"I Opened a Book and in I Strode": Fanfiction and Imaginative Reading

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This dissertation titled
"I Opened a Book and in I Strode": Fanfiction and Imaginative Reading

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ABSTRACT

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"I Opened a Book and in I Strode": Fanfiction and Imaginative Reading

Director of Dissertation: Robert Miklitsch

This dissertation studies imaginative reading and its relationship to fanfiction. Imaginative reading is a practice that involves engaging the imagination while reading, mentally constructing a picture of the characters and settings described in the text. Readers may imaginatively watch and listen to the narrated action, using imagination to recreate the characters’ sensations and emotions. To those who frequently read this way, imagining readers, the text can become, through the work of imagination, a play or film visualized or entered. The readers find themselves inside the world of the text, as if transported to foreign lands and foreign eras, as if they have been many different people, embodied in many different fictional characters. By engaging imaginatively and emotionally with the text, the readers can enter into the fictional world: the settings seem to them like locations they can visit, the many characters like roles they can inhabit or like real people with whom they can interact as imaginary friends and lovers. The readers feel that they have been absorbed into the world of the text, and sometimes into the characters.

One genre of literature is particularly closely connected to the act of imaginative reading: Internet fanfiction. In fact, imaginative reading is the source of Internet fanfiction and thereby shapes many of the genre’s characteristics. Bringing imaginative reading to bear on fanfiction texts reveals characteristics of these texts and of the genre in
which they participate. Because imaginative reading, especially of culturally devalued
texts by young women, is frequently decried by critics, fanfiction, which is frequently
written by young women about these culturally devalued texts, is often tarred with the
same brush. Thus many of the characteristics of fanfiction derive from fan writers’
attempts to avoid the stigmas accruing to imaginative reading and readers.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of writing a dissertation is often likened to a journey. I prefer to think of it as a quest: specifically, the quest in *The Lord of the Rings*. What did you expect from a Tolkien fan?

Frodo’s quest was only completed through the help and guidance of the Fellowship. I would like to thank the members of my own Fellowship of the Dissertation: Dr. Robert Miklitsch, Dr. Thomas Dancer, and Dr. Marsha Dutton. My parents, family, and friends also provided much-needed emotional, social, and financial support. They couldn’t carry the dissertation for me, but they could—and did—carry me.

I only hope that, having reached the end of this quest and thrown the One Dissertation into the Mount Doom of Academia, it will meet a better fate than the Ring did.
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INTRODUCTION

Imaginative Reading

Fanfiction is an ancient literary genre, widely familiar from the works of Greek playwrights, the mythic and legendary retellings of the Middle Ages, and reaching up into the modern world. In recent decades, however, it has taken off in new ways because of the ubiquity of modern media, ranging from plays to movies to television shows to the Internet. Especially on the Internet, fans find themselves rewriting the works of popular classics such as *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, and *Lord of the Rings*.

One way of understanding the popularity of fanfiction is its origin in a practice I call imaginative reading: engaging the imagination while reading, mentally constructing a picture of the characters and settings described in the text. Readers may use imagination to watch and listen to the narrated action, recreating the characters’ sensations and emotions in themselves. To imagining readers the text can become like a play or film visualized or entered. Readers find themselves inside the world of the text, as if transported to foreign lands and foreign eras, as if they have been many different people, embodied in many different fictional characters. By engaging imaginatively and emotionally with the text, readers can enter into the fictional world.

Some scholars have discussed imaginative reading while contrasting it with the modes of critical reading they are asked to do in the literary academy. One such discussion of imaginative reading appears in Anne G. Berggren’s “Reading like a Woman.” As the title implies, Berggren sees this reading practice as highly gendered. Drawing on her own reading experiences—as well as those of nine middle-class, middle-
aged, non-academic female readers—she establishes the characteristics of this reading practice, arguing that women reading imaginatively identify with fictional characters, draw lessons for life from the pages of fiction, and read obsessively. She distinguishes between these absorbed women readers and scholars:

When I entered a doctoral program in English and education at age fifty-two, I noticed immediately that my lifelong reading practices—personal, accepting, emotional, addictive—contrasted sharply with the critical, cognitive approaches to novels that my more recently trained fellow students employed. . . . Apparently, instead of reading like a scholar, I was reading like woman. (167)

Janice Radway, whom Berggren quotes, likewise contrasts the reading practices of what she terms the “middle-brow readers” she studies in A Feeling for Books with the reading practices of academics. Under the heading “The Pleasures of Absorption,” Radway describes this non-academic practice in a discussion of the readers’ reports for the Book-of-the-Month Club, in which editors evaluated books for the selection process:

