SOMETHING QUEER IN HIS MAKE-UP: GENDERBENDING, OMEGAVERSES, AND FANDOM'S DISCONTENTS

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2017

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ABSTRACT

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Although fan fiction as a literary and cultural phenomenon has a rich and well-studied history – transformative works have been published as far back as the time of *Don Quixote* – more taboo subcultures of the genre have gone largely unexplored within academia, as has the relationship between fans and authors within such genres. This dissertation examines several unique subgenres of fan participation within the BBC’s *Sherlock* fandom and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* fandom, including genres that focus on genderbending and genderswapping, non-consent, and male reproduction. I draw on the work of Gerard Genette and the concept of paratextuality to argue that readers of fan fiction have a far greater impact upon their communities – and even the texts they read – than previous scholars have observed. Furthermore, using both this concept and a literary analysis approach, I examine what narratives about gender roles, sexual orientation, and even reproduction emerge within the text, highlighting both transgressive rhetoric and instances where hegemonic ideologies are upheld, consciously or otherwise, through both authorial and fan-contributed content. Ultimately I suggest that although some fics may end up reinforcing restrictive normative gender models or ideas about reproduction, these genres nonetheless offer both writers and readers a literary framework through which they can push back against rigid gender roles and question the legitimacy of our established understandings of gender, sex, and even reproduction itself.
For Colleen.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks first and foremost go to my committee members, Doctors Susana Peña, Bill Albertini, Radhika Gajjala, and Ellen Gorsevksi, whose support, encouragement, and insights since my proposal have proven invaluable to me as I’ve moved through the writing process. Among them, I am especially thankful for the frequent advice and the wisdom of my advisor, Dr. Susana Peña, for agreeing to take on an additional advisee and being willing to work with him over multiple mediums and time zones, and across thousands of miles. I also owe thanks to my mentors, Dr. Esther Rothblum and Dr. Ellen Berry, who though uninvolved with this particular project, nonetheless encouraged and supported me throughout my doctoral work.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the friends who have supported me throughout the process, listened and offered advice when I needed it. My colleague and friend, Kristen Reynolds, has listened to me vent far more than my share and has patiently offered advice and perspective, as well as just the right word I needed whenever I needed it. I am especially thankful to Dr. Aisha McGriff, whose calm responses to more than a reasonable number of frantic instant messages have helped inch me away from panic on more instances than I can count, and who plied me with a perfectly curated selection of gifs when I just needed to laugh.

Finally, none of this would have been completed (and it may not even have been started) without the encouragement, love, support, and belief of my partner and wife, Colleen Miller. Her endless advice, patience, faith, and willingness to read this chapter or listen to that paragraph one more time have been the key to my being able to complete this work. Over the years that I have been in this doctoral program, she has supported me through more than any human can reasonably be expected to endure, and has done so with grace, strength, and an unwavering belief that I could finish – even when I didn’t believe that myself.
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INTRODUCTION

I first came to fan fiction in the latter half of the 1990’s; as a young queer person in the American southwest, I was deeply closeted and also deeply hungry for representations of queer life and relationships. As a fan of the series *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, I relished the few times the creators danced around the edges of queerness in their text, and although I might never have willingly admitted it to those with whom I watched the show, I found myself captivated by the idea of a secret homosexuality, a lesbian narrative taking place just out of frame. Still, it was purely by chance that my adolescent internet searches resulted in my first encounter with fan fiction, in the form of the combined *Xena* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* fanfiction archive. From there, I encountered vivid descriptions of non-heterosexual sexual expression – along with lesbian pairings of Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle, Hercules was often paired with his own sidekick, Iolaus. Far more than just the illicit experience of reading graphic sexual depictions, I was impacted especially by the depiction of queer intimacy, by the shared experience of secrecy; stories often touched on the need for characters’ relationships to be kept quiet all the while depicting loving, functional romantic partnerships. Although gay characters were already present on television, their interactions (at least on network programming) were generally limited to chaste kisses or handholding; fanfiction presented experiences I could previously only scarcely imagine. My readings of these stories only lasted a few months, but they had a profound impact upon me, reminding me that there were hundreds of others out there who also valued queer sexual expression and that the practice of imagining other possibilities for the characters mainstream television presented me with wasn’t inherently wrong or bizarre. Far from it, such forays made me a part of a community, if only briefly.
I drifted away from fan communities after I stopped reading Xena fanfiction; by the time I began my undergraduate work, I had all but forgotten the genre. It was not until nearly fifteen years later that I happened upon fanfiction again, when a comic author and artist I had just discovered began posting fan art and links to fanfic from *The Hobbit* and, later, the British Broadcasting Company’s *Sherlock* series. Where the fiction I had encountered in the late 1990’s was part of a relatively small, niche community, the writers and artists I now discovered numbered in the tens of thousands, and the community that had blossomed up around that was even more massive. Websites like *Archive of Our Own* and *Fanfiction.net* hosted works from thousands of fandoms, featured robust systems for interaction with fanfiction creators, and acted as outspoken defenders of fans’ rights as creators of fanart and fanfic.

This new technology has done more than simply invite new creators into fan communities; it has enabled fans to interact with authors and artists in ways that previous technology never allowed. Where authors of fanfic publishing in zines might need to wait for written responses to their stories or for interaction at fan gatherings, the existence of online fanfic archives allows for more rapid feedback between both author and reader of fic. Additionally, sophisticated, user-friendly UI’s allow readers to easily search for very specific genres, themes, and content ratings, allowing quick and easy access to a comparatively large array of results, versus those one might have historically found compiled in a printed fan zine. As I discuss in Chapter 1, I explore how, through their interactions with the authors as well as their own comments and blog posting, fans are shaping fan creations in multiple new ways. Importantly, these discussions often tackle issues that have broader cultural relevance outside of the stories around which they are centered. For example, the fans I discuss in Chapter 1 draw attention to issues of consent and potential partner violence within the story, while some in Chapter 2
discusses the presence of cross-gender and transgender narratives within fanfiction, and I explore
the way that fans engage both affirmationally and critically with such narratives, interrogating
gender normativity and transphobia where they emerge. Finally, fans highlighted in Chapter 3
celebrate alternative reproductive methods, envisioning worlds where male-male reproduction is
not only natural but also revered. In each instance, fans engage with complex gendered issues,
whether as authors and artists of fanart and fanfic, or as commenters or bloggers engaging in
public discussion around such works. At its core, my dissertation explores the way that fans
engage with dominant ideologies around gender, sex, sexual orientation, consent and
reproduction. I argue that, while these engagements may not always directly undermine
hegemonic or normative discourses or ideologies, that they nonetheless offer both writers,
readers, and artists in fan culture the opportunity to engage in dialogue about sensitive and
potentially taboo topics, to assert themselves not only as readers but as cultural critics, and, in
some instances, to engage with authors of fan fiction in ways that materially change the texts
themselves.

**Aca-fans and Honesty, or: Why I Worry About Everything to Follow**

Although he didn’t coin the term, the concept of the “aca-fan” was popularized in large
part thanks to Henry Jenkins, who himself defines it briefly on his website as “a hybrid creature
which is part fan and part academic” (n.d.). While I appreciate tremendously Jenkins’
contributions to the field of fan studies, as well as his efforts to bridge the divide between
academia, which used (and in some circles, still does) to perceive popular culture as base and
unworthy of scholarship, and fan communities, I hesitate to identify myself as an aca-fan. In
part, it feels inaccurate to me, especially if I identify the “aca-fan” with Matthew Hill’s concept
of the similarly-termed “scholar-fan,” one who “professional academic who draws on their fandom as a badge of distinction within the academy” (2002, p. 2). Hill contrasts this with the “fan-academic,” who he says, “uses academic theorising within their fan writing and within the construction of a scholarly fan identity” (Ibid.). The difference is subtle, but the shortest explanation might be where one’s primary identity lies - in thinking about myself, am I a scholar first (thus fitting into the scholar-fan or aca-fan mode), or a fan? Certainly I’ve been a fan far longer than a scholar - after all, I started reading fan fiction as a child. However, as the major work of my doctoral career, it feels dishonest to say that my “first” or “primary” identity in undertaking these works is as a fan; I didn’t use my fic-writing AO3 account to collect and comb through the AO3 archives, and I didn’t put that fan pseudonym on the survey I attempted, but rather in both instances publicly positioned myself as a scholar.

If anything, I still find myself struggling to bridge those two worlds within myself, and it is a struggle that permeates this work, though I hope not too noticeably at times. The question – am I writing as a scholar, or a fan, or both? – emerges time and again regarding considerations about what to include or omit, how far to take critique, and when (and when it is ethically appropriate) to take measures to safeguard a community I consider myself a part of against exploitation or derision. In that other world – where I write my own hobbit slash fics or shower praise on an author in an AO3 comment – I am free of the eyes of colleagues and those in my field who I realize might view such activities with distaste (or worse); how, then, can I expose the writers and artists whose work I appreciate to such public criticism (including criticism by myself)? Is it reasonable to expose others in such a way, without first putting my own fan creations up for consumption and critique?
Ultimately, I’ve found there are no definitive answers, and while Henry Jenkins may navigate the blurred boundary between fan and academic with ease, I have found no such clear path. Instead, throughout this text I have attempted to present each text as honestly as possible, and have made every attempt to acknowledge that, even when they are problematic or when I am critical of the results, these works still have value. Part of recognizing this value entailed conscious work to identify how and when I was reading a story as a “fan,” purely for recreation and pleasure, and when I was reading it critically as a scholar, looking for recurring themes or unique plot devices. The framework with which I read each text - as a scholar, or as a fan, and sometimes returning as one and the other - meant that I was able on the one hand to appreciate aesthetic choices or to recognize an author whose genre has traditionally been very kink-positive attempting to play with power dynamics (for example), while on the other hand evaluating the work for how it contrasted or aligned with common genre practices, how and if the author engaged with a consent model, etc. Finally, as a fan and a fic author who himself has commented frequently and received and responded to comments on my own work, I approached the project from a position where I already had some sense of the impact that commenting can have upon both the author, the readers, and the way the story is interpreted; although I did not have the terminology to explain this phenomenon until Genette, it nonetheless seemed somehow intuitive, and I suspect (though without a more extensive interviewing and/or survey work, can’t definitively prove) that many readers and authors of fan fiction would concur - even if they may not always agree that commenting can impact the text itself, I believe many would acknowledge that these modes of engagement and feedback do have a lasting impact upon both author and reader alike.
It has been my goal, furthermore, to highlight the agency and value, not only of fans-as-authors in the form of the creators of fanfic, but to show how commenters and readers who blog critically about topics also contribute meaningfully to the community, and sometimes to the text itself. Ultimately I realize that it is impossible to represent any genre or sub-genre of literature or art, and indeed any community in its entirety with perfect accuracy and authenticity; as such, I have attempted to portray these communities and genres in their diversity, to show and celebrate both the more socially acceptable works among them (PG stories like “Gardening,” for example, or massively popular works like “Dear John” that became, for a time, cultural phenomenon) as well as those that might garner the same laughter or lack of understanding that I myself fear in being “out” as a fan and fic writer – stories with explicit sex or troubling frameworks for consent, visual art that, while of great value to the community, is also graphically explicit enough that even the artists creating it take jabs at their own work. As a scholar, I believe it is important to show the breadth and depth of these communities and their creations, as much as is possible; as a fan, I am consistently moved by the tremendous amount of time and love that my fellow creators put into their work, and so it is with no small amount of trepidation that I attempt to do both of these worlds justice in the research I present hereafter.

Literature Review

Dionysius to De Sade: Fanfiction's Early Origins

Although fanfiction's origins are often spoken of in the same breath as the emergence of Star Trek fanfiction in the 1960's and 1970's, the phenomenon of fans producing transformative

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1 Reapersun, one artist whose work I reference several times, themselves linked to an image they’d created with the words “click for incredibly nsfw squicky weird dirty omegaverse kink” (Reapersun, 2013).
(or, as some have argued, derivative) texts based on original work has a much longer history in English literature. In the 2013 book *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, editor Anne Jamison explores this early history of fanfiction, tracing the history of imitative and transformative cultural productions as far back as the Ancient Greek philosophers. There, she specifically highlights Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* and Dionysius's similar notion of *imitatio* as early evidence that, even prior to the establishment of the novel itself, philosophy had already begun to tangle with the concept (and the potential legitimacy) of transformative works (p. 26). She goes on to cast doubt on the notion of Shakespeare as the singular force behind his own literary productions, commenting that, "[his] plays incorporated the innovations of actors and others involved with his company, the King's Men, as well as multiple sources, including histories, romances, and other plays" (p. 28). De Cervantes himself had an imitator who penned (and published) an entire sequel to *Don Quixote* in the early seventeenth century, but it is not until the eighteenth century publication of Samuel Richardson's novel *Clarissa* that the first not-for-profit transformative text seems to emerge (p. 29).

Jamison discusses a woman pseudonymously known as "Belfour" who, upon hearing that a sequel to *Clarissa* is in production, writes to Richardson to plead with him for a specific outcome (notably, she wishes to see the "rake," Lovelace, be morally redeemed and prevented from raping and despoiling the title character). To this, Jamison says, Richardson responds by denying her request and asserting that, "there cannot be a more pernicious notion, than that which is so commonly received, that a reformed vampire rake makes the best husband. This notion it was my intent to combat and expose" (p. 31). Belfour (also known as Lady Bradshlaigh), unsatisfied with the response, rewrote the novel to suit her own interests (as did her sister, Lady Echlin). Jamison adds that the scholar Judge once described Richardson’s response to fanfiction as one of
tremendous displeasure, suggesting that his distaste at the "bawdy rewritings" of his first novel, *Pamela*, led to him killing off the protagonist of his next novel. She notes that it is fortunate, perhaps, that Richardson didn't live to see the most famous retelling of his novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, described here in a manner traditional of contemporary fanfic postings:

In comparison, Richardson might have been happy to settle for any of Belfour's alternate comic happy endings, which Justine decidedly doesn't get. As an erotic fic writer on a roll can tend to do, @TheDivineMarquis let his fic (Justine/Everyone - NC-17, NSFW, warnings for every single thing (Jamison, p. 32).

The author was the Marquis de Sade; his "fic" was *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*.

This is not to suggest, of course, that all transformative fiction or "fic" is exclusively preoccupied with the erotic; although sexual fanfic clearly has a long history, neither the entirety of the genre, nor the exclusive focus of this dissertation, is on the practice of creating same-sex sexual encounters, or otherwise shifting what contours sexual scenarios take. Some of the most notable fanfiction can be found in the emergence of Sherlock fan culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries –fanfictions which seemed to leave behind sexual components altogether. George Elliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, and myriad fans of the original *Sherlock* publications by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Lantagne, 2015; Fries, 2013) all attest to the diverse interests in transformative literature well before the concept of slash, omegaverses (universes where men may become impregnated and sex is impacted by dominance roles as well as normative male/female sexual characteristics), or "hurt/comfort" entered - and, arguably, dominated - the realm of fanfiction, as I'll discuss later. And, as Jamison says, although "none of these earlier literary practices are exactly the equivalent of what we understand as fanfiction today" (p. 35), they still point to a far longer history for the practice of fans extending,
transforming, or elaborating upon existing cultural productions. Thus while authors of these earlier stories may not have widely circulated them or gathered at fan conventions to discuss their writing, while they may not have created “slash” or even have called their writings “fan fiction,” these earlier texts are nonetheless the literary predecessors of the contemporary genre of fan fiction. That this history exists at all is a testament to the urge to transform, to rework, to resignify existing cultural materials that are beloved, but of which something more is desired. It is a history that says that, while “fan fic” may be only decades long in its current iteration (and the concept of the “fan” itself only marginally older), people have been engaging in these (arguably, previously unnamed) fannish practices for far longer.

"Fic" as we think of it today is thus hardly a new genre; it would be difficult to even point to it as a newly studied genre of cultural production, given that Henry Jenkins began using the term "participatory culture" in his work with fan cultures in the 1980's (Brough, Emerson, & Robertson, 2014, p. 382), and both his and Camille Bacon-Smith's germinal works (Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (1992) and Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth (1991), respectively) were published in the early 1990's, two and a half decades ago. The genre - of literary pursuit as well as academic scholarship - has veritably exploded over the past two decades, with a substantial focus on the genre of "slash" fanfiction.

Slashing: Fanfiction’s Queer Histories and Transformations

Despite a comparatively long history of academic examination, the concept of "slash" is still far from established in mainstream culture and everyday lexicons; thus, a brief definition of this particular subset of fanfiction is merited. Although definitions vary from scholar to scholar -
and even within individual works of scholarship - I begin with the definition offered by the fan
writer Joan Martin, as quoted in Jenkins's 2013 volume *Textual Poachers*. She says:

In slash, the protagonists not only love each other but become (or are) lovers. Most
commonly, slash tells first time stories (i.e. stories about the initial sexual encounter
between a particular set of partners), but some stories involve an already established
relationship. Slash includes anything from soft romance to varying amounts of explicit sex.
Sometimes it includes very little but sex… Generally, slash offers strong characters who
are able to cope with their world and who aren't victims of it. It combines love and
sensuality. It may include violence, but warmth and love transcend the violence… It offers
detailed and loving descriptions of beautiful men making love willingly. It presents love as
entailing mutual respect and possible only between equals; sex as a mutually undertaken,
freely chosen, fully conscious interaction; and love and sex together as a source of great joy
to the protagonists (Jenkins, p. 188).

Importantly, Martin offers a number of clear assertions about what slash is - and what it

*isn't*. Foremost, slash (for Martin) is about "love," one which includes "mutual respect… between
equals," and where sex occurs it is "mutually undertaken, freely chosen, fully conscious." I
suggest - as have some others, notably Robin Anne Reid in her 2009 article, "Thrusts in the
Dark: Slasher's Queer Practices," that scenes of sexual non-consent (commonly referred to as
“non-con” or dubiously consensual – “dub-con”), of violence, of promiscuity and portrayals of
non-monogamous sexual expression are not so much proscribed in slash - they're simply ignored,
glossed over by critics in favor of what are celebrated as the more acceptable, less ethically
problematic categories of fanfiction. Martin's definition, while commonly accepted, actually fails
to encompass the breadth of what slash has come to include. Jenkins, in collaboration with
Shoshanna Green and Cynthia Jenkins, notes that, "the relationships are not always romantic, that the characters are not always drawn from other media, and that the central characters are not always male" (2006, p. 63). This opens the realm of acceptable uses of slash even more broadly - gone are the limitations on love, on romance, and even on the gender (male/male, or m/m) of the characters portrayed within. Given the restrictions on what can and cannot be included as "slash," then, the question remains: what is slash?

I draw on Rhiannon Bury, in her 2005 book *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online*, whose discussion of female fan culture approaches a concept that I believe is central to the contemporary body of literature known as "slash." She references the term "queer" as having "a multiplicity of non-normative sexualities, including gay and lesbian, that don't necessarily rely on homosexual practice" (p. 13) and goes on to reference Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's discussion of queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, are made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (Hall, 2003, p. 70). Bury goes on to note that:

making connections with other women, both straight and bisexual, who write about emotional and sexual relationships between male characters written as straight in the primary text is thus less a rejection of gender norms than a rejection of heterosexual norms. These "misalignments" of desire, as represented in slash texts and as experienced and discussed by its readers and writers, are parodic performances as defined by [queer theorist Judith Butler (p. 13).]

Taking my cue then from both Bury and the queer theorists she references (Sedgewick and Judith Butler, notably), I suggest that slash is far from limited by specific gender constraints or
confined to specific sexual or non-sexual practices. Rather, slash is a genre predicated upon dissonances of gender and sexuality, where the modus operandi of its authors necessitates that, whatever else it does, slash challenges, destabilizes, undermines - in effect, queers the established rhetoric (or canon) from which it derives its primary inspiration. I might go so far to suggest, then, that literature that follows a normative path that remains wholly authentic to the gender and sexual presentation within canonical texts - even if that presentation is itself bisexual, homosexual, or otherwise queer - is not actually "slash" fiction. To put it symbolically: we might think of slash as less its original inspiration - that "/" symbol interjected between Kirk and Spock\(^2\) in erotic fanfiction that suddenly put them into same-sex relationships - and more the actual act, the author's oppositional slash-ing apart of established gender and sexual roles. Slash does not just make two formerly straight, cisgender, male characters gay – it makes two characters engage each other in relational modes (whether sexual or romantic) not previously depicted in their canonical texts. Thus we might see two cisgender heterosexual characters rendered in slash as a straight couple with one cis man and one trans woman, as two trans gay men, as two thirds of a polyamorous, panromantic, asexual triad, or in myriad other relationship configurations. And lastly, importantly, the simple act writing “slash” does not ensure that those depictions will be politically transgressive, feminist, or socially justice – it simply means that they will contrast with the canonical representations of sex, gender, and/or sexual orientation.

\(^2\) Kirk and Spock, two characters from *Star Trek: The Original Series*, are believed to be the first fictional characters to be rendered in a “slash” dynamic in fan fiction in the early 1970’s. The term “slash” actually comes from how these stories were originally labeled – “K/S,” the “/” symbol indicating a sexual or romantic relationship between the pair (Jenkins, Greene, & Jenkins, 2006).
Following this definition, the broad category of slash might be said to have origins even farther back than those first published Kirk/Spock zines in the early 1970’s. In *Fic*, Jamison discusses the mystery novelist Rex Stout’s 1941 address to members of the Baker Street Irregulars, a fan society dedicated to Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories. Commonly referred to as “tongue-in-cheek,” Stout nonetheless puts forth a radical reimagining of both a main character in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon, as well as a reading of the main characters’ relationship that scholars today might justifiably read as “queering.” Jamison says that Stout’s speech made waves with this close reading, finding abundant evidence in "The Sacred Writings" of Watson's female gender in her nagging Holmes about drugs and smoking and pestering him to talk - and if that weren't enough, "Imagine a man asking another man to play him some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder* on a violin!" (p. 45).

While Stout’s treatment of Watson (and the latter’s relationship with Holmes) is certainly, as mentioned above and in other recounting of his speech, intended as a tongue-in-cheek jest, it is nonetheless an early example of the phenomenon of “genderswapping,” a slash sub-genre wherein one or more character’s gender(s) changes from those assigned in canonical text. The practice is one that has gained momentum in recent years in online fan communities, where postings of “genderswap,” “genderbending,” and “genderswitching” fan stories have prompted heated discussions from bloggers across multiple fandoms.

**Genderbending, Trans Fanfiction, and Community Dissent**

As noted above, the phenomenon of genderswapping is hardly a new one in either literature more broadly, or fanfiction specifically. Stout hinted at a genderswapped John Watson in the *Sherlock* series, and *Elementary*, a recent CBS rendition of the *Sherlock* lore, features Lucy Liu in the role of Dr. Joan Watson. More broadly, speculative fiction (fiction which includes fantasy
or science-fiction elements) as a genre has a long history of challenging binary and static gender roles, from Ursula K. LeGuin’s “potentials,” who change their sex periodically in order to reproduce (2000), to Iain M. Banks’s *Culture* series, where although sex is still binary, characters can fully change it at will (1997). Within the world of fanfiction, however, the notion of genderswap – or “genderbending” as it is sometimes called – has a relatively specific use, one which is capable of both teasing at non-normative possibilities and reinforcing cissexist, binary understanding of sex and gender.

Problematically, the term “genderswap” often has very little to do with the concept of gender as it is commonly understood among queer, feminist, and trans theorists, as evidenced by this definition of the practice on the community-run encyclopedia *Fanlore*:

Genderswap is a fanfiction and fanart trope in which one or more characters switch binary sexes, such as depicting a male character as a cis woman. Genderswap as a term actually covers several different fandom tropes. In fanart, it often indicates works in which the fan artist depicts a binary-gendered character as a cis person of a different gender. Genderswap fic is a subset of the more general genderfuck type of fic and can include several different scenarios. In one, a "swap" of the character's sex is usually carried out by some magical or technological device, making the trope popular in sci-fi or fantasy stories. In most genderswap stories, the character is restored to their original sex by the end, although some stories consciously subvert this trope. As in fanart, though, sometimes a genderswap fic involves writing a binary-gendered character as a cis person of a different gender (Genderswap, 2015).
Notably, the dominant mechanic in genderswap – one character changing their physical body, while retaining their gendered subjectivity – is at odds with the term itself, suggesting that gender identity and sexual embodiment are one and the same. When a character is identified as “genderswapped,” more commonly, the actual result is that their physical sex has changed, while their mental, emotional, and psychological understanding of their internal gender has not. Such conflations have been roundly criticized by queer, trans, and gender activists within the fan community. Among such critics was the blogger and fic writer Sherrold, who in a Livejournal entry posed the question:

Hey, why do we call that kind of story "genderswaps"? They aren't swapping gender -- they're swapping biological sex. Admittedly, in most cases, they then make some sort of half-assed effort to acquire new gender habits and reflexes...maybe that's why? We're more interested in the part of the story where they're trying to acquire the new gender than we are in the part where they're suddenly a new sex, and that's why we call them genderswaps rather than sexswaps? (Sherrold, 2008).

Others, meanwhile, have taken the enduring concept of “genderswap” within fandom to initiate a dialogue about trans identities, to not only interrogate the meaning of the specific term “genderbend” but to call into question the harm such a concept can have on the broader fan community, which increasingly includes out, self-identified trans, genderqueer, and gender non-binary authors, commentators, artists and independent scholars. Avery, author of the blog “Just Messing,” responded to a series of comments in an exchange about writing “genderbend” with zir own brief essay on the topic. In response to another blogger and fanfic author’s earlier comments questioning the concept of “genderswapping” as transphobic, Avery notes that:
It has a lot of potential to be a positive thing. However. There is literally only one way we ever see this word used… you almost NEVER see genderbend used to describe anything besides ‘female character is now male’ and vice versa. Which is binary-upholding, erasing everything that isn’t these two genders, and transphobic…

Genderbent is not being used to its proper potential, whatsoever. And it’s a shame. To me, the word has been soiled because of how absurdly often people use it to uphold the false gender binary. If the word were actually used to change a character’s presentation to something that showed an agendered person or a genderfluid person or a trans* person, or just anything that isn’t cis woman and cis man, then this would be a different story.

The word itself isn’t transphobic, but the way it is used the overwhelming majority of the time is transphobic, or at the very least cissexist (Avery, 2015).

I tend to echo Avery’s understanding of the standard implementation of “genderbending” as being problematic at the very least; as Avery suggests, character’s bodies being “switched” or “swapped” to have a different sex (one which is almost always identified as the “opposite” sex, male bodies turn into female bodies, female bodies turn into male bodies) ultimately serves to reinforce binary gender constructs, especially when done uncritically or without substantive engagement in the character’s psychological, emotional, and intellectual understanding of their identity, gendered and otherwise. Stories in which characters’ behaviors start to change simply by virtue of their transformed sex serve to further entrench both binary gender roles and essentialized ideologies around gender – if a coarse, uncaring, suspicious male character suddenly becomes friendly, nurturing, and trusting simply by virtue of the shift in their physical
embodiment, then the author has effectively put forth an argument that these personality traits are inherently gendered.

In addition to my exploration of the practice of genderbending/genderswap fanfiction, it is my hope that my work will engage critically with topics that have heretofore had minimal scholarly inquiry in the past: what are the implications of “race swapping” a character, depending on the way the author attempts it? In what ways are fans finding both literary and sexual value in discussions and depictions of male-male sexual reproduction? And importantly why does it matter that (and how) readers engage with authors of fanfic, whether through comments, transformative works of their own, or fanart inspired by the texts? While there have been brief explorations of all of the topics discussed herein in other texts, I hope for my dissertation to serve as an in-depth discussion of each practice, and to highlight such practices in their diversity, focusing neither exclusively on the “good” (conventionally well-written and/or socially transgressive) texts, nor on the “bad” (less conventionally well-written or incorporating stereotypical or oppressive practices and ideologies) stories, but rather offering examples of each. In this way, I hope to put forth a more well-rounded portrait of different fan sub-cultures, as well as to highlight the ways that they engage with one another beyond the initial publication of their stories. As a field, much of fan studies has concerned itself with questions of authorial gender – specifically, the question of why so many women are writing fan fiction. While I question this assumption in the first place (as I’ll discuss in one fan-initiated study below, gender in fan culture is far more diverse than many scholars give credit), I also suggest that there may be questions more fruitful in analyzing participatory culture – instead of asking, “why is a woman writing this?” my line of inquiry asks, “what is the impact of what this person has written?” In this way, I hope to build upon existing scholarship by theorists like Kristina Busse, whose
exploration of the origins of mpreg and omegaverse fan fiction lays the groundwork for my own discussion of the contemporary moment in such genres, as well as questions about what the future of these genres might entail.

**Methods and Methodologies**

As a hybrid phenomenon, the fan fiction and fan communities I am studying cannot easily be approached through a singular method. Rather, my approach is a hybrid one, incorporating diverse frameworks to approach different components of the project. I have endeavored to incorporate a feminist methodological approach to all of my research, whether that research included textual analysis, cyber-ethnography, or other research methods. One of my challenges has been to articulate a methodological approach which is both aligned with my American Culture Studies background and which respects my strong desire to undertake feminist research; although the two might seem often to complement each other, I have found the former field less disposed to espouse explicitly preferred methodologies, rather favoring the concepts of discourse analysis and literary criticism, when methods were discussed at all (not to mention their ideological predecessor, methodologies). Even in 2016, I find myself agreeing with Michael Pickering, who nearly a decade ago noted that “there has long been a reluctance to bring any explicit discussion of methods and methodology into cultural studies” (2008, p. 1). Pickering goes on to note that the field has heavily relied on textual analysis – one of my own primary methods in this dissertation, as I’ll discuss below – as well as a tendency toward robust theoretical analysis and criticism. He suggests that this is in part due to cultural studies tradition of repudiating established or rigidly prescribed methodological frameworks in favor of the hybrid, interdisciplinary, and non-traditional (Pickering, 2008).
Although I don’t dispute Pickering’s claim about the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies in regards to methodologies, my own hybrid approach is guided more by a feminist perspective, one inspired by the writings of feminist, queer, and women of color theorists who articulate theories of scholarship, research, and activism that incorporate as a central component an oppositional consciousness, an approach which Chela Sandoval suggests is “capable of aligning such divided theoretical domains,” like U.S. third world feminist scholarship, postcolonial criticism, and queer theory, “into intellectual and political coalition” (2000, pp. 69--70). I follow Sandoval’s rejection of what she identifies as an emerging academic apartheid in favor of a theoretical and methodological position which joins multiple methods and methodologies in a theoretical, methodological, and political approach to scholarship which challenges not only sexism, but racism, colonialism, neo-liberalism and heterosexism, and to which I would include a rejection of cissexism, a topic this dissertation will address at multiple points. Underlying all of my research is a desire to engage in what Luce Irigaray described as “jamming the theoretical machinery,” a desire summarized by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Patricia Leavy, and Michelle L. Yaiser which seeks not to

reconstruct another view of the social world (an exercise in power and colonization) but rather to unravel the social processes and relations that have constructed the social world in hierarchical ways. This process is a new form of political creation that occurs by creating resistant to dominant knowledge and then allowing that resistance to disrupt the social system thereby necessitating change (2004, p. 19).
Cyberethnography

I would be remiss in attempting an ethnographic study of this unique community without also highlighting the important contributions of those who pioneered this form of research, and especially those whose work in queer spaces and engaging with queer politics, narratives, and theories helped challenge heterosexism within digital communities and spaces. Specifically, I am indebted to scholars like Kate O’Riordan (2002, 2007) and Elizabeth H. Bassett (2002), whose discussion of their ethnographic work with “Gaygirls.com” in 2000 provided an early ethical framework for the intersection of cyberethnography and LGBTQ populations and spaces. Another work of O’Riordan’s, her 2007 chapter “Queer Theories and Cybersubjects: Intersecting Figures” in the collection *Queer Online*, offered a useful history of the practice of presenting gender online differently from how it is assigned/presented by individuals offline/in physical interactions. She discusses the “continued anxieties about authenticity online,” and then goes on to contrast these anxieties with highlighting trans narratives where there is an experience of the body as a “site of deceit” (O’Riordan refers to this as “wrong body narratives” - I would simply describe it as gender dysphoria) (p. 22). She then goes on to explain how these cyber representations, “separated from the morphology of the body,” operate as “site[s] of authenticity” - essentially, that trans individuals may be able to ameliorate dysphoria feelings by inhabiting spaces where their gender identity is consistent with their gender as it is (re)presented in a given space (Ibid). In considering my own worries about whether authors were depicting “authentic” representations of trans- and non-binary embodied experiences, such narratives proved a useful reminder both to avoid assumptions about the author’s own experience, and that authenticity itself is complex and shifting and cannot be “owned” by any single individual or group. In this way, I was able to approach texts with a more open mind, and to allow for the possibility of
authentic representations from authors of diverse identities. Other valuable contributors to the field include David Phillips (2007), Jenny Sunden (2003), Lisa Nakamura (2007), Tom Boellstorff (2008), and Chris Ashford (2009), whose writings (whether on the subject of cyberethnography or utilizing cyberethnography in their work) provide valuable guideposts for would-be cyberethnographers to follow, including myself.

**Textual Analysis**

One of the major components of this research project is the collection and analysis of diverse fan-generated texts, which I have explored and coded for ideological and sociological meaning. I include as “texts” any iteration created in relation to the topics being discussed; this includes posts on Tumblr, comments on Tumblr blogs and on Archive of Our Own stories, fan-created art posted both on Tumblr and AO3, fan-created stories and fan-conducted interviews, as well as postings featuring only static or moving images (GIFs) meant to convey meaning. Additionally, I have included as texts all of the *paratextual* elements associated with the above texts: tags posted at the bottom of Tumblr entries, content warnings posted at the top of AO3 stories, and footnotes, endnotes, and author notes (or A/N’s) are all fan-created texts which I have selected for inclusion in my analysis. At the moment I write this, I have identified just over 3,000 unique texts; although the bulk of them are brief comments or blog entries, some, such as the fan stories included for discussion, incorporate many chapters or even many “volumes,” some having been collected into online series of stories.

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3 Although I’ll delve into paratext and paratextuality in greater length in the following chapter, for the purposes of this introduction paratext can best be defined as all those visual (written or graphically depicted) components which surround a text (either immediately, as in the foreword / title page / editor’s introduction to a book, or secondarily, as in popularly read reviews, etc.).
Following Martin Baker, I acknowledge that one of the potential pitfalls of attempting an analysis of certain texts, often in the name of discourse analysis, is that the researcher may select texts relevant only to their interests or particular project, forgoing those that may contradict them (Barker, 2008). To this end, I have instead read the top 20 English-language stories in each fandom and sub-genre, when sorted by “kudos” (an AO3-implemented measurement of popularity, wherein fans can give a “kudos” to a story to indicate their enjoyment of the text), selecting one or two among these for analysis based on both comment participation, uniqueness of concept or content (did the authors do something unusual for the genre? Did they mix/mingle tropes, themes, or genres in unconventional or challenging ways?), and availability of narrative content to analyze. In this way, I hope to mitigate the problem of choosing texts that are only relevant to myself as the analyst; by default, the entire body of texts I will be examining are those that the community members themselves have already selected as valuable fan creations.

In each chapter, I analyze both commenting responses and Tumblr postings using parallel codes for theme, where possible. Given that each group of texts presents distinct methodological challenges, I address these issues (such as criteria for selection) in greater detail in each substantive chapter. In some chapters – notably, Chapters 3 and 4 – I also offer an extended textual analysis of the stories themselves, discussing relevant themes, ideological frameworks at play within the worlds where the stories take place, and the presence of transgressive political discourse vis a vis structures of gender, sex, sexual orientation, and reproduction. Additionally, because I recognize that a wholly transgressive text is unlikely, I have made a point of undertaking a rigorous critique of each text, exploring where feminist and queer political frameworks may be undermined by language, themes, or imagery that reinforce sexism,
cissexism, heterosexism or racism, or further marginalize underrepresented subjectivities and experiences.

**Survey**

Initially, I planned to analyze surveys of fan fiction participants. Due to a very low response rate (37 respondents out of several hundred anticipated), I did not feel responses collected were substantive enough to warrant discussion on behalf of a much larger community of writers, artists, and readers. In the conclusion, I further discuss both the creation and release of the survey, some of the interesting findings that the limited number of respondents did yield, as well as my specific plans to revise and rethink my approach to an updated survey in the future.

