Fan Fiction as a Digital Descendant of Transformative Literature

Elizabeth Jendrzey
Texas Women's University

Abstract

The internet brought many ways for individuals to create and share new texts across the globe, a practice that has been wholly embraced. However, fan fiction, a common form of this exchange, is often dismissed as the frivolous writings of fans with little better to do. An understanding of the history of transformative works places fan fiction in the context of a much longer narrative. Drawing from past attitudes and trends regarding transformative works, this paper suggests that modern fan fiction is the digital descendent of a rich history of literary transformations.

Keywords: fan fiction, transformative literature

Introduction

The conversation about the relationship between fan fiction and literature seems to be focused on two concepts. The first is that transformational literature of the past should be considered as fan fiction. The second is that fan fiction should be counted alongside all other literature as it is simply following the trends established by previous works. These arguments go hand in hand and can be seen at every level of the debate, from academic journals to Tumblr rants. However, there is a third option, one that does not lower the status of transformational literature through connotation or elevate fan fiction beyond its means and standards. While there is certainly a relationship between the two, fan fiction as we know it today is a descendent of transformative literature of the past.

Transformational literature is just as it says, literature that transforms an existing work. It borrows from the source, filling in the gaps and shaping it to fit the author's world. It may return in the same form as the source text, or it may be presented in a different kind of media. Fan fiction does all this on a digital platform, ignoring some of the more traditional aspects of literature. While transformational literature tends to utilize older works no longer under copyright, fan fiction may be about television episodes that aired mere hours before publication. It is a rather unorthodox subset of transformational literature, and one that is well worth examining in relation.

Borrowing Texts

One of the most frequently referenced works in fan fiction scholarship is Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*. I must confess, I am not a fan of the word "poachers" as it seems to imply thievery, when in fact most transformative literature is simply borrowing. Authors of transformative works generally do not claim to be the authors of the source text, they simply seek to take, in

their opinion, the best parts and play with them for a little while.

In what Farley (2016) notes as one of the first potential examples of fan fiction, the *Aeneid*, Virgil borrows heavily from Homer's *Odyssey* to create a work to appeal to a Roman audience. Unlike Odysseus, Aeneas is able to complete his many tasks in short order and return to Rome. To add insult to injury, Virgil rewrites Odysseus, making him much less favorable than Aeneas. Virgil makes no attempts to be Homer, but simply wished tell the story in a way that relates better to a Roman audience than the original Greek. As the Romans may not have been likely to read Homer's original, there is no real theft of audience and no real harm done.

In a similar vein, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* bears some strong resemblances to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The adventurous structure and pursuit of fair maidens aside, some of Spenser's quests and characters ring very close to Ariosto's versions, the most notable being Bradamant. She is a chaste warrior maiden, on a quest to find her one true love. Along the way, she fights many battles and wins a great majority of them, with the defeated men alternately in awe of her power and angered at being beaten by a woman. Bradamant is generally a helper to the quests of others, slowly working towards her own goal. A very similar character shows up throughout Spenser's work: Britomart.

While Spenser's borrowing is rather blatant at times, even Ariosto is not free from unoriginal thought, as much of his work draws from classical myth: the witch Alcina is painted in shades of Circe and Ruggiero's rescue of Angelica is almost a direct copy of Perseus and Andromeda. Though much of myth is not considered transformational, as the stories have been retold by many in many ways, Ariosto's usage should be, as he has repurposed these tales to fit into his own narrative.

As all of these authors of great literary works have done, so fan fiction writers do as well. There is no attempt to claim these characters as their own; indeed, disclaimers against ownership used to be a necessity of fan fiction posts before sites like Archive of Our Own instituted overarching disclaimers for everything on the site. Fan fiction authors do not seek to replace the authors of canonical works, but merely play in the sandbox for a while. This concept is most especially seen in alternate universe works. In these, it is not just characters that are borrowed, but sometimes the plots as well. Teenage werewolves replace superheroes and superheroes slip into the lives of the Gilmore Girls. You would be hard-pressed to find a popular fandom that did not have at least one story that drops the main cast of characters into the world of Harry Potter as students, to the point where "Hogwarts AU" is a searchable tag on Archive of Our Own, though it is not as ubiquitous as the likes of high school or coffee shop AUs. While fan fiction authors will not alter character names or important traits, as this familiarity is what draws readers in, it is difficult to call this kind of work poaching as it is simply continuing the trend of drawing from existing sources.