What gave the editors the greatest pleasure, I thought, was a feeling of transport and betweenness, a feeling of being suspended between the self and the world, a state where the one flowed imperceptibly into the other, a place where clear boundaries and limits were obscured. Good reading, as they described it, produced an awareness of the self expanded, a sense that the self was absorbed into something larger, not dissolved exactly, but quivering in solution, both other and not. (117)
The Book-of-the-Month Club searched for “reader’s books” that would produce this feeling. Radway describes it in terms of the mental and emotional engagement of imaginative reading:

A “reader’s book,” as opposed to a “reviewer’s book,” at least according to the Book-of-the-Month Club editors, was one that forged temporary bonds between writer and reader. . . . The chords that linked those different worlds were the emotions and physical responses that the writer was able to evoke in the reader while regaling the reader with stories and mesmerizing him or her with strange facts and compelling information. The modality of reading privileged . . . emphasized both sense and sensibility, both affect and cognition. (117)

Radway describes also how these readers’ reports from the Book-of-the-Month Club awakened memories of her own past reading practices: she felt she had “suffered a loss” when she was asked to read differently by the academy: “Indeed I recognized in their book talk and in their particular reading what I took to be my own habits before they were confronted with the different, more analytical and critical approaches of the English classroom” (120). She struggles to reconcile this intense feeling of loss with the undoubted pleasure she felt in learning to read more critically and analytically, realizing that “the standard practice in English education [seems] to dictate disapproval of this sort of readerly absorption in supposedly bad books. . . . Clearly, I had been asked by that professional training to identify against myself, my family, and my past in order to construct myself as an intellectual” (121).
Michael Warner observes in “Uncritical Reading” that imaginative reading is just one of the many ways in which “students who come into my literature classes . . . read in . . . ways they aren’t supposed to” and questions the academy’s frequent dismissal of such supposedly uncritical reading practices (13). Warner does not distinguish imaginative reading from other forms of “uncritical reading” that differ from academic reading methods.

Despite the contrasts between scholars' critical approaches to literature and many non-scholars’ imaginative approaches, the two reading practices themselves are not mutually exclusive. Most readers, both inside and outside the academy, tend to perform a mixture of both. It is the particular reading mode in use that leads to different outcomes. Attention to the critical portion of one’s reading experience can lead to the creation of a critical reading—a set of observations, written or otherwise, about the text. In the same way, special attention to and development of the performance of imaginative reading often leads to the creation of fanfiction.

Though it is a common reading practice, literary scholars seldom discuss imaginative reading. Because this reading technique creates such varying responses in readers, grounded in their individual imaginations and emotional states, they often consider it too idiosyncratic to be used objectively in describing and analyzing textual effects. This scholarly silence creates an interesting paradox in that scholars rarely discuss the effects of imaginative engagement on the reception of texts, even though this engagement is one of the most common reading practices.
The effects of ignoring the imaginative elements in reading in the reception of texts vary according to the texts and their genre. Some literary genres are written for imaginatively engaged rather than scholarly audiences. For example, authors of popular romance novels expect their readers to use the techniques of imaginative reading such as identification and absorption, etc. Scholars can, of course, use critical approaches in reading these works, but analysis that ignores the effects of imaginative engagement may have difficulty accounting for particular affective and psychological events precipitated by the text, which are a large part of understanding these texts and how readers respond to them.

One genre of literature is especially closely connected to the act of imaginative reading: Internet fanfiction. In fact, imaginative reading is the source of Internet fanfiction and thereby shapes many of the genre’s characteristics. Bringing imaginative reading to bear on fanfiction texts reveals characteristics of these texts and of the genre in which they participate.

What Is Fanfiction?

Fanfiction is a literary genre consisting of works in various media centering on characters and settings established in other authors’ works. A story written by a fan about the interactions of the crew members from *Star Trek* with a new alien species is fanfiction. Tales of a new person being drawn into C. S. Lewis’s Narnia is also fanfiction,

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1 *Fanfiction* can also refer to stories made up about the lives of famous people—for instance, stories of the adventures of the members of the band One Direction. However, this variety of fanfiction is referred to as “Real Person Fic” (RPF) and is a very different creature from narrative-based fanfiction. Consequently, this dissertation does not discuss RPF.
as it uses Lewis’s original and highly recognizable setting, even if the fanfiction does not utilize any of Lewis’s characters. While the term *fanfiction* was coined in the twentieth century, it clearly describes many historical works of literature, as well.

In fact, modern fanfiction is merely the most recent manifestation of an ancient literary tradition of derivative literature. Mark Cartwright says that ancient Greek tragedies were “almost always inspired by episodes from Greek mythology.”

