantly sympathetic, and may be the only person on the planet allowed to see the hero cry. The result is that women are for passion and "buddies" are for compassion. While the heroes spend an inordinate amount of time pursuing and wooing the woman of the week, they share their feelings, dreams, and the bulk of their time with their buddy. The most intense relationships, therefore, are between men, so while we do indeed see traditional heterosexuality being played out in "buddy shows," the source products themselves provide the hooks that fan writers lock onto and exploit in their rewritings.

Slashers use this "buddy show" formula to push the male protagonists' relationship to its perhaps inevitable conclusion by making the characters' close friendship into a romantic relationship. In doing so, they tear down the traditional formula of romance novels and films that negotiate the submission of a heroine to a hero by instead negotiating the complicated power balance between two equally dominant, independent, and masculine characters. This friendship-based love narrative, along with an equality-centered relationship dynamic, is the overwhelming preoccupation of slash narratives. Slashers often exaggerate the extent to which slash characters seem drawn to talk about the power dynamics within their relationship, demonstrated in a series of stories that parodied the characters' tendency to begin philosophical discussions about their relationship during sex. Although this tendency has received playful jabs within the slash community, it is a pattern that has yet to abate. In slash narratives, authors meticulously create an equality relationship dynamic in which characters are completely equal in everything from decision making to love making, and from patterns of dress to household chores to levels of attractiveness and financial security. These pat-

terns are exemplified by the following quotation from "The Only Constant" by "Isabeau," wherein the characters' first sexual interaction is interrupted by Qui-Gon telling his apprentice that rank is not a part of their romantic relationship, an exchange present in a great number of *Star Wars* slash stories:

I pulled away slightly, dizzy from the intensity of feeling. "Master—" I gasped; but he put one finger lightly against my mouth, silencing me.
 "No 'Master'," he said quietly. "Out there," with a nod of his head towards the door, "I am your Master; but in here, I am Qui-Gon. No more, no less." (Isabeau)

Slash stories transform the nature of sexual intercourse that, in heterosexual fiction, is often portrayed as a conquest or a devaluation of the woman who "loses her flower" if she should consent to be "taken."

He could see the absolute trust as Mac gave himself up to him, put himself in Richie's control and something tore open in his soul. No one had ever trusted him like this—shown him their darkest secret, given him the power to hurt them, willingly, even gladly . . . it made this once repugnant act one of love. (saraid)

This quotation from "the healing, too" by saraid exemplifies the way in which sex is used as an expression of trust in slash rather than an act of domination. Instead of the promiscuous, "bad" girl who asks to be penetrated in heterosexual fiction, slash men who ask to be penetrated are characterized as self-aware, confident, and nurturing. Their request is written as the ultimate gift they may offer their partner, and it is a gift that is neither expected nor demanded.

Though these narratives include graphic depictions of sex, they also invert the common structures of pornography. Pornography focuses on sex for the sake of sex, or sex outside of context (Heddy). What may be especially disturbing is pornographic texts' denial of the emotional consequences of sex. Within slash narratives, characters are drawn from films and

television series that provide years of shared history and emotional entanglement. Sex in a slash narrative always occurs within some kind of emotional context, but of particular interest is the fact that sex always has direct and dramatic emotional ramifications. “Keelywolfe” writes about the aftermath of such an encounter in her story, “Though Night Shall Fall”:

And even though later I knew that I should never have touched you, never fouled your skin with the taint of my darkness, this was a moment that I could not regret, ever, no matter the pain it caused me later. I could never regret the moment where I learned to love you again. (Keelywolfe)

It is hard to place this type of introspection within the pornography genre.

One effect of the friendship-based love formula, rather than the more common courtship formula, is that the characters are not forced to compete for their desired partner’s love, which is directly related to the fact that these characters are a far cry from conventional ideas of the “perfect” partner. In *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity*, Mark Simpson argues that male bodybuilders are uniquely positioned to look at each other and compare their bodies both to an ideal body, like that of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and to the bodies of other men around them. Within our culture, gazing at another man’s body is usually coded as homosexual; therefore, this gaze must be used only as a vehicle for improving the bodybuilder’s own body, channeling love inwards toward his own image (narcissism) (21-44). Simpson describes this system—that of gazing at other men’s bodies—as a method of comparison toward the attainment of an ideal body unique to bodybuilders, but it sounds remarkably similar to the life of many women who have gazed upon anorexic supermodels in magazines, and their friends in dressing rooms, as part of a competition toward the thinnest, firmest, body, the rounder bust, and the fullest lips.