**Relevance**

The question that lingers at the end of such a proposed exploration is perhaps the most obvious one: why does this matter? In genres of fanfiction already marginalized within their fandoms, what import is there in highlighting such radically niche texts (especially when decades have already been spent discussing fanfiction – even slash fanfiction)? Why does it matter how fans are engaging with each other and the texts they are creating, if these discussions, debates, and dialogues are only ever encountered by those within their fandoms?

The answers to these remain, for me, in the silences that have been sustained within fan studies around these issues. Niche texts, like those dealing with omegaverses, genderbending and genderswapping, consent and non-consent, are created within and celebrated by vital, thriving communities, providing spaces where writers are *most likely* to test the boundaries of gender, to insert trans and genderswapped subjects. Transgender characters are still far from commonplace in mainstream media, and although visibility is increasing for both characters and transgender
people themselves, representation is scarce at best. And yet, within fanfiction communities, online discussion is perhaps most vibrant and passionate specifically about these issues; while more conventional slash fanfiction may be beloved by fans, it is these subcultures – atypically gendered, sexually transformed, sometimes loved, and very often loathed – that prompt the fiercest debates within their fandoms.

Here, too, is the importance of studying these discussions themselves: they call into question previous assumptions about the gender identity, sex, and sexual orientation of the authors, commentators, and participants in fan cultures. Jenkins, in his updated 2013 edition of *Textual Poachers*, comments on the phenomenon of “academic accounts” which “seem preoccupied with the question of why straight women write stories about gay male characters, seeing slash as an appropriation of queerness.” He then acknowledges – a fact supported by fan-initiated studies of the same period (Lulu, 2013) – that “in fact, lesbian and bisexual women have always participated alongside straight women in slash fandom, and people of all sexual orientations have found slash a place for exploring their differences and commonalities” (p. 64).

The above-mentioned study by fan blogger Lulu of the blog “The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars” was a survey of 10,005 fans whose results were posted in late 2013. Lulu, herself an author of nearly 90 works on AO3, launched the census specifically targeting fans who were members of *Archive of Our Own*; by the time the survey closed, she had collected over ten thousand responses. Among the demographic information revealed in the study, Lulu found that only between 25% and 38% of all “slash” fans identify as both “female” and “heterosexual,” while only 29% of respondents overall identified as “heterosexual” (the next most common were “bisexual” at 23% and “pansexual” at 12%). Perhaps more interesting, she noted that while those who identified as “female” made up 80% of survey respondents, that left 20% choosing other
(and sometimes multiple) options, including 6% selecting “genderqueer”, 4% selecting “male”, and the remaining 10% spread between “transgender,” “androgynous,” “neutrois,” “agender,” and “other.” The presence here of trans, genderqueer, and non-normatively gendered fanfiction authors calls into question previous assumptions about the gender and sexual orientation of fandom’s diverse population, suggesting that those who engage with these creations are now more diverse – and more visible – than they have been at any other time in the study of fanfiction.

Her study likewise contested the image of fanfiction authors as exclusively white, showing that while 76% of survey respondents did self-identify as “White,” 7% identified as Asian, 5% as each “Hispanic/Latino/Latina” and “Mixed/Multiple,” 2% as “Black” and “Other,” and a final 1% identifying as either “Native American” or “Pacific Islander.” It is, coincidentally, a time when the discussion about fandom’s diversity seems to be the most missing: there have been few studies published about racial diversity in fan communities, and seemingly fewer about actual fan engagement with concepts around ethnicity, race, and nationality. Even Lulu’s own study seems to ignore the issue of race among her respondents; while she has analyzed demographics around sexuality and gender identity at length, examining their relationship to each other as well as within various genres of fanfiction, no parallel examination of the racial demographic of her respondents – as they intersect with gender and sexual orientation, as they relate to fandoms, or to genres of fanfiction – has been posted in the nearly two years since her results were first released.

I suggest that through effectively erasing fans of color from the body of data considered relevant for discussion, through a persistent disengagement with characters of color within canon and fanfiction texts, scholars and members of fan communities are perpetuating systems of white
privilege and further marginalizing fans of color. In my discussion of genderbending in Chapter 3, I hope to address some of these silences, specifically with regard to the potentiality of race changing and fans’ own reactions to the politics of race within their texts; of the six texts discussed in the chapter, two incorporate characters whose races were altered from the canonical text, and each addresses these racialized characters in very different ways. It had been my hope, initially, to incorporate survey data sufficient to demonstrate a more diverse fandom than is generally acknowledged by critics of the genre; however, given flaws in both survey design and advertisement, I felt the resulting data (as I mentioned above, there were only 37 respondents) was insufficient to make any sort of broad-based claims about the diversity (or lack thereof) of fan communities. I plan, in future research, to revisit this survey, to substantially alter it to be both more inclusive and more accessible to wider audiences. Despite these failures, it is my hope that through shedding light on some of the ways that fans have problematically (or positively) engaged with concepts of race and racialization, that I might encourage both future scholars and future fans to think more critically about the assumptions made about race, as well as the way it is deployed in fan creations.

**Chapter Outline**

**Chapter 1: Paratextuality, Epitextuality, and Intra-Fandom Engagement**

In this chapter, I explore the concept of paratext as it occurs on and around fanfiction, and its ensuing impact upon perceived meaning. Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, in her article “The Paratext of Fan Fiction,” (Leavenworth, 2015) builds upon the work of the French literary theorist Gérard Genette to explore the way that paratextual content includes both the elements immediately adjacent to/surrounding fanfiction – things like comments, tags, author notes
(commonly shortened to A/N or A/Ns) – as well as fan-contributed content, like popular fanart or podfics, comments posted directly on the AO3 stories, and critical feedback in blogs. Genette believed that paratextual elements could inform the reading of the texts themselves, since readers often first encounter and read the paratext prior to tackling the texts themselves.

Wendymarlowe’s story “Dear John” was, in the author’s words, “a bit of an experiment,” written as a hybrid epistolary series of sixty-four chapters that included everything from text message exchanges to emails to instant messages between characters, all updated in “real time” and taking place between November of 2014 and February of 2015. The story quickly gained a massive following – to date, “Dear John” has over 6500 comments and is among the top ten most-commented-upon stories on AO3 – and has generated hundreds of fan-created blog postings on Tumblr. Immediately following the publication of “Dear John,” Wendymarlowe published a series of companion stories, each incorporating a more traditional third-person narrative structure to “fill in” gaps in the epistolary about the encounters between Watson and Sherlock at the culmination of “Dear John” (2015). These subsequent stories also met with a tremendous amount of fan participation, with nearly 700 comments posted on one story alone (which only consisted of three chapters, a fraction as many as in the original work) and several Tumblr postings and fan creations. Wendymarlowe’s story is notable here because of how fervent fans were in pleading with the author – via comments as well as blog posts contesting what they saw as undertones of dub-con and non-con in an otherwise consensual love story. Emblematic of these concerns are the words of Cupid, who in a February 9, 2015 posting to her blog (in between one update to Wendymarlowe’s sequel and another) discusses the experience of simultaneously feeling like they are entitled to have and voice and opinion on the texts while still acknowledging that the author has “the final say.”
This chapter explores the relationship between the original fanfiction and its epi- and paratextual complements, as well as the way those components shaped and inspired further transformations of the text (via the “fixit” and subsequent fan creations inspired by Wendymarlowe’s original text). Here, I identify both the importance and frequency of fan engagement with fan-created texts, up to and including fans having a sense of agency in determining how authors craft their stories; while “Dear John” and “The Apology” are perhaps some of the most prominent recent examples of this, the phenomenon of fan critique and engagement is an altogether frequent one.

Chapter 2: Genderbending in *The Hobbit*

As discussed above, the concept of “genderswapping” and “genderbending” are hardly new to literature – gender play and transformation have a long history in science fiction and other genres, as well as that early treatment of Sherlock by Rex Stout. This chapter will draw on scholarship on gender, trans identities and experiences, and queer theory, as well as the limited work already available on “genderswap” fanfiction to examine the way genderswap has emerged within the *Hobbit* fandom. Within this community, authors regularly pen alternate telling of Tolkien’s story featuring characters whose genders and sexes diverge from those portrayed in the source material. Thus, Bilbo is often presented as “Bilba” or “Billa” (or sometimes even just “Bilbo”), a cisgender, heterosexual hobbit who encounters her love interest in the character of Thorin Oakenshield. Interestingly, genderswap fanfiction in this genre overwhelmingly leans toward changing the sex of one character – Bilbo – and very rarely of his/her love interest, Thorin. For this reason, I will be exploring multiple texts from within the genre, including one each where Bilbo and Thorin have been “swapped.”
Discussions of “genderswap” necessarily must include attention to the presence – or absence – of trans experience and narratives. Commonly within genderswapped or genderbent fanfictions, characters will simply wake up one morning in a body sexed differently from that they had grown up in and identified with; much to his chagrin, Captain Kirk may learn that that strange fruit consumed on an alien planet actually causes one to “swap” sexes, while the titular character in Indiana Jones might be roused one morning to find the religious relic he’d obtained had the unexpected magical side effect of changing his sex. Within the Hobbit fandom, however, characters are overwhelmingly cisgender, never experiencing the dysphoric sensations common in other genres where, through magic, technology, or fate, characters “wake up” or are transformed into other (usually binary) sexes. In genderswap fanfiction in The Hobbit, characters overwhelmingly fit into one of two categories: they are either born identified as one of two binary genders, never experiencing any incongruousness between their embodiment and their gendered subjectivity; or they are actual transgender characters, who may – or may not – have undertaken various degrees of gender transition prior to or during the story portrayed in the text. While other genres do have transgender characters, I have yet to find any other fandom where the presence of “genderswap” is also marked by the relative absence of the “magical transformation” plot device; while these are present, they seem to be by far in the minority.

For this reason, I focus in this chapter on some of the Hobbit fan stories that feature or explicitly acknowledge transgender characters; here, I’ve analyzed one story for each major character (Bilbo and Thorin), as well as the paratext and epitext surrounding these stories. My interests are twofold: first, I have attempted to highlight the ways in which genderswap fanfiction often ends up reinforcing normative gender roles and erasing trans identity, as well as how its parallel, trans fanfiction, encourages acceptance of and legitimizes those with
transgender life experiences and identities. Second, through comments and commentary collected through both blog postings and comments, I have highlighted the impact that participation in this sub-genre can have, encouraging new understandings of gender and sex.

Chapter 3: Male Reproduction and Omegaverses in *Sherlock* and *The Hobbit*

Perhaps one of the least-studied corners of any fandom, the genre of Omegaverse fanfiction has only recently gained mainstream media attention. In these universes, both gender and sex can be read as multi-layered, or at the very least, less binary – women may be born Alpha, Beta, or Omega, and men as well may be born as either Alpha, Beta, or Omega. Alphas, as a sex, are only capable of impregnating other Betas and Omegas and may never themselves be impregnated; they are dominant, aggressive, powerful, and often physically intimidating. Omegas – usually coded as the “opposite” of Alphas – may only ever be impregnated, and are biologically incapable of impregnating other Omegas or Betas (the latter of which occupy a space in between – their sex/gender configuration fits most closely with what we might consider conventional heteronormative ideals); like Alphas, Omegas are associated with a specific array of physical, emotional, and intellectual traits, including being more physically weak and delicate, more nurturing, and intuitively submissive.

My interests in this unique alternate universe - and others in these fandoms where reproduction is not limited to a traditional, binary, even sexual intercourse - are multiple, and at times conflicting. To begin with, I explore the concept of reproduction, the celebration of male pregnancy and childbirth as well as the way cultural scripts within these alternate universes celebrate, rather than vilify, male pregnancy and same-sex parenting units. This genre is compelling for me in part because it is so absent from academic discussions of slash; while the
violence and consent issues in “hurt/comfort” have been discussed, as have the fetishization of gay men and even the transphobia implicit in some genderswap fanfiction, academics have remained almost universally silent on the phenomenon of Omegaverse.

In addition, there is a troubling trend of biological essentialism interwoven through much of the fanfiction that has emerged in the male reproduction, male pregnancy (often shortened to “mpreg”), omegaverse, and alternate-parenting genres. Such fictions often (though not always) incorporate normatively gendered parenting roles; the parent who becomes impregnated is loving, submissive, gentle and nurturing, while the parent who impregnates is often aggressive, dominant, powerful, and physically imposing. Those who embody an “omega” gender are often inescapably oriented toward pregnancy and birth, to the point that these fictions are often tagged “dub-con” – because while intellectually, psychologically, and emotionally, a character may not wish to mate or become pregnant, their bodies often cannot help themselves. What are the consequences of an alternatively gendered universe whose rules regarding gender performance and reproduction may be even more rigid than those found in everyday culture?

Finally, I discuss how members of this fan community interact with such concepts, both in the fanfiction and fanart they write and produce and in the comments and blog entries written about such content. For all the criticism volleyed at non-consensual fanfiction, slash fanfiction as fetishizing, and genderbending fanfiction as erasing, thus far fannish engagement with the harsh political landscapes in these universes has been surprisingly absent from online discussions. In this chapter, I explore the limited instances of critical fan engagement with omegaverse and mpreg fanfiction and discuss why I believe these critical utterances are so rare in the genre.
Conclusion

In my conclusion, I touch again briefly on existing chapters, summarizing findings and highlighting areas where, despite the research undertaken, there may still be silences and omissions in the text. Given the limited scope of the project, I have also discussed other emerging research which, though related, was not able to be included in this essay – notably, an abundance of scholarship on queerness in particular fandoms, such as *Supernatural* and *Doctor Who*, the two remaining fandoms in the “Holy Trinity” mentioned earlier. Finally, I briefly highlight the questions still lingering – topics related to this dissertation that still need exploration, and areas that fandom in general – and fan studies in particular – have, so far, left untouched.
CHAPTER 1: PARATEXTUALITY, EPITEXTUALITY, AND INTRA-FANDOM ENGAGEMENT

The concept of paratext, first put forward by the French theorist Gerard Genette in his 1997 *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, describes elements normally positioned in close proximity to the text of a given story that (whether subtly or overtly) serve to frame how the reader approaches the story and impact the meanings drawn from the text. In the wake of Genette’s work, several theorists have expanded upon the idea of paratext to examine the way that it operates in modern culture, with some even suggesting that the paratexts of unique genres, such as fanfiction, can serve to reinforce authorial intent in an era when that intent is regularly questioned, if not dismissed entirely. Here I explore the work of one fan author, Wendymarlowe, the community that grew around two Sherlock-inspired fanfics she posted in between 2014 and 2015, and the way fan engagement constituted a unique paratext which, whether directly adjacent or not, helped to shape both the form of the text and the way that new readers approached that text.

**What is Paratext?**

In 1987, the French literary theorist Gerard Genette published his text *Seuils*, which was later translated and re-released in 1997 as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. In *Paratexts*, Genette defines and explores the concept of paratext. He first approaches the notion of paratext by exploring the broader concept of a literary work and the various components which any given work includes. “A literary work consists,” Genette says, “…of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance” (Genette, 1997, p. 1). He notes, however, that the text is very rarely presented
"unadorned" – “unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations,” but rather that the text is nearly always located near “accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, [and which] constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's paratext” (ibid.). The paratext is determined, to some degree, by its proximity to the text itself; practically, Genette asserts that a paratextual element,

...at least if it consists of a message that has taken on material form, necessarily has a location that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance. Within the same volume are such elements as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles or certain notes (pp. 4-5).

Although elements such as preface, notes, titles and even noted critical reviews or commentary may at first seem trivially important in comparison to the content of the text itself, Genette actually suggests that the paratext provides a critical framework through which we approach and make meaning of the text. He argues that

More a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or - a word Borges used apropos of a preface - a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse
about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the printed text” (p. 1).

Far from mere “adornments,” then, paratextual (and, Genette goes on to argue later, epitextual) elements have tremendous impact upon “one’s whole reading of the printed text.” Genette goes on to explore the various paratextual components that contribute to this threshold through which we understand the text, among them multiple chapters dedicated to presentation and impact of the publisher’s own paratext (such as formatting, covers, title pages, etc.), the name of the author as it is presented, titles, dedications and inscriptions, epigraphs, prefaces, notes and more. Although many – though perhaps not all – of these paratextual elements have parallel structures within fan fiction, Genette’s discussion of the “epitext” is most striking in its fannish iteration, and one which subsequent scholars have built upon to explore related concepts of metatext and epitext.

The relationship between paratext and epitext is at times unclear – given epitextual elements may eventually come to be incorporated into the text itself, it seems, in Genette’s understanding, to be largely a case of proximity to the published body of the text, together with the attached paratextual components. Specifically, he notes that,

The criterion distinguishing the epitext from the peritext⁴ - that is (according to our conventions), distinguishing the epitext from all the rest of the paratext - is in theory purely spatial. The epitext is any paratextual element not materially appended to the text.

⁴ Genette uses “epitext” to describe all of the paratextual content that is not directly adjacent to the text, and “peritext” to describe the paratextual content that is adjacent to the text. However, as his writing goes on, he at times uses “peritext” and “paratext” interchangeably – for this purpose, I use “paratext” both as an umbrella term that includes both epitext and peritext, and to refer to peritext itself (see Fig. 1 and 2 as examples).
within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space. The location of the epitext is therefore anywhere outside the book - but of course nothing precludes its later admission to the peritext (p. 344).

The author specifies four different kinds of epitext – publisher’s, semiofficial allographic, public authorial and private authorial – and though all can arguably be identified as having their counterparts in fan fiction, for the purposes of this discussion I focus primarily on the category public authorial. For Genette, this incorporates a wide-ranging body of texts, from interviews with the author to extended conversations, authorial responses to reviews, and colloquia and small-group discussions. Importantly, although each of these forms of epitextual engagement have relevance for fan fiction, the actual form they take in contemporary online fan communities varies greatly from that put forth by Genette, both in understood “proximity” to the text (how, after all, do we measure proximity in virtual spaces?) and in Genette’s proposed idea of in-person synchronous communication. Originally published in the French in 1987, Genette’s discussion of epitext existed prior to the availability of the first mainstream internet service providers; online commenting and rapid, near-synchronous long-distance critique and discussion was not yet a readily available form of discussion for authors.

Epitext, Fanfiction, and Fans as Critics

In her January 2015 article, “The Paratext of Fan Fiction,” Maria Lindgren Leavenworth draws upon Genette’s frameworks for paratext and epitextuality to consider the way that such literary phenomena can be understood in the context of fan fiction (Leavenworth, 2015). Through a close analysis of one fan fiction and its paratextual and epitextual components, Leavenworth demonstrates that although both genre and medium may be vastly different from
those explored within Genette’s *Paratexts*, the core concepts remain intact. In fan fiction as in
traditional literary publications, paratext and epitext both frame the way we approach the text
itself – and thus, impact the meaning we draw from it.

The story in which Leavenworth explores these themes is CavalierQueen’s 2009 fic
*Paradise Within: Happier Far*, which takes place in an alternate universe inspired by the *True
Blood* television series, itself based on *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series by Charlaine
Harris. Although Leavenworth briefly summarizes the plot of the story, she makes a point of
noting that

rather than analyzing the progression of the story, the potentially productive departure
from the canon, and the intertextual relationships it bears to other fictions, I focus on
paratextual features such as filing options, tags, Author Notes (A/Ns), and an epitextual
conversation between CavalierQueen and her readers (p. 34).

Although Leavenworth *is* exploring elements initially outlined by Genette for traditional print
text, she is also establishing that many of the paratextual elements present here (in both
CavalierQueen’s story specifically and more broadly in online fan fiction) operate in ways far
different from those outlined in *Paratexts*. Among the many different functions of paratext in fan
fiction, Leavenworth notes that fanfiction – and its paratexts – constitute “a contemporary
development” which “underscore[s] an altered author function and the possibilities for
repeatedly enforcing specific lines of interpretation” (p. 42). Although Genette’s argument that
paratext still serves to structure “relations with the public,” in fan fiction that relationship
becomes a seemingly more intimate one, in which the author’s “public” comes to have a more
substantial role in the writing and re-writing of the text itself than traditional literary “publics”
might be said to have (Genette, p. 14).
As mentioned by Leavenworth above, she is especially focused on what she identifies as the epitextual portion of *CavalierQueen*’s work, defined as “the dialogic relation between fan author and fan reader” (Leavenworth, p. 42). Leavenworth argues that these dialogues “emphasize the collaborative nature of specific forms of online creativity, and gesture to a collapse between public and private which is integral to communal writing, belied by the supposedly anonymous digital environment” (p. 42). She highlights the author’s comments in the A/N section at the beginning of later chapters as an example of where dialogue is tacitly invited by CavalierQueen, juxtaposing this with Genette’s understanding of the postface, which he says is meant “to fulfill only curative, or corrective, function” (Genette, p. 239). On the contrary, for Leavenworth the A/N serves as a point for creative collaboration:

As late as in the A/Ns for chapter 22 she writes, "I'm having trouble figuring out what happens after the next couple of chapters." The serial structure and the opportunity to direct the reader onwards mean that the postface […] plays a different role. The text is not finished, and readers reacting negatively to some aspects may be rewarded by alteration in the next chapter. If information seems to be missing, CavalierQueen can add it, and if there is any indication that interpretations move in other directions than the one she intends, she protects herself from criticism by forcefully demonstrating precisely how her appropriation is to be received (p. 52).

Thus, she argues “complete control over the text is periodically abandoned as readers’ reactions either influence the path it takes or determine how the text needs to be refashioned to meet expectations or remedy a lack of knowledge” (p. 52). Leavenworth notes that there are generational and philosophical differences which have caused Genette’s original supposition – that paratext largely serves as an illocutionary force by which the reading and meaning of the
The modern insistence on individual readers determining the meaning of a text has naturally diminished authorial control in original prefaces, but the situation is almost completely overturned in the fanfic. CavalierQueen’s use of the paratextual space foregrounds her own lines of interpretation and the reader is not assumed as much as identified. (ibid.).

Thus where paratext may have little impact on traditional, non-fan texts (at least their authorial intent), for Leavenworth fan fiction actually gives the author a greater ability to guide the reading of the text. Undeniably, the process of meaning-making is more collaborative than outlined in Genette’s *Paratexts*, but Leavenworth’s study of CavalierQueen’s fic suggests that there exists a “communal foundation of fan fiction in general and Paradise Within in particular” (Leavenworth, p. 53).

Finally – and importantly, here, for distinguishing one of the major differences between epitext as it appears in relation to mainstream texts versus fan fiction – Leavenworth comments briefly on the spatial relationship between epitextual elements for both CavalierQueen’s fic and fan fiction in general. The point she makes is brief – only part of a sentence in relationship to a broader discussion about the communal nature of epitext and the writing of fan fiction – but one I suggest has greater import than initially acknowledged. Of comments left on stories, Leavenworth notes that, “it could be argued that this part of the epitextual conversation is, in fact, part of the paratext (it comments on the text itself)” (p. 54). This difference alone indicates a
marked difference from Genette’s previous understanding of epitext as necessarily originating outside the body of the text; on the contrary, comments are rarely copied and amended to the document’s paratext after authorial review. Rather, these epitextual engagements are part and parcel of the rest of the work’s paratext, usually appearing after the text itself, as well as the other author-contributed paratextual elements like Author Notes, tags, and ratings; comments are not distantly recognized supplements to the text but actually text-adjacent complements. Figure 1 below illustrates the impact relationship between epitext, text, and paratext in traditional publications (left) and in fanfiction (right).\(^5\)

\[\text{Figure 1. Comparing proximity and impact of epitext and paratext upon texts; at left, a representation of the impact relationship in standard printed literature; at right, the relationship in online fanfiction published on AO3.}\]

In traditional text publications, epitextual components like interviews, colloquia, and reviews are not text-adjacent; even if well-known, readers of the text must seek them out,

\(^5\) It should be assumed, generally, that the text is always impacting paratext as well as epitext; for the purpose of these figures, I am specifically looking at the proximity of the elements to the text, as well as how the different paratextual elements impact the text, rather than the other way around.
undoubtedly to varying levels of success depending on access to the required mediums. Epitextual elements in fan fiction – similar interviews, colloquia, reviews and comments – may appear text-adjacent, and in the case of comments they are nearly universally text-adjacent, from the moment the epitextual addition is first made. Furthermore, the author’s own paratext often (if not usually) either makes direct reference to some of the most popular epitextual elements with which their work is associated or directly links the named epitext from within notes at the beginning or end of the fan fiction. Thus participation in the epitextual discussion becomes more accessible and immediate, and those epitexts which are directly linked from within the author’s paratext receive an implicit nod of appreciation, if not always approval.

**Epitext, Sherlock, and Wendymarlowe’s *Dear John***

In what follows, I explore the fan response to two fanfiction postings – “The Apology” and “Dear John,” both by the author Wendymarlowe – as examples of the way that fan engagement itself can serve as a form of paratext, one which shapes both the meaning and sometimes the direct content of the text, as well as the way readers approach the text. On November 20th, 2014, the pseudonymous author Wendymarlowe published the first text chapter (after a title page) of her epistolary fan fiction titled “Dear John” (Wendymarlowe, November 20, 2014). At under three hundred words, the chapter quickly became popular with both the author’s pre-existing fan base and other fans of the genre, more than twenty of whom commented within the first two days after the opening chapter had been published. The summary of the text offered to readers skimming through Archive of Our Own’s vast library of Sherlock fics would have relatively little to go on: Wendymarlowe simply summarized the forthcoming epistolary (which was set to take place in the universe of the BBC television show, *Sherlock*, during the break after the third series) by saying that:
With Sherlock dead, John eventually (under duress) makes a profile on an online dating site. And falls into a long-distance relationship with an enigmatic partner who reminds him of Sherlock in all the right ways. (Hint: it turns out to be Sherlock.)

Updated in real time (Wendymarlowe, November 20, 2014).

Tags and categories gave further insights into the text: readers familiar with AO3’s browsing structure would quickly be able to note that this was a male/male love story between the characters Sherlock Holmes and John Watson.

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**Dear John**

wendymarlowe

**Summary:**

With Sherlock dead, John eventually (under duress) makes a profile on an online dating site. And falls into a long-distance relationship with an enigmatic partner who reminds him of Sherlock in all the right ways. (Hint: it turns out to be Sherlock.)

Updated in real time.

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*Figure 2.* Paratextual elements at the beginning of each chapter give readers a framework for how to approach the text.
Ratings like “Explicit” and “No Archive Warnings Apply” let the readers know that the text will contain unabashedly adult content, which itself will likely be free of illegal or ethically questionable content (common “archive warnings,” for example, mark that texts contain elements of non-consent or feature sex between under-aged characters). Notably, other paratextual elements were missing from the text until near or after completion; it was not until the final chapter was posted, for example, that “Dear John” came to be marked as only the first part of the new “Dear John” series. As is common among fanfiction posted online, both the paratext and the text itself were changed as the story progressed; tags will frequently be added or removed to posted stories to specify what new content is being included, and ratings – such as “Explicit” or “Mature” – may be change depending on the addition of adult content.

Importantly, these changes are not always (and perhaps even not usually) undertaken at the sole inclination of the author. In an interview published several weeks after the final installment in the Dear John series, AO3 member kate_the_reader asks Wendymarlowe, “Did any of the ideas / points of speculation posted in the comments make you re-evaluate your game plan?” (March 12, 2015). The author responds that

Not the speculation, but the reaction definitely did. Originally I had planned for the radio silence from Sherlock after Christmas to extend another full week, but watching the comments and the reactions, I felt that would have pushed the anticipation from “exciting and agonizing” to “boring.” I had also planned to end the fic right after their aborted date - all the emails back and forth leading up to meeting, then silence on the day of the meeting itself, then mark the fic as “complete” the next day. Midway through January or so I got the idea to post an email from the dating site itself as a more concrete closer, but
I still planned to leave the ending ambiguous (as would make total sense, if you’re just watching the email trail). The week leading up to the date was when Dear John really caught on with new readers, though, and I think an ambiguous ending would have really disappointed everyone even if it was a solid literary choice. The apologies were kind of a compromise. And then after all THAT, I decided I really needed to write at least “The Apology,” and might as well do “The Date” and “The Hiatus” as well and just make it a set. I purposely posted the first chapter of “The Apology” concurrently with the end of “Dear John” so everyone didn’t read “the end” and freak out that it was over. (Ibid.)

The interviewer continues to press for further consideration of the role of commenter participation in Wendymarlowe’s crafting of Dear John and subsequent stories, and the author seems unreserved in acknowledging that not only did she consider the feedback from fans when editing and concluding the second installation of the series (“The Apology”), but that the feedback had a substantial impact both on the length and organization, and specific content of the text as she concluded it. She says that:

Honestly? It was kind of hard to take, especially after all the amazing love running up to the end of Dear John. *I* knew The Apology was going to resolve, but there was a ton of angst built up and with John’s trust issues and Sherlock’s fear of exposing his heart, they had to work through a lot first. I was really very proud of that first chapter, and at first I didn’t understand why so many people were saying John was abusive. It took some back-and-forth with commenters (and some back-and-forth changing the fic tags) before I really got it. And originally I was planning to have John and Sherlock not quite connecting for another chapter or so (i.e. they’re pushing toward sex but Sherlock thinks
John is using it as a punishment and John thinks Sherlock is bluffing about actually having a heart) - but given the feedback on the first chapter, I felt it was important to clear that up sooner rather than later. (Ibid.)

As I’ll discuss shortly, that feedback had a substantial impact, not only on the author-contributed paratext, but on the content of the story and the way the story is framed by those approaching it from within fandom.

**Participation Study Methods**

One of the most intriguing aspects of the research on fan paratexts has been unearthing the rhizomatic nature of the participatory culture which surrounds fanfiction, something which has led to divergent and at times challenging narratives, and at others complicated the task of collecting a comprehensive data portrait and forming a coherent, chronological narrative of the events involved. There are several reasons for this: discussions on stories often evolve into long, multi-branched comment trees, with subsequent commenters both quoting those who have gone before and offering their own thoughts on the topics presented. This practice appears within the fandom culture that has emerged on Tumblr as well; the practice of “sharing” allows fans to easily quote an excerpt or an entire post, offer their own commentary, and append media (varying from fan art to YouTube videos to “reaction gifs” – small, animated images that use popular culture to convey an emotional reaction to a topic in their chosen fandom) before posting as an entirely new post on their own blogs. In this way, a sort of fan lineage becomes apparent as discussions continue, incorporating three, four, or sometimes more authors and posts/excerpts before the most recent author chooses to weigh in. Although Tumblr posts are primarily the domain of fans themselves in this instance – Wendymarlowe does not participate directly in
discussions of her stories on Tumblr, at least not publicly – the opposite is true on the comment
trees (also known as “threads”) posted directly below the stories on AO3; perhaps because the
comments occur directly after the text of each chapter, they are a more convenient way for fic
authors to engage with their readers than registering a unique Tumblr account, seeking out
disparate feedback on one’s own work, and then writing individual Tumblr blog posts to respond
to said feedback. Although complex and at times difficult to navigate, discussions such as the
ones on Tumblr serve as a sort of unintended archive, preserving comments and posts that may
no longer be accessible after older blogs are moved, deleted, or privately archived. This
phenomenon – disappearing posts or blogs – has made especially difficult the task of
documenting source data for original posts, and so several entries ended up without dates and
times, while still others featured URLs that were, at the time they were gathered, inaccessible.

While this interweaving network of community and creativity necessarily produces
vibrant, sometimes outspoken commentary, it also presents unique challenges for the researcher–
specifically those that emerge within the Tumblr community. Because of a combination of user
preference and technological limitations, it is nearly impossible to guarantee that the review of
relevant posts has been absolutely complete. For example, as mentioned earlier with the
epitextual components of an AO3, Tumblr authors can “tag” their posts with relevant keywords
to help others find them, and also to sort them in their own archives. Problematically, however,
some sources note that tags beyond the first five turn “phantom” when searched using certain
search functions on Tumblr (for example, the standard or “old” search page seems to ignore the
sixth tag and beyond, while the “new” search page is credited with being able to search for all of
the tags, even allowing users to combine searches for multiple tags (Novak). Thus while
approximately 170 posts are brought up in an initial Tumblr search for “#wendymarlowe,”
through tracing reposts and exploring different authors’ tag archives, I was able to come up with just over 340 unique Tumblr posts referencing either Wendymarlowe or one of the two stores discussed here (“Dear John” and “The Apology”) directly, or the emotional response, theory and criticism, art, and community that has emerged in response to her works. Of these, 99 unique authors were identified from both single-author Tumblr blogs and group or organizational Tumblr blogs, as in the case of the Homeless Network 221B Con blog, which asserts itself as "a network dedicated to helping out our fellow 221B Con goers" through the posting of "lost and found, missed connections, listings of unoffical [sic] party rooms, panel reports, cosplayer who’s who, and so much more” (Fanfic Friday - Dear John, 2015).

Furthermore, given the trend among most Tumblr authors to either limit the amount of personal/identifiable information shared or to omit personal information entirely from their fan blogs, it is nearly impossible to offer a nuanced demographic analysis of these discussions, at least without contacting authors individually. While some bloggers do make an effort to identify themselves by name, gender and preferred pronouns, age or sexual orientation, “bios” – when they are included – are usually brief and focused on the author’s fan engagements. One author, May-Shepard, includes as their bio only that they are a, “Johnlock fic writer and ridiculousness enabler” (May_Shepard, 2015). Through this information, readers are able to access the author’s original fan works on Archive of Our Own, which itself may grant more biographical information about the author. Still others are even less forthcoming, such as the author deduce-my-heart, whose bio at the top of their blog notes only that their name is Lindsey and that they are a “giggler, made from pumpkin spice and steel hearts (NSFW)” (Lindsey, 2015). Racial, ethnic, and national identifiers are shared even less often on Tumblr, as are identifiers of class and ability/disability status. On Archive of Our Own comments, there is normally no space for
biographical information to be shared; while this information can be offered by authors on their individual AO3 account pages, the trend of secrecy found on Tumblr seems to be present here, as well, with little real-world biographical information outside of fandoms and, occasionally, age, gender, or sexual orientation.

Given fandom’s propensity for the rhizomatic both on Tumblr and on AO3 comments, I acknowledge the impossibility of truly claiming 100% coverage on posts containing relevant material on the author Wendymarlowe or the stories discussed here. While it is true that comments on each individual story can be catalogued – I can claim full coverage for data analysis on comments posted directly on her story “The Apology” – there remain more than a dozen fanworks inspired by Wendymarlowe’s works, in addition to comments scattered throughout the rest of the Sherlock fandoms which make reference to or compare other works with Wendymarlowe’s, works which may not themselves have any tags or identifying information that link them beyond reference in comment areas. Still, although I cannot claim to have collected every single instance of AO3 or Tumblr discussion about the related posts, I remain confident that what has been collected and analyzed here presents a holistic, well-rounded summary of the phenomenon as it occurred in late 2014 and early 2015, and in the months immediately thereafter. Every individual comment posted on “The Apology,” for example, has been coded for theme (fifteen themes were identified, some unique to each medium, as I will discuss later). In identifying unique themes, I looked for keywords or recurring phrases that occurred in different comments; for example, whenever a commenter made a suggestion, offered advice, or made statements critical of the text – in essence, if they sought to encourage the author to either alter the text or to defend their writing choices – I coded posts as “criticism.” Posts whose content exclusively incorporated praise – “Fucking hell, that was hot!”
or “I've never been more in love with a series than 'dear John’” – without any other content were coded for “praise.” In instances where multiple themes occurred – for example, a comment might first praise the author, then express excitement over upcoming updates, and conclude with a lengthy suggestion about how to handle a plot point – comments were coded by the theme that took up the greatest part of the comment, by word count.

In addition to theme, each post was coded by content type (fourteen unique types were identified on the 340 Tumblr posts; AO3’s lack of an option to post multimedia meant that only four were identified, all of which will be discussed later), and author name, date, URL, and tags (on Tumblr, tags are the quickest and default way that both I and community members find new posts relevant to the discussed authors, stories, and topics). To date, from Tumblr (as mentioned earlier, the “tags” feature is not available on AO3 comments), I have catalogued 446 unique tags on the included posts, with the vast majority in use only once or twice.