Virgil’s celebrated *Aeneid* picks up where Homer’s *Iliad* left off. Many ancient writers wrote the same cycle of myths and legends. For instance, the Theban Cycle consisted of four poems, possibly by four different writers, about the mythical history of Thebes. The Latin author Statius based his *Thebaid* on these stories in the first century BCE. In the fourteenth century the Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio based his *Teseida* on the *Thebaid*, and then the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer based his *Anelida and Arcite* and “The Knight’s Tale” on the *Teseida*. In fact, in the introduction to *Troilus and Criseyde*, Stephen A. Barney writes,

> Boccaccio stimulated a new tradition that flourished in the fourteenth century—taking a small episode or group of episodes from the great chronicles and treating them in more elaborate detail, just as the Greeks had elaborated segments of the Homeric cycles as independent works. Like the romances of Chrétien de Troyes and his followers, these new works could explore nuances of human relations, develop moral and philosophical themes, rearrange and give point and conclusiveness to the

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2 Where there is no in-text citation, the source in question was found on the Internet: the author’s name may be found in the Works Cited list at the end of the dissertation for the full citation and web address.
structure of events, and represent details of settings, conversations, private
complaints, public speeches, and the subtest gestures. (471)

In fact, a strong tradition of derivative literature developed in the European
Middle Ages because such works relied on already-established authority; authors often
introduced even works that were not derivative with comments from the authors claiming
that they were (see Pugh 13). The tales of Robin Hood or of King Arthur that flourished
over these centuries and continue to proliferate are all fanfictions—those by Marie de
France, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, Tennyson, and Marion Zimmer Bradley alike. Many
of Shakespeare’s plots came from history, Ovid, and Chaucer, among many other sources
(“Narrative and Dramatic Sources”). What is Milton’s Paradise Lost but Biblical
fanfiction?

Originality did not become widely regarded as one the hallmarks of great
literature until the eighteenth century, with the advent of copyright law (see Chapter 4).
Nonetheless, even in that century, unauthorized rewritings, sequels, and dramatic
adaptations flourished, as David A. Brewer documents in The Afterlife of Character, 1726-1825. Even the twentieth century, after the modernist movement had solidified
support for originality in literature and disdain for derivation, saw the writing of Tom
Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea,
based on Hamlet and Jane Eyre, respectively. All of these great works of literature, from
Sophocles and Shakespeare to Stoppard, qualify as fanfiction.

Many film and television adaptations of written works also qualify as fanfiction
because they so frequently change the material they adapt. The 1995 film adaptation of A
Little Princess, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, could accurately be called fanfiction because it displaces the narrative in time and space: Sarah goes to school in New York instead of London, her father apparently dies in battle in Europe rather than of illness in India, and the narrative is set during World War I rather than the late nineteenth century. The plot is also different. In Cuarón’s version, Sarah’s father is not actually killed in action, as reported, but blinded and afflicted with temporary amnesia. The two are reunited at the end of the story. The 1995 film clearly took part of its inspiration from the Shirley Temple film of 1939, which also reunited Sarah and her father, who was in this version apparently killed in the Siege of Mafeking. Cuarón also depicts the scullery maid Becky as black, and Becky is adopted as Sarah’s sister at the end rather than employed as her private maid. This version stays close enough to the novel to be clearly an adaptation rather than an original work, but it also makes enough changes to be termed fanfiction. Most of these changes are not unusual for Internet fanfiction itself and have their own designations in online fandom vocabulary: fix-it fic, AU, racebend, etc.³

In contrast, the 1987 miniseries A Little Princess, starring Amelia Shankley, would probably not count as a fanfiction. Although it adds scenes and dialogue that were not present in the 1905 Frances Hodgson Burnett novel of the same name, the details and characters of the story are little changed, minus a slight telescoping of the time frame so that the production would not have to hire two actresses of different ages to play Sarah Crewe.

³ See the glossary at the end of the introduction for glosses of these terms and others.
A particularly intriguing category of fanfiction is what may be called

*Internet/fanzine fanfiction*. This genre developed among a community of fans—a *fandom*. While works like Jane Austen’s novels and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories have long had organizations and clubs of fans, Internet/fanzine fanfiction originated with the *Star Trek* fandom in the 1960s. Before that, the term *fan fiction* meant only amateur science fiction, published in magazines by groups of science fiction fans: they did not write it using the characters and settings of other writers’ works (“Fanfiction” *Fanlore*).\(^4\)

Joan Marie Verba explains the changing definition of the term: “Science fiction (sf) fans formed clubs as early as the 1920s, and published science fiction fanzines (amateur fan magazines) since the 1930s. Therefore, it was natural for the science fiction fans who went to the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland in 1966 and who saw the pilot of *Star Trek*, which Gene Roddenberry had brought to the convention, to put out a fanzine devoted to that program” (1). The fanzine *Spockanalia*, published in September of 1967, at the beginning of the television show’s second season, contained the first fanzine fanfiction based on someone else’s characters: the first works of this new genre.\(^5\) Many others followed. Alice Bell explains the stimulus *Star Trek* provided for fan writers: “This series not only inspired fans, but it offered a whole infrastructure with which they could interact. There were conventions to attend and magazines where they

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\(^4\) The *Oxford English Dictionary’s* first example of the use of *fan fiction*, from 1944, seems to be in this sense: “*Fan fiction*, sometimes improperly used to mean fan science fiction, that is, ordinary fantasy published in a fan magazine” (“Fan, n.2”).