Psychologists Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vukovic, Sims, and Ritenbough reported in an article entitled “Body Image and Weight Concerns

Among African American and White Adolescent Females: Differences that Make a Difference” that, especially for white girls, the definition of beauty is one of a culturally approved ideal. In their analysis, an individual’s attainment of beauty was described by respondents as the attainment of perfection, and anything shy of perfection was equated with failure. Parker et al. use this finding to explain differential anorexia rates found in white and African-American populations, but the findings also demonstrate the role of beauty ideals in romantic fiction. As exemplified in films like Disney’s animated *Cinderella*, the woman deserving of love and happiness is the most beautiful woman. As we all know, what is good is what is beautiful (Brehm 65-72). A desired partner, girls are told, can only be attained through the alteration of one’s own body. Squeeze into a smaller personality, tweeze your interests into an acceptable shape and, of course, always remember to smile; smile until it hurts, especially when it hurts (Matlin 205-06, 210). *Cinderella*, Harlequin Romances, fashion magazines, and helpful aunts have assured us that the only way for a woman to gain the regard of a desired partner is to be perfect. If only you’d drop ten pounds, maybe you could find someone who wouldn’t hit you. Only beauty can make the heterosexual woman deserving.

In slash, relationships are structured rather differently. The characters’ attraction to each other is primarily intellectual or spiritual, based upon a long friendship. They are deserving not because of their appearance, but because of their character. Slash characters could not be described as “perfect”—rather the opposite, as authors spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on and developing their flaws. Emma Woodhouse includes the following passage in her story, “The Padawan’s Whore,” which includes some of the common flaws attributed to Qui-Gon’s character in slash:

We returned to our quarters together and Obi-Wan stayed quite close beside me, ready to assist his decrepit Master, I suppose. Well, face it. I was old. At least, too old for a youth of barely twenty. Too old, too big, and

definitely too male. I recognized a self-pity attack coming on, and laughed at it silently. My hair was going gray, my nose had been broken more than once, oh yes, I was altogether a thoroughly pathetic case. (Woodhouse)

As a side note, this passage shows the way in which homosexual desire becomes just another of these “flaws.” Even in stories that deal directly with a supposedly straight desired partner, gender and sexual orientation are not portrayed as particularly salient or determining factors, but rather are cast in the same vein as a crooked nose or an overly impulsive nature. As opposed to the “coming out” story or other romance narratives that are structured around the gay community, slash is not about being gay (or being straight). It is about being in love. Despite anatomically correct sex scenes between characters of the same gender, slash remains gender-neutral by making gender basically unimportant—or just as important as hair length and finger thickness—in the choice of a desired partner (and in a reader’s choice of a desired self).

To return to the concept of flaws, the Duncan MacLeod/Methos pairing (from “to pair”: to put two characters together as a romantic couple) from *Highlander: The Series* is almost entirely dominated by stories that deal with the acceptance of one particular flaw. In the series, MacLeod ends his friendship with Methos (a.k.a. Adam Pierson) when he finds out that Methos had done terrible things in the distant past (Tynan). Without ever really talking through their differences, the two are reconciled in the series by one of MacLeod’s many girlfriends, who gets Methos to help MacLeod with a problem that he cannot solve on his own (Tordjmann). In slash rewrites, however, the gradual reestablishment of trust and acceptance between the two men is dealt with in detail and, in particular, fan rewrites deal with Methos’s feelings of betrayal when MacLeod suddenly ends the friendship, an emotion that was glossed over on the screen. Slash does not deal in the careful presentation of one’s self in order to show a desired partner an ideal image, but rather

in the revelation and acceptance of actual faults. This brings to the surface an individual’s desire to be recognized completely by another, to drop the pretense of an image, and to be accepted as a total human being, complete with imperfections and infractions. The following quotation comes from “The Book of Lost Days” by “Tasselby” in which she rewrites Methos and MacLeod’s interactions as they slowly rebuild trust and intimacy after MacLeod finds out the gruesome details of Methos’s past. In this and several other stories within this pairing, the game of chess that the characters play represents the precarious and painfully strategic negotiation they go through to balance their relationship.

If it weren’t for the intensity of his eyes, the care and confusion there, I might have to check his pulse. I’d think the shock must have killed him. I don’t want him to speak and ruin it. As long as we sit here on opposite sides of the game and just . . . share the moment, I can, for once, not hide. No masks, no deception. I can just . . . love him, letting the feeling flow through me and over my skin, sharp and alive and painful like that first breath in stagnant lungs . . . cold air on an exposed wound . . . It hurts, it heals . . . It burns.