**Themes, Tags, and Tributes: Fan Participation as Paratext**

Most of the themes were identical between Tumblr and AO3 postings; these included Praise/Recommendation (where the poster celebrated the author or the work itself, or where they celebrated a fan creation inspired by Wendymarlowe’s work), Fanwork (where they specifically posted their own fan creation, such as a fanfic inspired by “The Apology” or a “book cover” intended to be paired with either story), Excitement (about a new chapter just having been posted or some other development in the work), Anticipation/Waiting (posts which expressed frustration, pleasure, worry, or longing for a new chapter to be posted to either story), Shock/Surprise (surprise/shock that a new chapter was posted or how quickly it was posted, or shock/surprise at the content of a new chapter), Criticism (usually about something written in the
story, whether of a thematic or grammatical nature), and Community Oriented (posts which discuss the shared “plight” of synchronous readers of the Dear John and The Apology stories, which offer links to community resources for support, discussion, and engagement, or which celebrate the specific phenomenon of the community that existed around these stories). In addition, some themes were relevant only to topics on or the other mediums: some Tumblr posters wrote entries about Wendymarlowe herself, about her motivations or wondering about her potential reaction to the fandom while such posts were not present in AO3 comments, where commenters could directly ask the author. There, several other themes appeared which were not present on Tumblr; the “Question” and “Answer” themes, where commenters offered a question about the text and either Wendymarlowe or another commenter answered them, were not present in Tumblr postings (likely because posters there had no guarantee that Wendymarlowe would see their individual questions, and because she did not disseminate answers via Tumblr).

Additionally, the “Agreement” and “Disagreement” themes, comments whose entire focus was to echo or agree (or, conversely, disagree) with a comment above, were not present in the same way on Tumblr. There, instead, authors may have offered competing theories if they “disagreed,” but posts were never limited to a functional statement of “I disagree” or “I agree.” Although the reasons for this are not clear, I suspect that the open-ended nature of Tumblr blogging combined with the pressure of maintaining a readership may have inclined posters there to continuously build upon the theories and assertions of those whose work came before (whether they agreed or disagreed). Interestingly, although some themes did seem to recur often in both mediums – praise/recommendation, for example, was very high on both Tumblr and AO3, with 281 and 78 themed posts, respectively – there was not a uniform leader across each medium, and despite
shared themes across mediums, some spaces harbored disproportionately more of one type of posting than the other.

This was most notable for the themes “community oriented” and “theorizing,” where in each instance Tumblr postings far outnumbered AO3 postings – even despite the fact that for sheer volume, AO3 far outpaced Tumblr (as mentioned earlier, 340 Tumblr postings were catalogued versus 684 AO3 comments). This may be due, in part, to the very documents studied: while Tumblr

![Distribution of Feedback themes on AO3 vs Tumblr](image)

**Figure 3.** Distribution of feedback themes on AO3 versus Tumblr.

posters discussed both Wendymarlowe’s “Dear John” and “The Apology,” sometimes both in one posting, comments were actively catalogued only from the author’s latter posting, “The Apology”;
given that “Dear John” itself included nearly 7,000 unique comments, it may well be possible that further theorizing and community oriented postings were present than have been chosen to be discussed here. However, given the unique content of Tumblr postings, in addition to the themes of each, I am confident that the medium does encourage authors to discuss both theory and community (and specifically, community building) at greater length and in greater depth.

Not only was the discussion about community and the focus on community-oriented experience prominent on Tumblr, but there were several instances where Tumblr postings about community had (whether as a result of the limitations of the AO3 platform or a perceived lack of need from AO3 users) no comparable parallel among AO3 postings. Most notable on Tumblr were the creations of micro-communities and community resources meant to offer posters a space to vent, discuss stories, and experience a shared camaraderie around the simultaneous frustration and pleasure of reading a real-time epistolary fanfic. In a February 4, 2015 post titled “Mibbit.com Webchat client,” the user lexxxwasniahc posted that she had registered an official chatroom for the fandom, saying

there was discussion today about a support group chat room. And i said that it wasn’t mine, but then i registered it because that way there will be an op (not that i’m really that mature that i should be trusted… but your stuck with me now) I can op other people if anyone wants….

So yeah, people are welcome to come by whenever… obviously there will be more activity when we get updates but…. I have a lot of emotions. (Lexxxwasniahc, 2015)
Lexxxwasniahc goes on to link to/reference the chat client again later on the 4th of February and on the 7th, in both instances shortly after updates have been posted in an attempt to create a shared discussion space for readers following Wendymarlowe’s work.

Here the post’s own paratext offers some important clues about the author’s own self-awareness about the size of community and hints to others “in the know” about what to expect with the Mibbit chat client; while the first two tags are among the most common, #dear john and #wendymarlowe, and the third indicates the content of the post, #liveblogging fic, the last - #fandot - speaks to the fan community that has emerged around Wendymarlowe as truly a microcosm of the greater Sherlock fandom. “Fandot,” according to different fan narratives posted online, is a term which emerged on Tumblr in relation to a British radio sitcom, “Cabin Pressure,” also starring Benedict Cumberbatch. The author Caitlyn from the Tumblr blog bbcsherlockftw responded to an August 3, 2012 “Ask” about the topic of fandots with

I think it means that they have such a small fan base that it can’t even really be called fandom.

While that is (possibly) a part of it, it really stems from a quote in the first episode in which Carolyn (the owner of MJN Air) claims that, since MJN only has one airplane, it cannot be called an airline and instead must be called an “airdot.” (bbcsherlockftw, 2012)

It is important to note here that although the poster herself identifies her fan community as a “fandot” rather than a “fandom,” there were actually nearly 100 authors active in the Wendymarlowe fan community on Tumblr (and likely over 100, given the difficult-to-trace nature of Tumblr postings, as discussed above), and even when only commenters were included among
the AO3 fandom for the stories, over 100 were counted; when “kudos” are included, that number skyrockets to 2459 for “The Apology” and 4810 for “Dear John.” For comparison, the highest number of “kudos” on a fanfiction for the program Cabin Pressure, discussed above, is currently 1721, with only one story even garnering more than a thousand kudos. Thus while some participants in the Wendymarlowe fan community might be attempting, through tags, to signal to potential readers the presence of a micro-fan community (or “fandot”), the raw numbers for participation and readership suggest that there may well be more fans of the author Wendymarlowe and her “Dear John” series than of, for example, whole other “fandot” communities (Cabin Pressure being only one among them).

While the most common recurring tags were perhaps the most straightforward – “#dear john” was used the most at 269 instances, while “#wendymarlowe” followed that at 174 – others were more nuanced, referencing the community itself as a fandom (with the “#dear john fandom” tag), more fraught (the “#crack” tag appeared five times by two different authors), or made reference to the perceived affective plight of the fan community (among the most popular tags was “#dear john hell” which was used twenty-two times by seven different authors). It was perhaps the latter that packed the most suggestive meaning into the fewest words; the tag was meant to indicate both the simultaneous pleasure and pain of reading a story posted in real-time, and was a call to

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6 A “kudos” is defined by Archive of Our Own as, “not only as a quick and easy way to let a creator know that their work has been appreciated, but […] also a valuable accessibility tool for those who, for various reasons such as language difficulties, issues with mobility and typing, etc., would find it difficult or impossible to leave a comment or review” (Kudos FAQ, n.d.).

7 Although I have not yet seen the explanation explicitly defined, the #crack tag, in relation to the Wendymarlowe stories, seems to be a way of indicating the addictive and intensely pleasurable sensation of reading the stories and immediately desiring more to read.
others trapped in a shared “hell” to commiserate, whether through re-postings, theorizing, commentary, or simple animated GIF postings meant to convey varied emotional states.

Although animated GIF images (or “reaction gifs” as they are more commonly called) comprised a significant portion of the posts made to Tumblr, the “#dear john hell” tag featured only one such post. Here, looping video from the BBC series featuring a distressed Sherlock Holmes and a similarly distraught John Watson are shown with original text superimposed over the image, suggesting alternate or subtextual readings of what is being presented in the images. These gifs are joined in a Tumblr posting by iamjohnlocked4life with a short textual introduction which reads only “DEAR JOHN HOLY FUCK,” the first two words of which are a link to the most recently published chapter of the story (2015a). In addition to the “#dear john hell” tag, the author has included “#dear john heaven,” “#wendymarlowe jesus christ,” “#shell-shocked,” “#dear john,” and “#dear john shock,” leaving the reader with a sense that the text will offer not only a “shock” but likely cause substantial emotional turmoil.

Still other contributions under the “#dear john hell” tag involved substantially more intellectual and creative labor. Iamjohnlocked4life was also noted for creating several instances of fanart inspired by the story, notable among them several “movie covers” which played on the style and theme of the 1989 film *Say Anything* to create a Sherlock-meets-Watson series of fan posters (iamjohnlocked4life, 2015b). In two of the posters, the creator adapted one of the original taglines advertised with the film *Say Anything* (“To know Lloyd Dobler is to love him. Diane Court is about to know Lloyd Dobler.”) to fit the narrative of the stories, the words “To know William is to love him. John Watson is about to know William,” featured alongside a photoshopped image of Sherlock holding a boombox aloft over a faded photo of Watson and Sherlock laughing together;
the image suggests both the eventual romance (the picture of the two paralleling the couple shot from the original poster, combined with the assertion that John Watson is about to “love” Sherlock’s character), as well as the angst and sense of betrayal present near the end of the story, after Watson feels he has been betrayed by Sherlock. The third and most risqué of the fan posters features the same images – Sherlock with boombox, Watson and Sherlock laughing – but an alternate tagline which serves as a textual wink at one of the fandom’s “in-jokes,” a tagline which Iamjohnlocked4life credits to Tumblr user Theresacinematicend, which summarizes Dear John as, “Cyber-rimmed a dead man,” a play on the chat-based sex scenes featured in the story between John Watson and the pseudonymous and as-yet-unseen “William,” who is actually Sherlock (presumed by Watson to be dead at the time the scene takes place).

Still another instance of creative engagement with the text posted under the “#dear john hell” tag is a post by Heimishtheidealhusband on February 4, 2015, wherein the poster responds to another community member’s speculation on what might be happening from the characters’ perspectives shortly after the most recent chapter has been posted. Warning the other members of the “#dear john hell” community to “Buckle up kids,” Heimishtheidealhusband continues to paint a vivid chronology of the events from the moment a Sherlock is receives an angry email conveying Watson’s sense of betrayal and anger, to the (anticipated, as-of-then-unposted) response by Sherlock (Heimishtheidealhusband, 2015). Heimishtheidealhusband poses the following explanation for the real-time delay:

First, he goes back and re-reads every word of their correspondence, carefully taking notes and analyzing John’s word choices for conscious and subconscious tells.

Second, he probably goes to have a sad wank. All that rimming.
Third, crunches the numbers to give himself the assurance of *science!* that John has some serious feelings for Sherlock, even still. 58 correspondences, that’s at the very least enough to calculate some manovas [sic] or a solid CI. Maybe even a regression if he’s lucky.

Fourth, off to the mind palace! Sherlock has the results of his experiment, but now what to do next? How to maximize chances of success? I’m giving this 12 hours of mind palace time because why not.

…theoretically at some point in there Mycroft or Mrs. Hudson forces him to have a biscuit or a cat nap or something. There’s the last 24 hours accounted for, easily.

Then he writes. Or has a plan to let John sit in it until his rage is over, and THEN he writes. Because he’s probably figured out the exact amount of time John needs to finish raging and will send the email at the exact MOMENT it’s safe. (2015)

Although such a post (often referred to as “headcanon,” where a poster theorizes about the occurrences or the meaning within a primary source or fanfiction) is not uncommon in the Wendymarlowe fandom on Tumblr and on AO3, it is unique among “#dear john hell” postings, where expressions of emotion, frustration, or threaded discussions are more common. Juxtaposed against such shorter postings, this entry by Heimishtheidealhusband frames a future for the story which has not yet been published, offering an optimistic entry into a story which at present-time evokes tension and highlights both the anger and desperation of the characters involved.
Figure 4. Distribution of tags on Tumblr postings for Dear John and The Apology

For the most part, however, the most commonly used tags on Tumblr posts about Wendymarlowe’s work were straightforward identifiers about fandom, fanfic author, or story title. As mentioned earlier, both “#dear john” and “#wendymarlowe” led the tag count, followed shortly thereafter by “#johnlock,” the fandom’s chosen portmanteau of “John Watson” and “Sherlock Holmes,” one which implicates a sexual and/or romantic relationship between the two characters – this tag comprised approximately 8% of the top ten tags used, with 47 instances recorded by multiple authors. Following that, “#dear john hell” tied with the more general “#Sherlock” tag at 22 tag instances each. After these, “#fic rec” – a tag used across fandoms to note that the poster was recommending a single or multiple pieces of fanfic – tied with “#the Apology,” each with 18 instances in the data. Rounding out the top ten tags used were, in order, “#fanfic,” “#dear john fandom,” and “#fanfiction,” with 14, 10, and 9 instances used respectively.
Although the chart above does demonstrate the frequency of the most popular tags used, it does little to reflect the astonishing array of individual tags used; nearly 450 individual tags were identified among the 340 posts, with a full 379 of those used only once. Of those tags that did not appear in the top ten counted, many conveyed the poster’s emotional state at the time (2 examples), depicted the poster’s actions while waiting for updates or in the wake of an update (2 examples), celebrated the community or gave a nod to something that had occurred earlier on Tumblr or on AO3 comments (2 examples), or offered impassioned pleas to the characters themselves on how to behave (2 examples). Among such tags were included a warning for Sherlock’s character, “#you best be bringing your a game son,” the assertion that, “#i love this fandom,” a declaration of Wendymarlowe’s writing prowess in the form of “#god what a fantastic author,” and myriad expressions of delight, frustration, anguish, anticipation, and impatience, perhaps typified by the tags “#screaming” and “#you should be screaming.” As identifiers, these do little to help new readers find posts about the fandom or Wendymarlowe’s stories specifically; when paired with broader tags such as “#wendymarlowe” or “#sherlock,” they serve to introduce those searching for more general tags to the emotional intensity of the stories they may be about to encounter. Although “#fic rec” and “#johnlock” certainly tell would-be readers a good deal about the works being mentioned – that they are considered quality texts, that they are likely inspired by the BBC’s Sherlock series, that they feature both the characters John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, likely in a romantic relationship – they offer little foreshadowing of how the readers may react to the text or the content or style of the text. “#You realize we're all just gonna get more flaily from here right?” fulfills that role aptly, even before the actual content of posts is considered.
As discussed earlier, the nature of Tumblr as both a more technologically rich platform and a venue structured to encourage community development, individual content creation, and to support content curation has necessarily resulted in the content of Tumblr posts being both more diverse and, in some instances, more robust than what is posted in the comment sections of Archive of Our Own. Notably, there is no intuitive way for commenters on AO3 to share different forms of media in comments; outside of simple URL’s posted, commenters cannot share reaction gifs or images, cannot display their own original art or embed fan music or video. For this reason, while Tumblr postings were categorized into fourteen different types of content, the comments in AO3 were sorted into only four discrete categories, each of them text-based; these included original comment (containing only the commenter’s own reactions, thoughts, questions or criticisms), original comment with excerpt (containing an excerpt from the story as well as the commenter’s own words), original comment with link (containing a link to another page, either hosted on AO3 or elsewhere on the web, in addition to the commenter’s own words), and thread participant (a commenter’s response to an earlier comment posted – these were usually short, affirmative posts agreeing, joking, or answering the comments specifically preceding them).

Despite the limitations of the medium, however, comments abounded on the AO3 site, likely because this provided the most instantaneous and fluid method by which commenters could give feedback (positive or negative) or seek clarification on various points within Wendymarlowe’s stories. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the vast outnumbering of threaded postings, the phenomenon of responding directly to another commenter (even if briefly) was observed with much greater frequency on AO3; while only 26.7% of Tumblr postings constituted a part of threaded discussions, fully 47.1% of comments posted on Archive of Our Own were
either the genesis of or a response comment in a threaded discussion.\footnote{Although this statistic alone might make it seem as though \textit{Archive of Our Own} is actually more active as a community space than \textit{Tumblr}, I would put forth that this is only one metric by which community engagement/development/participation can be measured. While it is true that commenters are very active and often engage with one-another on \textit{AO3}, it is also true that \textit{Tumblr}’s richer user interface and array of features allows users to engage in multiple modes – through commenting/responding to each other, reposting one another’s work, direct messaging to engage in private conversation – and, since \textit{Tumblr} is not \textit{exclusively} a fan website, it provides spaces for members of fan communities to engage with and support one another, not only around diverse fandoms, but in regard to everyday lived interactions and struggles.} Proportionately, Tumblr had more instances of a post-and-excerpt combination, with 4.1\% to \textit{AO3}’s 1\%, though in both mediums these were among the less-frequent types of postings observed. Although Tumblr postings were more heterogeneous than those on \textit{AO3}, the same prominent categories – namely, threaded discussions and original text posts – predominated in both mediums, with “original comments” on \textit{AO3} and its Tumblr parallel, “original text” being the most commonly shared post type.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{AO3_comments_by_content_type.png}
\caption{\textit{AO3} comments by content type.}
\end{figure}

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Despite similarities in content type, there remained vast – and sometimes surprising – differences in the theme (the topic or “point” of a post, rather than the format it took) of fans’ postings. Although the instances of criticism were few both on Tumblr and in the comments on "The Apology," the percentage of comments engaging in this way was nearly twice as high on Archive of Our Own as on Tumblr (21 comments were identified under this theme, or 3.1% of all comments, versus 6 Tumblr postings, or 1.7%). Engagement in comments ranged from theoretically or thematically critical to the more mundane, as in a critique offered by the user Xupz, for example, who identifies herself as a native French speaker and offers two full comments’ worth of corrections on Wendymarlowe’s French during the culminating sex scene in the chapter (Xupz, 2015). As in other critical comments, the author responded by thanking the commenter for their feedback and acknowledged that she was “always happy for pointers” and that although there were “a few bits of this which were intentional […] I took your advice for most of the rest” and edited the French text in the story to be grammatically correct following the commenter’s critique (Wendymarlowe, February 15, 2015). Thus the French text (and ensuing
translations) reflect the critiques and contributions of one of the author’s readers, whose engagement within the paratext of the story had a material impact upon the content of the story itself.

Commenters on AO3 took advantage of the virtual proximity of the fic's author to ask her clarifying questions or seek guidance or reassurance during points in the text they found difficult or frustrating, as in the consent issues surrounding Chapter 1 of "The Apology." This is not to suggest that Tumblr users were at all less engaged with the text than those on AO3 – many of them posted both on Tumblr accounts and on AO3, often under identical user names – but rather that Tumblr afforded less of an expectation of authorial response, instead serving as a space for fans to offer criticism and discuss the texts among themselves, to frame the work for new readers who may not yet have approached it, or to theorize about the relationship between themselves as fans and Wendymarlowe as author. Take for example a February 9, 2015 posting by the Tumblr user Cupid, who (in between chapter updates to The Apology) put forward the following thoughts about her relationship to Wendymarlowe as an author, and her role (and potential rights) as a reader and member of a fan community:

I feel the need to fight for it. I feel the need to fight for a Trash!John/BAMF!John that doesn’t feel like a sexual predator. I feel the need to fight for a Sherlock who doesn’t need to strip and feel like he’s standing with a predator in order for John to understand him. I feel the need to see sexual tension and danger without John palming his groin in a disgustingly rude manner when Sherlock is laid bare to him.

I am so emotionally invested and care about this so much that I actually said something to the author! But WHO AM I TO SAY ANYTHING?
No one…but I still did. And THAT is what confuses me! I suddenly think I, the reader, have a right (outside of requesting triggers)….but I don’t, I shouldn’t, it’s the writer who has final say.

But it still boggles me that I feel this way!  (Cupid, 2015)

Although Cupid has no reasonable expectation that Wendymarlowe will be scouring Tumblr and responding to posts – to date, I can find no instances where the author has engaged in fan discussions on Tumblr – she still offers up a critical reading, challenging the lack of explicit consent and the presence of a perceived predator narrative within the discussed chapter. She notes that she “actually said something to the author” – highlighting participation both on AO3 as well on Tumblr – and suggests that, despite how confusing the experience of feedback may be for her, it still makes her feel as though she has “a right (outside of requesting trigger [warnings])…” but then quickly remembers that she doesn’t, “…shouldn’t, it’s the author who has the final say… But it still boggles me that I feel this way!” (Ibid).

Although I was unable to identify which AO3 account Cupid held (if indeed she even posted publicly – users also have the option of messaging authors directly through AO3’s user interface), her criticism of the predatory/non-consensual nature of the opening chapter of “The Apology” is one shared by several of the other authors, some who do specifically request that Wendymarlowe consider adding in tags to warn readers about non-con content, or at least update the “Warnings” section of her story to make clear that there may be objectionable content. This discussion especially provides an example of when an author acknowledges the feedback and either refuses to incorporate it into the story or compromises. When the commenter MacBean suggests on a February 9, 2015 AO3 comment that, “I...really feel like this should be tagged as
dark!John, rather than BAMF!John? Because this behaviour is uncomfortably not BAMFy. It's...manipulative and insecure and... mean. It also feels not entirely consensual,” several other commenters echo her sentiment, expressing concern and dismay at the potentially non-consensual nature of the sex scene as it is emerging (MacBean, 2015). When Wendymarlowe weighs in later on in the thread, she disagrees with the original commenter, arguing that, “"Dark!John" would imply that the cruelty is intentional, and it really isn't” (Wendymarlowe, February 9, 2015a). Later that evening in the same thread, another commenter, girlswhowearglasses, posts that she agrees with MacBean’s concerns about the story and makes a related request of the author:

Wendy, I've seen you make a few comments that the way things appear now is not the way the story is going to go, and I appreciate that reassurance. But this is the rare fic where I've actually followed the comment conversations and so if I were applying my normal fic-reading routine, I would have missed those "unofficial author's notes."

May I respectfully ask that you consider changing from "No Archive Warnings Apply" (or if staying in that category, perhaps a tag along the lines of "includes scene that could be interpreted as dubious consent") to "Author Chose Not to Use Archive Warnings" (which at least tips off the reader that anything is possible)? (girlswhowearglasses, 2015)

Here, instead of disagreeing and refusing to adjust the paratextual elements of the story, Wendymarlowe concedes that the request is a reasonable accommodation and agrees to update the story warning (and summarily does so), and promises that she “will try to get the second half

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9 The prefix “BAMF!” when prepended to a character name signifies that this is a “Badass Mother Fucker” version of the character; they are typically more aggressive, outgoing, daring and debonair.
up as soon as possible” so that concerns about lack of consent in the story can be allayed (Wendymarlowe, February 9, 2015b).

As mentioned earlier in Kate_the_reader’s interview with Wendymarlowe, the overall response to “The Apology” impacted the author directly beyond the changes made as a result of each individual comment critique. She noted, first, that the existence of “The Apology” at all was due, at least in part, to the massive reader response that caught on in the final weeks of “Dear John” chapter postings. “The week leading up to the date was when Dear John really caught on with new readers, though, and I think an ambiguous ending would have really disappointed everyone even if it was a solid literary choice,” she says, and goes on to note that once written, she decided to post “The Apology” concurrently with the final installment of the “Dear John” epistolary, “so everyone didn’t read “the end” and freak out that it was over” (March 12, 2015). This, combined with the changes made to both archive warnings and the content of “The Apology,” stress the importance of fan engagement in these paratextual elements that they serve not only as a window through which new readers approach a text, framing it with commentary, criticism, and even suggestive art and imagery, but that they actually shape the text itself.

This idea – that the paratext impacts not just the meaning of the text but the content of the text – is one broached neither by Genette nor Leavenworth, but one that challenges the contours of the concept itself. If the impact of paratext is not limited to interpretation, and if that paratext – through vehicles like comments, community fora and blog postings – need not necessarily be created or contributed by the author, then it is possible to argue that all fiction (and not only fan fiction), when approached online through a collaborative space like AO3, can be open to revision and reframing by the communities that engage with them.
Conclusion

This chapter is about the way that readers engage with the authors of fanfic, and how that engagement can have a material impact, not only on the framing of the work and how new readers approach it, but potentially on the work itself, as authors read, consider, and potentially incorporate feedback from readers into revisions or future updates. Through an examination of two *Sherlock* fics posted by Wendymarlowe in 2014 and 2015, I highlight the way that fans both engage with one another in dialogue and community building, and how these engagements occur in diverse and often complexly layered ways. My hope, in highlighting this phenomenon and putting a focus on the multiple impacts that engagement-as-paratext can have, is to establish a framework through which we might reconsider fannish engagement with the products of participatory culture – namely, fanart, fanfic, fan conventions, etc. – and come to acknowledge the important role that these paratexts have vis-à-vis both the text and the communities from which they emerge.

Furthermore, I suggest that these engagements may well serve as a mode of critical engagement with texts that, ultimately, pushes both authors and readers toward more socially justice oriented ideologies. When commenters and bloggers, as those discussed above, advocate for the importance of consent and interrogate an author’s perceived thoughtlessness at incorporating elements of non-consent into their work, they are both engaging in oppositional modes with the authors and signposting to future authors and readers what values are important for the community (namely, consent, or if consent is lacking, a clear, unambiguous paratextual cue that the fic will include such elements). If, as I explore in the following chapters, fans are using fanfiction and fanart to engage substantively with norms around sex, gender, and
reproduction, then these paratextual engagements must necessarily also be considered as integral components of those engagements; even if in some cases fic authors themselves don’t always (or ever) respond to comments, they nonetheless stand in the public record, visibly adjacent to the text itself, archived commentary which highlights the texts’ successes, its failures, and the ways in which such texts encourage dialogue and critical inquiry with hegemonic structures like cissexism, sexism, racism and heterosexism, among many others. Paratextual engagements in the form of reader contributions may not be the only important examples of paratext – they may not even have primacy for other readers, who will first encounter tags, titles, and author notes all before they come to the comments. They are, however, valuable components of fan texts themselves, which help shape meaning, provide guidance, and at their best even advocate for more socially just, socially aware practices within fan communities.
As discussed briefly in the introduction to this dissertation, the practice of altering a canonical character's sex or gender is far from new: Ann Jamison discusses the gender play of members of the Baker Street Irregulars, a group of *Sherlock* fans who gathered periodically to celebrate Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s writings. Among the members was the author and critic Rex Stout, who once wrote (albeit jokingly) that Mr. Watson was very likely Sherlock’s wife ("Imagine a man asking another man to play him some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder* on a violin!") (p. 45). Although the interpretation here relies more on heteronormative models of gender performance and sexual expression, the suggestion nonetheless is put forward that readers might radically reconsider the assumptions they had previously made in their gendered readings of the *Sherlock* stories. As fan fiction came into its own in the latter half of the twentieth century (Jenkins 2013), scholars began to explore the way that fans reconceptualized canonical material in ways that, as Stout above, challenged established understandings of beloved franchises and characters. Whether by creating new, queer pairings of characters previously rendered heterosexual (Ibid.) or, more recently, transforming the sex, gender identity, or gender expression of characters (McClellan 2014, Busse & Lothian 2009), the authors and commenters of fanfiction have continued to push back against a mainstream popular culture narrative which has continued to celebrate white, cisgender, heterosexual men - often completely ignoring the possibility for strong queer, transgender, or women characters, as well as characters of color. Although there are pitfalls for authors who create genderswapped fanfiction without first engaging in research about their “target” embodiment (especially in the case of transgender characters), genderswap fanfiction nonetheless succeeds in at least questioning the reliability of
gender norms as they are presented in popular culture, ultimately advocating for a greater range of representation in gender, sex, and gender expression.

**Terminology**

Because gender studies has had a rapid evolutionary arc, and because the language with which we discuss it changes frequently, I want briefly to touch upon some terms I use throughout this chapter, and also to discuss the presence of other terms now commonly understood as antiquated (or outright offensive.) by trans scholars and activists. These terms are by no means an exhaustive list, and the definitions offered here are only put forward in the hopes that they will help inform and shape the reading of the texts below.

*Sex*: Feminist and queer theory has offered pointed debates about exactly what constitutes sex; rather than approaching the correct definition, I hope simply to offer a viable definition, one which can help elucidate the complexities of sex and gender as they are discussed in the stories below. For the purposes of this chapter, “sex” is defined as the combination of bodily characteristics, ranging from hormones to secondary sex characteristics to genitalia (and more). People are generally assigned a sex at birth based on the physical appearance of their genitalia.

*Gender identity*: An individual’s internal understanding of their own gender; in most cultures, this includes only the binary options of “man” and “woman,” but some cultures do also include additional gender identities. Like sex, gender is not necessarily a static identity.

*Gender expression*: An individual’s chosen way of expressing themselves, which need not necessarily be predicated upon either their gender identity or their sex. For example,
one who was assigned male at birth may identify as genderqueer but exclusively choose
to express themselves via clothing and other stylings which are traditionally associated
with femininity; this does not negate their gender identity, since one need not follow the
other.

_Cisgender:_ A term which gained prominence in the mid-2000’s, the term cisgender refers
to one whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. Someone
who is assigned male at birth (commonly shortened to “AMAB,” the parallel for those
assigned female at birth being “AFAB”) and identifies as a man could be described as
cisgender.

_Transgender:_ This term refers to an individual whose gender identity differs from the sex
they were assigned at birth. For example, someone who is “AMAB” and identifies as a
woman would likely be described as transgender (and perhaps several other gendered
identities, too). Transgender is commonly thought of as an “umbrella” term for gender
identities that fall outside of normative, binary models of gender (so anything _other_ than
cisgender man and cisgender woman).

_Transition:_ A process by which someone begins to interact with the world in a way more
closely aligned with the gender with which they identify. For example, a transgender
woman might begin attending therapy, change her name, change her style of dress,
hairstyling, or makeup, and even consider surgical possibilities to help her transition.
Alternately, she may do nothing at all, and simply _know_ that her identity is as she says it
is, and so begin interacting with the world accordingly. Although much of popular culture
is focused on the “transition” narrative for transgender people, not all transgender people will ever transition.

_Transformation_: Not generally used in relationship to gender, gender identity, or transgender people, _transformation_ here indicates one’s sex (and/or gender) being changed via non-medical means - most commonly in fan fiction, this occurs as a result of a magical (for example, a spell, curse, or charm), technological (a pill is developed to “switch” sexes, or a teleportation device mis-triggers and the teleported individual(s) show up with different sexes), or natural (someone eats some strange looking berries that have the unintended side effect of altering one’s sex, or the venom in a spider bite causes someone to wake up with a new sex) intervention or occurrence in the character’s life.

Occasionally - though not terribly often - characters will have some foreknowledge that the transformation is going to occur, or they will have sought it out themselves.

**Scholarship on Genderswapping**

Although the concept of genderswap - if we take it, broadly, as altering the sex of a canonical character - has existed at least since the period when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was still publishing his stories, scholarship of this phenomenon has only emerged in the last ten years. Most notably, Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian, in their 2009 chapter “Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Slash Fiction,” offer the first in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of genderswap (or genderbending) fanfiction, with an analysis of several stories centered in the _Stargate: Atlantis_ fandom. They frame the genre of genderbending or genderswap fanfiction (or “genderfuck,” which they often call it), not as its own individual category, but as a sub-genre of the broader “slash” genre; as I discussed briefly in
the introduction, “slash” fanfiction depicts same-sex relationships between characters not
normally presented as romantically or sexually involved within canonical texts. The authors note
that:

> The subgenre on which we focus in this essay is “genderfuck” fiction, which uses science
fiction and fantasy tropes to alter and reimagine characters’ sexed and gendered bodies.
The passage quoted above shows a John whose body has turned temporarily female,
engaged in exploring the orgasmic potential of his new genitals. Such sudden re-
embodiments are common in the genre, and not only for the sake of their erotics. (p. 2)

Busse and Lothian go on to argue that genderfuck is as much about the exploration of the erotic
possibilities as it is a feminist interrogation of the “cultural meanings and effects of gendered
bodies” and that such texts can range from “spurious and voyeuristic to the political and
subversive.” They do note decisively, however, that

> through explorations of cross-dressing, disjunctures between identity and embodiment,
and allusions to the realities of queer and transgendered [sic] lives, fan genderfuck stories
highlight multidimensional intersections of sex, gender, desire, and embodiment (p. 2).

The point at which the authors enter their research is one wherein “thousands of stories” have
been published about a specific pairing (McKay/Sheppard) on the show, and of those “several
dozen are genderfuck stories,” ranging from texts that feature crossdressing and impregnation to
“transgender life narratives” and “radical genderqueer politicisations of the two characters” (p.
3). After asserting that “fan fiction writing communities have historically been made up
overwhelmingly of women (who tend to be mainly white, middle-class and straight or
bisexual),” they go on to suggest that it “is scarcely surprising, then, that questions of gender
presentation, representation, and equality” emerge as central foci of both fan fiction and fan discussions” (p. 4). Genderswap fan fiction, then, seems to be less an opportunity for trans, genderqueer, and non-binary individuals (and their outspoken allies) to push back against the rigid gender roles into which they are often forced and necessarily transgress, and more - in Busse and Lothian’s understanding - as an opportunity for “overwhelmingly” straight or bisexual women (the unspoken assumption being that they are cisgender) to explore the contours of gender and sexual experiences with which they are not intimately familiar, whether exclusively for intellectual pleasure and curiosity, or intentionally with an aim to disrupt and fracture established mores around “gender presentation, representation, and equality.” For both authors, there is value in the act of subverting expected gender roles, even - as is almost always the case, they assert - when the ones writing such subversive moments do so from positions relatively well insulated from transphobia and cissexist oppression.

Busse and Lothian’s analysis of genderbending or “genderfuck” fan fiction ultimately suggests that by

Forcing male characters to experience the social and cultural, physical and emotional realities of life in a female body, genderfuck stories ask whether and how much these socio-biological facts – objectification, sexual vulnerability, the possibility of becoming pregnant – constitute womanhood. They also ask to what degree originally-male characters remain themselves through such changes: when the cultural predicates by which one gains one’s sense of identity change, is one still the same person? (p. 5)

Here, they note that the answer to such questions is often problematic, with sex transformations resulting in a limited range of behaviors, desires, and experiences - those typically used to
symbolize the “female” condition, such as “menstrual cramps [and] chocolate cravings,” or a frustration with the “restrictive expectations of women’s clothing.” More compellingly ontological questions, such as “who am I?” and “what is a woman/man/transgender person?” garner less attention in the minds of these characters, whose primary attention is instead given over to the inconvenience of femaleness (p. 5). As I’ll discuss in my analysis of *Hobbit* fanfiction, this preoccupation with the apparent “misfortune” of having one’s sex changed is no less common, despite the fact that the stories are written several years after those in Busse and Lothian’s analysis; this suggests that, despite a rise in representations of transgender individuals in popular culture and an increasing willingness on behalf of cultural and political figures to engage in complex questions surrounding gender and identity, the actual understanding of what it means to “be” a given gender, at least for many fanfiction authors, still remains a largely binary, essentialized one.

This is a concern also echoed by Ann McClellan in her 2014 article “Redefining genderswap fan fiction: A Sherlock case study,” wherein she notes that, “by foregrounding gender expectations and how they are both attached to and separate from biological sex, genderswap fan fiction complicates such assumptions and encourages readers to see sex and gender identity as codependent rather than as separate aspects of an individual’s identity.” Nonetheless, there are many fruitful possibilities within genderswap fan fiction, even despite the problem of essentialism and reinforced binaries, for writers and commenters to engage in critique, discussion, and debate around gender norms, gender essentialism, and the ways that institutional oppression serve to regulate sex, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, Busse and Lothian argue that since
these crossgendered writings connect to an understanding of gender as performance: the woman writing can show the disjuncture between womanliness and actual women by writing femininity and its discontents onto the bodies of favored male characters. If women write men, because to write women would mean to feel that they have to abide the narrow roles permitted to them, then it would make sense that these men (as they become identificatory objects for the women reading and writing them) would be defined against the narrow roles women are supposed to follow. Genderswap, then, offers women a reconnection to the female body via a doubled gender masquerade, reminding us clearly that all women perform femininity just like John quite consciously has to acquire these skills. (6)

Although I challenge the assumption that the writer in every genderswap fanfiction is a woman - many members of fan communities openly identify as men, as genderqueer or as non-binary - I still find compelling the concept that genderswap is written, at least in part, as a way for authors to explore gender expression and gender identities they either do not experience personally, or do not see represented in the media they consume. What impact does it have, for example, to turn a white, cisgender man into a black, transgender woman - for readers at large, and for the author in particular? Unfortunately, although authors occasionally comment upon the impact writing and publishing genderbend fan fiction has upon them, the overall impact is largely left to the (reader’s/scholar’s) imagination.