\(^5\) The *Oxford English Dictionary’s* first example for this new sense of the word dates from 1975: “Laura, whose ambition is to become a professional writer, has been writing *Star Trek* fiction since her early teens, and was recently nominated for a Hugo Award for fan fiction for her series ‘Federation and Empire’” (“Fan, n.2”).
could be published.” Star Trek fans soon began writing fanfiction about other series they enjoyed, like Doctor Who, and fanzine fanfiction became its own genre with its own style, tropes, and conventions (Bell).

Eventually fan writers moved from printed fanzines to the Internet. Bell traces this movement: “First there were news groups and then mailing lists, followed by a short period on blogs. People soon moved to LiveJournal because it offered such a great comments structure. More recently, Twitter and Tumblr have become key community places.” Fanfiction is often published online on privately owned fan websites, usually structured to support only one fandom, or on sites set up to host fanfiction in multiple fandoms, such as FanFiction.net and Archive of Our Own (AO3).

Notes on This Dissertation

Fanfiction frequently seems inaccessible—or, perhaps more accurately, unreadable—to those outside of fandom, and particularly to scholars. Internet fanfiction is published online, without editors to select the best pieces for publication and distribution or copyeditors to repair infelicities of phrasing or errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Fanfiction writers sometimes employ “beta-readers” or “betas” to proofread their work for spelling and grammar and/or canonical accuracy, but these betas are fellow fans and peers, not professionals. The writers and betas are also frequently young, developing writers. As a result, Internet fanfiction is often marked by stylistic infelicities.
Moreover, Internet fanfiction is created by and for members of a fandom, who are intimately knowledgeable about the works on which the fanfiction is based and about common areas of inquiry, debate, etc., within the fandom community itself. This fact makes Internet fanfiction an insider genre, which may be less accessible to those outside the fandom community.

Most scholarly works on the topic refer to such works with two words: *fan fiction*. However, fans themselves generally call it *fanfiction*, *fanfic*, or *fic*. One article on *The Daily Dot* stresses,

> The word is “fanfiction.” It’s not Fan Fiction or FanFiction or fanfictions or fan-fiction. It’s just *fanfic*, for short. Get it right. . . . When you write *fanfic* as “fan fiction” you’re implying that a) you’re not one of us, because if you were, you’d call it fic like normal people, and b) you’re thinking that “fan” is an adjective that somehow separates our fiction from normal-people fiction. Fanfiction is a literary format with its own subgenres. You wouldn’t call a play “stage fiction” or a movie “film fiction.” They’re things. Fanfiction is a thing. (Baker-Whitelaw and Romano)

Other terms, like *fan community*, *fan writer*, etc., are scholarly designations infrequently used by fans themselves.
The genre of Internet fanfiction is a metafictional one: it is always altering, expanding, and commenting on another piece of fiction. Fanfiction is itself always partially about how the fan writer reads the original work on which the fanfiction is based; thus it is an ideal genre for studying the effects of imaginative reading. Chapter 1 examines the practice of imaginative reading and how fanfiction arises from this practice. Imaginative reading has been both celebrated and stigmatized, and as fanfiction derives from the more extreme end of imaginative reading, this genre has frequently been criticized in many of the same ways as the reading practice itself. Many of the criticisms of imaginative reading have remained remarkably consistent over the past few centuries. Because imaginative reading is the source of fanfiction, these criticisms have strong effects on the genre of fanfiction itself.

Chapter 2 focuses on the fanfiction trope of the Mary Sue character. Mary Sues, which are extremely common in Internet fanfiction, are themselves an objective correlative for the act of imaginative reading. Thus fans particularly criticize Mary Sues for many of the reasons that extreme imaginative reading is criticized by those outside of fandom. Nonetheless, the Mary Sue trope has remained resilient in fanfiction, as a product of the imaginative reading that produces the genre itself.

Though critics frequently set imaginative reading and critical reading in contrast to one another, Chapter 3 demonstrates that fans frequently perform these two reading techniques simultaneously. This chapter examines how fanfiction demonstrates the role of critical reading in its production. Fan writers often create fanfiction in order to
ameliorate problems that they have with the original canon. Additionally, fans are often critical of one another’s fanfictions, sometimes as a result of the stigma associated with imaginative reading. Fan critics especially censure signs in the fanfiction, like the inclusion of Mary Sues, that they believe to indicate that the author is imaginatively reading with a transgressive intensity.

Many authors object to fans creating fanfiction of their works, seeing it as a transgressive act of appropriation, equivalent to stealing. However, as Chapter 4 argues, imaginative reading produces a mindset that does not see texts or characters as objects that can be stolen, but rather as an ever-expanding set of possible parallel versions which can be added to by fan writers. This chapter analyzes two fanfictions that promulgate this concept of the multifold nature of fictional characters.