He swallows thickly, his eyes never leaving my face. “It’s your move.”

My relief is palpable, happiness rushing in to soothe the places left flayed by anxiety. Glancing briefly at the board, I lift my queen in a sudden, sure move. “Checkmate . . .”

So I shed the last vestiges of Adam Pierson and pull myself up to my full height and breadth, nearly as big as him, and consciously put away the last of my masks, lowering my defenses, showing him *me* . . . And he sees, his eyes full with the unrestricted view of what he’d only glimpsed before. All my age and loneliness, the love and the fear and the sadness and joy . . . I want him to have it. Not all of my secrets, not yet, maybe not ever, but the core of me . . . I want him to know. (Tasselby)

Slash characters are far from perfect, but they don’t have to be. They receive the love of their desired partners not because of their physical and

psychological resemblance to the airbrushed *Playboy* (or *Playgirl*) centerfold, but because they trust their partners enough to show them all the hidden things and broken places. Slash characters receive love because they share themselves and their lives fully and without reservation.

These traditions within slash contrast sharply with another tradition within fan writing, that of the “Mary Sue” character. Mary Sue is a derogatory name used by fans to refer to an original female character (OFC) who is entirely too extraordinarily perfect to be believable. She often has thigh-length hair, violet eyes or eyes that change color depending on her mood, and is so incredibly beautiful that the hero (or heroes) immediately falls completely in lust with her; he cannot form complete sentences until the completion of an incredibly flexible and fantastic NC-17 scene, and maybe not even then. She enters the story and not only absorbs all of the male protagonists’ time and interest, but she drives the plot as well. This usually entails the OFC saving the world with skills that only she possesses, and dying heroically in the process. In other words, she’s beautiful, she’s smart, she’s courageous, and everyone is so in love with her that grown men are reduced to puddles of goo as soon as they are gifted with her presence.

Fan readers have accused the authors of Mary Sue stories of writing idealized versions of themselves in order to fantasize about sex with the male protagonist. This in and of itself would seem to be insufficient evidence for why Mary Sue receives the kind of passionate lambasting that many readers have provided (Adoratrice). The point in question is, why doesn’t Mary Sue work for everyone?

Mary Sue’s overwhelming perfection is a reproduction of the romance system that is already in place in our culture, namely that a woman deserves the love of a desirable partner for achieving a culturally predetermined ideal of beauty. Mary Sue characters tell readers, the majority of whom are female, that the attainment of the desired partner is to be found only through perfection. She highlights exactly how unattainable the desired partner—or any desired partner—

is for an average woman. A woman who is a little too plump, a little too plain, a little too loud, or a little too flat can be forcefully pushed out of the narrative when the male protagonist loves Mary Sue for her absolute perfection. Mary Sue represents and reproduces the worst aspects of female competition for desirable heterosexual relationship partners. Within this system wherein perfection is a prerequisite for a fulfilling relationship, “average” women are assured that they will never find a man willing to love them, that they will never find a community of women who will support them rather than compete with them, and that they can never look upon another woman and feel desire rather than despair or triumph.

Slash fan fiction, therefore, works as a rewrite of both traditional romance narratives and of other fan writing like the Mary Sue tradition. Slash fan fiction is attractive to women who feel oppressed by patriarchy because it provides a glimpse into the attainment and preservation of a relationship based upon mutual trust and egalitarian values. Yet, a question inevitably arises. Do these stories actually change anything? As written by slash authors Tasha and Alyse, poaching on conventions of the cartoon *Pinky and the Brain*, “Are you pondering what I’m pondering, Pinky?” “I think so, Brain. But how are two guys in a shower going to help us take over the world?” In other words, what work is done by the texts, or what work is being done by the authors through the texts?

At the most basic level, there is a playful transgression at the heart of fan writing activities, especially in their Internet incarnation. As stated previously, many of the women who write and read slash work in computer-related fields or work as office assistants, positions that give them daily access to a computer (Adder). Consequently, many slashers read, write, and discuss slash fiction throughout the work day. Aided by the Windows interface, these women have one window on their desktop open to a spreadsheet or word processing document, and another page open to the Internet or their e-mail server. Throughout the day, they toggle between these windows, stealing the time away from a job that is

often dull and unfulfilling (Adder; Turkle 12-14, 172-74, 178-79, 188-89, 209).