Filling in the Gaps

While some authors choose to borrow from existing works and manipulate them to fit their own concepts, others may take canon and choose to fill in the gaps. Within any work, there are always questions to ask that the author did not choose to answer. Basu (2016) relates the idea of "selvages," the spaces in a story that allow for others to come along and write their own additions. Similar to the fabric from which they take their name, these selvages are both structurally sound and unfinished, and as Basu states, "they beg for completion" (para. 3.2).

To return to a previous example, Virgil does just that with Aeneas; while a minor character in Homer's work, with minimal backstory, Aeneas is transformed into a hero in Virgil's tale, one who is possibly a little too perfect. Other writers of Aeneas's tale may change this aspect of his character, making him more interesting. However, this simply follows the pattern set by Virgil himself, one of adapting a character to fit the needs of the author and audience (Farley, 2016).

In another notable case, Milton explores the Devil's side of the story in *Paradise Lost*. The Bible tells a very one-sided story of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man, understandable as it is a theological text. Milton opts to explore the other side, to craft a tale of why the Devil might have wanted to overthrow the perfect world built on Earth. In doing so, Milton created a story of betrayal and tyranny wherein the Devil's motives were based in revenge and seeking to restore himself to a level of power.

Interestingly, this somewhat sympathetic version of the Devil is one that has carried weight even into modern television: the CW's *Supernatural* turned the apocalypse into a temper tantrum from Lucifer over the fact that he was no longer God's favorite son, and Fox's *Lucifer* presents the Devil as charismatic and wanting to help others, so long as he gets what he desires as well. These transformations of a transformation are a far cry from the Devil of the Bible, but the concept of an evil with a reason is one that society is familiar with.

Works of Shakespeare have also been exposed to elaboration from other authors. Mary Crowden Clarke published *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* in the 1850s, a collection of tales that showcased exactly what the title says. In these stories, the girls showed character traits that were still evident in their adult selves. For example, Kate, known for her disdain of men throughout *The Taming of the Shrew*, is seen throwing rocks at stupid boys. Clarke's works are a little insight, a potential backstory to the women Shakespeare crafted (Isaac, 2000). In a more modern but renowned example, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* tells of the exploits of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a pair of minor characters from *Hamlet*. Stoppard's story follows along that of Shakespeare, but it is only a partial tale, one told from the titular character's point of view and therefore limited. As a result, it is quite a different tale, though Stoppard's version ends for the pair in the exact same way Shakespeare's did.

This focus on the possible holes in the story is also something seen in fan fiction.

Especially in fandoms that have elaborate storyworlds, such as Harry Potter, there is no possible way for the author to answer everything the reader might ask, so the reader opts to come up with their own answers. Keeping with the example of Harry Potter, there is relatively little known about the characters who went to school with Harry's parents, despite the decisions of that generation heavily influencing Harry's story. As a result, a large portion of Harry Potter fan fiction is dedicated to exploring this generation, the Marauders, to the point that archives such as FanFiction.Net and specialized sites like HarryPotterFanFiction.com have included options to search just within that era. These potentialities operate under the assumption that the reader has not yet been told that this *isn't* what happened, answering questions that other readers may not even realize they have. They are narratives that build from the existing story, taking the stable fabric as a base and finishing a bit of the unfinished edge.

Course Correction

Transformational literature not only questions the text of the work, but the context in which it was written, albeit in a more subtle way. It is not uncommon to see a classic story told in such a way that it fits the contemporary moral code as opposed to that of the time it was written. One of the most famous instances of this is Thomas and Henrietta Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare*. They removed everything that might have been considered slightly inappropriate for women and children, to the

point that we still use the word *bowdlerize* to refer to a highly censored work (Isaac, 2000).