As imaginative reading provides the basis of fanfiction, it also explains many of its characteristics, such as the ubiquity and criticism of Mary Sue characters, the particular form of fannish literary criticism, and fanfiction’s unusual depictions of appropriation. The following glossary may provide further background, not only as an explication of fandom vocabulary but as a primer in the ways fans conceptualize fanfiction and other fan products and activities.

**Glossary of Fanfiction Terms**

*General*

*BNF*  
Big Name Fan. A fan who is well known in his or her fandom.
Bookverse/Movieverse: The version of canon based on the book (Bookverse) or the film adaptation (Movieverse). Depending on how many liberties the adaptation takes, the two may present very different versions of events. See Chapter 4.

Canon: The work or works on which a fanfiction is based; the authoritative version of events; of or pertaining to this version. What constitutes canon may be a matter of debate within a fandom.

Con: Short for convention, as in a convention of science fiction fans, like ComicCon. Con can also be short for consent in fics with sexual content: Non-Con stands for nonconsensual sex and Dub-Con for dubious consent.

Fandom: Fannish activities or the fan community in general. Can also refer to the communities surrounding particular texts, such as the Star Trek fandom or the Harry Potter fandom.

Fanfic: A short form of fanfiction. Can also be called fic. Writing fanfic can be called ficcing.

Fannish: Of or pertaining to fans

Fanon: A widespread trope or convention within a fandom—such as a common pairing or common depiction of a character—which
may eventually be so widespread as to be confused with the canon.

Fanservice References in the canon that are meant as a nod or concession to the fans. An example would be characters on the television show *Lost* referring to the passengers from the tail section of the plane as *tailies*, a term that originated among the fans on *Lost* message boards, or the author of a series of books including more scenes with a character who is a fan favorite.

Headcanon The version of an event or character that is accepted by an individual fan as his or her personal canon. For example, as Legolas’s hair color is not described in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* books, some fans may have a headcanon that Legolas is a blond or a brunet.

Original Fiction Fiction that is not fanfiction

Profic Professionally written and published fanfiction, such as tie-in novels for a film or television franchise, or professionally published novels based on texts like the Jane Austen novels that are in the public domain.
### Kinds of Fanworks/Fannish Activity

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosplay</td>
<td>Costume Play: dressing up in costume as a character, usually for an RPG or a convention.</td>
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<td>Fanart</td>
<td>Art by fans that illustrates events in the canon or other scenes with the characters</td>
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<td>Fanvid</td>
<td>Fanmade videos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Filk</td>
<td>Also known as <em>Songfic</em>: musical fanfiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRL</td>
<td>In Real Life, as opposed to online</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meta</td>
<td>Short for <em>metaliterature</em>. Can also refer to a discussion of the canon, fandom, etc. <em>Metafic</em> is a fanfiction genre in which the fictional characters comment on the canon, fandom, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>RPG/RP</td>
<td>Role-Playing Game. Can refer to written RPs in which fans communally write a story, each one controlling the actions of a single character; tabletop RPGs such as Dungeons and Dragons (DnD); or a LARP—Live Action Role Play—in which the players act out the actions of their chosen characters.</td>
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### Creating and Consuming Fanfiction

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<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>A/N</td>
<td>Author’s Notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beta reader</td>
<td>Also referred to as a Beta. A fan who acts as an editor for another fan’s fics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>-----------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrit</td>
<td>Constructive Criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels</td>
<td>Intense feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>MST3K/MST</td>
<td><em>Mystery Science Theater 3000.</em> A piece that sporks someone else’s fanfiction in the style of the television series of the same name, quoting the fanfiction and then adding cynical one-liners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pairing</td>
<td>Two characters a fan wants to be in a relationship. Also called a <em>ship.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plotbunny</td>
<td>An idea for a story</td>
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<td>OTP</td>
<td>One True Pairing: the one pairing the fan is most devoted to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rec</td>
<td>Recommendation: a recommended fanfiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To ship</td>
<td>When a fan wants two characters—a pairing—to be in a relationship. Someone who ships a couple—pairs them together—is called a shipper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To spork</td>
<td>To make fun of someone else’s fanfiction, sometimes line by line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIP</td>
<td>Work In Progress</td>
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</table>

**Fanfiction Genres**

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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternate Universe</td>
<td>Also referred to as AU. A fanfiction that is based on an alternate version of events (a universe in which some event happened</td>
</tr>
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</table>
differently), or placed in a different setting, such as a different time period or country.

**Badfic**
Fanfictions that are held to be especially badly written or that were intentionally badly written

**Crackfic**
Also called *crack*. A fanfiction with such strange events and crossovers that the reader may receive the impression that the writer was on crack cocaine. Can also refer to a fanfiction that is as addictive as crack.