Criteria for Story Selection

Within the broader genre of "genderbending" fanfiction, there have emerged three or four distinct sub-categories of writing which tend to adhere to some similar conventions, even if
minimally; it was my intent to include one story of each sub-genre for each character. Delimiting factors for story selection included length (as I'll discuss below, a range of 5000-50,000 words) and high comment frequency; however, in some instances there were so few examples of a certain type of story (for example, a gender transformed Thorin) that requirements of length and high comment volume were compromised in order to include the desired range of representational configurations.

First, and most easily defined, are those stories wherein the character is portrayed with a gender other than that featured in the fandom's canonical texts. For example, such a fiction within the realm of the television series *Scandal* might feature, rather than the protagonist "Olivia Pope," a male character with similar personality traits and affectations, named "Oliver Pope." Still others within this genre preserve the character's original name, changing their sex and gender while preserving other aspects of their persona (such that it's still clear that, for example, this is *still* Olivia - just Olivia who identifies as a cisgender man).

Another sub-genre of the genderbending genre focuses on characters who identify specifically as transgender, whether by specifically using the word, or by enacting a role conventionally understood as transgender without specifically self-identifying as such (as in historical periods where such terminology did not exist). Such stories are usually identified by the inclusion of the tag "Transgender Character" as a part of the story's paratext; sometimes, though not always, they also include tags indicating the gender of the character, such as "fem!Bilbo" or "fem!Thorin," in the case of stories written about such characters within *The Hobbit*. Importantly, I follow Ann McClellan in stressing that although transgender fanfiction is a sub-genre of genderswap fan fiction, the opposite cannot universally be said to be true:
“genderswap narratives in themselves do not qualify as transgender fan fiction; rather, trans stories explicitly explore a character whose gender identity is dissociated from his or her assigned sex identity and who may or may not seek to transition to the other sex” (2014).

Third in this series, and the final sub-genre that I'll be exploring, are those episodes of genderbending where the character's sex is transformed in the text, either via a magical, technological, or natural means. Generally, these stories feature involuntary bodily changes which are either brought about through an accident, or as the result of some malevolent intervention (i.e. a curse, a virus, a bite, etc.). Along with transgender fanfiction, this sub-genre appears to be one that has garnered less attention by fanfiction writers; within the *Hobbit* fandom, it seems to be even less popular than among larger fandoms, perhaps at least in part because no singular term has emerged among fans that encapsulates the sub-genre adequately (although I use "transformation," this label is rarely - if ever - present in such stories, which instead usually have the broader label of "genderbending" or one of its umbrella counterparts). For this reason, such stories are difficult to identify without combing through story summaries and, occasionally, full stories themselves.

Finally, some fics go so far as to incorporate elements of all three (transgender characters, cisgender characters whose gender differs from that presented in the canon, and characters whose gender is magically/technologically changed within the story – I will expand on these below). One such example is the fic “And Confetti in His Palms,” by Rutobuka and Yeaka. In this story, the author portrays Bilbo as a transgender man who has engaged the help of wizards to magically transform his body, all within an alternate Alpha/Omega universe (more on that in Chapter 4). However, the vast majority of genderbend fics adhere to a single subgenre, though many do
incorporate elements of alternate universes or change other notable aspects of the story (such as time, location, overall plot line, etc.).

When exploring non-normative models of gender and sex, there are still more categories that, while they certainly deal with "bending" the original gender of a canonical character, are not often identified as "genderswap" fanfiction, instead being seen as their own distinct category. In addition to fanfiction wherein the universe incorporates more than simply male and female genders, such gendered genres might explore the possibility of reproduction without women-identified characters or envision worlds even more rigidly structured by gender roles than those in the canon. Among these is the popular category of "omegaverse" fanfiction - although I will briefly touch on omegaverse in this chapter, it is discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

When I initially set out to select stories in this genre for analysis, I intended only to pick from among the top ten stories in each category, for each character, when sorted by "Kudos," AO3's community-based metric for measuring how popular a given story is. However, I quickly found that, even with these parameters, the volume of material to be read would be prohibitive for the purpose of completing a dissertation - while Tolkien's *The Hobbit* clocks in at just over 95,000 words, some stories posted on Archive of Our Own doubled or tripled this word count - and often, the more popular a story was, the *longer* it was. Alternately, very short stories - called "ficlets" - tended to have high popularity, despite having relatively little content available for analysis. For this reason, I set myself a threshold of only reading stories between 5,000 and 50,000 words long - short enough for a full short story and long enough for a modest novel, eliminating some of the more epic homages to Tolkien's work.
I further narrowed my sample by focusing on stories with a modest to high level of fan participation (ten or more comments), ultimately privileging stories that, while fulfilling the basic requirements of the genre (genderbending) and sub-genre (cisgender, transgender, or transformation), also either subverted their genre and/or sub-genre expectations or in other ways incorporated novel or infrequently utilized tropes (in two stories, for example, Bilbo is depicted as a black woman - once as a cisgender woman, and once as a transgender woman; in another story, Thorin is a cisgender woman in an alternate universe heavily influenced by the lore of the 1990's television show *The Sentinel*, and gender roles for both characters reflect the incorporation of two fandoms). Thus, while all stories exhibit key elements characteristic of their respective genres and sub-genres, the disproportionate presence of fics that subvert those genre expectations is a result of my own methodology and a desire to highlight, not only the commonalities within genres, but the ways authors may be actively challenging those expectations. Additionally, although genderbending stories in this genre overwhelmingly transform the gender of one character over the other (Bilbo is genderbent - either as a trans man, a trans woman, a cisgender woman or through magical transformation), I wanted to attempt to include examples of genderbending for each of the main characters I was examining (in this instance, the most popular pairing in fanfiction from this fandom, Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield). Additionally, because I wanted to attempt a well-rounded analysis of the genre for both its merits and its flaws, the works selected highlight both some of the most promising aspects of the genderbending category and some of its most troubling flaws - not every work, as I'll discuss, is an example of fans engaging in transgressive approaches to sex and gender.

Lastly, when all of the above considerations were taken in story selection and I was still left with multiple texts from which to choose, I found myself leaning heavily toward what Busse
and Lothian refer to as “issue fic” – stories which have some sort of political or social issue, either at the heart of the fic or at least tangentially related to them - because these tend to deal at greater length with man of the social issues this dissertation tackles (gender norms, homophobia, etc.). While Busse and Lothian argue that such stories are generally unpopular, I suggest that a good number of the moderate-length (or longer) stories on AO3 might in some way constitute an “issue fic,” and furthermore that fans often quite enjoy them. For example, “The Blooming Bellflower” could reasonably be identified as an “issue fic” - the tags include “trans character,” “gender issues,” and “gender dysphoria,” all signifying that the fic will have at least as one of its foci a discussion of gender roles and the experiences of trans individuals - and it has 68 comments, with 190 kudos and over 4000 hits, and these numbers are not uncommon for feedback on “issue fics.” In addition, I suggest that even if a story didn’t begin with the author intending for it to be an “issue fic,” that some do indeed evolve into this category – perhaps the author took on reader feedback and adapted the story, perhaps they wrote a non-consensual scene in a story not otherwise marked at all by non-con elements and then actually wanted to explore, in some way, what that non-consensual portrayal meant. These texts were often tremendously fruitful for analysis, whether I problematized the author’s handling of a topic, or whether I found they had excelled at discussing sensitive issues in a manner conducive to a social justice framework.

So, for example, I was able to find only limited examples of a certain genre or sub-genre – for example, Thorin is “transformed” in Sinisterbug’s “With Love - A Composition of Crack Ficlets for Rutobuka During the Holidays,” even though the singular chapter is below my length threshold and has few comments – I included it, in the interest of at least demonstrating the
breath of approaches taken to the concept of gender transformation. However, this and most
other chapters in the collection would likely be identified as “fluff” – defined by Fanlore as

Fanfic without angst; any pleasant, feel-good story. Fluff may lack plot; however, unlike
a PWP [porn without plot] the focus is not sex, but displays of affection between two or
more characters, whether their relationship is romantic or not. It may also indicate a
mood piece with warm, uplifting descriptions… (“Fluff,” 2014)

As well as including the tag “fluff” in the paratext for Sinisterbug’s story, the author actually
makes the title of the first chapter “Fluff” and, within the chapter where Thorin is transformed,
the conflict itself is relatively non-existent, as I will discuss below. Such stories were selected for
analysis only when I was unable to find stories with at least moderate conflict, where “issues”
sufficient for the fic to qualify as an “issue fic” emerged. Among the “issues” I looked for might
be rigid gender roles, transgender characters who were transitioning, had any level of anxiety
around their identity, or who perceived hostility in others because of their gender; stories where
characters struggled with their gender identity in any way; stories where non-consensual acts
occurred and that act had repercussions beyond the non-con moment itself; and other stories in
which the authors seemed to be attempting to engage in concepts surrounding social justice,
regardless of the level of success with which they ultimately applied (or did not apply) social
justice frameworks/approaches. Essentially, I aimed my analysis at “issue fics” because I
anticipated (and in each instance I examined, whether fluff or issue fic, my anticipation proved
accurate) that there would be substantially more material available for analysis, regardless of
how politically astute I found that material to be. Conversely, “fluff” texts, which avoid conflict
and often have high (or exclusively) sexual content, tend not to afford the characters the
opportunity to engage in dialogue (or to include other narrative content) about social, cultural, or political issues - while these fics are abundant and are often well-written, I have found them generally not to offer adequate material for analysis (excluding those instances where I might choose to explore the implication of silences within a text - while certainly compelling, those silences are not the focus of this dissertation).

Generally speaking, however, because of the length and the presence of conflict, combined with topics that still encounter varying levels of social stigma in mainstream culture (much less fan communities), the vast majority of stories that were available after all of the above criteria were applied were “issue fics.” In instances where there were multiple stories available for analysis after I had gone through the above criteria and some of them did not appear to be trying to make a social justice argument, I opted to examine those that did attempt such arguments or engagements. After all, as a fan myself and one who has certainly written my share of “fluff,” I understand that not all fics are written in the hopes of challenging the patriarchy or undermining cissexist ideology or affirming the importance of consent in kink settings; sometimes, for both writers and readers, there is pleasure in simply reading unproblematically, or in encountering worlds where these issues simply don’t exist.

**Story Analysis**

In Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, the characters of Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield, while eventually close friends, never have a romantic relationship; furthermore, each character is identified in the text as male, and given the lack of textual evidence to the contrary, the historical period in which *The Hobbit* was written, and Tolkien’s own religious and political background, it seems reasonable to assess that the characters are both heterosexual, cisgender men, despite
definite evidence in the literature either for or against this point. Before diving into the stories themselves, I wanted first to comment on some thematic similarities I saw when searching for individual fics to examine. As I discussed briefly earlier in this dissertation, *The Hobbit* fandom itself had a relatively small number of transformation fics; rather, the vast majority of stories featured either a cisgender female version of one of the two characters (or both), or in fewer circumstances a transgender version of the canonical character(s). Transformation stories did appear, of course, and when they did they were overwhelmingly stories about involuntary transformations; with one exception, none of the transformed, genderbent *Hobbit* characters I’ve encountered in these stories actually sought out to have their sex changed through magical or otherwise non-conventional means. I’ll discuss the phenomenon of stories featuring a genderswapped Bilbo later in my analysis, but as may be noted even via a cursory exploration of AO3’s offerings, the number of stories featuring a genderswapped Bilbo far, far exceeded those featuring a genderswapped Thorin; indeed, it took some time to even identify stories of appropriate length that included, for example, a genderswapped Thorin of the transformation subgenre, and authors seemed quite resistant to pairing a fem!Thorin with a canonical Bilbo; more often, in stories where Thorin’s sex and/or gender had changed, it happened that both characters were, instead, cisgender women. Visual portrayals of these genderswapped characters in fanart (whether on AO3 or on Tumblr) tend to mirror the quantities and varieties posted in story form on AO3.10

10Portrayals of a fem!Bilbo far outnumber a fem!Thorin, and fem!Bilbo is portrayed in greater diversity (both of gender expression, physical appearance, and sexual orientation) than fem!Thorin. Notably, I was able to find no fanart that depicted a fem!Thorin with Bilbo as a cisgender man; she was sometimes depicted individually or, often,
This practice – either switching Bilbo’s gender, or switching both character’s gender, but not switching Thorin’s – was so common, in fact, that I was able to identify only one story wherein the character of Thorin Oakenshield experienced the “transformation” trope, his sex shifting from male to female - though, curiously, the common practice of automatically also changing gender identity was not present here. The text itself did not even appear as a stand-alone story; rather, the scene depicted was only a shorter chapter in a much longer work, “With Love - A Composition of Crack Ficlets\(^\text{11}\) for Rutobuka During the Holidays.” In this piece, the author sinisterbug includes a chapter titled “Genderbending Both of Them (Oh Gosh Tiny Lesbians <3).” Given the paucity of stories featuring a transformed Thorin, this chapter was also one of the few instances where I found myself needing to stray from my standard length-and-comment guidelines; although the overall collection itself hit just over 13,000 words, this short chapter was barely 400, and had only three comments (in comparison to nearly sixty for the entire collection). I believe, though, that both the relative absence of comments and the rarity of such a piece speak to the way that, even within a fandom where gender and sex are shifted and altered and sexual roles and expectations are diverse and vastly different from the canonical texts, fans still incorporate normative concepts about masculinity, femininity, and gender roles in their writing when they contemplate questions of transformation. Who, for example, is allowed to be genderswapped? What impacts do physical size and fictional race have to do on a

\(^{11}\) Ficlets, according to the Fanlore wiki, refer to, “a very short story, usually fan fiction but sometimes original fiction. The term is commonly applied to stories under 1000 words, although there is no hard and fast rule about how long a ficlet can be. “Ficlet” is preferred to drabble by some fans as a term for stories that are near the length of a drabble (around 100 words) but not 100 words precisely” (Ficlets, 2010).
character’s potentiality for genderswapping? Are there characters for whom genderswapping would not only be unpleasant - but would so starkly change their personality such that they would no longer be recognizable to readers of the canon? This story suggests that, indeed, there are limits on what is considered an “acceptable” or plausible configuration of sex and gender post-“bending”; certain pairings are far more frequent, and certain individuals are “swapped” more often than others. Finally, I note that the story repeatedly with the “fluff” tag, and given the brevity of each story (each chapter is a unique, self-contained story, rather than part of a longer narrative) and the lack of relative conflict within the story, the tag seemed to be aptly applied; still, the limited array of offerings meant that in this instance I felt it was appropriate to engage critically with a “fluff” piece.

Sinisterbug’s story starts abruptly, without background or any substantive context: we are informed that the character Gandalf had been in the middle of casting a spell when another dwarf, Nori, had bumped into his staff, causing something in his spellwork to go awry. Sinisterbug writes that

Gandalf bent almost in half, peering down through his bushy eyebrows to better see the results of Nori bumping into Gandalf’s staff mid-spell. Standing there together on top of a tree trunk as smoke cleared, no bigger than a dwarf’s thumb each, were Bilbo and Thorin.

The company gathered around to get a better look. They could see the two tiny women, and they could likewise hear a fair amount of squeaking, but they couldn’t make anything of it. Their vocal chords must be too small, they concluded. (2015)
Although we don’t know what spell Gandalf had been attempting to cast, the result is made evident in the first two paragraphs: he had instead targeted both Thorin and Bilbo, and they had been both miniaturized (“no bigger than a dwarf’s thumb each,”) with their sexes transformed. Not only that, however, but the author has instantly shifted the use of pronouns for the characters, and the commentary that ensues between them suggests that, not only is there relatively little inner turmoil for one character, but that their gender was accepted with relative ease, while for the other it was a cause for fury: “Thorin panted to catch her breath… She had sworn to tie Gandalf’s beard to a warg’s nutsack if he didn’t fix this now” (Sinisterbug). Bilbo, however, was “put out,” but “seemed a bit more resigned to simply waiting… ‘I am no wizard. I’m not likely to burgle my way out of this,’ she said, and simply went to the edge of the tree trunk to spy a way down’” (Sinisterbug). While Thorin (already being assigned the identity and pronouns of woman and she by the author, whether the character seemed to identify so or not) clearly struggles with the transformation, to the point of threatening physical violence if it is not reversed, Bilbo gives little thought to it, instead directing his attention to more practical matters, such as how to move to a safer waiting place (both, at the start of the chapter, appear to be trapped on a tree trunk).

Curiously, the most substantive part of the discussion between the two characters - who are so small that they are unable to be heard by the larger dwarves and wizard - focuses, not on the sudden sex swap, the feminine clothes (Bilbo is observed using “the edge of her skirt to dab at the corner of her eyes”), but about Bilbo’s eating habits and the fact that, according to Thorin, “you are glad to have been made small, since now you may eat your fill as often as you want without dwindling our rations” (Sinisterbug). Interestingly, this is one of very few instances where the financial impact of a character’s transformation is at all acknowledged, and it is
asserted that the change in appetite has happened, not because Bilbo is now a woman, but because Bilbo is now tiny.

This lack of acknowledgement of class (and potentially labor) issues is a common trend throughout genderbending stories; even in transformation stories, where a character is suddenly occupying a different sex than they presumably have clothes and supplies for, the financial impact of having to buy new clothes, potentially new supplies, to possibly handle a new grooming regimen go largely unacknowledged, with the exception of characters occasionally struggling to manage longer hair (and even then, the struggle to deal with new hair is framed as one of clumsiness/lack of experience, rather than a lack of finances to afford adequate supplies). True to fantasy genres in fandom generally, there is relatively little discussion of finances and wages, and that holds true across the genderswap genre. If, in Tolkien’s world (as in ours) women often earn less than men and have fewer opportunities for professional advancement, would we then assume that Bilbo is going to earn less of a reward as a woman than he would have as a man? If so, it is never made clear in any of the stories analyzed. This silence is perhaps especially curious given Bilbo’s uniquely vulnerable position as the only member of his race/species traveling with the dwarves – he is far from home and tailors who would easily be able to make clothes for a hobbit’s body, and as the solitary hobbit would be at a serious disadvantage were the other dwarves to decide he or she should earn less as a woman hobbit than as a man. Although I don’t explore the issue of finances and the impact that class would have on genderswapped characters in depth, I do believe that there is space – even in the silences – for ample scholarship by future researchers.
That the sex swap is taken to have swapped the character’s gender as well is evident in a later sentence of the chapter, when “Bilbo clutched the ends of her torn and stained skirt and smiled a wild smile. ‘You are beginning to think like a hobbit, madam dwarf,’ she says to Thorin, referring to the character - who has already expressed shock and dismay at the change - as “Madam” dwarf; a sentence later, one of the full-sized dwarves spies Thorin on the ground and refers to them as “Queen Thorin II Oakenshield,” despite never having had cause to think of Thorin as a woman or “Queen” in the past (Ibid).

As the comments to the article suggest, the primary driving factor behind the fiction seems less, as Busse and Lothian articulated, as a way for the author to “highlight multidimensional intersections of sex, gender, desire, and embodiment,” and more as an opportunity to treat the reader to “chipmunk voices” and “smoll wives [who] got even smaller12???” (Gimlishairsalon, 2015; Rutobuka, 2014). For both Thorin and Bilbo, the experience of forced sex change goes largely unexamined, the scene instead centering the diminutive size of both characters. Indeed, so much is left to be assumed about the result of the genderswap in this story that, without any clear indication of sexual or romantic attraction between the two characters either before or during the change, they are assumed to have “become” lesbians - rather than (assuming an implied relationship before the change) simply two gay, bisexual, or queer men who suddenly have bodies traditionally assigned as female. Not only are gender and sex conflated within the framework of the chapter, but sexual orientation is

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12 Smoll is a term which seems to have emerged in fandom within the last two to three years; although at its most basic it simply refers to something which is “small” (i.e. dwarves and hobbits are small, relative to the size of humans, as depicted in Tolkien’s literature), it is more commonly used to depict something which is not just diminutive in size, but also perceived as “cute” or especially endearing (McCulloch, 2015).
necessarily seen as emerging from and being predicated upon both sex and gender. There is not even a suggestion that, in their new bodies, Thorin and Bilbo may no longer be attracted to each other, despite the fact that both were (the title implies) attracted to individuals who identified as men before their transformation.

Finally – and this common thread is one that appears to be woven through the vast majority of genderswap and genderbend fics in the *Hobbit* fandom – the answer to my earlier question about “who can be genderswapped” and “what impact do size and race have upon such changes” appears to be, respectively, “some people” and “some impact.” Although I have only explored genderswap in depth within this fandom, the overwhelming trend of swapping either both characters or only Bilbo suggests that there is something about the gender expression of the character Thorin that is read as more innate or essential to his characterization. In addition to being one of the physically larger and more formidable dwarves among the group, Thorin is the political leader of his entire race, is acknowledged frequently as an adept warrior with a fiery temper, and is acknowledged as a skilled craftsman whose skill is metalworking (not uncommon for a dwarf, although there are toymakers, cooks, and scribes in the party as well). All of these aspects appear to combine to make Thorin’s masculine gender presentation and power dynamic with regard to Bilbo both appear inalienable; he must be in charge, and he must be bigger, stronger, and more aggressive than Bilbo, who is frequently characterized as gentle, nurturing, bookish, and deferential. Thus, when authors do change Thorin’s sex, they overwhelmingly do so in conjunction with Bilbo’s, such that the larger female Thorin may still retain her power dynamic with the hobbit, both physically with regards to her size, and politically and culturally with regard to her position in the pack.
While Busse and Lothian suggest that “issue fic,” or fan fiction which takes on political
issues, is often unpopular with fannish communities, the relatively cavalier handling of what
would realistically be a major life change here suggests that the author does not even allow for
the possibility of an “issue” from which to make this an “issue fic.” Bilbo’s and Thorin’s newly
sexed (and gendered, and sexualized) bodies are not cause for critical inquiry into a restricting
model of masculinity present for some races in Tolkien’s universe, nor are they an opportunity
for author and fan to speculate on the ways that desire might not flow so neatly from gender
identity and expression. Rather, in this piece, they present only an opportunity for imagined
visual pleasure, the characters literally objectified as tiny, feminine dolls, such that one
commenter actually writes, “Does Queen Thorin get a tiny dollhouse throne??!! So Adorable!”
(pangur_pangur, 2015). Also notable here is the stress on smallness as a marker of their
femaleness; they are not only smaller as a result of having their sexed bodies changed into
(presumably) smaller female variants, but they are literally miniaturized, taking up less space
than even full-sized female dwarves and hobbits would ordinarily occupy. This trend – of
femininity being associated with diminutive sizes and/or an expectation for women and femmes
to literally take up less space – is one that has, in the words of Colleen McMillan and Terry
Mitchell in a 2015 article in the *Internal Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science*, been
“evident in various temporal eras” (p. 6).

Fortunately, while some of the few fem!Thorin texts do undertake genderbending in a
way that focuses more on the spectacle of a feminized Thorin without addressing the social,
cultural, and psychological implications of such a change, there are still several works that do
complicate assumptions about masculinity and femininity and challenge the reader to think
critically about the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Interestingly, none
of these critical stories employ the transformation subgenre. “An Unexpected Bond,” by myredturtle (which I identified as a potential “issue fic” by tags for “dwarf gender concepts,” as well as a quick skim to confirm that gender politics comprised at least a moderate portion of what was discussed in the dialogue), features a cisgender Bilbo who is ultimately paired with a cisgender Thorin (2015). This particular pairing is rare enough within the AO3 fanfiction community, but the author has further complicated the gender and sexual dynamics of the story by placing both Bilbo and Thorin, and the entire rest of Tolkien’s *Hobbit* cast and setting, within a universe structured at least partially according to the supernatural gender roles that have emerged within the fandom of the 1990’s television show *The Sentinel*. While the show itself focuses on a police officer who has supernaturally heightened senses and his sidekick, once referred to as his “Guide,” who helps him learn to use and control his senses, the fandom surrounding *The Sentinel* has since evolved, such that the sentinel-guide pairing has come to be its own fan trope, one which appears in multiple fandoms and often informs sexual, relational, and - in the instance of “An Unexpected Bond” - gender roles.

Early in the text, myredturtle outlines some of the key ways that *The Sentinel* trope has influenced their Tolkien fanfiction. They note that:

Bilbo was a sentinel, and sentinels did not leave the Shire. What adventures might be forgiven in a guide would not be tolerated for a sentinel, as sentinels were the Shires best defence against trouble. So Bilbo unhappily put away his dreams of adventure and his longing for foreign sights and learned from his father how to use his senses (myredturtle).

In myredturtle’s *Hobbit* universe, a hobbit’s identity of “sentinel” is not merely a private psychological and physiological component which informs their advanced senses and urges them
to find their “guide” - the sentinel is a vital part of the Hobbit community, who by the very fact of their sentinel-ness is marked as a kind of protector of the Shire. After an attack on the Shire, Bilbo’s sentinel sense “awakens,” and he begins to express concern to his father that he won’t meet his “guide.” His father reassures him by explaining that, while a “guide” isn’t required to live a happy and productive life, that “they just make it much easier and more reliable” (Ibid.).

Even for Bilbo, himself a sentinel, the assumption that a guide was required to be able to live as a sentinel was never questioned; it isn’t until his father reveals the actual impact that a guide has upon a sentinel that Bilbo comes to realize that not only is a guide not required for him to live and be able to fulfill his role for the Shire, but that this knowledge is commonly shared among prior sentinels. Bilbo doesn’t question his father’s wisdom in this scene any further, and after the passing of both parents and of many years, the story eventually finds him giving up on the expectation of the guide for whom he has been waiting: “The years continued to pass, and no guide arrived to ease his loneliness. On his fiftieth birthday, Bilbo buried the last of his hope as deep as it would go. After all, life goes on.”

The import of this assertion is not at first discernible: while we understand that Bilbo desires a guide and that his father, Bungo, has said a guide will help improve his senses and make things “much easier,” Bilbo’s upbringing has enforced the notion that, if not mandatory for survival, a guide is at least essential for a happy and fulfilled life. Essentially, then, by giving up on the hope of finding a “guide,” Bilbo is giving up on a chance for happiness - his “loneliness” may never ease, and the easier path in life will not be open to him. The cultural and physiological importance of the sentinel-guide relationship reinforce the notion that there is actually only one potentially perfect partner for Bilbo; if he cannot find his guide, his resignation seems to suggest,
then he will not bother trying to find anyone. This functions to establish an even more rigid binary than male-female, man-woman, husband-wife, for while multiple iterations of each binary might be acceptable, even celebrated, there is literally only one true pairing for both sentinels and guides, and the loneliness they feel cannot be eased outside of the sentinel-guide partnership.

Fortuitous, then, that the next paragraph in the story leads Bilbo to his sought-after guide, as the story segues into a more familiar retelling of the original Hobbit plot, with Gandalf arriving on Bilbo’s door and proposing an adventure. The story then continues in much the same vein as the canonical Hobbit, until the arrival of the final dwarf (Thorin) to Bilbo’s unanticipated dinner party; while in the film this arrival is met with foreboding, in the fic the scene has Bilbo’s “sentinel sense” prickling: he feels that there is “something different about this one,” and Bilbo, “could feel a pull towards him, a desire to touch, to smell, to taste. This dwarf was his guide! The one he’d given up waiting for, finally at his door” (Ibid).

Bilbo has, notably, decided that the dwarf at the door is his guide without even having heard a single word from the individual - he has only just opened the door, made a snap assumption about gender (Bilbo felt a pull towards “him” and prepares to “greet him as was proper for a sentinel upon first meeting is guide,” until Thorin interrupts), and made the assumption that Thorin recognized both his own role as “guide” and Bilbo’s as his would-be sentinel (after a gruffly-asked question from Thorin, Bilbo wonders if this was “how all dwarf guides greeted sentinels?”). Bilbo’s assumptions carry on for the majority of the chapter until, part-way through the company’s journey, Bilbo learns that not only does Thorin not perceive the hobbit to be a sentinel, but he does not even believe that sentinels (and presumably, guides) are
actually real. When Thorin makes it plain that he isn’t entirely familiar with the concept, Bilbo explains that

“A sentinel is an individual, male or female, who has five enhanced senses. I can see, hear, taste and smell better than any other hobbit, and I can identify the type of rock that makes up grains of sand by touch alone. I can feel the changes in the air that herald a storm long before it arrives, I can hear the sound of rain landing on leaves over in the Old Forest, the other side of Buckland. I could smell my mothers [sic] baking from here to Bag End, and I can taste the pinch of nutmeg that gets added to every barrel of Old Toby. I can smell that Dwalin still has several of the biscuits he lifted from my tin, and that he's not shared them with any of the other dwarves.” (Ibid.)

After some awkward conversation, the pair come to the understanding that not only is Thorin willing to fulfill his role as Bilbo’s guide - despite no similar role existing within dwarven culture - but that he has “felt a pull” toward Bilbo since their first meeting, despite not having expressed it until their conversation. At this point - nearly three quarters of the way through the story - that the pair has expressed an interest, not only in supporting one-another in the guide-sentinel role, but in exploring the sexual and romantic possibilities of the relationship.

Faced with the prospect of “sharing a room when we get to bree,” Thorin seemingly abruptly shifts the conversation to the way that “hobbits are like men and elves, in that they separate their people by those who can bear young, and those that sire them. [...] The separation… is referred to in everyday speech” (Ibid). Bilbo nods, acknowledging that within hobbit culture a binary gender model exists with hobbits being separated into “male and female [...] him and her,” and asks if dwarves have a similar tradition. Thorin explains that
While we have male and female dwarves, all are referred to as 'he' regardless of sex, unless they have borne a child. For the majority, our lives are devoted to our craft, to our passion. Maybe three fifths of us join together with another dwarf as life-mates, and an even smaller number start families. [...] To bear young means effectively suspending your involvement in or abandoning your craft and instead devoting yourself to your offspring. A dwarf that chooses this path is honoured for her sacrifice, and it is every other dwarf's duty to assist her as he can. (Ibid.)

Following this disclosure, Thorin falls silent, and Bilbo prompts him to continue further, disclosing that for hobbits, sex differences among hobbits include “external indicators”; Thorin responds “uncomfortably,” asserting that, “aside from the actual baby making parts, a dwarf’s sex is almost impossible to determine. In fact, a large part of courtship is the delicate confirmation of which set of equipment your prospective partner is in possession of” (Ibid). Asked why one simply couldn’t ask what sex a prospective partner was, Thorin responds that one would only do that, “if you desire an axe to the face.” He continues:

It's something we're very private about. When I was small there was less strict secrecy, but after our home was taken from us and we were forced to wander it was soon made clear to us that men in particular felt different about trading with those born as bearers. After a couple of unfortunate incidents where a bearer was accosted by men who thought that they would be easy prey, we learnt that our best option was total secrecy. One is generally aware of what sex one's closest family is, but beyond that, no. And really, it's not anybody's business. (Ibid.)
Thorin goes on to discuss dwarven culture and romantic traditions in greater depth, highlighting how dwarves believe themselves to have a “One,” something of a spiritually predetermined soul mate; they hope to only ever partner with that one individual, a “single life-mate that is their match,”; notably, this “one” is not explicitly described as being part of a heterosexual couple. Other minutiae of dwarven and hobbit culture are discussed throughout the story, but ultimately, as the commenter kallinea_rae noted in their response to the work, the bulk of the text is comprised of “worldbuilding and couple negotiations” (2015). Outside of a few moments of revelation and the slowly ebbing suspense of whether or not Bilbo will find his “guide,” the text emerges for the reader as more of a guidebook on the complexities of gender, sex, and romantic structures within the fictional races’ cultures than it does an example of characters fully living in and embodying those cultures. We learn about dwarven courtship without seeing it enacted beyond a few references to a blushing Thorin and some furtive comments about sharing a room at an inn; the author describes the powerful impact that the guide can have in helping the sentinel hone his skills, but we don’t get the chance to see that impact enacted.

Despite the fact that this story struggles at times with flow and plot, the unique approach to gender and the thoughtful use of pronouns makes it stand out from most other stories where a character experiences a cisgender swap. Here, Thorin is identified, ultimately, as female, but he persists in using male pronouns and all other characters in the story who refer to him with pronouns do so likewise. In this telling, the common Tolkien trope of dwarven women being similar in appearance to dwarven men is taken to the extreme; Thorin says they are “almost impossible to determine,” and that outside of one’s romantic partner and one’s immediate family, most dwarves neither know, nor care about an individual dwarf’s sex - whether that dwarf is a king or not. In myredturtle’s Hobbit universe, gender identity and expression appear to have little
substantive connection to sex (at least for dwarves), and sex itself is treated as largely 
inconsequential, a subject of which few are willing to discuss outside of its relevance in sex and 
reproduction. All dwarves are “he,” regardless of genitalia, until and unless they choose to bear 
children; it is only after that that sex becomes sharply demarcated, with mothers being relegated 
to the role of caretaker and expected to participate in less strenuous and safer work, with the 
assumption that they will be safeguarded long enough to raise their dwarf children.

Although no doubt problematic in that a dwarf’s decision to pursue motherhood results in 
their being relegated to specific professional pursuits, the concept of a largely mono-gendered 
culture suggests a cultural, political, and spiritual understanding of gender in which gender

identity is potentially less strictly regulated (for example, any dwarf can be hailed 
unproblematically as “he”). The reality of a largely mono-gendered culture directly challenges 
the established relevance of binary gender frameworks; however, it does so while at the same 
time normalizing masculinity and erasing femininity. In the end, while binary gender is 
challenged, it is challenged in favor of a privileging of masculine gender expression, something 
feminists have rigorously critiqued in discussions of androgyny and gender neutrality 
(specifically, that masculine expression is not a substitute for gender neutrality or androgyny) 
(Williams 2015; Nelson 2016; Lang, 2016).

Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that although Bilbo identifies as a man, Thorin does 
not necessarily identify as a woman, and indeed that in this alternate fictional universe, there 
may not actually exist a separate gender of “woman” in dwarven culture, despite the presence of 
multiple sexes. Although neither the author nor commenters suggested as such, it seems 
reasonable, in light of the non-binary, non-heterosexual dynamics of their pairing, that the
relationship remains a markedly queer one, with the dwarf-and-hobbit couple challenging norms around gender expression, at least for hobbits; for dwarves, the entire concept of sentinel-and-guide duality layers an unexpected level of complexity upon an already complexly gendered, arguably interracial, relationship.

As much as some texts - even texts where Thorin’s sex is swapped - engage in interesting or unconventional ways with norms around gender, sex, and sexual orientation, still others end up reinforcing binary models of gender and often serve to further entrench sexist ideology about the way that gender is acted and enacted upon bodies. I want to touch briefly on a notable example by an author who has several stories depicting transgender characters, “ylc.” ylc’s 2015 work, “Of misunderstandings and other obstacles for love,” sets out at its inception to portray a sort of rom-com novella where Thorin is a transgender woman subletting her brother’s apartment and Bilbo is a cisgender man who has just moved into another apartment in the building. This story also appeared to me to be an “issue fic” by virtue of its handling of a character who was still in the process of transitioning (or recently had) and who specifically acknowledged fearing transphobia within the text, in addition to tags about “misunderstandings” and “self confidence issues.”

Where other stories struggle to move through worldbuilding and backstory into actual plot, ylc’s “Of misunderstandings and other obstacles for love” struggles with both, in addition to an evident lack of research into transgender experiences and narratives. At first, the story does parallel the narratives of many trans and non-binary individuals when coming out; Thorin says that her “father called her crazy the night she came out to him: he said it couldn’t be possible.” To Thorin’s father, who saw Thorin as “strong, smart, a natural leader” who enjoyed playing
“sports, doing manual work, [and practicing] judo” (Ibid), the notion that Thorin could identify as anything other than a man was impossible. Such a rejection narrative parallels the narratives shared by many trans individuals, some of whom “are not allowed to explore gender identities and expressions in their youth due to familial or cultural expectations (Schultz, 8).