However, it was not just propriety that might spur changes to the source text. Farley (2016) makes a case for Alexander Pope's translations of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as examples of transformational work, and given her findings, I am inclined to agree. While maintaining the story, Pope did not perform a literal translation from Greek to English. Rather, as Farley shows, he altered the phrasings as he saw fit in order to form a tale that fit his own political and cultural stance. His version is full of morality, casting subtle and not-so-subtle judgments on some of the decisions of the characters. It also reframes some of the characters in different positions than Homer intended. For example, Homer's title for Agamemnon was akin to "marshaler of the troops" in Farley's translation (para. 5.4). However, Pope refers to Agamemnon as "king of men," a term with more power in the context of Pope's English society (para. 5.5). Similarly, Richmond Lattimore, a twentieth-century translator, also refers to Agamemnon as a king. What is also interesting about Lattimore's take on various characters is who he considers important to the story, as his list of personae at the start of his translation is incomplete. As Farley points out, Lattimore is not telling the tale of a war with Helen at the center; rather, he speaks of heroes to a post-World War II society. This kind of storybending happens quite often, especially in regards to ancient texts.

Fan fiction is often used by writers to explore and correct certain aspects of a

canon text that they found dissatisfying. As previously mentioned, this may include filling in storyline gaps or extending the story from where the canon creator left it. However, it also includes the correction of some aspect the reader found personally offensive. It is through this correction that fan fiction reaches its best critical potential. It is not an explicit criticism, a statement that the canon creator did something wrong or failed in some way. Some works of fan fiction even work on a "what if?" concept, exploring possibilities that the canon creator simply did not have the time or space to explore. However, more often these changes are a critical reflection of what the fan fiction author saw in the canon source. Western media has a strong anchor in the able-bodied, white heterosexual male. As fans of any given media are far more diverse than this, it makes sense that they would wish to see themselves represented. As a result, fan fiction implements changes that the source may not. Commonly, this is expressed in slash fiction, the pairing of characters in homosexual relationships, which creates representation for non-heterosexual fans. However, other trends, such as changing a character's canon gender or race, have also been used to increase representation. It is a critique of the media standard, one that does not match the standards of the rest of the world. As such, fan fiction writers seek to correct it to the best of their abilities.

Across Multiple Media

A less frequent, but still important, aspect of transformational literature is that of transmedial storytelling. In considering the classics, poems are often transformed into poems and plays are often transformed into plays. However, they could also just as easily be transformed into paintings or statues, as seen in much of the art of the Renaissance. All are acknowledged as being part of the same story, though different takes on it from different authors or creators.

Haugtvedt (2016) elaborates on this idea using the example of *Sweeney Todd* and its variations in the mid-nineteenth century. She presents the original story, *The String of Pearls,* and its subsequent remakes as part of a single universe. What started as a serial by James Malcolm Rymer in a penny newspaper became a stage melodrama by George Dibdin Pitt before the serial even reached the end of its tale. Though Dibdin Pitt's tale would divert from Rymer's, Rymer was acknowledged as the inspiration. As a result of the success of the melodrama, Rymer wrote an expanded version of the serial, more than quadrupling its length. When he did so, he co-opted some of Dibdin Pitt's ideas as well. In the end, each of the three versions are part of the same storyworld, though they do not all have to be enjoyed to enjoy the story.

Collins (2013) expands on the concept of the transmedial storyworld. Using the works of Jane Austen as a basis, Collins connects everything from Sybil Brinton's 1913 *Old Friends and New Fancies* to the Chatsworth mansion used to film the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice*. As he presents it, every mention and transformation of Austen's works are an extension of them, part of a single Austenland created by multiple authors. In this instance, the story does not

so much change as it is shared across different media, as the root stays the same, but it does grow. Fans may pick and choose to enjoy what they wish, but the buffet of options is always available.