**Crossover**
A fanfiction that mixes together two or more fandoms—like Harry Potter joining the Fellowship of the Ring.

**Drabble**
A short fanfiction of no more than 100 words

**Fix-it Fic**
A fanfiction that fixes things that the fan did not like about the canonical work

**Fluff**
Fanfiction that is light and pleasant

**Genderbend**
A fanfiction that changes the gender of one or more characters

**Het**
Fanfiction with a heterosexual pairing or pairings

**Hurt/Comfort**
Also known as H/C. A fanfiction in which a character is hurt, either physically or emotionally, in order to be comforted by another character. The pairing involved can be in a romantic/sexual or platonic relationship. The hurting of a character may also be referred to as “Whump.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mary Sue</td>
<td>An overly idealized female original character; can be shortened to Sue. Male Mary Sues may be called Marty Stus, Gary Stus, or Stus. The author of a Mary Sue story is called a Suethor. Mary Sues that appear in the canon rather than the fanfiction are called Canon Sues or Canon Stus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>A short fanfiction that consists of no more than a single chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OOC</td>
<td>Out of Character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Character</td>
<td>Also referred to as an OC. A fanfiction character that was completely invented by the fan writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWP</td>
<td>Stands for “Plot? What Plot?” Usually refers to a light fanfiction that simply shows an episode or episodes in a character or pairing’s life. Can also mean “Porn Without Plot.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racebend</td>
<td>A fanfiction that changes the race or ethnicity of one or more characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPF</td>
<td>Real Person Fic. Fanfiction written about a real person, such as Johnny Depp fanfiction or fictional stories written about the band One Direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slash</td>
<td>Homoromantic or homoerotic fanfiction. Usually refers to fics with male/male pairings, but can also refer to female/female pairings. Fanfic with female/female pairings can also be called femslash.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reboot

The complete rewriting of a work. The new *Star Trek* films, which rewrite the old Original Series films, are a reboot.

Punctuation and Portmanteaus

**Bang paths**

*Fanlore* explains, “An exclamation mark (sometimes called a ‘bang’) between two words denotes a trait!character relationship between them, especially between a character and a trait of that character. For example, CAPSLOCK!Harry refers to Harry Potter shouting in capslock during much of The Order of the Phoenix, while Femme!Blair would refer to a characterization of Blair behaving in fanfiction in a way some might consider stereotypically effeminate” (“!”). *Raincityruckus* explains that this form of description probably developed from “bang paths” in old email systems: “If you wanted to write a mail to the Steve here in Engineering, you just wrote ‘Steve’ in the to: field and the computer sent it to the local account named Steve. But if it was Steve over in the physics department you wrote it to phys!Steve; the computer sent it to the ‘phys’ computer, which sent it in turn to the Steve account” (qtd in “!”).

**Keysmash/keymash**

Usually some mix of the letters on the homerow of a qwerty keyboard, such as *asldkf;j*. Meant to indicate an excitement so great as to cause the fan to become inarticulate.
Ship names

Shippers frequently invent names for their favorite ships, usually expressed as a portmanteau of the two characters’ names. For instance, Draco and Hermione from *Harry Potter* become *Dramione*. For details on how such ship names are constructed, see DiGirolamo.
CHAPTER 1: IMAGINATIVE READING AND FANS

From Reading to Writing

The writing of fanfiction emerges directly from the way its writers read, from the very imagination they put into their reading of fiction. The readers are deeply engaged in the text, imaginatively experiencing the sights, sounds, and feelings described. They feel themselves such a part of the fictional world that the characters take on a certain reality: the readers can imaginatively see them, hear them, watch their expressions change, participate in their feelings. The characters become, in the readers’ imaginations, almost as real as actual people. In fact, readers may feel that they know the characters better than they know the real people in their lives. They have been imaginatively embodied in the characters, privy to their thoughts and feelings—and no matter how well drawn, fictional characters are almost always easier to understand and more consistent than real people. Real people have more complexity, more variety, than fictional characters. Consequently, the readers know these imaginary people very well and, especially in cases in which they particularly love the fictions they consume about the characters, feel a positive emotional attachment to them.

It is here that the leap from consuming fiction to creating it occurs. In The Democratic Genre, Sheenagh Pugh figures the movement from consumption of fiction to creation of it in terms of characters coming to be like imaginary friends to the reader. She describes playing Legos with her children, using the Robin Hood figures to act out Robin Hood stories they had read or watched. Then they began to invent new episodes:
When I ran out of stories, I and my audience would invent new ones. . . .
Sometimes we explored aspects the canonical stories didn’t touch on. . . .
Now and then, we departed from the canon altogether to produce a “what if.” . . . What we were doing, in essence, was writing fan fiction. . . . We had a canon of stories invented by others, but we wanted more, sometimes because the existing stories did not satisfy us in some way, sometimes because there are simply never enough stories and we did not want them to come to an end. (9)

Clearly, not all imagining readers take this step: different readers engage with the text in different ways, and with different intensities. But as of June 25, 2010, fan writers had posted 6,085,534 fanfictions on FanFiction.net alone (FFN Research “Fanfiction.Net Story Totals”). The actual number of fanfics that have been produced by fandom is certainly far higher. The writing of fanfiction is a widespread phenomenon, produced by intensely imagining and creative readers who want more stories about beloved characters.