Much of the rest of ylc’s story, however, is interwoven with language that is quickly becoming antiquated (and had been publicly interrogated by the time the author published the first chapter of the work); she refers, for example, to an experience of having something “wrong with her body,” a callback to the concept of “wrong body” or “trapped in the wrong body” - terminology which, while not completely absent from contemporary narratives of trans identity, has nonetheless been problematized with increasing frequency as both transgender activists and transgender and gender studies, as well as queer theory scholars have sought to shift the discussion. In a 2012 essay posted on her website, trans activist and author Janet Mock tackled the concept of being “trapped” in a “wrong body,” asserting that

To me, “trapped in the wrong body” is a blanket statement that makes trans* people’s varying journeys and narratives palatable to the masses. It’s helped cis masses understand our plight – to a certain extent. It’s basically a soundbite of struggle, “I was a girl (boy) trapped in a boy’s (girl’s) body,” which aims to humanize trans* folks, who are often seen as alien, as freaks, as less-than-human and other. (Mock, 2012)

For Mock, the rhetoric of being “trapped in the wrong body” is a way of flattening difference among trans narratives, of tidying them up and making them “palatable to the masses,” so that substantive engagement with transgender individuals’ struggles and experiences is not necessary. Mock goes on to explain that one of the reasons she finds the phrase so troubling is that it
places me in the role of victim, and to those who take mainstream media depictions as
truth I’m seen as a human to be pitied because I’m someone who needs to be saved,
rather than a self-determined woman with agency and choice and the ability to define
who I am in this society and who I will become in spite of it. (Ibid.)

The transgender studies scholar Ulrica Kendal, in her 2014 entry “Wrong Body” in Transgender
Studies Quarterly, elaborated on the way that many feminists and transgender studies scholars
have problematized the concept of “wrong body.” She noted that

The theoretical critique regards the assumption of essentialism that underlies the wrong-
body conception. The body is assumed wrong in relation to an inner, real, and authentic
gender identity, thus giving the impression of an essence that the body constrains,
producing a reified image of both body and self as static and separate entities and thereby
correlating an essentialism of genital materiality that disputes the realness of transgender
experience. The idea of authenticity underlies essentialism and produces norms of
naturalness and realness. Essentialism therefore reinforces the norms of a gender binary,
resulting in misrecognition of gender-varied bodies and expressions, risking
stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion. Hence the critique mainly concerns: the
master narrative of the wrong body that overshadows gender-variant body experience as
valid; the reference to gender and/or genital essentialism; the reification of body and self
as static and separable entities; and the reproduction of gender binary norms (pp. 267-
268).

For Kendal, then, rhetoric about the “wrong body” or being “trapped in the wrong body” is
harmful because it serves to reinforce an essentialist ideology wherein in order to have a “right”
body, one must have a body which is genitally and in multiple other ways “correct” according to binary gender norms. In the service of making transgender experiences of embodiment intelligible and palatable to a cisgender majority, the concept of “wrong body” ultimately serves, not only to entrench cissexism against binary transgender individuals, but to compound the oppression of those non-binary transgender and genderqueer individuals for whom sex is neither static, nor binary.

Thus, when ylc’s Thorin character “has always stared at her reflection and felt there was something wrong with her body,” the reader has demonstrated for them (from a contemporary, transgender character, no less) that this binary is unarguably real, that “wrong body” is still an acceptable shorthand for a monolithic experience of transgender embodiment. This scene takes place within the first chapter of the text, and follows one of the starkest examples of how unexamined cis privilege can inform the creation of fictional transgender narratives. While staring at her naked body in a mirror in her home, Thorin reflects on her transition experience. She “reminds herself she has just started taking her hormones and the operation is too recent, so her scar won’t remain that angry red line forever” (Ylc). No details are given, here or anywhere else in the text: how recently is “just started”? What single surgery would give Thorin - who later speaks about a powerful dysphoric experience and throughout the text struggles with being perceived as unfeminine - a single scar, one “angry red line”?

I put these questions forward, not to emphasize that the character of Thorin must have had specific surgeries, or even that it’s required that she have any particular medical procedure in order to identify and live as a woman - but rather to highlight the way in which the author seeks to capitalize on the concept of a transgender subject without demonstrating any substantive
understanding of the political, medical, and cultural restrictions that are regularly placed upon transgender individuals, and perhaps upon transgender women especially. Few (if any) Western surgeons are willing to perform bottom surgery for transgender women without adhering to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health’s *Standards of Care*, the most recent edition of which asserts that neither transgender men nor transgender women should be permitted to undergo bottom surgery without “twelve consecutive months of hormone therapy”; the same is recommended, though not required, for breast augmentation surgery for trans women (WPATH, p. 60). A cursory internet search regarding transition or surgery for transgender women - even using antiquated terminology like “sex reassignment surgery” or “transsexual surgery,” which, although less common among transgender and non-binary individuals, still circulate in mainstream culture as acceptable terms - would reveal that there are harsh requirements for such surgeries, and that there is no singular, universal surgery that “completes” a transition. As Busse and Lothian argue in their discussion of *Stargate: Atlantis* fanfiction where transgender characters are present, such depictions constitute a romanticized narrative of FTM transsexuality assumes that passing is a once-for-all, “overnight” experience [...] Most of the story revolves around Rodney and John’s relationship and the repercussions of John finding out about Rodney having been born in a female body. The story thus clearly functions in a phantasmatic space that is less concerned with accurately representing transgendered or transsexual identities and politics than it is with exploring the show’s characters and their dynamics. (p. 15)
As in the fic discussed by Busse and Lothian, the flattening of transition experience here seems to suggest that having a substantive discussion and/or portrayal of transgender identity or experience is secondary to simply showing a love story with a “twist” at the end.

Furthermore, I highlight the disparity between standard medical practices here and what is presented in the text, not to suggest that there should be *one* narrative about transition, or even that all transition-related narratives need to incorporate or somehow acknowledge the restrictions placed upon transgender individuals seeking medical transition. Rather, I advocate for a practice of transgender representation that acknowledges the complexities of trans lived experiences, that - if it does seek to incorporate medical narratives or highlight the struggles experienced with transitioning - at least carry in them some evidence that the author has done due diligence in researching the experiences of *actual transgender people*. Increased inclusion of transgender and non-binary characters in fiction - including fan fiction - is a worthy goal, but if those stories end up reinforcing binaries or erasing the oppression that transgender individuals experience in everyday life, then they ultimately may do more harm than good.

To briefly highlight one example of how such harm can come about, I point to an exchange within the comments, several chapters into the work. After a scene in which the character Thorin has been peppered with questions by Bilbo (still unaware that Thorin is trans), the commenter Mawgon suggests the following:

> It makes her suspicious, because the fact that he wants nothing in return is completely unthinkable, but she can’t, for the life of her, figure out what’s in for him."

That's really good writing there. Subtly showing the character is trans. You don't grow up as a woman and not realize that men who are unusually friendly tend to want one very
specific thing. Good for Thorin that it's just cute little Bilbo. That kind of cluelessness could be dangerous if she was dealing with someone else... (Mawgon, 2015.)

I highlight this comment, not to engage in a debate over whether or not Bilbo does want something (whether that something is sexual/romantic, as the commenter suggests, or otherwise), but rather to dispute the claim that Thorin’s response to Bilbo is an inherently trans way of responding. For the commenter, Thorin’s lack of understanding isn’t indicative of self-consciousness around her trans identity, or worry about her safety, or fear of potentially violent repercussions from someone asking questions; it is merely indicative of her “ignorance,” something brought about because she didn’t “grow up as a woman.” Such an argument rests upon an understanding of “gender” as being conflated with “sex” and “gender expression” - because Thorin did not grow up presenting in a feminine manner, because she was not hypersexualized from childhood, through adolescence and into early adulthood, she could not possibly understand what it means when a man expresses sexual interest in her. While this might provide a fruitful opportunity for critical discussion, the author instead doubles down on the commenter’s essentializing depiction of trans experience/identity, responding that they are “glad [the commenter] thought so!” and that they, “keep worrying I'm not really portraying Thorin as trans, so this comment made me really happy!” (ylc, June 27, 2015). Thorin’s transness is essentially confirmed as demarcating her from cisgender women’s experience and identity; however much she may identify as a woman, she still didn’t “grow up as” one, something which leaves her “clueless” about what it really means to be a woman. Although such stark examples of cissexism in the framing of transgender characters are somewhat uncommon, they nonetheless reveal that not every foray into transgender representation is a positive one, and even attempts to depict complex, well-rounded transgender characters can go awry without adequate research and
at least a moderate understanding of policies (medical, social, and political) which often rigidly shape the contours of trans lived experiences.

I’ve saved the Bilbo stories for last because, in the years I’ve spent combing through *The Hobbit* fanfiction, I’ve noticed that this character, perhaps more than any other, has a tendency to have his gender switched. As I mentioned in the start of this section, stories featuring a female Thorin were rare enough on Archive of Our Own; stories where Thorin alone had been genderswapped and was paired with a male Bilbo were even fewer. Notably, because the character of Bilbo was so frequently portrayed in genderswap stories enacting genders other than that canonically assigned in the book (a cisgender man), the stories about a genderswapped Bilbo also more frequently subverted other expectations about the character. In one of the stories I’ll discuss below, Bilbo is not only a transgender woman, but she’s black - so far the only instance of a race-changed *Hobbit* character I have been able to find on AO3 (although another story depicts fanart of a black female Bilbo, the story does not give any written clues as to Bilbo’s appearance, at least insofar as race is concerned). In yet another story, the final I’ll discuss in this chapter, Bilbo is not only a trans woman - she is a trans woman who sought out the help of a “wizard” for what appears to be gender confirmation… magic, thus combining both the transformation and the transgender sub-genres; in addition to all this, every character in this story is actually a humanoid animal - Thorin and the dwarves are all wolfish, with pointy ears and fluffy tails, and Bilbo and the other hobbits are (presumably) bunnies, with longer, rounded ears and large, furry feet (in keeping, it seems, with the tradition in the books of Hobbits having hairy feet). Here and elsewhere in tales about a genderswapped Bilbo, the titular character of *The Hobbit* finds themselves not only written with a non-canonical gender identity and expression, but often with features that don’t even play at being close to canon (as in Bilbo’s bunny-hobbit,
above and below). This greater range of portrayals results in depictions which, whether trans, cisgender, or transformed, convey a level of complexity and awareness of gender diversity one might hope to find even in more mainstream, non-fan-fictional works on trans and non-binary individuals.

In “Tranformation [sic] of the body, not of the mind,” authors AlexKingoftheDamned and swimsalot tell a variation of the traditional Hobbit plot wherein Gandalf is forced to transform Bilbo. As the company is journeying toward the Lonely Mountain, they are set upon by a giant, predatory bird that has targeted Bilbo and refuses to relent. Having escaped the bird’s attention only briefly, Gandalf suggests that he can transform Bilbo in order to change his “scent” - effectively making him vanish to the scent-seeking bird. Bilbo is warned that it is fickle, and I will have little control of what Bilbo will change into. He may become a goblin, or a human, or a dwarf himself, but he will not be Bilbo, and the creature will cease (AlexKingoftheDamned and Swimsalot, 2013).

While the author does not specifically write Gandalf as guaranteeing Bilbo will still have his own personality/interior identity after the change, the implication in the scene seems to be that “he will not be Bilbo” in a chemical/biological/genetic sense – that is, that whatever physical aspects of “Bilbo” are causing the bird to pursue him will be eradicated after the spell. After some very brief questions (Bilbo confirms that he’ll still maintain his own memories/awareness), Gandalf performs the spell: Bilbo’s “bones shifted and his flesh moved,” and after collapsing to the ground he realizes:

Bilbo Baggins had become a woman.
Bilbo blinked a few times and hesitantly sat up, finding his body settling in ways he wasn't used to. He shook his head, trying to clear away some of the dizziness and was hit in the face by hair he had never had before. He looked up at all the bearded faces staring down at him in shock and found himself starting to worry.

"What is it?" he asked, surprised by the pitch of his voice.

That was when he looked down. He was still small, smaller than he had been before even, and certainly wasn't himself.

"I'm a girl." he stated, rather calmly in his opinion. (Ibid.)

The bird returns abruptly and, realizing it can no longer “smell” the hobbit as he was before, ultimately gives up and leaves the party to continue on their way, with the other dwarves immediately asking when Gandalf could change Bilbo back. The wizard advises that he “would not risk trying. The spell is impossible to control, and it is a miracle that Bilbo retained his hobbit stature at all” (Ibid). Given that it is precisely the character’s hobbit embodiment - and the fact that the dragon at the end of their journey is unfamiliar with the smell of hobbits - both Gandalf and the rest of the party agree that he will remain as a female hobbit, at least until he has achieved his goal with the company. Importantly, Bilbo doesn’t seem to experience any substantial crisis in identity, and while there are periods of readjustment - she has to adjust to riding a horse while wearing a long dress and struggles to learn what to do with the mass of curly hair until the wizard helps her put it in braids - Bilbo experiences neither dysphoric feelings regarding an incongruence between physical embodiment and gender identity nor does she seem to require a period of readjustment as she comes to identify as a woman. The process happens almost instantaneously, without much discussion - Bilbo was once a “he,” and after a sex swap,
is now “she.” Outside of the few minor inconveniences noted above, the change seems, at first, to have had little impact upon Bilbo’s overall goal in assisting the group.

The wrench that is finally thrown into the plan is yet another twist on the canonical character of Smaug the dragon: when female Bilbo (whom the narrator now refers to with female pronouns, indicating Bilbo’s own acceptance of a new gender as well as a new sex) enters the Lonely Mountain, the dragon Smaug immediately smells her and gives chase.

"Th-the dragon. Came out of no where." Bilbo said, panting from the run. She looked around Gandalf, towards the door then shrunk back, terrified that she might see the dragon again. "I was walking towards the stairs. Everything was quiet and then out of no where I was attacked! He looked like he was going to eat me. I barely got away."

Suddenly Thorin’s eyes widened and he looked at Gandalf, who nodded gravely. (Ibid.)

Gandalf goes on to explain to the party that when the spell transformed Bilbo, it put him in an entirely new, fully healed body, one which had physically never been touched - or, for the purposes of a dragon with a penchant for eating virgin women - had intercourse. Bilbo realizes that there is “no way she was going to be able to sneak in and lure the dragon out” and momentarily succumbs to hopelessness, deciding that it is “impossible” and that “she’d come all this way for nothing.” She ventures to ask if there might be another plan, and one of the dwarves puts forth a suggestion in jest.

“Well, if you weren’t a virgin – ” Kili laughed, and flinched, anticipating another blow from his brother.

“No, that’s not such a bad plan,” Fili agreed. “Then you wouldn’t smell like a virgin, and you could try again. Big scaly won’t even want to talk to you until you don’t smell so
enticing.”

“No, stop it at once,” Gandalf said. “That is not a proper plan.”

“What, you think your virginity is worth more than the mountain, all its treasures, the people it could inhabit, you think you’re worth more?” Dwalin said with a deep, threatening voice. (Ibid.)

What ensues is a brief back-and-forth between the dwarves, Gandalf, and Bilbo regarding the relative value of the hobbit’s virginity - as well as the “realness” of her gender. “Bilbo might be a lady now,” exclaims one dwarf, “but that doesn’t mean she’s more important than everything that palace could be used for!” (Ibid). “Bilbo isn’t even a real lady, he’s still himself,” comments another, apparently in agreement that the hobbit’s virginity should be forfeited in favor of the mission they share. Bilbo repeatedly tries to interject to share her thoughts and to ask for a brief reprieve in order to consider the situation, but the gathering of (all male) dwarves either speaks over her or attempts to convince her that it, “doesn’t have to be some awful thing, you know.” Bilbo’s own sexual autonomy is rendered as practically non-existent, the choice framed - not as “do you want to have sex or not?” but as “is your body worth more - or less - than the success of the mission.” Transformed into a female body, Bilbo is no longer the sole arbiter of her sexuality; it is effectively a currency, the price of entrance into the mountain, and one nearly every dwarf in the company is willing to have her pay.

Just as the company begins to argue about who will be the one to have sex with Bilbo, Thorin interrupts, making space for Bilbo to participate in the discussion and, once she agrees to have sex with someone, quickly declaring that “the task falls to me” and that they’ll return to an inn for the evening. Once at the inn, the story seems to make a radical leap - perhaps in an effort
to expedite the “porn-with-a-little-plot” the authors have referenced in the tags - and portray Thorin and Bilbo as having been repressing a deep and abiding infatuation - even love - for one another. After only a few words spoken in the bedroom, Thorin confesses that

“You are the most amazing person I have ever met,” Thorin said, looking back at the fire crackling at the other end of the room. “Man or a woman, you are… you are extraordinary. And I want you to know… I think you deserve to know… that this is not something I do lightly, or without great thought. Or emotion.”

"I'm glad." Bilbo said, blushing dark. "I mean, you're the most impressive person I've ever met. I've never met anyone I respect as much as you. You're noble and brave and loyal. You are the only person I would have chosen to do this with." (Ibid.)

Inexplicably, and with few (if any) other noticeable cues elsewhere in the chapter, we learn that Thorin has been attracted to Bilbo since before he was transformed into a woman; likewise, Bilbo feels that Thorin is “the most impressive person” she’s ever met, and although her high regard has been conveyed elsewhere in the story, at no other point has it been clear - or even heavily implied - that there was a mutual attraction between the hobbit and the dwarf.

Further complicating Bilbo’s expression of adoration for Thorin is her concluding statement: “the only person I would have chosen to do this with” (emphasis mine) (Ibid.). However, Bilbo didn’t choose to “do this” with Thorin; not only did she not choose to have her sex (and, following the story’s narrative, gender) transformed, but her decision to have sex was arguably the result of overwhelming peer pressure; even when she did consent, the choice was made by Thorin, not Bilbo. Ultimately, although she may have desired him at some point, the sexual encounter depicted in the story is far from consensual, and devaluing of her sexual
autonomy is erased because “she would have wanted to anyway” - a narrative that closely parallels the practice of victim-blaming in the rhetoric of contemporary rape culture. This erasure is only magnified later in the scene, when Thorin’s perception of Bilbo as “amazing” has transformed into “love,” with the dwarf having “loved” Bilbo since the moment she lifted a sword to protect him, and Bilbo reciprocating, noting that she “loves” Thorin as well, but fears that intercourse would lead to pregnancy - something she is unwilling to experience, since she hopes to eventually return to her “regular body.” After being succinctly assured that reproduction between dwarves and hobbits is not possible, the two have intercourse, the scene resolves with Bilbo thanking Thorin, and the latter informing her that she is “mine now,” and that if she remained a woman “we could be married” (AlexKingoftheDamned and swimsalot, 2013).

Ultimately, then, the gendered dynamics of the story end up relying not only a tenuous application (at best) of consent politics, but those politics are reinforced by heterosexist, patriarchal institutional structures which Thorin implements moments after Bilbo's first sexual experience in order to convince her to remain in a body she has already expressed a desire to change/shift out of. Thus, not only is Bilbo’s current bodily autonomy valued as less important than the shared goals of the company he is traveling with, but after surrendering to their desire for a successful quest, he finds his new (and first) lover already asking him to yield his own embodied desires in favor of political institutions which could benefit Thorin and Bilbo socially in the future.

In The Feels Whale (Miscellea)’s 2013 fic “Silly Trinkets,” the author tells the story of a cisgender, woman-identified hobbit (named “Briar,” instead of “Bilbo”) who journeys through Middle Earth to help the dwarves reclaim their homeland - the standard story arc for many
Hobbit fics, including others discussed within this chapter. The story begins with Gandalf orchestrating an intrigue around Bilbo’s gender, the structure of which neither Briar nor the dwarves are aware of. From the first moment he begins interacting with Briar around the dwarves, Gandalf refers to the hobbit as “Master Baggins,” something Briar writes off as a “silly farce, but one the wizard seems determined to keep going” (Miscellea). The story makes large leaps in between chapters, dropping the characters into the very beginning of important scenes - meeting up with Beorn the Skinchanger for the first time, or battling wargs after escaping the Goblin King. At one point, shortly after they have arrived in the elven city of Rivendell, Briar has had her clothes changed from the rough traveling outfit she wore on the road into elven hand-me-downs, with her hair styled in a less practical, more ornate fashion - all stylistic choices by the elves caring for her that have the effect of emphasizing her feminine features. She is traveling down one of the hallways in the city and bumps into Thorin, who is described as being visibly impacted:

“Master Baggins?” Thorin looks her up and looks her down, taking in the silver gray fabric of her gown, the lilies woven into her braids, and stop [sic] (oddly enough) to rest on the clever little comb keeping her fringe out of her eyes.

Briar can’t help the annoyed little sigh that escapes her at the ‘master’. It’s the same sigh she’s huffed every time she hears that word from one of the other’s lips, but it’s never been so damning as it is now that Thorin is standing in front of her with his eyebrows up around his hairline and her skirts pooling around the toes of his boots.

“…Mistress Baggins.” He corrects himself and his hands clench at his sides. Whatever that means, Briar can’t find it in herself to guess, but she doesn’t like it. (Ibid.)
Although the moment is never explicitly unpacked within the fic itself, cues given throughout the rest of the text indicate that, prior to this moment, Thorin had regarded Briar as a man; because hobbits were largely unknown to dwarves (and presumably because, even within Tolkien canon, dwarf women look similar to dwarf men), Thorin had simply taken Gandalf’s use of the honorific “Master” as confirmation of his assumptions. It is not until this scene, when he refers to Briar as “Mistress” for the first time, that Thorin finds himself questioning the assumptions he had made about Briar’s sex and gender identity. Whether the anger that results from this discovery is because he feels foolish for misunderstanding, confused by a (by now) burgeoning attraction to the hobbit, or angry with Gandalf for a perceived deceit is unclear, but the experience of discovering Briar’s (presumed) sex and gender elicit similarly strong reactions from other characters in Miscellea’s piece. Take, for example, the scene at dinner, shortly after the encounter above, when the made-over Briar meets with the rest of the company in her more normatively feminine attire:

“And who is this?” Fili all but leers at her from across the table, elbowing his brother who regards her with a bright grin. “You left to find our burglar, but came back with a lady! Uncle, I think you’re not very good at this.”

“I’m not complaining.” Kili snorts and carves a slice of bread off his loaf with one hand and offers it to her with a suave grin. “I didn’t know there were other halflings in Rivendell. We’re travelling with one of the Shire, Mistress, who shares your look. Perhaps you are distant kin.”

“You aren’t funny, Kili.” Briar replies tartly and takes the bread from the young dwarf’s fingers before he drops it on the table in surprise. “Thank you for this.” She reaches for one of the pots on the table and finds it full of …hmmm some kind of paste smelling of
smoked fish and spicy herbs. She spreads a little of it on her bread and tries it.

Silence reigns at the table and when she looks up she finds herself the center of attention.

“What?”

“Master Baggins?” Ori yelps. “You… you’re a mistress?”

“I am.” Briar agrees. (Ibid.)

Although the reactions range from sudden attraction to teasing to shock, each of the dwarves identified in the scene is noticeably surprised by the realization that Briar’s gender is other than what they had expected. While for Fili and Kili (the two youngest members of the group) their ultimate reaction is more measured and they are able to sustain a positive relationship with Briar, others become more standoffish:

Of the party, only the young dwarf lords treated her more or less the same after that disastrous night when her secret came out. Fili still flirted with her while Kili behaved somewhat more like a bratty younger brother, but they didn’t withdraw from her quite like the others did. They were never involved in the conversations that mysteriously went silent whenever she came into sight. They still sat with her at meal times and involved her in their mischief, but neither would they explain what it was she’d done to wrong the others.

“It’s nothing you did.” Is all Fili would tell her. “Things will go back to the way there [sic] were. Only give it time.” (Ibid.)

Although by the end of the fic Briar’s relationship with the other characters in the story has normalized and they no longer regard her as a cause for suspicion or unease, the experience of having their gendered perception of her transformed suddenly not only has a powerful impact
upon them in the moment of their realization, but an impact which is sustained through portions of the narrative, causing tension among the group of travelers and loneliness, confusion, and pain specifically for Briar, who neither realizes her gender is being misread initially, nor intentionally seeks to shift the way her peers perceive her gender. Furthermore, although the distance between the dwarves and Briar is ultimately resolved, it is never thoroughly interrogated, and the dwarves’ practice of distancing themselves from her because of her newly perceived gender goes largely unquestioned, accepted as simply the fallout of Gandalf’s initial meddling. Thus while the story does play with established norms around gender and sex - that both are easily intuited upon first meeting and that gender expression is static cross-culturally - the fact that binary gender exists and needs to have a regulatory impact upon social interactions is never truly interrogated.

In terms of changes from the canon, this story does have another that marks it as unique from most of the Hobbit fics published on AO3; the character of Briar is identified, via art included throughout the text, as black. Miscellea comments at the end of the first chapter that the inspiration for the story comes from another author’s project, titled, “You Look upon a Woman,” which they say “reimagines Tolkien with a cast of women of color” (Sara, 2013). Miscellea links to a specific prompt by the project’s creator, Sara:

Angel Coulby as Bilbo-Bramble Baggins—burglar, Ring-bearer, poet, translator, Elf-friend and scholar. After an adventurous youth, she spent her twilight years in Rivendell, working on her memoir, There and Back Again, as well as the compendium of lore, Translations from the Elvish. She was granted the great privilege of traveling to the Grey Havens with the last of the Elven lords, and passed into the West in her 131st year. (Ibid.)
Interestingly, outside of the chapter art included throughout the fic (art which is added after the text is originally published, as the author notes in their end notes after the first chapter), there only appear to be one or two brief mentions of Briar’s race in the text, when the dwarves are braiding her hair and she describes it as something impossibly difficult for the dwarves (themselves expert in braiding hair) to have much success with. Bofur, one of the dwarves, recounts Briar saying that “Hobbit hair is as contrary as Hobbits themselves,” and Briar herself comments about the need for special haircare products in order to style her hair.

Our only other indication that Briar’s hair is something not commonly seen by dwarves (or elves) is a brief reference, earlier in the text, to the female elves “playing” with Briar’s hair, and her letting them because they “seemed to be enjoying themselves.” Both passages are brief and vague enough that it might even be argued the author isn’t referring to black haircare or the common experience of having hair touched by those outside of one’s race; without the accompanying pictures, after all, there would be no evidence to support such a notion (and for those readers who are visually impaired there would literally be no other way to realize the author intended her to be read as a black woman because no text accompanies the images).

Perhaps even more surprising than the way race is discussed (or not discussed) in this race-changed fic is the way that commenters react (or more appropriately, don’t react) to the author identifying Briar as a black woman. While one commenter mentions that “Angel Coulby is a perfect, and perfectly lovely, Briar,” and another exclaims “SWEET JESUS YES” at the prospect of having a genderbent, POC woman leading the story, there is relatively little discussion on the change of the character’s race (Kudzery, 2013; Annie, 2013). The two most substantive engagements with the author’s depiction of Briar as a black woman seem, ultimately,
to undermine the potentially subversive politics with which the project was first put forth. For example, commenting on the scene when the elves play with Briar’s hair, one reader notes that, “the elf women enjoying themselves by playing with miss baggins' hair was an especially nice touch” (katdemon1895, 2013). The author responds to another portion of Katdemon1895’s comment without addressing the “nice touch” of the elves touching and playing with Briar’s hair, and neither author nor commenter, nor anywhere in the text itself, are the politics of Briar’s bodily autonomy, the fetishization of her hair by the elves, or the infantilization of the elves treating a more diminutive, black hobbit as though she was simply a plaything. This, combined with the comparative lack of acknowledgement of Briar’s race (one commenter actually asked, “Can I just, I mean, why are you using Guinevere in the pictures? Is she how you image fem Bilbo? (Though don't get me wrong, I love her too)” (StoriesAreLife, 2016), begs the question: if the impact of changing a white character into a character of color is either that the change is so underdeveloped that readers don’t realize it, or that racist practices are justified - even celebrated, who is ultimately benefitted by such a change? Is a race-changed character, handled as above, truly challenging the implicit white privilege of a story where every character is described as (or assumed to be) white?

I don’t mean to suggest that in every instance where a character’s race is changed from canon, the net result does more to reinforce racist ideologies than to subvert them; just as with genderswap fics, race changing can result in stories which subvert dominant ideologies, advance liberation politics, and educate readers about the importance of difference and intersectionality. One of the most politically cogent texts I’ve encountered within the Hobbit fandom - at least insofar as the complexities of trans subjectivities and embodiment are concerned - is the
abandoned\textsuperscript{13}, orphaned\textsuperscript{14} work \textit{The Blooming Bellflower}, last updated in 2015. Placed within a largely familiar, traditional Tolkien setting, this is another text which follows the overall arc of the original \textit{Hobbit} plot, subtly changing or embellishing existing plot or lore points in order to explore the experience of Bella Baggins, a black transgender hobbit. Unlike in other fics discussed above, however, the author goes to comparatively great lengths both to explore the contours and complexities of Bella’s racialized, gendered identity, and the author’s own paratextual content works to further complicate reader assumptions about race, even explicitly problematizing the politics of race, nation, and religion as they are presented in canonical Tolkien literature.

Before the text of the story even begins, some of the key concepts explored within “The Blooming Bellflower” are highlighted within the author-supplied paratextual elements. Tags note that not only will the story include “genderswap” and “canon divergence,” but that that swap features a “trans female character,” references to “gender dysphoria,” a “female character of color” and - in case the preceding tags weren’t specific enough - the author includes the tag, “I made Bilbo black and trans basically.” The combination of these tags, together with a quick skim

\textsuperscript{13} Although there is no official feature in the AO3 user interface, stories are often considered abandoned after not having been updated for several months, as is the case in this story. Authors who officially wish to mark stories as abandoned may include the tag, “Abandoned Work - Unfinished and Discontinued.”

\textsuperscript{14} Alternately, if they wish to neither be associated with the story in the future \textit{nor} to be able to update it, they may “orphan” the account, which will “permanently eliminate all...identifying data from the selected work(s)” (AO3, “Orphaning FAQ”, n.d.). Stories which are orphaned are moved to be listed under AO3’s “orphaned_account” username, and the author may neither update nor reclaim the story they orphaned; this is typically done in instances where an author no longer wishes for their name to be associated with the account, but they still wish for readers to be able to read (and commenters to be able to comment upon) the work.
of the text, confirmed for me that this was another example of an “issue fic,” wherein the author
was attempting to grapple with social justice issues like dysphoria, racism in fantasy genres, and
normative gender roles. In the “Notes” section prefacing the text, the author incorporates
“Chapter-specific triggers,” a way to not only inform the reader about the content of the chapter
but to give them an opportunity to either avoid, skim, or skip past content that could potentially
have a traumatic impact upon them (triggers listed include “past dysphoria,” “trans character
being outed as trans,” and “hate speech,” among others). Interestingly, the very presence of these
tags highlights the authors recognition that, while many (perhaps even most) of the readers of
such fics may be cisgender, that not all of them are likely to be – thus, the inclusion of content
warnings for material which would specifically have a harmful effect primarily on trans,
genderqueer, and non-binary readers.

In contrast to work discussed above, the author of “The Blooming Bellflower” seeks,
from the outset, not only to make absolutely clear that the main character is a woman of color,
but to both celebrate that identity and situate it within a specific cultural context (relative to the
lore of Tolkien’s Middle Earth). Bella is referred to as having skin that “was perhaps browner
than most of the Shire… but was not regarded as a bad thing,” and the darker skin of her mother
causes her to be perceived as “such a beauty, after all, with her skin the color of cool earth at the
start of spring” (Orphaned_account, 2014). Her hair is “pitch black and more coarse as often
happened to darker skinned hobbits,” the author writes, indicating that not only are she and her
mother women of color, but racial diversity exists throughout the Shire. Furthermore, the
description of her mother as “such a beauty” suggests that blackness is not only commonplace
within the Shire, but that it is regarded as beautiful; such narratives contrast with commonplace
standards of beauty which emphasize whiteness as preferred.
Despite the relatively progressive discussion of the politics of race and beauty within the shire, the author notes that “while all kinds of hobbits made a Shire, the Shire did not wish to be comprised of hobbits with her… inclinations, as the gentler folk called it” (Ibid.). The narrator tells us the other hobbits in the Shire speak of her in whispers.

“That Bilbo,” they would say, in between compliments on Miss Lavender Proudfoot’s latest attempt at lemon cakes, “needs to stop wearing lady’s dresses and start being sensible. At the rate he’s going he is going to cost every branch of the Baggins family their good reputation. [...] If I were his mother, I would have knocked such unnatural inclinations out of him before they got so out of hand.” (Ibid.)

By briefly describing the way that gossip circulates throughout the Shire regarding Bella and her gender (and then revisiting such a culture later, when she is vocally confronted about “embarrassing the Shire”), the narrator introduces the reader to the fact that the Shire still incorporates a rigidly binary understanding of gender while at the same time revealing that her transgender identity is regarded as a source of embarrassment, perceived as “unnatural” in her community. The rhetoric of transgender women being “men in dresses” has a substantial history within transphobic rhetoric: both anti-transgender feminists and mainstream conservatives have employed this rhetoric in order to dehumanize, delegitimize, and at times advocate for violence against transgender women (Schilt, 2010, p. 32; Rodriguez, 2017; Maza, 2013; Ring, 2016). By referencing dominant narratives of transphobia while at the same time framing them as regressive and damaging, the text serves to both destabilize such rhetorics and ideologies and to suggest that alternate understandings of gender identity, expression, and sex might not only be viable, but healthy and valuable to a positive, supportive community.
We see this message - an emphasis on the importance of mutual respect and support, and an awareness that individuals must be allowed to live their gender identity - in the exchanges Bella has shortly afterwards, during her discussion with Gandalf. After he finds Bella at work (the story begins with Bella already having been ejected from her family home in Bag End and resorting to work as a maid in a nearby village inn), the wizard begins questioning her about how long she had been working at the Prancing Pony. After one or two questions, Bella grows exasperated and tells him to just “ask me directly” if he knows what he thinks he does.

Gandalf nodded. “You are, or were depending on the perspective, Bilbo Baggins of Bag End.”

Bella pressed the heel of her hand to her eyes. “Yes. I was born Bilbo Baggins.”

“Yet here you are.” The statement connoted a variety of things she ought to have been, what he had expected of her; a man, ensconced in Bag End, rich enough to while away her hours reading and puffing on a pipe, wearing a waistcoat and trousers, calling herself Bilbo Baggins with pride and untroubled knowledge of the truth of it.

But such was not the reality of things. Bella inclined her head. “Here I am.”

Gandalf smiled, and it was kind in a way that was entirely unexpected, a genuine kindness, only minorly tinged with pity. “Oh, Bella Baggins, you really are your mother’s daughter.”

Bella did not know how to handle that, being called a ‘daughter’ so plainly and simply, somewhere outside of her own head. “You would call me her daughter? As simply as you would call any woman that?”

“It is what you propose yourself to be, and I would not presume to know your heart better
on this matter. Even wizards cannot divine a heart better than its owner.”

(Orphaned_account, 2014).

Here and in later exchanges with between the two characters, Gandalf engages thoughtfully and respectfully with Bella, neither questioning her gender nor outing her transgender status to the other members of the company (once they set off on their journey); this has the effect, ultimately, of modeling positive allyship for the reader, demonstrating ways in which cisgender friends, family, and community members can support both their transgender and non-binary peers/friends/family, and advance the overall cause of transgender rights and inclusion. By normalizing Bella’s gender and refusing to participate in the attempted spectacularization of her trans identity - something she has grown used to in the largely transphobic Shire - Gandalf highlights alternate models of interacting with gender and reinforces the concept of bodily autonomy and the right to self-identity; despite his being a wizard, Gandalf “cannot divine a heart better than its owner” (Ibid).