Fan fiction has always been a transmedial form of expression. In its early days, zines were the distribution method, far different from the television shows usually being written about. With the advent of the internet, listservs took over the distribution, followed by specialized sites until more open blogging and archiving platforms came into play. Interestingly, as more people turn to digital means to consume media, the transmedial gap is shrinking somewhat, though it is still present as watching a show on Netflix is not the same as reading fan fiction of that same show elsewhere on the internet. This change in media form is an integral part of what makes fan fiction what it is today, a part of the greater conversation and storyworld of a canon, but still separate from it. Fans can enjoy canon without delving into fan fiction, or only entertaining a portion of it. Some brave souls even seek out fan fiction for canon they have not or no longer consume, such as with television shows that may have taken an unfavorable turn. The transmedial nature of fan fiction allows for flexibility in the fans' enjoyment, allowing them to consume media as they see fit.

However, in today's world of copyright issues, it is far less likely that canon will be influenced by something a fan may write. That does not stop other fans from incorporating ideas from fan fiction into their own personal concept of the canon, often called headcanon. This is just another way in which bringing the story to an open, digital space can influence perception of a work.

The Digital Effect

It is the digital space that is ultimately responsible for fan fiction as it is today. As I have shown, fan fiction follows many of the similarities of traditional and even renowned transformational literature. Yet fan fiction is something of a different beast and that is down to the nature of the internet.

When the world moved from manuscript culture to print culture with the invention of the printing press, we moved from a culture of production to one of consumption. Instead of a few people taking days and weeks upon end to transcribe books only to be kept by the elite, multiple copies of books were churned out in the time it took the ink to dry, available to a much wider variety of people at a much lower cost. With the introduction of the digital, a similar change took place. We moved from a culture of consumption to one of production. When anyone can have access to a computer for printing instead of needing a large press, it becomes much easier for the everyman to create. When the internet came into play, this change strengthened even more. Not only could anyone produce content, now it could be published for anyone else in the world to read.

It is this concept that helped shape today's fan fiction. Though the zines of the 60s and 70s allowed for the circulation of stories based on a media canon, they simply did not have the reach that the internet does. In addition, these zines had editors, people

who may have controlled the content of each issue before it went out. It was a step, a way to send non-professional transformative literature to people who might enjoy it. The internet took this step and ran with it. Every author of every skill level could get the piece they wrote published, no matter how heavily it was influenced or borrowed from someone else's work. It could be read by anyone, from a veteran fan who was enjoying the newfound freedom and variety to a teen who had never even heard of fan fiction until it was stumbled upon.

It also allows for new opportunities for expansion. Jenkins (2006) talks about participatory culture, wherein artists inspire other artists in a domino effect. In the past, shades of this would appear in transformative literature, such as in the case of *Sweeney Todd*. However, the internet allows for a much more rapid pace of the same thing. What may start as an idea in a Tumblr post in the morning could be a work of fan fiction complete with art by nightfall, with various people who have never met before weighing in on the concept. As people watch the strangers interact with no hesitation, it encourages them to interact as well, contributing to the discussion. This combination of freedom and opportunity has shaped an area of transformative literature irrevocably, bending the rules until they break and making something with the remains.

Conclusion

Fan fiction as it stands today exhibits many of the traits I have discussed. It fills in the gaps of the story, sometimes by using a minor character to do so. It may also rewrite sections of the source text, leaving the story mostly intact but changing the context to fit the point the author is trying to get across. It moves across media, allowing each fan to pick and choose which pieces to keep. All of these are aspects of a long tradition of transformative literature.

However, I chose to use the word "descendent" for a reason. Certainly, if you look at it chronologically, fan fiction is the latest iteration of transformative literature, one spurred on by the creation of the internet. Nonetheless, there is something of a disconnect between that long tradition and fan fiction, and a hierarchy as well. Literature, even transformative literature, generally has standards. Somebody has edited the work and marketed it. It has a lot of strings attached. Fan fiction, on the other hand, doesn't have to have those strings. It's a bunch of kids playing in a sandbox, writing stories about the worlds they love. The stories don't even have to be good. Some of them may decide to grow up, to revise and remove all traces of the source material and add those strings. But to impose the standard of literature onto all of fan fiction is a bit ill-fitting. If those standards are placed on fan fiction, then it means there will be less room to try new things and grow and play. Frankly, if the kids are happy there, why on earth would you make them want to leave the sandbox?

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