Positive Views of Imaginative Reading

Because fanfiction has its source in imaginative reading, it often shares in that reading practice’s public reputation, both good and bad. Critics in western culture have both celebrated and distrusted intensely imaginative reading experiences of the kind that produce fanfiction. As a result, fan writers frequently have to contend particularly with negative stereotypes of imaginative reading: it is the backdrop against which critics, both from within fandom and from without, will judge their work.
As imaginative reading is so common a practice among pleasure readers, books and reading are often praised for their imaginative possibilities: reading fiction is praised partly for effects that are specific to imagining readers. Former United Kingdom Children’s Laureate Julia Donaldson describes imaginative reading in a poem that emphasizes many of the benefits of imaginative reading. In the first stanza, Donaldson describes how the imaginative reading of books provides readers with an escape from their everyday existence:

I opened a book and in I strode.

Now nobody can find me.

I’ve left my chair, my house, my road,

My town and my world behind me.

Critics often describe imagining readers as becoming “absorbed” into the work they read. This imaginative absorption provides an escape as the reader feels herself transported into the text. The same educational benefits that people often attribute to physical travel are sometimes attributed to the imaginative travel experienced through reading. BookBub ran an article by writer Ashley Hamilton called “17 Secrets Only Book Lovers Are in On,” which included quotations like, “Reading is a discount ticket to everywhere.—Mary Schmich.” Additionally, those who praise imaginative reading often attribute to this imaginative escape an inspirational benefit: Hamilton adds, “Reading is dreaming with eyes open.” Supporters of imaginative reading also praise the pleasures of escapism itself: Hamilton’s article includes the quotation, “A book a day keeps reality away.”
The second stanza of Donaldson’s poem emphasizes how the imagining reader enters the action of the book as well, feeling as if she is herself the protagonist:

I’m wearing the cloak, I’ve slipped on the ring,
I’ve swallowed the magic potion.
I’ve fought with a dragon, dined with a king
And dived in a bottomless ocean.

As in the comparison of imaginative reading to travel, this participation in the action of books can be educational and inspirational. A popular image that has been passed around various social media emphasizes this point: “I am a reader. Not because I have no life. . . . But because I choose to have many.” This statement pushes back against some of the criticisms of the escapism described in the first stanza of Donaldson’s poem: the image insists that escapism in books is not a useless, time-wasting activity that carries one away from one’s own life, but rather an activity that enhances that life by allowing the reader to experience the lives of other people. This experience of the action in the book, through the person of the protagonist, is so strong that Donaldson does not even mention the book or the characters in this stanza: she describes experiencing the protagonist’s adventures as her own.

Donaldson’s third stanza describes how characters in books can also become surrogate friends and role models to the imagining reader:

I opened a book and made some friends.
I shared their tears and laughter
And followed their road with its bumps and bends
To the happily ever after.

In this stanza, Donaldson describes characters not as vessels for her own imaginative adventures, but as people whom she feels she has come to know and journey alongside.

J. K. Rowling, among other commentators, has praised this imaginative experience of fictional characters as real people for the way it provides role models to readers: “The advantage of a fictional hero or heroine is that you can know them better than you can know a living hero, many of whom you would never meet. You can have a very intense relationship with fictional characters because they are in your own head” (qtd in “Barnes and Noble”). Readers view and participate in characters’ achievements in a way that they cannot with real heroes and role models. A popular meme among fans on Tumblr emphasizes the superiority of fictional friends to real ones: often superimposed over pictures of favorite fictional characters, the meme reads,

You say they’re only characters

You say they’re not real

But where were you

When I needed to grow?

Where were you

When I needed to believe?

Where were you

When I was dying?

Who saved my life?

Because it wasn’t you.
They’re more than fiction. They were there for me even if they weren’t real. They were there when you weren’t. They’re more than you think they are. (Behindtheplottwist)

The fictional friends produced by absorbed reading provide an ever-present support that real friends cannot.

Finally, Donaldson asserts that imaginative reading absorbs not only the reader into the text, but also the text into the reader. The lessons and experiences of the book stay with the reader because of her strong imaginative involvement:

I finished my book and out I came.

The cloak can no longer hide me.

My chair and my house are just the same,

But I have a book inside me.

The book can therefore have a strong and long-lasting effect on the imagining reader. An often-reblogged statement from Suzanne Collins, author of the *Hunger Games* novels, describes this effect:

You know what’s sad about reading books? It’s that you fall in love with the characters. They grow on you. And as you read, you start to feel what they feel—all of them—you become them. And when you’re done, you’re never the same. Sure you’re still you, you look the same, talk in the same manner, but something in you has changed. Something in the way you think, the way you choose, sometimes, even the things you say may differ.