While trans-affirmational rhetoric would itself be a positive contribution to representations of transgender characters, the author is actually careful to create a complexly layered narrative, with a character for whom identity is neither static, nor unproblematic. Without specifically naming the experience, the author describes Bella’s own mental state at various points, sharing the different ways she perceives her beauty, goodness, value, or lack thereof. At one point, the narrator reveals that Bella believes herself to be “clumsy. Ugly. Sinful. Useless,” and that those words “pounded into her back, heart, stomach, and mind as if the axes of her own Company were bent towards her.” Bella struggles with the ideology with which she was raised, a cultural and religious belief structure which tells her that her gender identity and
(presumably) sexual orientation constituted “lechery,” “debauchery,” “pretense and seduction” and “unnatural inclinations.” The character’s frequent sense of self-doubt, self-hatred, and guilt are common components of depression, and that she experiences depression itself reflects an experience disproportionately common among transgender individuals (recent studies indicate that over 50% of transgender women and over 48% of transgender men experience depression) (Israel, 2001; Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013). Such experiences do not comprise the entirety of Bella’s experience, but they are nonetheless a part of it, and depicting Bella as continuing to struggle further humanizes the character.

Although the text remains unfinished, it nonetheless embodies much of the promise of transgender fan fiction. In addition to incorporating a richly complex transgender character whose experience both reflects and challenges mainstream narratives of trans experience, the text devotes its attention to a rigorous interrogation of the value of binary gender systems and offers up alternate models of gender identity and expression, as explored through the character of Dis, Thorin’s sister, and other discussions of dwarven women’s bodies, attire, skills and place within broader dwarf culture. Furthermore, this text stands out from most other Hobbit fics, whether genderswapped or not, because of its uniquely articulated awareness of the politics or race and racialization within Tolkien, and a series of consciously planned decisions regarding race changing various characters (in addition to Bella, we learn that the skinchanger, Beorn, and the Silvan elf Tauriel are also black)15. Such thoughtful engagements yield fruitful dialogue with readers as well - the commenter SavioBriion, for example, notes that

15 Through both paratextual notes, comments, and various descriptions in the text, the author discusses not only the physical appearance of Beorn and Tauriel, but the politics regarding their representation. They reference the mythology established by Tolkien, which features different gods, among them “Yavanna,” a goddess whose realm
as a queer brown (cis) woman, this fic means so much to me. I grew up in Singapore but am studying in Australia, where I do rather stick out. And yesterday I was just talking on Facebook about how important representation in books is, and why racebending in fandoms is so important, and why Aravis, from the Narnia books, is so important; there were and still are so few brown-skinned girls in fantasy for me to relate to, or to dress up as and attend conventions (SavioBriion, 2015).

Elsewhere in the comments, the author responds to praise by one user by discussing their decision to portray Bilbo as a woman, saying that, “One thing I really like about fem!Bilbo fanfiction is that it always makes her decision to leave and adventure more compelling—we see she has more to lose in society, and more rules to break in order to do what she wants to do” (Orphaned_account, 2014). Such exchanges demonstrate an awareness by the author of the impact of various forms of institutional oppression, in that a minoritized character such as Bella faces hurdles, not only to live as herself, but to leave the relative safety (if a stigmatized one) of her home in search of adventure, something the character realizes will necessitate “more rules to break in order to do what she wants to do.” Through both the text itself, the author-contributed paratextual elements, and the engagement with fans via comments, the author here shows a

was “far to the east in Middle Earth, at the beginning of the first age.” The author suggests that, in their rendition of Tolkien mythology, Yavanna created the hobbits to tend to the plants and growing things, the skinchangers to tend to the animals (given their ability to shift into animals), and the Silvan elves had been invited to “awaken” in Yavanna’s garden and help look over it. Part of the reason the author puts forward for having an alternate origin story for such characters is to counteract the depiction of beings and creatures from the East and South as evil (in Tolkien’s stories, for example, the Haradrim are “a great and cruel people that dwelt in the wide lands south of Mordor beyond the mouths of Anduin” (Tolkien, p. 90). The author hopes to counter such narratives and the eurocentrism found overall in Tolkien’s writing by offering positive representations of characters of color from outside of Middle Earth (Orphaned_account, 2014).
nuanced understanding of the intersecting structures of oppression and the complexity with which stigmatized individuals navigate those structures.

**Conclusion**

As both a trans scholar and a reader (and occasional writer) of fan fiction, the topic of genderbent stories is one that is especially close to my heart; Busse and Lothian perhaps says it best when they describe fan fiction as a “literary genre based primarily in affect: love for the source, desire to continue it into different contexts, annoyance with the things it does badly, and pleasure in the friendships and shared desires that circulate in fan communities.” My relationship to genderbent stories - whether they portray magical transformations, cisgender re-imaginings, or newly transgender iterations of canonical characters is at times fraught, and at times affectionate - for every story that seems to get it a little (or a lot) wrong, there are others that shine, offering powerful, unique, and nuanced examinations of what it means to be a gendered being in a fantasy realm (or in any realm, for that matter).

In this chapter, I’ve proposed three broad sub-genres to the genderbending genre – trans fics, transformation fics, and cisgender fics – in addition to questioning some of the key assumptions built into the very lexicon that dominates the genre. After briefly discussing the way that authors of mainstream literature in the past have engaged with concepts of gender fluidity and non-normative gender models, I highlighted several more contemporary theoretical forays into the realm of genderbending fanfiction – notably those by Busse and Lothian (2009) and McClellan (2014), whose examination of the genre provided several useful threads that appear to be interwoven through many (if not most) of the fics published in the genre. Finally, I explore six individual fics – three each for the character Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield – in my
attempt to understand what some of the dominant narratives in genderbending fanfiction are. Although I admit that, in retrospect, I may have hoped that every story I found would provide a clear, unambiguous narrative which affirmed non-normative gender models and celebrated genderbent and trans narratives, I still found each text compelling, useful even in their sometimes problematic rhetoric. These stories, after all, are likely not often written by advanced scholars of gender theory or feminist studies, and so to have authors ambitiously attempting to create positive portrayals of trans and non-binary individuals (whether they use those terms or not) speaks to me of progress, of a genuine (if not always informed) desire to improve climate, to expand upon what is considered acceptable or valuable within the genre; this is supported by reader comments which, even if (and when) they may fail to acknowledge a lack of consent in the narrative or behaviors which reinforce white supremacy, nonetheless support the existence of such non-traditional characters – and if we take these comments, adjacent as they are to the texts, as paratext, it seems reasonable to me that they are also signaling to future readers that trans stories, trans characters, and ultimately, trans people have value, however rocky the path to that assertion may be.

Given that, how then to move forward, toward representations that both affirm the value of gender diversity but avoid the pitfalls of writing without adequate knowledge, or in other ways that may end up harming historically disenfranchised populations? While further scholarly work is undoubtedly merited in these genres, I argue that the most valuable method by which writers can approach more socially just texts is through the method already available to them: reader feedback, and specifically feedback in the form of critical engagement by commenters. As I discussed in the previous chapter, thoughtful critical feedback can have a material impact on the text itself. Furthermore, even if authors are disinclined to modify work following critical
feedback, other comment readers may well read such criticisms and incorporate new knowledge (or a desire to obtain new knowledge) into their own future works. While this is certainly a form of labor (one with which fans may not wish to engage when they are otherwise reading as a leisure activity), I believe that, especially for individuals from privileged backgrounds or who have had access/exposure to social justice frameworks, critical engagement is not only important, it is ethically imperative. Failure to provide feedback when unjust frameworks or sexist, cissexist, racist, or otherwise hegemonic discourses are encountered results, as I have discussed elsewhere in this chapter, in problematic texts garnering responses only from those who see the benefits in the text, rather than the potential harm that could be caused by it. If an author engaging in these activities hears only praise, what motivation is there to question or rethink the way they have been approaching their subjects in the future?

Despite my efforts to engage thoroughly and critically with each text under discussion, I have found - even with their flaws - that although some fics may also end up reinforcing cissexist and sexist ideologies and social norms, still other attempts by fans to challenge canonical portrayals of gender can serve to destabilize the rigidity of binary gender norms. At their best, these fics highlight whole new possible modes of engagement that may previously have been considered impossible; often, in this genre, characters whose “genderswapped” gender or sex would normally render them unlikely candidates for adventuring, romance, or even heroism have an opportunity to partake in all three, and more. Women characters who (especially in high fantasy, where gender parity is far from achieved) lead parties of adventurers to fight dragons and retake forbidden kingdoms are still rare, and in mainstream popular culture, at least, trans characters – whether men, women, or genderqueer or non-binary – are all but absent from such stories, too often relegated to positions where their primary function serves to be as “the trans
character,” to convey a “trans narrative” or otherwise stand in as the token non-binary figure. In trans fanfic, however, these characters can have fully realized adventures, love lives that aren’t wholly built around their identity as a trans person, and complex relationships with other characters whose sole preoccupation is not the trans identity of their friend/leader/lover/family member. While I believe more research should be encouraged for those seeking to portray stigmatized individuals in ways that do not further marginalize or stigmatize them, fan fiction authors are already looking for new ways to challenge both themselves and their communities of fans, simply by articulating a desire for more diverse gender portrayals and by bringing that desire to fruition.
In late January of 2017, an article was published on the *Inside Higher Ed* website focusing on a recent schism within an online community of feminist scholars, the WMST-L listserv. The title of the article, “Rift in women’s studies over transgender issues,” belied the actual origin of the disagreement: a scholar posted a call for papers for an upcoming conference panel whose theme was to be, “Pregnancy without Women: Representations of Reproduction in Art, Literature, Film and Culture” (Jaschik, 2017). Although the article did briefly touch on this panel topic, wherein the poster had requested papers which “theorize pregnancy without women from feminist and/or queer perspectives [...] as an issue that impacts more than just women” (Ibid). The proposal, put forth by Aimee Wilson and Karen Weingarten, was instantly critiqued by members of the WMST-L list on multiple grounds, among them the use of the term “cis” (which some list members found offensive), as well as the idea that “pregnancy without women” was a way to “downplay or erase, or take over women's bodily functions,” something which one member interviewed for the article suggested was “anti-feminist and anti-women in the extreme.” The consensus from the group opposed to the CFP seemed to suggest unequivocally that, not only was the topic misogynist, but it was misogynist to even suggest discussing it. After a quick series of back-and-forth arguments from multiple sides of the debate, the list owner quashed discussion altogether, asserting that it gave “rise to a hostile atmosphere” (Ibid). A single call for papers on “pregnancy without women” (which explicitly included reference to speculative fiction, artificial reproductive technologies, and the economics of pregnancy and abortion, among other things) led, in less than a week, to a virulent discussion about trans and non-binary list members, a repudiation of the practice of using trans-inclusive language, a large
boycott of a decades-old Women’s Studies discussion list, and coverage in mainstream academic news media. For a topic that still remains relatively niche and largely under-explored, the spectre of male reproduction had, in a relatively short time, an explosive impact.

Just as members of the WMST-L list had strong reactions (some for, some against) to the call for papers reconsidering pregnancy without women, so too do members of fandom tend to be polarized where the topic of male reproduction is concerned. Kristina Busse, in “Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse,” notes that, “even with the seeming loss of taboos and a general acceptance of all kinks,” there are still some that are perceived as more risqué than others - mpreg and omegaverse, or A/B/O (see appendix), among them (Busse, p. 317). The stories I examine here include two variants of the male reproduction genre - the first, fitting under the broad “male reproduction” umbrella, simply offer alternative imaginings of reproduction wherein the parents are both identified as cisgender men; one involves pregnancy, and the other focuses on gardened children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Omega</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can become pregnant.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes.*</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can impregnate others.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes.*</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent; aggressive.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Can be.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Rarely.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submissive</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Betas are generally depicted as standard humans; traits like aggression or nurturing vary from individual to individual. Notably, betas are almost always portrayed as subservient/submissive to Alphas, and rarely as submissive (but usually at least somewhat dominant) to Omegas.

Figure 7. Common Traits of Alphas, Betas, and Omegas
In the second series, I specifically discuss the “omegaverse” (variably referred to as Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics, or “A/B/O,” for the different “types” of characters in the universe), exploring the ways that such stories both challenge and reinforce binary gender roles and interrogate the concept of gender essentialism. I explore the ways that fans interact with these concepts via both comments and fanart, ultimately arguing that, for better or worse, the cultural competency around omegaverse tropes for fans not only incorporates paratextual engagement, it relies upon it as a major component of worldbuilding.

**Theoretical Predecessors: Literature, Mythology, Medicine**

While discussions about “reproduction without women” may only recently be re-emerging into mainstream discourse, the concept of male reproduction is one that scholars of fan fiction, yaoi or “Boys Love (BL)”\(^{16}\), film and literature have been tackling for decades. While the sub-genre of mpreg (and its related genre, the “omegaverse”) have seen an explosion in popularity in the last few years in online fan circles, scholars of other genres have touched upon the subject of male pregnancy and pregnancy without women as early as the 1960’s, often with troubling results. Early texts published during this period tended to focus on the phenomenon of “couvade,” or men who experience pregnancy symptoms at the same time as women (with whom they may or may not have a relationship) in their lives are pregnant and experiencing pregnancy symptoms. Often, these studies tended to spectacularize or fetishize indigenous or primarily POC-spaces, and discussions of the culture around couvade and the mythology of male

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\(^{16}\) Boy’s Love, more commonly referred to as “BL” or “Yaoi” in the United States, is a form of media (spanning both print and animated genres) which originated in Japan in the 1970’s and whose “narratives focus on male-male romantic and sexual relationships,” regardless of whether or not the characters within the stories actually identify as “gay” or not (McLelland & Welker, pp. 4-6).
pregnancy served to reinforce what were commonsense racist understandings of people of color and indigenous populations as intellectually inferior to white and European-descended populations, or as having a more “primitive” theological, mythological, and even biological understanding both of the world around them and specifically of the processes and practices of reproduction (Money & Hosta, 1968; Meigs, 1976).

While I won’t delve at length into these discussions, I do find it important to note that current discussions of male pregnancy and pregnancy without women rarely, if ever, consider the way in which the very concept of pregnancy (and specifically male pregnancy) has historically been racialized. This history - one of racist theorizing that privileged a white gaze intentionally delegitimizing black and indigenous cultures and narratives - tends to have been mostly overlooked in current theorizing about male reproduction.

Among the earliest scholars of the contemporary iteration of male reproduction is Dr. Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto, whose 2008 article, “Mpreg, the male body as pregnant in female homoerotic fiction,” published in the Journal of Kyoto Seika University, first sought to differentiate "mpreg" as a unique genre related to, but different from both slash and yaoi. She drew on the work of both yaoi and fanfiction artists, as well as interviews with those who had done research on the genre, to explore the way that, despite being politicized as a genre by external viewers and readers, mpreg itself was not inherently transgressive (2008).

In addition to her argument about mpreg as not necessarily always being transgressive, Bauwens-Sugimoto discusses media studies scholar Constance Penley, who in a 1998 interview for the online journal Fringecore suggested that, as paraphrased by Bauwens-Sugimoto, “these sort of stories aren’t popular because fans don’t see pregnancy and child rearing as romantic” (p.
Bauwens-Sugimoto then goes on to explain that, “while in heterosexual romance, the risk of pregnancy is usually there and needs addressing, and pregnancy may add to the complexity of the story, the thing fans like, Penley says, is that in slash sex can be and is purely recreative” (Ibid). For Penley, fans (in her discussion, fans of the Kirk-Spock slash pairing) were disinterested in male pregnancy fics not because they as readers sought to “guard reproduction as a female domain,” in Bauwens-Sugimoto’s words, but because the concept of pregnancy itself was less compelling, seen as un-erotic when compared to the “purely recreative” sexual encounters that would otherwise be seen as possible between two male-identified characters.

Bauwens-Sugimoto goes on to unpack the tradition surrounding male pregnancy depictions further, drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Robyn Longhurst’s work on male pregnancy to offer a theoretical framework (p. 167). For Bauwens-Sugimoto, the fact that male characters are able to become pregnant means that “gender roles are no longer completely gender free, or potentially able to twist and turn any instant” (Ibid). She argues that

Once one of the characters in a pairing becomes pregnant, he is "stuck in the role," until he aborts, miscarries, or gives birth. This being tied down to their bodies, being reduced to their bodies, is illustrated quite well in all of the stories quoted above. Butler's theory however, useful to theorize other slash and yaoi, does not cover this subgenre, in which gender roles are no longer fluid but become fixed by a character's body. (167)

This reading of Butler, however, assumes that being pregnant is an inherently gendered state of being, such that once one’s body is experiencing pregnancy, their gender is fixed until such time as the pregnancy is terminated; interestingly, although gender is contingent upon one’s status as
pregnant (or not pregnant), the actual gender that the character is forced to experience is never explicitly identified by Bauwens-Sugimoto, other than that it is one that allows for pregnancy (without negating the character’s masculine identities, as she discusses earlier in her work) (Ibid). Even in these stories, gender is performative, and even when characters are several months pregnant, many contemporary fics do allow them to still affirm their identities as men; it stands to reason, then, that fic authors do acknowledge, even if not explicitly, a separation between the concepts of “sex” and “gender,” and that the one need not necessarily dictate the other). Ultimately I believe that Bauwens-Sugimoto’s analysis comes up a bit short, too bound to rigid models of gender and sex and the assumed relationship of each to the experience of pregnancy.

More recent work on the phenomena of mpreg and omegaverse have delved deeper into the topics, offering comprehensive rubrics by which texts can be judged as “omegaverse” or not and highlighting the increasingly nuanced ways that fans engage with the concept of male reproduction without relying upon the concept of male pregnancy as a herald of depravity or a marker of impending tragedy in the text. In her 2016 piece in the journal *Revenant*, Jacquelin Elliott traces the trajectory of the “queer monster/queer monstrosity” trope, beginning with Jack Halberstam’s discussion in the mid-1990’s, wherein he argued that, “postmodern Gothicism [...] has encouraged media consumers to suspect the monster hunters and rarely the monster [...] and, thus, helped engender a desire for sympathetic representations of queer monstrosity” (Ibid). From there, Elliott examines the emergent popularity of teen paranormal romance genres as well as the surge in popular lycanthrope characters in literature and film, such as Remus Lupin in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* franchise or Scott McCall on MTV’s relaunch of *Teen Wolf* in the form of a television series, and goes on to highlight how such series engage in the practice of
“queerbaiting” - using different hints or strong subtextual clues to suggest at a queer culture or sexuality without ever explicitly acknowledging characters, relationships, or situations as queer. That werewolves have been connected to a kind of closeted queer sexuality is evident even prior to remake of the Teen Wolf franchise, such as in the scene in the original 1985 film where the main character (“Scott Howard”) comes out to his best friend, Stiles:

Scott Howard: Stiles, I got something to tell you. It’s kind of hard, but…

Stiles: Look, are you gonna tell me you’re a fag because if you’re gonna tell me that you’re a fag, I don’t think I can handle it.

Scott Howard: I’m not a fag. I’m… a werewolf (Daniel 1985).

While the original series more bluntly highlighted the parallels between closeted queer sexuality and Scott’s closeted identity as a monstrous other, the contemporary remake has been less outspoken in drawing these parallels. For this reason, Elliott suggests, many fans have withdrawn from the show, frustrated with the endless queerbaiting and the refusal of the show’s producers to include actual queer text and representation within the series. As with other genres where queerness is only portrayed subtextually, if at all, fans began engaging with the series more and more via the reading and writing of Teen Wolf fan fiction. Elliott suggests that this exodus (of fans from the actual aired show) is a testament to the fact that, “if writers will not explicitly explore the interplay of animality and queer sexuality inherent to the werewolf, then fans will, again, be more than happy to take up the task” (Ibid).

In other genres, such as the Harry Potter fandom, Elliott notes that fans have done precisely that; faced with a lack of monstrous characters explicitly coded as queer, authors of fan fiction have taken up the pairing of Sirius Black (a character who can shift
between human and dog form) and Remus Lupin, a werewolf, as a popular slash pairing. Elliott notes that texts featuring this pairing “often make erotic use of its lycanthropic characters’ animality with popular tropes including mpreg and heat fics, as well as Alpha/Beta/Omega wolf dynamics heightening BDSM play” (Ibid). She goes on to reference the practice of “knotting” in such stories, wherein she says that “a character’s genitals resemble those of a wolf’s (even if the character is in human form), including a bulbus glandis, or ‘knot’” (Ibid).

In such depictions, during penetrative sex the knotted penis of the Alpha becomes physically lodged in the body of the Omega, releasing large amounts of ejaculate usually over a long period of time. The Alpha is unable to force their “knot” to lessen or subside, and so upon the Alpha’s orgasm, the Alpha/Omega couple become physically locked together, often for several hours, until the former’s “knot” becomes small enough to be withdrawn from the Omega’s body.

Although her discussion of knotting is brief, it’s also important given how little attention this specific practice has had in academic circles, compared to its relative popularity in fan spaces. Within mainstream popular culture, the topic of male reproduction is all but unheard of, with the exception of the occasional spectacularization of transmasculine pregnancy and publications like the 2015 article in Jezebel titled “Knotting is the weird fanfic sex trend that cannot be unseen,” that introduced the reader to the concept of knotting without offering much in the way of context about male reproduction, pregnancy, or the broader realm of Omegaverse tropes (Shrayber). In this article, the author refers to knotting as having been popularized with Supernatural fan fiction and highlights that while knotting stories comprise less than one percent of the stories on AO3, given the size of that archive, there are still literally thousands of stories
across a plethora of fandoms. Of the reasons for the trope’s popularity, the author suggests that for “those who read/write this type of fiction there’s an element of loss of control that’s not possible in other situations. Since the knot won’t release until the alpha has finished and can’t be controlled by either party, the sex has to go on until it’s done” (Ibid.). Thus, without explicitly engaging in discussions about consent, non-consent, power play and kink, a couple in a story can experience aspects of submission and domination and, in a way, each member of the scenario has the opportunity to relinquish control of the sexual act, even if that control is only yielded to the biological “nature” of the characters themselves, rather than a particular being with cognitive function.

Knotting is, of course, only one part (albeit a situationally important part) of the omegaverse genre. Kristina Busse, in her chapter, “Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse,” lays out a chronology of the history of Omegaverse, identifying as its predecessors popular texts even earlier than Supernatural. For Busse, while much of the fandom does indeed draw inspiration from more contemporary series like Supernatural, the recent remake of Teen Wolf, Sherlock and even less current texts like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Twilight, many of the archetypal features of the “omegaverse” genre actually have connections to the realm of Star Trek lore, primarily from the episode “Amok Time” wherein the Vulcan character Spock is brought to his home planet to participate in a mating ritual that their race experiences every seven years. The episode, aired in 1967, introduced “pon farr” - the Vulcan’s biological imperative to participate in a mating cycle or ritual, “during which Vulcans must have sex or suffer excruciating pain, insanity, and potential death” (Busse, p. 318). Busse goes on to describe how the concept of pon farr was taken up within fandom, with many stories finding Spock at the point of his pon farr but without anyone to partner with, except for Captain Kirk
(Ibid). Although Busse highlights other fandoms where the “fuck or die” trope has emerged, she identifies Star Trek as the earliest instance of this, and so it seems reasonable to suggest that - where the “omegaverse” trope incorporates physical pain, mental anguish, or otherwise debilitating consequences when the characters do not experience sexual release - the earliest contributor to the framework of the contemporary “omegaverse” is *Star Trek* and the idea of “pon farr.”

Busse goes on to examine several of the other most common characteristics for omegaverse fiction; without unpacking each at length (several are largely self-explanatory), they can best be summarized as:

**The Animal in All of Us**

*Omegaverse fics often incorporate a focus on animalistic behavior*¹⁷, and may even incorporate forms of animal transformation. Busse notes that this tradition likely draws its inspiration from series wherein transformation was already common, such as *Buffy the*...

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¹⁷ The use of the term “animalistic” here is not meant to suggest that humans aren’t animals themselves, but rather specifically intended to show the ways in which a character otherwise perceived as “human” engages in activity that is commonly associated with non-human beings, specifically canines. Alphas are generally depicted as having canine genitalia (as the discussion and art discussed demonstrate), thus one might reasonably argue that such stories are meant to blur an otherwise rigid line between “human” and “animal.” I do want to acknowledge the many valuable critiques of the concept of “animalism” and some of the rhetoric as it is here presented, especially from the field of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists might very well question my use of animalistic here as speciesist, the latter of which Peter Singer has defined as “an attitude of bias against a being because of the species to which it belongs” (2015). Works such as Carol J. Adams’s *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1990), and Alison Suen’s *The Speaking Animal: Ethics, Language and the Human-Animal Divide* (2015) all provide more in-depth discussions of ecofeminism and speciesism than it is possible to delve into here; undoubtedly, the relationship between omegaverse fics and ecofeminist critique would and should provide much fodder for future scholars in both fields.
Vampire Slayer, Harry Potter, Twilight, and Teen Wolf, as well as Supernatural and Dark Angel. Busse explains that, “while Dark Angel only features heat cycles in female characters, fandom - especially slash fandom - of course responded with males in heat as well” (p. 319). She suggests that this may be a way not only for authors of fanfic to “engage issues of enforced sex,” but to challenge “biology-based societal constraints” (ibid).

Ass Babies and Boy Baby Bumps

Busse describes how male pregnancy is a common feature of omegaverse fics, and that pregnancy can occur as a result of magic, science, or as a spontaneous and unexplained phenomenon (Ibid.). She says that male pregnancies can be used to achieve diverse goals within fics, including, “a romantic need to create a love child between male lovers, an interest in pregnancy's emotional and physical fallout on a partnership, or even a fascination with the horrors of forced breeding” (p. 320).

Wolves Mate for Life

Busse suggests that fandom takes inspiration from the understanding of conventional wolves as mating for life; thus, within omegaverse fandoms, the “bond” between an Alpha and their Omega is generally portrayed as a lifelong, unalterable one.

My Mind to Your Mind

Last but not least, Busse returns to the Star Trek fandom to highlight the characteristic within omegaverse fanfiction that focuses on a deep emotional or psychological bond between the Alpha and the Omega. Although she stops short of actually crediting Star Trek and the Vulcan practice of “mind melding,” she does reference the Vulcan practice within the canon and notes that as a genre feature, this bonding, “presents the readers
with a couple whose love is not only unlimited and forever but trustworthy: both partners can be sure of it, since they can feel the other's every thought and emotion” (p. 321).

Busse concludes her discussion of the trope by mentioning that while these characteristics are often common to different A/B/O stories, not all stories will incorporate all, and they do not always occur unproblematically. For example, in one story she references, the character Tony Stark from the *Iron Man* franchise is at risk for losing his company because his shareholders “don’t trust alphas”; in another story, Sherlock uses various chemicals to conceal his A/B/O status in order to avoid societal prejudices (p. 321).

Given all this, I am cautious about universally labeling stories that cross expected boundaries regarding gender, sex, and reproduction as inherently transgressive. Berit Åström, a professor of Language Studies at Umeå University, noted importantly in her discussion of male pregnancy in *Supernatural* fan fiction that

Pregnancy as a theme in popular culture narratives is commonly accompanied by a number of structures and conventions that are transferred, with very little change, into mpreg stories. In some narratives, the queer theme of male pregnancy therefore results in quite heteronormative stories (2010).

Åström goes on to discuss stories in which, for example, one of the Winchester brothers (the central characters in *Supernatural*) becomes pregnant with the other’s child, and by virtue of his being pregnant is expected to make dietary changes, to refrain from work, and to subsume his interests, desires, and needs in favor of a theoretical child (Ibid). Although the author of the article doesn’t make clear whether these are societal expectations or not, they do imply through their analysis that, rather than attempting a critique of societal expectations, they are (perhaps
unconsciously) actually reinforcing such expectations. Åström notes how this narrative parallels lines of argument “often used in narratives of female pregnancy, where women are told not to exert themselves, and not to express strong emotions, because they are endangering the baby” (Ibid). This practice, reminiscent of bell hooks’ concept of “transference without transformation,” effectively replaces one body with another body without doing the more difficult work of questioning (and ideally, undermining/destabilizing) the oppressive structures that make the representation problematic in the first case (1996, p. 268). This is not to say that all mpreg or omegaverse fanfiction arrives here eventually, but rather that this endpoint - a story which reinforces sexist/cissexist or otherwise normative gender and sexual structures - is not implicitly avoided by the mere presence of mpreg content.

**Story Discussion: Male Pregnancies / Male “Pregnancies”**

As I mentioned briefly earlier in the chapter, the category of male reproduction is a broad one that includes varied approaches to male-male reproduction; while “omegaverse” stories certainly comprise part of this category, authors have also developed new ways of thinking about reproduction between men that hasn’t involved the reproductive capacities of one assigned female at birth. The two stories I discuss here - The Feels Whale (Miscellea)’s “Gardening” and Phoenixreal’s unfinished work “Kingdom of Earth and Sky” - take vastly different approaches to the topic of reproduction.

In the latter (“Kingdom of Earth and Sky”), the author incorporates canonical characters from *Sherlock* - the titular character, as well as Sherlock’s brother Mycroft, their mother, John Watson and the detective Greg Lestrade, as well as one of the series’ villains, Moriarty - but draws them into a radically different fictional universe, including new fantasy races,
mythologies, and conflicting models of gender, sex, and sexual expression within the universe. In addition to having archive warnings for Rape/Non-Con elements, this text included tags warning the reader about the presence of “arranged marriage,” “war,” “isolation,” “Genderless Sherlock,” “past torture,” and “past child abuse” - all topics that would likely be sufficient basis for an issue fic on their own, but combined to make this text one with many layers of social commentary. The basic premise of “Kingdom of Earth and Sky” involves a series of fantasy races and kingdoms - the humans, who live spread out across multiple kingdoms: Kingdom of the Wind, ruled by the “royal Holmes family”; “Kingdom of Earth,” or “Bracken,” including “Prince John” and the current King, Lestrade; and the enemy “Kingdom of Fire, Hildonia,” which is ruled by the “God-King Moriarty.” Finally, there is a fourth faction, who are accessible only through the “Kingdom of Wind” - a people known as the “Aerials,” otherworldly beings sometimes referred to as angels and who live in the “astral plane.” At the story’s outset, Moriarty looms as a menacing figure, along with his kingdom, and John is learning that in order to forge an alliance between the Kingdoms of Earth and Wind, he must agree to marry a member of the Holmes family - in this case, of course, Sherlock. Although there are many points where Phoenixsky’s Sherlock differs from the canonical Sherlock, the earliest and perhaps most straight-forward is his background: Sherlock is a child of both the human matriarch of the Holmes family, and the “angelic” king of the Aerials (who, Mycroft explains during negotiations, “desired a union” with humans) (2014a). Mycroft explains that it is because Sherlock is part Aerial that he is able to become pregnant and would be able to give John heirs to continue the line of succession, overcoming John’s only major objection to the arranged marriage.
Much of the rest of the story focuses on the developing relationship between John and Sherlock, and John’s attempts to help Sherlock overcome the abuse he experienced during his upbringing (Mycroft repeatedly denigrates him, and when John asks if Sherlock needs to consent to the wedding, replies, “Of course not. He’s a freakish commodity to be traded for peace, nothing more” (Phoenixsky, 2014a)). John encourages Sherlock to express his own opinions, to eat when he desires (after having been near-starved in his homeland), and confirms for him that no amount of speaking out will result in the beatings he experienced back in the monastery where he was raised. Although this dynamic does help set the framework for a slow development of trust and respect between the characters, it also serves to erase the vast majority of personality traits that typify the Sherlock character in nearly every other iteration of him, whether in fandom or in the canonical BBC rendition. Here, Sherlock is nearly illiterate, knows almost nothing of science, psychology, and his near-trademark quick wit and barbed observations are completely absent; on the contrary, this depiction of Sherlock is meek, timid, and seems consistently surprised that he is being permitted to speak and engage freely with others. Notably, during their first extended encounter after being married, Sherlock is bewildered and unsure what - and how much - he is allowed to say:

“I…am permitted to speak to you?” he asked softly, trying to look away from John’s eyes.

John swallowed thickly. “Yes, good gods, yes, you can speak to me. I want you to speak to me.”

Sherlock nodded. “But…but what do I say to you?”

“Whatever you want…but I really want to know what they told you yesterday and the
day before about me and what was happening. I want to know what they said,” he said softly. [sic] (Ibid).

Sherlock goes on to describe the expectations for him set forth by Mycroft and his family, which are meant to reinforce his position as a bearer of children for John and the Kingdom of Earth, and little more - he is not expected to speak, to argue, or even to appear in public (Ibid).

What is troubling about this depiction is not merely the absence of all those traits that traditionally make Sherlock *Sherlock*, nor even necessarily the objectification/abuse narrative structured around Sherlock-as-childbearer; rather, it is that Sherlock’s ultimate education and liberation come, not as a result of their own self-discovery or empowerment, but from John, who bestows them upon Sherlock - first through discussion, and ultimately through their (non-consensual) sexual encounter. Sherlock is rendered as knowing nearly nothing about human relationships, including what love is - during a brief scene, John actually has to define the term for him. In this way, despite an attempt to undermine traditional reproductive frameworks by positing a world wherein two men could result in offspring that was biologically related to both of them, the author ends up fashioning a character so abjectly submissive that they have no tangible personality, no opinions, no beliefs - and the only manner they have of acquiring any of those is at the hands of the literal patriarch, both of the house and of the kingdom, when he chooses to bestow them. That Sherlock still feels helpless to protest in his marriage is evident in the final posted chapter, when John propositions him for sex for the first time.

“But it is supposed to be done,” Sherlock said quietly. “And…and I am ready.”

He wasn’t, not in the least, but the warnings came back to him and he couldn’t shut them out. He was in love with John, he was sure of that already, and he didn’t want to lose
him, so he had to give him an heir or he’d abandon him and maybe send him back to the
Monastary [sic] and he didn’t want to go back, he wanted to stay with John. John looked
at him for a long moment and smiled.

“Only if you are sure,” he said softly.

Sherlock nodded, having no idea what to do. (Ibid.)

In the ensuing scene - one in which Sherlock feels compelled to participate, despite his
acknowledged unreadiness - he experiences his first orgasm, apologizes to John for orgasming, is
warned that penetrative sex will result in pain for him, and then - when there is pain and
Sherlock begins to cry and protest, telling John, “Please, it hurts,” - told to “shhh,” “relax,” and
that John promises “it will feel good.” After a short time in the narrative, Sherlock does begin to
feel pleasure, and when the encounter is over he thanks John for “being nice… for caring… for
everything” (Ibid). The story, which incorporates “warnings” as paratextual elements (“Graphic
Depictions of Violence” are listed as the only warning), fails to mention any element of rape,
non-consensual, or even “dubiously consensual” sex (or “dub con”), either in the warnings, the
tags, or the chapter notes preceding each chapter. Given the author’s awareness of the presence
of violence in the chapter enough to incorporate some warnings, this suggests that the sex scene
is presented as a consensual one, free of content that would ordinarily merit some manner of
content warning.

Reader engagement with the chapter seems to reinforce the concept of the sexual
encounter presented as a positive one. Commenter ConfusedFandomFanatic comments that it is
a, “Great chapter, john is just so sweet it kills me. Can't wait to read more!” to which phoenixreal
responds that, “I know and when we get to the angry/vengeful John...well... :)”
ReaderWriterPoet demands, “Give me more fluffy sexiness, I'm hooked!” (2014); phoenixreal comments back the same day, saying simply, “Thank you! I've got to get back in a Sherlock mood again! :)” (2014c). Of the twenty-two comments between readers and the author in this chapter, none engage critically with the only sex scene the author has written into the story; all (as of this writing) have been either praise or a request for the author to update. Thus the comments reinforce the narrative as put forth by the author, that this is an example of positive (even redemptive, if we consider the few concluding sentences in which Sherlock thanks John and they both profess their love for one another) sexual expression, just another bit of unproblematic fandom “fluff.”

Not all mpreg stories trend toward the dark, or even explicit; unlike the AU rendition of Sherlock above, The Feels Whale (Miscellea)’s “Gardening” attempts to situate itself firmly within Tolkien lore, with a setting that begins shortly after (and thus, attempts to preserve) Tolkien’s canonical timeline. Bilbo has returned home to the Shire believing Thorin dead (as he was at the end of both the film and novel versions of *The Hobbit*); the reader sees him begin to garden, with “freshly turned earth” in his backyard and his family gardener, Hamfast Gamgee, asking what he’s planting at “this time of year” (The Feels Whale (Miscellea), 2013).