Besides being an enjoyable but relatively safe way of subverting one's working conditions, movement between computer windows lets women be active participants on slash listservs. In slash circles, this activity includes the posting (from "to post": sending e-mail to the group) of actual fan fiction, as well as the discussion of the fiction that has been posted, discussion of fandom, and discussion of list members' personal problems. The most popular lists have around six hundred to one thousand members, and can consist of as many as one hundred posts every day (these lists are known as "high volume") (Yahoo! Inc.). Although it is generally accepted that the vast majority of a list's members will never post (these people are called "lurkers"), membership to a high volume list for those who do post is a rigorous and time-consuming activity. Informal list "rules" or etiquette (also known as netiquette) require that individuals who post also read all of the other posts, because it is considered rude or simply tacky to bring up a topic that has already been discussed. In addition, these list members are constantly going through cycles of self-parody, which necessitate a good working knowledge of the list's activities. The active list member cannot, therefore, miss even one day's worth of posts if she wishes to remain an active part of the community. In this manner, fan reading and writing become a way of life.

Slash fan fiction communities parody their own activities to themselves. Most of this self-parody is based on the accidental and purposeful homogeneity found in slash stories. Accidental homogeneity is found in the formation of "fannon," or fan cannon—those conventions that are developed within fan communities but not found in the source product. One example of fannon is the formation of psychic links between characters in the *Star Wars* universe, and spiritual or psychic energy exchanges during sex for *Highlander* characters. The source products for these programs do not contain references to these phenomena, but they have become commonplace within fan fiction narratives. They were probably

adapted from the mind meld, an early slash staple from the Kirk/Spock pairing and the original *Star Trek*. These consistencies and regularities spring up throughout fan writing communities, and new members of a list often give themselves away as newbies (a teasing or slightly derogatory term for new list members or people new to fandom in general) by assuming that some piece of fannon is actually cannon (which refers to things that happen in the professionally published source product). Fannon can include anything from a generalized phenomenon like psychic bonds to very specific interpretive patterns such as a particular emotion that the fan community agrees a character was feeling during a specific scene. Other types of fannon are merely stylistic and include themes and plot devices common to a particular pairing, such as the single-bed hotel room in *The X-Files*, and alien aphrodisiacs and bizarre undercover assignments in *Star Wars*.

The second type of homogeneity is purposeful homogeneity, and this type of sameness comes about as the result of a list challenge. A challenge is a set of criteria that one list member posts to the list. Everyone else then has a particular amount of time to write a story that fits those criteria. Challenges receive from two or three to hundreds of responses, and occasionally ten or twenty responses are posted to the list the same day that a challenge is issued. One type of challenge is a "line challenge," or "first line" challenge wherein authors must complete a story that begins with or otherwise incorporates the line provided by the challenger. On the Master_Apprentice list for Qui-Gon/Obi-Wan pairings from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, such challenges have included "I don't want to die a virgin," "No one will believe that we're lovers," and "I'm a Jedi, not a <fill in the blank>." Other types of challenges are thematic, and examples from the same list have included "virgin sacrifice at dawn," "the accidental soul bond," "sharing body heat," and "pirate stories" (Padawan). Some challenges specify words, objects, or unusual characters who must appear in the story, such as the eggbeater challenge on a *The X-Files* Mulder/Krycek list or a *Hercules* list challenge in which feathers, love

potion, and grapes all had to feature prominently in the story. Finally, drabbles are challenges that must be exactly one hundred words long.

After one reads around twenty pirate stories in a single day, it becomes apparent that the purpose of these stories is not to fulfill an eye patch fetish. There comes a moment when even the most dedicated fan of virgin sacrifices must tire of basically the same story slightly tweaked by a different author. Given the level of total and utter boredom one might imagine upon encountering the fiftieth response to the eggbeater challenge in one's mailbox, it may seem obvious that fan readers will eventually stop reading these similar stories. Yet, as discussed previously, fans have to know the intricacies of everything posted to the list in order to be an active member, and that includes the thirty-fifth story in which Hercules and Iolaus experiment with ostrich feathers. Given these circumstances, it would seem that active list members would despise challenges that force them to slog through numerous stories with practically identical content, but the truth is just the opposite: lists thrive on challenges, and they often bring out the most spirited discussions that include even list members who usually lurk. There must be something else going on here. Perhaps list members are reading more than slash fan fiction texts; perhaps even more profoundly, they are reading the differences between the texts.

Recall, for a moment, that slash fiction rewrites stereotypical masculine ideals and reconfigures the normative romance narrative. How, then, does a narrative become normative and a masculinity become archetypal? Entertainment products, religious stories, "common sense" adages, and educational texts all have a part in forming our understanding of how the world works and how the world ought to work. They explain to an individual what society expects of him or her, and provide a culture-specific script for expected and appropriate behavior. What is a relationship supposed to be like? From our cultural texts emerge the values of patriarchy, values that have certainly modified over time but that still support the valuation of husbands' careers over the careers

of their wives, that still accept as fact that women ought to take care of home and children, that still ask about the ill effects of maternal employment on childhood development, and that still question same-sex desire and sexually assertive women. These values, rarely openly stated, are still performative, and they leave women who give up lucrative careers to relocate closer to their husband's new job, women who are never promoted to upper management or even past entry-level positions despite a college education, and women who leave work and come home to find a considerable amount of housework waiting for them, frustrated, tired, and angry. This set of norms, traditions, and proscriptions may seem immeasurably vast. Made up of hundreds of interwoven pieces, it may appear to be impossible to slay.

Slash fiction texts and the practices of reading, writing, and rewriting slash texts may be seen as a practice from which a metatext emerges. From between the texts and practices, from similarities, differences, and ambiguities emerges something that cannot be accounted for by any one text. That which emerges, the metatext, is a story that tells us how to live, and it is a story that breaks strongly from normative traditions. Metatext incorporates the corpus of written texts, but also the practices of writing, rewriting, reading, and living in community that surrounds slash fan fiction publication. Metatext is thus constantly being produced and then reproduced through the process of story posting, discussion, critique, parody, and rescription. It is at the level of metatext that slash fan fiction may implicate the culturally approved set of norms and values. Interrogating the metatext that emerges from slash fan fiction with the same question previously put to dominant texts—"What is a relationship like?"—one gets a radically different output. Some of the pieces that present themselves for consideration of this question are the equality relationship dynamic and friendship-based love narrative from the actual slash fiction texts, the sharp critiques of Mary Sue stories from listserv discussions, and the communal nature of online slash fan fiction communities. The values that

emerge from the juxtaposition of these pieces are egalitarian rather than patriarchal.

This process becomes particularly visible in the case of challenges. There have to be numerous responses, and each response is diligently read, because the differences and similarities between the individual texts form a metatext—that is, they form a way of seeing and understanding the world. Fan fiction exists because there is something faulty about the archetypes and norms being provided by socially approved texts. Fan stories rewrite the approved allegories by recombining cultural fragments and playing with the pieces provided by the consensus press. Like a bricoleur, the fan writer gathers sections and segments, archetypes and themes, and then recombines them to make something different. This is not a planned attack, but a process of play and of trial-and-error (Turkle 50-76). This is why fan fiction must be communal; the work being done is difficult work. No one pirate story gets it right, no individual text truly “repairs the damage,” but as fan writers work together, rewriting the source products and rewriting each other’s reconfigurations, they begin to write out a story that is worth having. They begin to create a metatext that tells us how to live in a relationship founded upon equality, explaining how it begins, how it is sustained, and how it ends. The metatext tells us how to live as a community of women who support, critique, and love each other. It’s difficult work because we’ve never seen these things before, and just when it seems that the answer has been written, it must be rescripted yet again as our old patterns of thinking and our old habits seep in once again. This is the purpose of self-parody; it highlights the problems and contradictions that still exist within the metatext being created. What slowly emerges between the texts is a different way of relating and thinking. These communities are actively involved in constructing a life that is truly worth living.

Slash fan fiction communities are not large enough to actually take on all of the world’s social ills, but the point remains that they can represent a positive intervention in the lives of the women who read and write slash on a daily basis. Women who feel frustrated, despondent, or helpless may

actually effect change within their own perceptions and behaviors. Not every woman can be a movie producer, a professional author, songwriter, or photographer, but through fan fiction, a much broader population of women may make an active intervention in the material conditions of their own lives by constructing a story that lives on in their reconstructed values, beliefs, and scripts.

In sum, although slash is part of a long history of fan activities, it offers singular challenges to normative constructions of gender and romance as it allows women to construct narratives that subvert patriarchy by reappropriating those prototypical hero characters who usually reproduce women’s position of social disempowerment. By rewriting both the source product and each other’s reconfigurations, women are able to write out a radically different romance narrative and an unconventional conceptualization of community, gender, and relationships. As written by one slash author, “So, much as I hate to admit it, I owe a debt of gratitude to all of those critics who hate m/m (slash). To everyone who falls into this category, I raise my glass. And all of you readers out there, please do the same. As long as there is hate and fear and intolerance, we will be working, in our own way, to end it.” Slash fiction is easy to trivialize and disregard as the insignificant practice of a few pathological individuals, but in doing so, one may bypass an activity with great potential. Perhaps it is not the potential to change the world, but it is the potential to change women’s lives, one individual, one story, and one day at a time.

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