“Forgive me, Gaffer.” Mister Bilbo says to him and pats his right breast pocket, which is something he’s been observed to do often of late. “I would if I could. You know I only hold the greatest respect for you, but we’re meant to sow our seeds alone.”

“Oh!” says Old Hamfast. “I see! Yes, of course. You’re correct. I’ll leave you in peace

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18 The term “fluff” is commonly used to refer to lighter, less tonally somber or perilous texts. Often “fluff” describes shorter fics wherein the focus is a sweet or pleasurable sexual encounter with minimal plot and explicit sexual details.
then, my boy.”

Hamfast Gamgee is as good as his word, but his sons are terrible gossips. It’s a failing many of the Shire share and so it doesn’t take long for word to get around that Bilbo Baggins is gardening (Ibid.).

As the chapter unfolds, we learn that gardening is literally the method by which hobbits reproduce; they fashion a “seed” out of locks of hair of both parents (who may, it seems, be of any gender and even different races within the Tolkien universe) and literally plant it in the earth, tending to it for several months until it (hopefully) blossoms into a young hobbit, born at roughly the equivalent of a toddler and already able to speak a few words. That Bilbo is “gardening” as a bachelor - one who, his community realizes, is mourning the death of a dwarven lover - is a source of little shock to the hobbits in the Shire, since as the narrator notes, Bilbo “wouldn’t be the first Hobbit in memory to want something living to remember a lost loved one by.” The story is rated “Teen and Up Audiences,” indicating that there will be no explicit sex scenes, and yet the process of reproduction among hobbits is examined with great detail: we learn that Bilbo turned the soil with the “bronze tools he had to ransom back” from a competitive cousin, that he tilled stones into the garden, “green and striped through with darker bands of color [...] not the good gray granite found in the West” (Ibid.). Furthermore, the process of reproduction is presented, not as something that occurs only between the parents, but as a result of community involvement; Bilbo’s gardener Hamfast offers to have his sons bring “a parcel of pine straw in the morning” to use as mulch (Ibid.). As a result, however, the experience is one open to competition and even attempted destruction; at one point in the story, Bilbo begins sleeping outside with his garden after “a certain unnamed cousin” (from whom he had ransomed his tools)
tried putting “noxious things in his irrigation trough.” Even the “delivery” isn’t something Bilbo himself notices - the narrator informs us that

“It’s Solstice-tide when Hamfast Gamgee looks to his employer and says to him, “It’s time.”

“Yes.” Bilbo agrees as he feels the earth underneath the sumptuous vine that shelters it. There are shapes under the earth. They rise and fall under his hands in a steady rhythm that bodes well for the harvest. “I think you’re right. Gracious me…” (Ibid).

Notably, throughout the discussion of Bilbo’s gardening, neither his sex nor his gender - nor the sex and gender of the other parent, who most hobbits in the story presume to be a dwarf - are ever a cause for any questioning or concern. Because of the unique way that new hobbits are birthed, the story’s lore suggests, parents can be of any gender combination. Of slightly more concern for the hobbits in The Feels Whale’s Shire is the racial background of Bilbo’s deceased partner, which results in mixed-race children who have physical traits from both parents.

Interestingly, despite the fact that this is portrayed as something of a curiosity in the story, the phenomenon of multiracial (and arguably multi-species) offspring is not anathema, either to Tolkien’s canonical works or to depictions in fan fiction; they do, however, tend to draw little attention in the way of critical discussion within the texts themselves. Masculinity and femininity, gender identity, and even genitalia never seem to enter the picture where hobbit reproduction are concerned, and as a result (the narrative suggests), sexual relationships may be less rigidly policed in the Shire, and sex neither dictates gender nor serves as a compulsory framework to ensure heterosexual reproductive couples.
Although the process is something of a mystery to those outside the Shire - Gandalf quietly pulls aside Lord Elrond to explain that hobbit reproduction differs from elvish reproduction, and the dwarf Feris comments about how “curious” it is that Bilbo never married, “but if that’s how it’s done then I suppose that’s how it’s done. We Dwarves rarely have children out of wedlock.” When he continues to ask if the dwobbits’ mother comes to visit them often, the exchange that follows serves to highlight the amusing nature of the misunderstanding, rather than to spectacularize or stigmatize Bilbo for partaking in a reproductive process that differs from those of dwarves:

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Bilbo frowns and looks around, surprised to find himself the center of attention. “What mother? They haven’t got one.”

“No mother?” Kili sits up in his chair. “Then how… where did they come from if not their mother?”

“Well they came from the garden of course.” Bilbo replies and wishes very badly that he had a pipe to chew on right now. “Fool boy, where do you think fauntlings come from?” (Ibid).

In the ensuing exchanges, both in this chapter and others, Bilbo’s relationships - with Thorin, when they finally reunite (and Bilbo realizes Thorin had never actually died), as well as with other dwarves and members of Tolkien’s other fantasy races - center on reconnection, kinship, and community building. His relationship to Thorin is never questioned on the basis of his sex or gender, and the legitimacy of the children they have together is honored from the moment Thorin

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19 Dwobbits is a portmanteau that emerged within Tolkien fanfiction to describe the offspring of Dwarves and Hobbits.
and his peers learn about the dwobbits’ parentage. Thus, while the reproductive process between Thorin and Bilbo is an asexual one, the reality of their (subtextually) romantic and sexual relationship, the suitability of Bilbo as a long-term companion for a male king, and the recognition of their offspring as legitimate (if not necessarily destined to be heirs) is never questioned, either via the narrator’s observations or via dialogue or events that happen within the story’s narrative. Queer parenting is not only acknowledged, it is affirmed, and the fact that the children of this queer relationship were “birthed” through a non-traditional method is, if not entirely understood, never devalued.

In addition to offering a uniquely complex framework for reproduction, “Gardening” also included an unusually high level of reader engagement, whether via commenting or kudos; fans additionally created both fan art and subsequent stories inspired by the “Gardening” universe. Of the over 500 comments spread over 7 chapters, the vast majority praise the originality of the concept, engage in communal nostalgia over the concept of “cabbage patch dwobbits,” or comment on how this iteration of “mpreg” is among their favorite ways to see it done. Others, meanwhile, latch onto portions of the story unrelated to the structure of sex and gender; Papertigress, for example, say they “love the concept of the hour of meditation every afternoon - where everything stops and people remember or contemplate. It sounds healthy” (Papertigress, 2013). Absent from comments were any suggestions that the reason this new version of male reproduction was so celebrated was because it happened asexually; whether that itself contributed to readers’ enjoyment of the text remains unknown. In another chapter, the user Aynde comments, not about the particularities of “Gardening,” but about the text as a whole when juxtaposed with the rest of the Hobbit mpreg literature:
Just as I tire of all the "Bilbo walks away pregnant" stories I see, I find this gem where he's quite philosophical about it, "I'm sad, but I have the means, so I'll make the child."

The fact that Hobbit's are GROWN... even more lolz (Aynde, 2013).

The Feels Whale (Miscellea) responds by suggesting that, “as with a good romance, the secret to Mpreg is in how you sell it to the audience. You CAN gloss over the details of how it happens and go straight for the fluffy middle bits and dramatic ending, but the story suffers for it” (The Feels Whale (Miscellea), February 13, 2013a). While not directly relating to specific content within the work, beyond to acknowledge the level of detail The Feels Whale (Miscellea) themself puts into the text, the comment does serve both to encourage readers to continue reading their other texts, and to shed light on the reason they included such a high level of detail when describing the process of reproduction in the story. Still others use the comment section as a means for clarification, as in the case of user “AlecMcDowell,” who asks:

Oh, man. Please tell me that Bilbo and Thorin had at least been sleeping together before everything blew up? Because as soon as you told us it was braided hair to make the babies I just got the awkward image of Thorin using it as a first date kind of thing and here comes crazy Bilbo stealing his hair (sperm) and making babies because he's so in love. Still, enjoying this very much! (AlecMcDowell, 2013)

The author responds in the affirmative a few hours later, saying only that they were “totally knocking boots. No worries” (The Feels Whale (Miscellea), February 13, 2013b).

Although critical engagement does exist within the text, it tends to be limited to a discussion about the consensual nature of Bilbo’s decision to “garden” without Thorin, and the
implications of the cultural misunderstanding. User “Marycontrary” notes, in her comments in Chapter 4, that

…my concern was never "Is Bilbo acting like a jerk within the lights of his own cultural upbringing?" but rather "Is Thorin going to look at things narrowly from his own cultural perspective, and be very upset?" Because once you've got different cultures and biologies in play, there's a lot of room for two people to hurt each other despite being generous by their own lights. (Marycontrary, 2013)

Indeed, the entire concept of “consent” in the text is complicated (and perhaps, for this reason, unaddressed) precisely because of the unique approach taken by The Feels Whale (Miscellea); reproduction is a non-sexual act, and the core of the “seed” – a lock of Bilbo’s hair braided together with a lock that Thorin had given Bilbo prior to battle – is one consensually given, but with a vastly different cultural context. As the story resolves itself, it becomes clear that Thorin not only consents to what has happened, but is wildly enthusiastic to be a father; I believe that it is at least in part because of this (and perhaps the possibility that further additions might muddy the overarching themes of the story) that the story does not offer an extended or even briefly pointed discussion about consent.

**Story Discussion: Omegaverses**

As discussed in the appendix, most Omegaverse stories have several common features: regardless of (usually binary) gender identity as man or woman, characters also have an identity as “alpha,” “omega,” or “beta” which can inform the way they interact sexually and romantically with partners, their ability to reproduce, and (though not always) their personality and everyday interactions outside of romantic relationships. Here I explore two such stories, one each from
within the *Sherlock* and *Hobbit* fandom, in an attempt to highlight the ways that authors in fandom are renegotiating gender and sexual boundaries, while at the same time articulating universes where gender, sex, and sexual orientation are even more rigidly fixed than in our own.

As discussed in the appendix, reproduction in these universes is generally focused on the Alpha/Omega pairing, where the omega (and, generally, the beta) is capable of becoming pregnant, and the Alpha (and usually also the beta) is capable of impregnating others. Furthermore, it is generally understood that *all* omegas, regardless of their gender as man or woman, are capable of becoming pregnant; similarly, *all* Alphas, regardless of whether they identify as man or woman or their sex assigned at birth, are capable of impregnating others.

**Omegaverse and Sherlock**

In “The Six Steps of Courtship,” author Emptycel sets up a scenario wherein Sherlock Holmes, an undercover omega with an assumed name, goes to an alpha-omega speed dating event in an attempt to find a serial killer, and meets John Watson, an alpha doctor and former soldier, instead (2014). While nothing in the tags specifically highlights this as a potential “issue fic,” skimming the story quickly revealed that there were myriad complex engagements with both normative gender roles and with normative Omegaverse roles; essentially, this was an issue fic that not only sought to challenge gender roles, but to challenge the roles of the genre itself. While John is obvious about his attraction to Sherlock, the latter makes it clear from the outset that he is not especially interested in a long-term relationship and has no intention of finding someone to “bond.” Through the course of seven chapters, Sherlock “outs” himself to John as a consulting detective and invites him to help Sherlock solve the serial killer crime, and eventually - if largely unintentionally - begins (and eventually completes) the six stages of courtship referenced in the title.
While the actual dynamics of this story’s omegaverse vary little from those presented in most other Omegaverse stories, Emptycel’s text does stand out in its attempt to balance the concept of inherent biological sex roles - an omega’s submissiveness and an alpha’s dominance - with the contrasting personalities both John and Sherlock exhibit in the show (and in their representations in this fic). Outwardly, Sherlock can be aggressively dominant in matters of intellect and logic, and Emptycel explores the internal struggle this presents for Sherlock early on, describing Sherlock’s internal narrative wherein he thinks about how he had never hated his gender more than when his fellow omegas started talking about their dreams of children and pretty homes with white picket fences.

Sherlock had been fighting that stereotype since he first presented and these idiots seemed to be doing everything they could to reinforce it (Ibid.).

In this instance, we see from early in the story that Sherlock’s omega status is understood as another gender, distinct from (and yet not in opposition to) his gender identity as man; while not all omegaverse fics discuss alpha/beta/omega identity as a gender identity, some do, and it is rarely seen as . From the outset - the above passage comes just a few paragraphs into the story - we see that Sherlock recognizes the stereotypical expectations heaped upon those who are identified as omegas, and because of those stereotypes he experiences extreme anti-omega sentiments as well as a strong desire to dissociate himself from anything resembling omega behavior. Furthermore, we see examples of the way that omegas are stereotyped in this story’s omegaverse through the dialogue of other characters, who see Sherlock at a later point in the story and teasing him:
“Yeah, Sherlock,” Donovan interrupted. “God knows you’ve always wanted to settle down.”

“Cooking dinner and taking care of the children,” Lestrade added, his voice trembling slightly.

“Washing the dishes--”

“Doing the laundry--”

“And being a perfect little housewife,” Donovan finished with a smile (Ibid.).

This scene, which occurs mid-way through the story, after John has already “scented” Sherlock and begun the process of moving in with him, is notable for several reasons. While the dialogue does show an attempt to mock Sherlock for being an omega and to reinforce in the minds of those in the scene that Sherlock’s “omega” identity is one traditionally associated with submissiveness and femininity, the fact that those perpetuating the mistreatment are identified throughout the story’s narrative as antagonistic characters indicates that their treatment of him is abusive and potentially dehumanizing, rather than more light-hearted banter between friends.

Second, this encounter is immediately followed by a rapid exchange between Sherlock and John, wherein both nonverbally express outrage at the words spoken to Sherlock. The narrator reveals John’s thought process, noting that he desires to - but knows he shouldn’t - intervene, that he “didn’t have a right to intervene,” and he mentally notes that taking any “alpha-specific actions” would only serve, in this scenario, to further stigmatize Sherlock. Instead of taking immediate (and non-consensual) action, he and Sherlock make eye contact and (through a manner unspecified), John “asks for permission” to intercede, and Sherlock’s “eyes granted him the permission.” However, instead of barking threats at those teasing Sherlock,
growling (an action John already took earlier in the story, when he first met Sherlock and someone was attempting to grab at the detective), or instigating a physical altercation, John responds by quietly stepping behind Sherlock, embracing him, and kissing the back of his neck. John says nothing, and Sherlock instead fills the silence, articulating his own comeback against those who had been teasing him regarding his omega status. The exchange - John seeking permission, Sherlock taking the more dominant/aggressive role in defending himself, rather than allowing his “alpha” to do it - serve to shock the others in the immediate area into silence as a response, and both Sherlock and John leave the vicinity with Sherlock, rather than John, having had the last word. This exchange - John acknowledging his instincts but first asking Sherlock if it is acceptable to act upon them (and, in at least one scene, refraining from acting upon them when Sherlock answers in the negative) offer compelling examples of the way in which omegaverse fan fiction can be structured both to incorporate kinks around animalistic behavior and bonding and submission while at the same time incorporating a consent framework that blends well with the existing narrative and the already-established common tropes of omegaverse fic.

**Omegaverse and The Hobbit**

Before fans even begin the actual text of Fideliant’s 2013 *Hobbit* omegaverse fic “No Matter What we Breed,” they’re reminded of some of the common tropes of omegaverse stories and informed about which characters will take the “alpha” and “omega” roles. In the tags for the section, we see that the story will include an “Alpha Thorin” and “Omega Bilbo,” and the “summary” text at the beginning of the chapter tells us that the version of Tolkien’s universe we are entering is one where, “omega males are slightly less rare than Arkenstones.” Furthermore, I noted this fic as a potential “issue fic” by the presence, not only of content warnings about
attempted rape/non-consensual content, but by the tag “cultural differences,” which is usually only present when authors are discussing at least in some depth the relative species/race differences between different fantasy beings - a quick skim revealed that that central difference was a Hobbit culture that was largely unaware of the existence of Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics. Although the story is categorized as a “Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield” relationship fic from the “relationship” category appended to the story’s paratext, readers would also be informed that in the summary, reading that Thorin falls “in love with the first gentlehobbit he lays eyes upon,” and that Bilbo is literally, “the first omega male in centuries.” The summary ends by informing the reader that, “Erebor is suddenly not the only prize that Thorin has set his sights on winning” (Ibid). Thus from before the text of the story even begins, Bilbo’s status as an omega is identified as one of object, someone (or something) to be obtained, a primal fetish to be fulfilled rather than an individual with their own complex needs and desires. Such rhetoric, I suggest, builds a framework through which we approach depictions of non-consent and discussions of biological essentialism and determinism as simply tools to drive what is portrayed as a love story toward its inevitable denouement.

The first chapter of “No Matter What we Breed” opens with Thorin being startled by how drawn he is to Gandalf’s selection of the hobbit who is to accompany them on the journey. It’s “shocking enough that Thorin has to tighten his jaw to keep himself grounded. An alpha or a beta would easily perceive a quickening of his breath as interest,” and Thorin struggles with the immediate attraction, realizing it has something to do with Bilbo’s status - whether that is alpha, beta, or (less likely, in this story’s universe) omega (Fideliant 2014). The narrator explains that it “would not do” to have Thorin be known to be attracted to a “modest-looking” hobbit, and that should Bilbo turn out to also be an alpha, as Thorin is, the latter would be humiliated and “would
never hear the end of it from Dwalin, the hierarchy of kings and subjects be damned” (Ibid.). The narrator moves on quickly from this momentary description of a possible source of Thorin’s anxiety, and although the story does not substantively engage with the concept of alpha-alpha relationships again - whether in or outside of royal relationships - the lingering suggestion from this scene implies that alpha/beta/omega identity is perceived within this text as a secondary (or even primary), additional gender, one which is similarly culturally and politically regulated.

The normative model - and the one that would afford Thorin the least amount of teasing from his peers - only appears to allow for alphas to participate in sexual and/or romantic relationships with omegas or betas. Two “alphas” together is a cause for laughter, perceived as incorrect, even a cause for shame - in the same way, one might argue, that homosexuality was once (and in many areas, still is) widely regarded as suboptimal to heterosexuality. This form of oppression is never explicitly named in the story, but the fact the author built stigma into alpha-alpha relationships does seem to suggest an attempt at world-building that simultaneously allows for gay relationships while incorporating at least one cultural and political structure which repudiates same-sex relationships, where those sexes are alphas. Neither those who commented upon the story nor the author themself discussed this phenomenon outside of this single scene; although the lack of engagement on the topic leaves its import to readers unclear, I suspect the reason is that, at least in part, this kind of heterosexist social structure is common to many Omegaverse fics, even if not usually so clearly spelled out.

Bilbo’s lack of awareness about his own alpha/beta/omega status (the story implies, but never explicitly states, that this paradigm does not exist in Hobbit culture) presents obstacles, not only to the perceptions and beliefs of the other characters who are drawn to him, but to his own
continued safety. When the party arrive at the elven kingdom, and all of the elves find themselves drawn to Bilbo one night as he enters his first “heat.” Rather than explain the situation to Bilbo and ask for the hobbit’s own thoughts on how to address both his personal needs and the challenges the new dynamic will bring to the group, Thorin instead seeks out Gandalf (the wizard apparently not impacted by alpha/omega dynamics) and asks for his help. The wizard acquiesces, offering Thorin something to help himself control his own alpha urges, but balks when Thorin requests something for Bilbo:

The look on Gandalf’s face turns dangerous. “Thorin Oakenshield, are you suggesting we drug Bilbo?”

“Not drug, you fool!” Thorin grits. “If you have any knowledge of omegas, any at all of what an unclaimed heat will do to them — I was there last night to witness what he was feeling. He is going to suffer, Gandalf. Badly. Last night was only just the beginning of what is to come, and it will become much worse unless you help me to help him.”

“Then tell him. He deserves to know what to expect of his own body. What you and every other dwarf are intending to do. That is fair, Thorin.”

Thorin looks away from him and at a bookcase. “He will know. In time.” [...]

“Very well,” Gandalf says, though not without heavy disapproval in his voice. “But you must promise me that you will not compel Bilbo into making a choice that he wants no part of, Thorin. If he chooses another, or none at all…”

“I promise.” Thorin nods, then turns to leave the room. (Fideliant, 2014)

The medicine - intended both to ease the painful physical side effects Bilbo experiences each night - is granted only after Thorin agrees not to try to compel Bilbo into “making a choice that
he wants no part of,” apparently without regard to the fact that both Gandalf and Thorin are effectively making the choice to control Bilbo’s body without the hobbit having a part in it. Before the issue of consent to a sexual encounter is even granted, Bilbo’s body is being regulated non-consensually through the use of magical and/or medicinal potions, the consumption of which he is not even informed until much later in the text, long after he has been administered heavy doses of the potion.

When Bilbo finally finds out that Thorin has been secretly drugging him, he is furious, accusing Thorin of lying and attempting to manipulate him, and for a short while the two are estranged; as the story continues, however, they begin to speak, and it is only after a climactic combat scene in which an orc attempts to rape Bilbo that the two become close again. Offered the choice to return home to Hobbiton and safety or to continue on with the company, Bilbo suddenly expresses his change of heart, kissing Thorin and saying that since he is allowed to choose, he chooses Thorin. The sudden resolution is troubling on multiple levels; first, despite having had brief encounters throughout the story after their estrangement, Thorin and Bilbo have not had a substantive conversation about Thorin’s violation of Bilbo’s body via the forced consumption of the potion. Although it is made clear initially that Bilbo is angry with Thorin, this anger is never thoroughly discussed, and instead the two characters seem simply to “overcome” the harm Thorin’s actions may have caused Bilbo simply out of necessity for survival - when they are attempting to escape goblins and orcs, little time is left for in-depth discussion. Furthermore, the warning note for “Graphic Depictions of Violence” is added only with the publication of Chapter 7 - which features an orc’s explicit attempted rape of Bilbo. This, paired with the warning in the notes that there will be “attempted rape and violence in this chapter,” suggest that Thorin’s forced drugging of Bilbo and his attempt to control the hobbits
sexual and perhaps reproductive behavior do not constitute violence; if only an attempted rape merits a chapter warning for violence, then the other instances of non-consensual interaction - including both the drugging and another scene where Thorin tries to roughly drag Bilbo away from another dwarf, hurting him - are not themselves violent encounters.

I stress here that my concern is not exclusively with the presence of non-consensual content in the text – many stories do feature elements of non-con or dub-con, and certainly there is value for many in exploring taboo or violent topics in a relatively safe space – but rather with the fact that the author only deemed elements non-consensual enough to merit content warnings when they involved an explicit attempted rape. Other elements, like the drugging of Bilbo or, in other stories, the expectation that he will have sex in order to preserve the mission – are not even acknowledged as non-consent, or at least not to the degree that they might be perceived as problematic or triggering enough to merit content warnings or tags.

Thus the ultimate implication, when authors add warnings about “violence” or “non-consent” or “dubious consent” only when there is an attempted rape is that the myriad other forms of sexual coercion and assault go unidentified, glossed over in the author’s attempt to reach a happy resolution. Were Fideliant to have labeled this fic as non-con from the very beginning, it would have signified the author’s awareness that the forced drugging (and ultimately, the forced regulation of a character’s sexual activities as a result) of one character by another is an example of non-consent; Bilbo may not have been raped by Thorin, but he was assaulted.

Although comments on the story were numerous - there were just over 180 spread out over the eight chapters - there was little variation from a general theme of celebration/praise of
the author’s writing and creativity. The most detailed comments tended to come after the posting of Chapter 5, where Thorin tells Bilbo about his omega status, what it means to be an omega, and that he’s been drugging him. Of the ten initial comments (not including author responses or continued commentary/feedback) on this chapter, five specifically addressed the exchange between Bilbo and Thorin, focusing either on celebrating the fact that Bilbo had finally been told, or (more commonly) praising Bilbo’s reaction. Among the latter responses include commenters who asserted:

Good job handling of Bilbo's reaction! I'm glad he didn't just faint straight into Thorin's arms & the King himself being awkward as hell is great too. Going to be very happy to see how everyone else reacts to this :) Thanks for updating! (unknownsister, 2013)

I congratulate you for writing the best reaction ever to someone being told that they are being lied to, and drugged. Thank you for not making Bilbo a pussy. (jcrycolr3wradc 2013)

Good for you, Bilbo. You walk right away from this bullshit! (hobbitdragon 2013)

Despite the commenters’ statements of solidarity with Bilbo and their support for the author “not making Bilbo a pussy” - read here as implying that for the character to have instantly forgiven Thorin for his misdeeds would have made rendered him more feminine and less worthy of respect (the commenter implicitly equates the term “pussy” with weak character) - none of these commenters voiced objections when, in the subsequent chapters, the characters began to behave warmly toward one another or, in the final chapter, actually form a long-lasting romantic and sexual partnership. That Bilbo ends up actually choosing to stay with Thorin, despite the pair never having discussed the non-consensual drugging and manipulation at length, seems not to
cause strife among readers, at least not to the degree required for them to feel compelled to comment critically. Thus, although there is an initial understanding that Thorin’s behavior is troubling, fans in this instance seem willing to overlook that in the ultimate interest of an unambiguous resolution to the overarching love story. Concerns about consent, manipulation, and honesty in the relationship are effectively trumped by a desire for a happy ending.

**Participatory Culture, Fanart, and the Shame of Knotting**

I want, briefly, to highlight some examples of the ways that artists have engaged with fandom in ways that have helped to shape the genre’s own identity. While not all stories published on Archive of Our Own - or indeed, on most fanfic platforms - will have accompanying visual representations of plot points or characters, it is not uncommon for more popular stories and the work of prominent authors to spread across fandom, until fans of their fics render their work visually. In exploring the art that has emerged around the topic of male pregnancy and omegaverses, I find it notable that, as with genderswapping/genderbending fanfiction, there are some instances where characters seem drastically less likely to be pregnant, or to be the “omega” in visual depictions - specifically, here, I highlight the character of Thorin Oakenshield, for whom I was unable to find any art depicting him either having given birth to children or as pregnant. Interestingly, most fan depictions of “mpreg Bilbo” centered on domestic scenes, choosing to display Thorin and/or Bilbo, together with their child or children (Closetshipping, 2014; The Lazy Took, 2013; Val, 2014). Art was found depicting both Sherlock and Watson as pregnant, and notably, in this fandom artists depicted both domestic, non-sexualized representations of each character as pregnant as well as graphically sexual depictions.
When portrayed explicitly in sexual scenarios, art of omegaverse characters tends to focus on highlighting or emphasizing the aspects of their bodies - or the sexual acts themselves - which stray from normative understandings of physiology and sexual intercourse. Thus in some images, such as omegaverse art by the artist Reapersun, we see a Sherlock who, even at the barest level of physical build, is portrayed as vastly more muscular and bulky than his representation on the actual BBC show. In addition, one of Reapersun’s untitled works demonstrates the animalistic anatomy described by Busse earlier in this chapter - his genitalia is depicted as a blend of male human penis and the swollen “knot” discussed as evocative of canine genitalia (March 18, 2014). Beside him, John Watson exposes himself to Sherlock, revealing an anus which is already self-lubricating, suggesting that this scene depicts one of the “heats” common in omegaverse fan fiction, where both characters experience a strong drive to reproduce. Another untitled work by the same artist portrays a slightly less graphic scene, with Sherlock embracing a pregnant Watson from behind, one hand affectionately caressing his round belly while the other manually stimulates his erection (April 18, 2014). Watson is shown as having swollen breasts (something not often discussed in the context of Omegaverse fics, but which nonetheless fits in with the archetype of the maternal male parent). Importantly, while not all omegaverse fanfiction has correlating fanart - and not all fanart is explicitly inspired by a particular story, as opposed to a theme, topic, or trend in different stories - both the frequency and the proximity of these visual depictions in relation to the written texts suggest that they are valuable paratextual elements whose renderings serve not only to educate the readers (after all, “knotting” as depicted by two human men is likely a much more palatable (and potentially legal) source of visual information than the same depiction between two canines or a human man and a canine).
Conversely, non-sexual art tends often to challenge expectations around character roles in ways beyond those confined to anatomy. Take, for example, representations of Sherlock as a doting father (or father-to-be) or an expectant mother, in instances where Sherlock is impregnated. Even fan reinterpretations of Sherlock tend to leave the character as largely cold and calculating, with the “nurturer” role in the relationship defaulting to Watson - whether the story features omegaverse or mpreg characteristics or not.

Thus, where in the series we traditionally see Sherlock playing his violin in stressful moments or as he’s working through the complexities of a case, fanart featuring Sherlock in an mpreg universe depicts this action as a nurturing one, with the detective playing his violin music into headphones attached to his own pregnant belly (QED221b, 2015). Interestingly, this shift in roles occurs in fanart even when Sherlock is depicted as the “Alpha,” or non-child-bearing partner; another work by Bulecelep portrays a pregnant John having a vivid nightmare over several panels, after which Sherlock is depicted cradling John’s face and reassuring him that it was all a dream and that he’s actually safe (2014). Juxtaposed with Sherlock’s haphazard attempts (at best) to reassure John during emotionally fraught points in the canonical BBC series, these images afford fans of the series an opportunity to see the titular character expressing behaviors and emotions that are depicted as uncommon, if not impossible for him in the canon.

**Conclusions and Questions**

In the decades since the contemporary iteration of “male pregnancy” - and its more recent counterpart, the omegaverse - has begun to gain the attention of scholars, perceptions of the genre and its many subgenres have varied widely. While some of the earliest scholars who discussed the subject believed that male pregnancy was unpalatable for fans or, at its worst,
politically regressive, more recent explorations into the topic have identified ways that both male pregnancy and the omegaverse can free authors to explore sexual taboos and renegotiate gender norms in ways that previously might have seemed unimaginable. While there is limited statistical data to be able to state unequivocally that fandom at large once eschewed the topic of male pregnancy, even a cursory glance at contemporary fanfic archives shows that, even as niche topics, both omegaverse and male pregnancies have seen an explosion in popularity.

As might be expected when an underrepresented theme gains popularity, the level of political engagement with ideologies of sex and gender has varied widely in such stories. Although it is not uncommon to see omegaverse stories in which individuals are purely beholden to their gendered and sexed identities (identities which they are never permitted to question or negotiate), this is not the entirety of the mpreg universe. Stories like The Feels Whale (Miscellea)’s “Gardening” turn the very concept of sexual reproduction on its head and present a more egalitarian way of approaching family planning and childbirth. Similarly, in Six Stages of Courtship by Emptycel, the author challenges even the traditional tropes of omegaverse fiction; John, the alpha, is differential and even subservient to Sherlock, the omega, and throughout their “courtship” there is a strong narrative of communication compromise and consent.

Importantly, reader engagement in this genre appears to be high, and while many of the comments offered to authors are comprised largely of expected praise or complimentary rhetoric, some of the most in-depth feedback tends to center around the pleasure of encountering unique approaches to either reproduction or omegaverse dynamics. When readers do notice issues with consent or lack of consent in a story, they speak supportively of characters who either refuse to submit to the expectations of their sexed/gendered roles, or who resist the romance tradition of
being violated and instantly forgiving one’s violator. Finally, fan participation is also noticeably high in regards to the creation of fan art, either inspired by specific stories or by general concepts of male pregnancy and the omegaverse as they emerge in specific fandoms. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find stories paired with art that they inspired, whether that be graphically sexual or more mundane and bucolic.

Admittedly, while all of the fandoms discussed are fictional, there is perhaps no other genre, at least as discussed in this dissertation, more distantly removed from our contemporary reality than omegaverse fanfiction and its relative, mpreg. While not every story will provide a more progressive challenge to gender, sex, and reproductive norms, I have found that the most thoughtful and well-researched among them can be profoundly affirmative and lead to fruitful reader engagement that not only entertains, but even informs and advocates. I suggest that the very distance that separates us from these realities also gives us an opportunity to consider what social and political values have been articulated by fans that might be put to productive use when engaging our own cultural moment. We may not need to ask, for example, where omegas can find suppressors to conceal their scent and afford them protection and cultural capital, nor may we need to give much thought to what kind of mulch is best for growing our children. Questions about safe and legal access to hormone therapy for trans and non-binary individuals, or questioning whether our institutions afford all individuals comprehensive access to reproductive health and justice, regardless of sex or gender identity are questions that not only may emerge but already have and which, all too often, go unanswered. Thus, while it might be easy to dismiss speculative fanfiction as nonsensical or purely recreational (as if there is anything wrong with something being purely recreational), we might instead regard such stories as inculcating in readers a value for greater access and equity in regards to bodily autonomy and reproductive
justice. Even if these stories don’t explicitly state an agenda of liberating us from binary gender restrictions or heteronormative reproductive models, they may ultimately, subtly - even if only for a handful of readers - have that impact regardless.
CONCLUSION

Failures, Fics, and Fandom’s Gender/Queer Futures

While my first encounter with fanfiction was one that had a profoundly transformative impact upon me - as a thirteen or fourteen-year-old queer in the U.S. southwest, finding *anything* depicting same-gender romantic and sexual relationships was a revelation - my reintroduction to the genre, nearly twenty years later, was quite different. Revisiting fanfic at a different point in my life, I found it offered less in the way of personal revelation and instead piqued my interest in new scholarship, in exploring the way these sometimes intricately constructed texts grapple with issues still regarded as challenging in our contemporary cultural moment. In the stories, characters whom I already regarded as beloved came to grapple with issues and experiences they would likely never otherwise encounter in canonical texts: what does it mean to be a man carrying a child? How does one safely navigate dating and coming out as a trans woman? Even stepping outside of the questions posed within the texts themselves, broader discussions about the roles and rights of both authors and readers emerged for me: do readers of fanfic have a *right* to expect that their feedback will be read, if not acted upon? What relationship, if any, exists between the commenter upon a fic and the author who wrote it? And, as I began to think about bridging the gap between the fiction and the individuals who write and read these fictions, yet more questions bubbled up to the surface: (how) do readers have an impact upon writers, and potentially even upon the texts they’re reading? And when issues of social justice, human rights, and gender equity (even liberation) come into the discussion, what impact can participating in genres where these questions emerge have, both upon readers and writers, and upon the community at large?
These are the questions I have sought to address within my dissertation. Although I acknowledge that some answers were reached with greater success than others, I believe that my work offers a unique contribution to existing fields of fan studies, feminist scholarship, and cultural studies. By weaving together the work of feminist and queer theorists, critical race theorists, and fan studies scholars with the writing and commentary from fans themselves, I hope to have offered a compelling portrait of a thriving community, albeit one that still resides in the margins of a larger network of fannish participation and representation.

The Survey

What Went Wrong?

If I had to pinpoint the overall failure of the survey on one design flaw, it would be my assumptions about the relevance of a particular fandom to such a broad, diverse community of writers, artists, and readers. My initial assumption – that the massive numbers of fans of the Sherlock series (and a substantially smaller number for The Hobbit) would yield the voluminous, vastly diverse responses that more open-ended surveys (like the fan-initiated study, referenced in the introduction) had. Certainly, this was, I believe a failing of mine as a result of my own white privilege and my assumption that a text featuring near-exclusively white characters would necessarily translate in relevance and popularity to everyone, regardless of race, class, or national background. As a result, should I have the opportunity to revisit the survey in the future, I would substantially revise both the questions in the survey itself as well as the overall framing of the survey (this was released as a survey of Sherlock and Hobbit fans; in future attempts, I would likely shift the scope to focus more explicitly on the sexual and gender dynamics of the survey, with the option for participants of any fandom to respond).
In addition to issues with the actual structure and the content of the survey, I found marketing to be a substantial challenge. Largely, this was a challenge of my own making – in crafting documentation for institutional review, I allowed myself a fairly limited number of venues by which I might access fans, and my desire to adhere to a specific timeline meant that, rather than revisit the IRB process and seek an update to allow for greater or more flexible methods by which I might access potential participants, I simply adhered to my original plan, hoping that eventually there might be a spark of interest in the survey. Unfortunately, as I learned too late, opportunities to participate in institutional research are not exactly the stuff that viral sensations are made of, and so when my survey closed at the end of 2016 there were far fewer participants than I had expected (when I began the process, I tentatively estimated having easily two or three hundred participants – a far cry from the 37 who answered the call for participation). Other mitigating factors included, I believe, my relative lack of prominence within the communities which I was studying; despite the fact that I do write, read, and comment on fanfic, I do so from a private account unassociated with my professional research interests. In future attempts, I would likely work to engage regularly and positively with members of diverse fan communities well in advance of any survey attempts, potentially even reaching out to community leaders (such as prominent authors and artists, podcast hosts, respected bloggers, etc.) in an attempt to forge connections and explain both the relevance of the study, and ways such research could potentially, in the future, serve to support fan communities.

**Rethinking Future Surveys**

Future attempts at survey research would incorporate several key changes. In addition to vastly overhauling my recruitment/advertisement strategy, I would (as suggested above) open the
survey to be available to fans of any fandom, allowing them to self-identify which fandoms they are a member of, rather than offering a pre-selected array. Questions would be simplified (I found clumsy phrasing at some times yielded more brevity on the part of participants) to encourage more open-ended responses. Finally, I believe in future editions of the survey I would revisit my decision to have survey questions unlocked via pathing; in the survey I realized, for example, a fan who attested to not having read any Sherlock or Hobbit fanfics would automatically skip the genre questions that focused on genderbending, non-consent, trans fanfiction, and omegaverses/male pregnancy within Sherlock and The Hobbit. This necessarily excluded readers who may have had strong feelings about such genres, only with regards to other fandoms. By making every question available to all readers, only with the option to skip or decline if uninterested, I believe I would garner a greater number of responses overall, as well as a greater diversity of content within each response. Lastly, although I’m uncertain about the feasibility (given both institutional restrictions around privacy and general financial availability), I would be interested in the possibility of either compensating participants for their time generally, or of incentivizing participation via offering them the option to “opt-in” for a chance to win something useful at the end of the survey (for example, reaching the final page would trigger an option to enter the drawing, wherein they could enter their email address for the chance to win an ipad, etc.).

Survey Data

As I have mentioned in several other places, the responses to the survey were very limited – only 37 in total, and of those several participants either declined to respond to many/most questions, or the system had triggered for them to skip based on their self-identified
reading habits. Thus, I wish to stress the importance of recognizing that I do not believe this to be a truly sufficient sample to be able to make any reliable statements about the diverse participants, either of Hobbit or of Sherlock fandoms at the moment, and certainly not a sufficient portrait of the current state of fandom more generally. I present the charts and information below purely in the interest of disclosing what was gathered, and out of respect for those research participants who took the time to thoughtfully respond to the survey questions.

While some aspects of the demographic data were surprising, others yielded results not dissimilar from those on Lulu’s 2013 survey. When asked to answer the question, “Which of the following terms most closely matches your gender identity?“ Of 37 total survey participants, 26 (70.27%) selected Woman (Cisgender), 1 (2.7%) selected Man (Cisgender), 1 (2.7%) selected Agender, 3 (8.1%) selected Genderqueer, and 2 (5.5%) selected Other; although these statistics differ to some degree from Lulu’s survey, they also include more specific terminology which may not have been allowed for an accurate array of responses in her work; for example, “Transgender” is its own gender identity, separate from “Male” and “Female” and also from the similar option, “Trans*.” Demographic information for sexual orientation was extremely similar to Lulu’s survey data, with 9 (or 27%) identifying as “Straight or Heterosexual,” followed by 7 (21.21%) for “Bisexual,” 5 (15.15%) each for Asexual and Queer, 3 (9.1%) each for “Lesbian, Gay, or Homosexual” and Pansexual, and 1 (or 3.03%) for “Other.” Lulu’s survey, in contrast, had 29% of its respondents select Heterosexual, 5% select Homosexual and Gray-Asexual, 23% select Bisexual, 9% each selecting Queer and Asexual, and finally 12% selecting Pansexual, with a relatively small amount (3%) choosing Other.
When asked, “Which term most closely fits your racial identity?,” 29 (or 87.88%) of 33 respondents selected “(Non-Hispanic) White,” with 1 each (or 3.03%) selecting Asian, Black, Multiracial, and Other; no participants responded by selecting “Latino or Hispanic,” “Middle Eastern,” “Native American,” or “Pacific Islander.” These results did surprise me, partially as a result of my own assumptions about the relative diversity of the particular fan community I was examining, and partially based on data examined in Lulu’s study. There, out of 10,005 respondents, only 76% identified as White, followed by 7% Asian, 5% each Mixed/Multiple and Hispanic/Latino/Latina, 2% each Black and Other, and 1% each Pacific Islander and Native American. As I mentioned above, I believe part of this is a result of my rigidity with regards to fandoms incorporated, as well as a lack of outreach specifically to communities that support/encourage/engage in critical discussion with and about fans of color; future versions of this survey would certainly remove the delimiting factor of a particular fandom, and I would make a conscious and sustained effort specifically to reach out to communities of color.

What was most compelling for me, in terms of the results of the survey, were the participants written responses to the open-ended questions. In addition to confirming some of my prior expectations about the relationship between authors and readers/commenters, several participants directly challenged assumptions that I had held going into the survey process, while others took the opportunity of an unlimited feedback box, not only to answer my questions, but to ruminate on terminology and offer compelling alternative perspectives on some of the topics discussed in the survey; still others shared poignantly about the way that reading the genres discussed in the survey had had an impact upon them. For example, in response to that particular question (“Please comment about why you believe your participation in these genres of fanfiction has impacted you.”), Participant “A” responded that:
I am hearing stories about people with experiences much different than my own life. I am finding pain and fears, and wishes of others that I have never imagined. I am learning about hidden desires, shame, fear, and love in ways that I never guessed. I am stretching myself to think in ways that I have never thought before. (Participant A)

Using fanfiction as a way to learn about different experiences, backgrounds, cultures and people was a common thread interwoven through several of the responses. Participant “B” noted in particular that the comments were useful - even “very negative” ones - because they gave “insight and compassion for how others are treated.”

I think it widens my viewpoint, and helps me understand other people. Often reading the comments -- which can be very negative - gives me insight and compassion for how others are treated. (Participant B)

Still other commenters noted that reading fanfic - specifically fanfic written in genres like omegaverse and mpreg, genderbending, and non-consent - enabled them to understand themselves better and work through their own struggles regarding their identity.

Reading sexually explicit fic that deals with certain kinks often makes me more open to participating in those kinks myself (Participant “C”).

They've opened up my life to all sorts of new people and new experiences. Also, it helped me to admit that I'm bisexual (Participant “D”).

They are fabulous, and reading A/B/O in particular has provided catharsis and relief from my own experience of (real life) gender bullshit. Also, my experience reading dudcon [sic] /non con has connected me with many good friends and provided a framework for me to understand violence and sexualityt [sic] in my own life (Participant “E”).
For these readers, the fics provide insights, not only about life experiences that they may not have had or subcultures they may not have been exposed to, but into their own desires and identities. “C” discusses how exposure to different kinks makes them more receptive to participating in them; “D” and “E” both discuss how engagement with fanfic has helped them to acknowledge their own identities, whether sexually (“C” notes they came to admit they were bisexual) or regarding gender (“E” says that A/B/O fics help mitigate some of their own struggles around “gender bullshit”). Furthermore, engagement with taboo topics like dub-con and non-con have enabled them to meet and connect to new friends, and given them a framework through which they can better understand “violence and sexuality in [their] own life.” In general, although the raw number of responses was limited by overall participant quantity, I found the actual quality of participant feedback to be exceptional. Furthermore - and, I admit, at least partially surprising - commentary on questions such as those above explicitly confirmed an initial hypothesis of mine, that engagement with these genres can not only serve to challenge reader assumptions around gender, sex, sexuality and reproduction, but that engagement with such representations can actually impact individual’s experience of identity, whether that experience includes coming to terms with a marginalized sexual orientation or sexual habit, or finding manageable ways to work through difficulties around gender identity and expression. For this reason, I would hope future research into the topic might offer participants greater freedom to explore and address the relationship between fandom participation and identity, and would myself revise future survey attempts both to encourage more feedback regarding these questions, and to ask additional, more pointed questions about the impact of fandom participation upon understanding or awareness of particular cultures, communities, or identities, regardless of reader subjectivity. It was my hope that the latter might be a more common theme within feedback, and
while such narratives were present, they were only a small portion of a larger, more diverse array of participant comments.

**Research Summary**

The three central chapters of this dissertation each examine an aspect of fandom that I’ve found compelling, especially with regard to the way fans have engaged with both canon and fan-created writings to explore non-normative models of gender, sex, and sexual reproduction, as well as to interrogate the role of consent in sexual scenarios. I open by identifying key theories and tracing a trajectory, not only of fanfiction and fanfic scholarship generally, but more specifically of fanfic that explores non-normative concepts around gender, sex, and sexuality, highlighting the way that fans have been engaging in transformative fiction – even gender transformative fiction – for far longer than might at first be assumed. In Chapter 2, I discuss the concept of paratext, most notably articulated by the linguist Gerard Genette. I build upon Genette’s framework to examine how fan participation, in the form of comments and even fanart, can also serve as forms of paratext, influencing the way that new readers approach and make meaning from the text. In the interest of demonstrating this mechanism, as well as highlighting the diversity of fan engagement with fan texts, the primary focus of this chapter is on the responses of fans themselves, with secondary and tertiary attention to the author-contributed paratextual elements and, respectively, the content of the stories themselves.

In Chapter 3, I dig into the content of the texts in greater depth, exploring six different examples of “genderbending” fanfic, all written within Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* fandom. Within this broad genre, I identify three specific sub-genres: transgender fanfic, with stories that specifically identify one of the characters as transgender; cisgender fanfic, with stories that have
Figure 8. Responses to the question, “Which term most closely fits your gender identity?”
Figure 9. Responses to the question, “Which term most closely fits your racial identity?”
Figure 10. Responses to the question, “Which term most closely fits your sexual orientation identity?”
cisgender characters whose gender and sex differ from those presented in the canon; and transformation fanfic, where characters find their sex (and perhaps gender) to be suddenly transformed, often as a result of magical or technological intervention. I look at the way some commenters respond to different stories, ultimately arguing for the importance of commenter participation, not only as a method by which authors can revise and revisit concepts that may have been underexplored or articulated in problematic ways, but as a method by which future readers can understand why even texts which aspire toward a social justice framework may ultimately reinforce oppressive ideologies.

Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on the phenomenon of male pregnancy and omegaverse fanfiction, and the way readers and artists engage with these concepts. In both Chapter 3 and 4, I have attempted a more in-depth analysis of the stories themselves; in doing so, it is my hope to avoid the easy assumption that simply because fans are engaging with different ideas around sex, gender, and sexual reproduction, that they are necessarily engaging with or promoting transgressive or socially just ideologies. Thus, in this chapter I highlight both texts where the authors provided elegantly nuanced explorations of pregnancy and reproduction, as well as those texts that may have fallen short of that mark, rehashing gender stereotypes or conforming with surprising rigidity to binary gender models. Still, regardless of those selections that engaged less critically with patriarchal, cissexist, or sexist ideologies, I ultimately argue that mpreg and omegaverse fanfiction can, with consideration, thought, and an attention to the importance of not normalizing heteronormative discourse, be compelling sites for writing resistance into fics.

Among the key contributions of this work to the broader field, I have identified three primary sites where my work has either built on, departed from, or otherwise compellingly contributed to the existing body of work. These are:
1. Utilizing Genette’s understanding of paratextuality as a theoretical framework by which to discuss participatory culture, with a specific focus on fanfic and the way that readers and artists respond to/engage with fanfic. I believe that, when taking an approach to comments that recognizes them as paratextual elements (rather than separate, potentially disparate feedback rigidly demarcated from the text), future scholars may be able to usefully delve further into the impact that readers and commenters can have upon the field and upon each other.

2. Although brief, I believe my attempt to reorient the understanding of slash away from simply “same-sex sexual or romantic depictions of formerly straight characters,” and toward an understanding of the practice as fundamentally changing the established gender and sexual roles of canonical characters and relationships may be useful for future scholars looking at other ways that fans have engaged transformatively with both canonical and fandom-contributed texts. This could potentially open up the genre of slash and the broader scholarship of slash fanfic to incorporate writing and research about genders outside of the binary, and about non-heteronormative sexual and romantic dynamics beyond just cisgender homosexuality. As I discuss in the introduction, if we perceive slash as not simply making cisgender straight characters into cisgender gay characters, but rather as a way of engaging with canonical texts that can result in any non-canonical combination of genders, sexual and romantic orientations, then the field of what counts as slash becomes much broader and more welcoming to diverse portrayals, and – I hope – the stigma associated with writing such portrayals may eventually start to subside.

3. Finally, I believe that the very act of researching, and in so doing (at least in part)
archiving the histories of these cultures and subcultures provides and invaluable service, in cataloguing some of the trends in a particular genre and sub-genre of creative engagement. Furthermore, through engaging with these texts as both a fan and a scholar, it is my hope to advance the project of legitimizing fannish creation, especially creations which may at present still be seen as too culturally taboo or risqué to even discuss in mainstream media, much less in a sustained examination in a scholarly text. Although I would position my own work far from that contributed by field pioneers like Henry Jenkins and Rhiannon Bury, I do hope to have, at least in my own small way, followed in their footsteps, shedding further light on communities, cultures, and creations that were previously largely left in the dark. It is my hope that future scholars might engage further with these genres and subgenres, continuing the work of untangling the complexly gendered, sexualized, and racialized threads interwoven throughout the texts I have discussed.

That said, there are still many areas I would be eager to revisit and reconsider in a major future revision or update. In addition to an entirely new survey and approach to completing the surveys, I would enjoy the opportunity do a more comprehensive reading, perhaps expanding an individual chapter (genderswap fanfiction, for example, or mpreg and omegaverse) such that I can engage multiple fandoms when examining recurring topics/themes/tropes/etc.

**Directions for Future Research**

In addition to my comments above about the project of a major survey revision, there are several directions in which I could see fruitfully extending this research. First, I am especially interested in the way that race and processes of racialization occur in fanfic; having read a
handful of racechange fics, I would be curious to explore, not only how common this phenomenon may be in other genres, but how readers engage with and respond to authors’ writing about race and characters of color, regardless of whether they were depicted as such in canonical texts or not. Additionally, I would be interested - likely primarily via survey research - in gathering more information specifically about the experiences of fans of color engaging in fan practices (writing fanfic, creating fanart) that are generally depicted, at the mainstream level, as near-exclusively “white” fan practices.

Finally, in addition to the other research avenues I have discussed above, I am increasingly intrigued by the expanding body of fanart, both those inspired by and accompanying fanfic, and fanart as it is created without a (non-canonical) textual background. I briefly mentioned in Chapter 1 that my reintroduction to fanfiction and transformative works, more broadly, came as a result of a webcomic artist whose work I’d appreciated; that artist, Archia, had ceased work on their webcomic, instead shifting their focus to near-exclusively creating fanart. Since that time, Archia has maintained a successful art blog and published four for-profit artbooks featuring different variations of Sherlock/John storylines, and more recently an original artbook titled *The God in the Field*, which visually retells the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, with Persephone depicted as a man instead of a woman. While Archia may be one of the better known (and more commercially successful) fanartists, there are nonetheless hundreds (perhaps thousands) of artists regularly contributing to the body of transformative work through a visual, as opposed to textual medium. This form of representation has so far garnered relatively little interest in terms of scholarly examination, and could offer interesting insights into how fans can and do challenge gender and sexual norms visually, and the way this impacts fanart enthusiasts.
Conclusions

When I began work on this dissertation, it was with no small amount of trepidation; I worried that taking a sustained, critical approach to something I loved would both ruin the thing I loved and result in scholarship that wasn’t quite critical enough. I have encountered diverse challenges as I’ve continued research into my topic - issues with research design, pivotal articles unavailable anywhere outside their country of origin, as well as an impossibly large body of work from which I had to narrow down to a comparably miniscule number of texts to discuss. In the end, however, I have found that while I may read fanfic a little less, that my appreciation for the work that goes into it - and the communities that arise around different fics - has only grown as I’ve seen authors and readers engage in thoughtful, complex, and compelling ways around concepts and issues that still baffle even some mainstream media sources, political leaders, and feminist scholars.

Through hundreds of pages of fic, I have had the opportunity to read some of the most transformative, transgressive fanfic that I’ve encountered in the nearly two decades since I first came upon the genre as a whole. While not every story I read or discussed ended up challenging norms or advocating for a more gender-fluid social paradigm, they all provided bountiful entry points into a discussion about the relationship between author and reader, and moreover, demonstrated that there is a sustained desire among fan creators to engage with norms and taboos around gender, sexuality, and reproduction. In the end, I hope to have made some useful contribution to the greater body of scholarship that examines both gender and gender norms, and fanfiction and participatory culture; despite the points where I undoubtedly stumbled in the writing of this dissertation, I believe that this work, taken in its entirety, paints a vivid picture of a unique, active, vibrant literary and artistic sub-culture. With any luck, future scholars will
continue explorations into these genres, and the fans who construct and sustain these stories, archives, and communities will continue to challenge one another, to advocate for new possibilities, and to celebrate difference when and where it emerges - whether in the fics they’re reading, or in themselves and their communities.
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Site: [http://www.wpath.org/site_page.cfm?pk_association_webpage_menu=1351&pk_association_webpage=3926](http://www.wpath.org/site_page.cfm?pk_association_webpage_menu=1351&pk_association_webpage=3926)


APPENDIX A
Common Terms

Because the universes in which male pregnancy and Omegaverse take place can have highly specialized gender and sex roles, as well as uncommon tropes around physical embodiment and primary and secondary sexual characteristics, I want to highlight some of the more commonly used tropes that emerge within such stories. This list is by no means exhaustive, and nor are all of the comments below present in every mpreg or omegaverse fic; these are merely some of the more commonly utilized concepts.

Alpha/Beta/Omega: In the Omegaverse, individuals are generally identified as being either an “Alpha,” a “Beta,” or an “Omega.” “Alpha” individuals are traditionally associated with more stereotypically masculine behavior: they may be dominant, aggressive (sexually and otherwise), they are often physically larger and stronger, and in sexual scenarios they are (regardless of sex assigned at birth) overwhelmingly the penetrative partner. “Omega” individuals are generally depicted with more stereotypically feminine behavior, including submissiveness (sexually and otherwise), maternal instincts, shorter or with a more diminutive build, and as the receptive partner in sexual scenarios; “omegas,” regardless of sex assigned at birth, are able to conceive, carry, and give birth to children. “Beta” individuals are all those who weren’t born as either “alpha” or “omega,” and as with “alphas” and “omegas,” include individuals across the gender and sexual spectrum. The primary difference between “betas” and “alphas”/”omegas” appears to be that “betas” are perceived as less special, and do not exhibit the animalistic drives associated with “alphas” and “omegas.” Additionally, for “betas,” sexual reproduction operates as it does traditionally; cisgender women may not also impregnate other women (whereas “alpha” women
can impregnate others), and cisgender men may not become pregnant (whereas “omega” men may, and often do become pregnant within the stories).

Heat: A period during which an “omega” experiences a strong sexual drive, sexual frustration if they do not engage in sex with an “alpha,” and usually a strong desire to become impregnated.

Knotting: One of the (and perhaps the only) ubiquitous tropes in omegaverse fics, “knotting” refers to

the reproductive organs of canid animals. If you're not familiar with these reproductive organs, it's really pretty simple: The wolf penis has what's called a Bulbus Glandis, commonly known as a knot, that swells when the wolf is aroused and allows the animal to lock their penis inside an orifice immediately after penetration. Unlocking occurs only after the wolf has completed sexual congress. In the animal world, knotting is a biological mechanism necessary for breeding (Shrayber 2014).

Within omegaverse fandom, knotting functions in essentially the same way, keeping sexual partners physically locked for several hours after their initial sexual contact; although the function is generally described as encouraging conception on the part of the omega, omegas may still take “suppressors” (below) or the pair may use other forms of birth control, so that “knotting” does not necessarily result in impregnation.

Bond: A common feature of many omegaverse stories, a “bond” occurs when an “alpha” has not only had sex with an “omega,” but when their relationship is understood as a lifelong partnership. “Scenting,” “marking,” and “knotting” are often incorporated as key prerequisites for a “bond.”
**Scarcity:** In many omegaverse stories, a key aspect of either “alpha” or “omega” reality is that one or the other (and sometimes, both) are perceived as relatively uncommon, and as a result highly sought-after.

**Scenting:** Another feature inspired by werewolf literature and, prior to that, based upon canid social and sexual practices, “scenting” includes the practice of one partner (usually an “alpha”) intentionally committing the other partner’s (usually the “omega’s”) scent to memory and often, in so doing, emitting a scent of the “alpha’s” own, such that their pheromones co-mingle and each partner smells something like (or strongly like) the other.

**Suppressors:** Because not every “omegaverse” fic features characters thrilled to be a part of their universe, and because characters often want to “hide” their alpha or (more commonly) “omega” status, some stories include reference to “suppressors,” a kind of either magical or conventional medicine that is taken to lessen the effects of one’s “alpha” or “omega” identity, and potentially to suppress their “heats” or make them less difficult.
APPENDIX B

HSRB Approval Letter

DATE: April 14, 2016

TO: Elliot Director
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [817932-3] Something Queer in His Make-Up: Genderbending, Omegaverses, and Fandom's Discontents

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: April 13, 2016
EXPIRATION DATE: December 29, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 100 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on December 29, 2016. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
APPENDIX C

AO3 and Tumblr Recruitment Post

Archive of Our Own and Tumblr Announcements/Postings

Greetings, fans!

I am posting this invitation in the hopes of gaining participants in a survey I am conducting to better understand the relationship between fanfiction authors and their readers, as well as to explore how fans think about different concepts within fandom. My dissertation explores the way that fans engage with and think about certain genres – Omegaverse, Mpreg, Slash, Genderswap/Genderbend, Non-Con, and Trans/Transgender Fanfiction – within the The Hobbit and Sherlock (BBC) fandoms, as well as how they interact with the authors of those fanfictions (or, if authors, how they interact with commenters).

One of the main goals of my research is to understand the relationship between authors of fanfiction and those who respond to fanfiction, either via comments, forum postings, or commentary on their own blogs.

The survey itself is comprised of forty-five questions, ranging from demographic information to reading and writing habits, to open-ended questions about your thoughts on genres, on participation, and on your role as an author, commenter, or both. I anticipate the survey will take between thirty and forty-five minutes if filled out in detail. Participants may elect to skip questions if they are uncomfortable responding.

I would be tremendously grateful if you would consider filling out my survey and sharing your thoughts on the topics explored. Survey data will be kept confidential, although data from the survey will be used in related papers or presentations. Where specific identifying information is shared (such as name, stories authored, etc.), this information will be either redacted or changed via pseudonyms. Additionally, demographic information will be asked in the hopes of painting a clearer picture of who participates in these fandoms; while this may be used in relation to individual responses within related papers or presentations, specific survey responses will be kept confidential and original participant names (if given) will always be replaced with pseudonyms.

If you have any questions at all about the survey, you may contact me directly at elliotd@bgsu.edu, or via direct message on Archive of Our Own at my username, ElliotD. Additionally, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Susana Peña, at susanap@bgsu.edu, or via phone at (419) 372-6525. Regardless of whether you do participate in this study, as both a scholar and a fellow fan I appreciate your time in reading this message.

Many thanks,

Elliot Director

Doctoral Candidate, Department of American Culture Studies

Bowling Green State University
APPENDIX D
AO3 Permission Request Email

Archive of Our Own Survey Posting Permission Email

Dear Archive of Our Own Staff,

My name is Elliot Director, and I'm currently a doctoral candidate in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University. My dissertation focuses on fan fiction, and specifically the way that fans and authors engage with each other, and the impact of that engagement on both the texts that are written and the members of fan communities themselves; it is being completed under the supervision of Dr. Susana Peña.

I'm writing to you today to request permission or seek advice for the most appropriate way to invite members of the Archive of Our Own community to participate in a short survey I have created. The survey asks some basic demographic questions (which I hope to discuss with regards to the diversity of fanfiction communities) and also prompts respondents to discuss their experience with reading, writing, and responding to different kinds of fanfiction, as well as their expectations around feedback. Overall I anticipate the survey taking between thirty and forty-five minutes to complete. Participants may elect to skip questions if they are uncomfortable responding.

My hope would be to post a short invitation on the archive, tagging it with appropriate genres and keywords. In addition I will be promoting the survey on Tumblr, but given the archive of fiction I will be exploring will be AO3 stories it is my hope that permission can be granted to also post this survey to your site.

If you have questions or concerns about this research, you may contact me directly via email at elliotd@bgsu.edu, via direct messaging on Archive of Our Own to the account ElliotD, or via phone at (419) 862-5085. Additionally, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Susana Peña, at susanap@bgsu.edu, or via phone at (419) 372-6525. You may also contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about AO3 members' rights as participants in this research. Thank you for your time!

Regards,

Elliot Director
Doctoral Candidate, Department of American Culture Studies
Bowling Green State University
APPENDIX E

IRB-Approved Letter of Consent

Bowling Green State University

Introduction
My name is Elliot Director, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). I am completing my dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Susana Peña. You are being asked to take part in this study based on your participation in either The Hobbit or Sherlock (British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC series) fanfiction communities online. You should expect this survey to take between thirty to forty-five minutes to complete. Participants may elect to skip questions if they are uncomfortable responding.

Purpose
The purpose of my research is to examine how authors of fanfiction engage with readers of fanfiction, and in the way that fans discuss, react to, and think about fanfiction. I am particularly interested in certain genres, specifically under-studied genres of fanfiction. Finally, I hope to be able, through collecting some basic demographic information, to offer a clearer portrait of who is currently participating in these fan communities. Benefits of the study include greater knowledge about fan practices and communities and potentially increased legitimacy for those participating in under-studied genres. Although no monetary compensation is offered for participation, survey respondents may enjoy the opportunity to reflect on their experience in fanfiction or to discuss specific works or ideas that they enjoy, when asked.

Participation Requirements
Participants must be 18 years of age or older in order to participate.

Voluntary Nature
Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Whether or not you complete the survey, any relationship you have or may have with Bowling Green State University will not be impacted.

Confidentiality:
Although the survey is not anonymous because some authors have been invited directly and participants may disclose identifying information, all survey information will be kept confidential. No contact information, including IP and email addresses, will be retained for the survey. Survey data will be kept on a password-protected computer. Although contact information will not be collected, I may use direct excerpts from your comments or responses within the resulting dissertation or future work. Finally, please exercise caution about when and where you take this survey, as some employers may use tracking software. You may want to complete your survey on a personal computer; upon completion, it is recommended that you clear your browser history and cache.

Topics
Topics to be discussed will include various fanfiction tropes and themes, including questions about Omegaverses and Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics; male pregnancy and non-traditional reproduction in fanfiction; genderswapping, genderbending, and cross-gender portrayals in fanfiction; transgender characters in fanfiction; consent and non-consent in regards to sexual scenarios; and slash, commonly understood as same-gender pairings of characters within fanfiction. You will also be asked about your participation in fan communities — whether and how often you write fanfiction, read fanfiction, and comment on fanfiction, and what your expectations are for each kind of participation.

BGSU HSRB - APPROVED FOR USE
IRBNet ID #: 817362
EFFECTIVE: 04/13/2016
EXPIRES: 12/29/2016
Risks
Although risks for this survey are minimal, you may feel emotional discomfort when asked to speak critically about concepts or practices within your fan community. Additionally, topics will touch on sexual scenarios, which may be uncomfortable for those who do not read adult fanfiction or who do not wish to read about non-consensual fanfiction. To safeguard against these risks, you will be warned at the beginning of sections where such scenarios will be discussed, and may opt to skip such questions.

Contact
If you have questions or concerns about this research or your participation in it, you may contact me directly via email at elliottd@bgsu.edu, via direct messaging on Archive of Our Own to the account ElliotD, or via phone at (419) 372-5085. Additionally, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Susana Peña, at susanap@bgsu.edu, or via phone at (419) 372-6525. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you for your time!

Consent to Participate
Please read the statement below. If you agree and consent to participate, clicking “Next” will serve as your consent to participate in the survey.

“I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.”
APPENDIX F

Fan Survey

Demographic Information

In this section, I will ask you basic demographic information about yourself. Although I understand the categories defined are highly subjective, please answer as closely as seems reasonable; if an option does not fit, you may select “Other” and fill in an appropriate response.

1. Which term most closely fits your gender identity?
   Woman (Transgender)
   Woman (Cisgender)
   Man (Transgender)
   Man (Cisgender)
   Agender
   Genderqueer
   Neutrois
   Other

2. In what year were you born?

3. Which term most closely fits your racial identity?
   Asian
   Native American
   Black or African American
   Pacific Islander
   Latino or Hispanic
   (Non-Hispanic) White
   Middle Eastern
   Other
   Multiracial

4. Which term most closely fits your sexual orientation identity?
   Straight or Heterosexual
   Asexual
   Lesbian, Gay, or Homosexual
   Pansexual
   Bisexual
   Other
   Queer

5. In what country do you currently reside?

6. Do you currently identify as having a disability?
   Yes, I identify as having a disability.
   No, I do not identify as having a disability.
   Other.
Reader Participation

7. Please check any of the fandoms in which you have read fanfiction in the past year:
   The Hobbit
   Sherlock (BBC Series)
   I have not read fanfiction from either of the above genres in the past year.

8. Please check any of the fandoms in which you have written fanfiction in the past year:
   The Hobbit
   Sherlock (BBC Series)
   I have not written fanfiction from either of the above genres in the past year.

9. Please check any of the following genres of fanfiction that you have read in the past year:
   Slash
   Non-Consensual or Dubiously Consensual (Non-Con or Dub-Con
   Male
   Omegaverse (Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamic)
   Genderswap or genderbending
   Transgender Fanfiction (fanfiction with transgender characters)
   None of the above. (If this and no others are checked AND “None of the above.” is checked on Question 10, subsequent sections will not show and respondents will only finish out the participation section)

10. Please check any of the following genres of fanfiction that you have written in the past year:
    Slash
    Non-Consensual or Dubiously Consensual (Non-Con or Dub-Con)
    Male Omegaverse (Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics)
    Genderswap or genderbending
    Transgender Fanfiction (fanfiction with transgender characters)
    None of the above. (If this and no others are checked AND “None of the above.” is checked on question 9, subsequent sections will not show and respondents will only finish out the participation section)

11. If you read any of the genres of fanfiction discussed throughout this survey, how often do you comment on the stories you read?
    I comment on every story I read.
    I comment on most stories I read.
    I comment on about half of the stories I read.
    I rarely comment on stories I read.
I never comment on stories I read.
Other

12. If you write any of the genres of fanfiction discussed throughout this survey, how often do you respond to comments made on your stories?
   I respond to every comment on my stories.
   I respond to most comments on my stories.
   I respond to about half of the comments on my stories.
   I rarely respond to comments on my stories.
   I never respond to comments on my stories.
   I do not write fanfiction.
   Other

13. If you comment on the stories that you read (with any degree of frequency, even rarely), do you normally expect an author to respond to your comment? Please comment about why or why not.

14. If you read and respond to comments on the stories that you write, do you feel obligated to do so? Please comment about why or why not.

15. If you comment critically (with intent to offer advice, challenge the meaning or story, or request changes) on the stories that you read, do you normally expect an author to make changes based upon your comments? Please comment about why or why not.

16. If you receive critical comments from readers on your own stories, do you normally feel obligated to make changes based upon those comments? Please comment about why or why not.

17. Do you write about fanfiction-related topics on a blog?
   Yes
   No
   Other
   (if No or Other are selected, skips to Question 19)

18. If you blog about fanfiction-related topics, do you normally expect an author to acknowledge or take your blog posts into account when writing their stories?
   Yes
   No
   Other
   (if No or Other are selected, skips to Question 21)
19. Please comment about why you do normally expect authors of fanfiction to acknowledge or take your blog posts into account when writing their stories.

20. Please comment about why you do not normally expect authors of fanfiction to acknowledge or take your blog posts into account when writing their stories.

21. Do you believe reading any of these genres of fanfiction has impacted you?
   Yes.
   No.
   Other.  
   *If No or Other are selected, skips to 23*

22. Please comment about why you believe your participation in these genres of fanfiction has impacted you.

23. Please comment about why you believe your participation in these genres of fanfiction has not impacted you.

24. If you have any other comments about fanfiction, fan participation or fan communities, please feel free to share them here.

**Slash**

This section will only show if survey participants have selected BOTH “slash” as one of their responses to either question 9 or 10 AND EITHER “The Hobbit” OR “Sherlock (BBC Series)” as one of their responses to either question 7 or 8.

25. As best as you are able, please define or describe the term “slash” as it relates to fanfiction.

26. If you read “slash” fanfiction, which of the following categories do you read?
   Male/Male
   Female/Female
   Female/Female/Male
   Male/Male/Female
   Other

27. What do you enjoy about reading slash fanfiction?

28. What do you dislike about reading slash fanfiction?

29. What, if anything, would you like to change about the stories you have read or written about slash fanfiction?
Genderswap & Genderbend

This section will only show if survey participants have selected EITHER “Genderswap or genderbending” OR “Transgender fanfiction” as one of their responses to either question 9 or 10 AND EITHER “The Hobbit” OR “Sherlock (BBC Series)” as one of their responses to either question 7 or 8.

30. As best as you are able, please define or describe the term “genderswap” as it relates to fanfiction.

31. As best as you are able, please define or describe the term “genderbend” as it relates to fanfiction.

32. As best as you are able, please define or describe the term “trans/transgender fanfiction.”

33. What do you enjoy about reading genderswap, genderbend, or trans/transgender fanfiction?

34. What do you dislike about reading genderswap, genderbend, or trans/transgender fanfiction?

35. What, if anything, would you like to change about the stories you have read or written about genderswap, genderbend, or trans/transgender fanfiction?

36. Have you ever read fanfiction where another aspect of a character’s identity (such as race, ethnicity, age, ability or disability), rather than gender or sex, were swapped?
   Yes
   No
   I’m not sure
   Other

37. Whether or not you have read fanfiction where another aspect of a character’s identity (such as race, ethnicity, age, ability or disability), rather than gender or sex, were swapped, what would your thoughts be on such a genre of fanfiction?
Male Pregnancy and the Omegaverse
This section will only show if survey participants have selected EITHER “Male pregnancy” OR “Omegaverse” as one of their responses to either question 9 or 10 AND EITHER “The Hobbit” OR “Sherlock (BBC Series)” as one of their responses to either question 7 or 8.

38. As best as you are able, please define or describe the term “Male Pregnancy (Mpreg)” as it relates to fanfiction.

39. As best as you are able, please define or describe the term “Omegaverse (Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics)” as it relates to fanfiction.

40. What do you enjoy about reading male pregnancy or omegaverse fanfiction?

41. What do you dislike about reading male pregnancy or omegaverse fanfiction?

42. What, if anything, would you like to change about the stories you have read or written about male pregnancy or omegaverse fanfiction?

Consent, Dubious Consent, and Non-Consent in Fanfiction
This section will only show if survey participants have selected BOTH “Dubiously consensual or non-consensual” as one of their responses to either question 9 or 10 AND EITHER “The Hobbit” OR “Sherlock (BBC Series)” as one of their responses to either question 7 or 8.

The following questions will focus on fanfiction commonly identified as “dub-con” or “dubious consent,” as well as “non-con” or “non-consent” - stories which depict sexual scenarios where explicit consent may not be present. These questions are optional; if you prefer not to read or respond to questions of this nature, you may discontinue the survey by clicking the “Skip this section” button below. Otherwise, please continue ahead into the next sections.

SKIP THIS SECTION button will appear here. If pressed, survey will skip to “Thank you” message at end of survey.

43. What do you enjoy about reading Dubious Consent or Non-Consent fanfiction?

44. What do you dislike about reading Dubious Consent or Non-Consent fanfiction?

45. What, if anything, would you like to change about the stories you have read or written about Dubious Consent or Non-Consent fanfiction?

Thank you for participating!
Thank you for your participation in this survey! Your answers will help to shed light on some important questions within fandom and fan fiction studies. If you have questions or concerns about this research or your participation in it, you may contact me directly via email at sheanad@bgsu.edu, via direct messaging on Archive of Our Own to the account ElliotD, or via phone at (419) 862-5085.