. . . ‘Cause for once you were this, this otherworldly being in Neverwhere,
and then you suddenly have to say goodbye after a few weeks from when you read the last page. (Qtd in atomos)

Books, according to these statements, provide the benefits of travel, escapism, friendship, role models, and long-lasting effects through the power of imaginative reading. Most of these statements also tacitly identify imaginative reading with reading fiction in general.

Criticisms of Imaginative Reading: Vulnerable Readers and Devalued Texts

While some commentators praise imaginative reading for its absorptive, escapist effects, others regard it with suspicion and caution, especially in its more intensely imaginative and emotional forms, and for these same effects. The intensity of this distrust and criticism of imaginative reading varies on the basis of three criteria: the supposed mental vulnerability of the reader, the quality of the work being read, and the intensity of the imaginative reading experience itself. Critics also frequently lump together criticisms based on these three disparate criteria.

For centuries, critics have expressed fears about imaginative reading’s delusive effects, particularly on supposedly emotionally and mentally vulnerable readers, such as women and young people. Scholar Anne G. Berggren, who calls imaginative reading “reading like a woman,” notes that criticisms of women’s imaginative reading as inferior and even dangerous date from at least the sixteenth century, “by which time,” Berggren explains, “women readers were sufficiently numerous to influence the writing and publishing of books” (168). In The Woman Reader: 1837-1914, Kate Flint gives
numerous examples of the stereotypes of women’s reading from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, which Berggren sees as demonstrating the “dismissive” attitudes toward imagining women readers. Flint explains why women were an especial site of such fears: “it was often put forward that [the female reader], as woman, was peculiarly susceptible to emotionally provocative material” (22). She quotes an unnamed critic who stated in “Moral and Political Tendency of Modern Novels” (1842) that “the great bulk of novel readers are females; and to them such impressions (as are conveyed through fiction) are peculiarly mischievous: for . . . they are naturally more sensitive, more impressable [sic], than the other sex” (Flint 12).

Anglophone critics wrote that women readers, through imaginative reading, would become emotionally involved in sexual scenes and wish to recreate them in their own lives. Particularly because of the supposed emotional susceptibility of the female imagining reader, these critics believed that such sexual scenes would have a corrupting effect. Edward Hake wrote in 1574 that the female fiction reader “is so nouseled in amorous bookes, vaine stories and fonde trifeling fancies, that shee smelleth of naughtinesse even all hir lyfe after” (qtd in Flint 23). In Shamela, Henry Fielding’s 1741 response to Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, Fielding expresses concerns for the mental purity of well-bred young women who imaginatively read some of the provocative scenes of the novel: “I cannot agree that my Daughter should entertain herself with some of his Pictures; which I do not expect to be contemplated without Emotion, unless by one of my Age and Temper, who can see the Girl lie on her Back, with one Arm round
Mrs. Jewkes and the other round the Squire, naked in Bed, with his Hand on her
Breasts, &c. with as much Indifference as I read any other Page in the whole Novel” (7).

Critics have also worried that female imagining readers of fiction would model
their behavior on that of fictional characters. Pamela tells the story of a servant girl who
marries her master; in Shamela Fielding warns that “The Instruction which it conveys to
Servant-Maids, is, I think, very plainly this, To look out for their Masters as sharp as they
can. The Consequences of which will be . . . that if the Master is not a Fool, they will be
debauched by him; and if he is a Fool, they will marry him. Neither of which, I
apprehend, my good Friend, we desire should be the Case of our Sons” (6).

It is not only women for whom critics fear as imagining readers: they also
categorize young readers, who have not yet had much experience of the world, as
vulnerable imagining readers. Fielding warns of the negative effects imaginative reading
of sexual scenes may have on young men: "There are many lascivious Images in
[Pamela], very improper to be laid before the Youth of either Sex.” Further, he fears that
young men may also try to follow the example of fictional characters; he expresses the
hope that his parody “will make young Gentlemen wary how they take the most fatal
Step both to themselves and Families, by youthful, hasty and improper Matches” (52).

Critics also feared the imaginative reading of women and young people because
they believed that such naïve audiences would absorb unrealistic expectations of men
and/or of love from the romances they read, mistaking the fictional incidents and
emotions for reality; Flint observes that romances were believed to “instil false
expectations, ‘insinuate themselves into their unwary readers’” (24). Particularly after the
institution of circulating libraries, Flint notes, “one encounters the familiar fear that young women will be corrupted by what they read, and, becoming preoccupied with the importance of romance, will seek perpetually for excitement” (24). In *The Female Quixote* (1752), a novel describing a young female reader who bizarrely believes everything that occurs in her favorite heroic romances to be absolute fact, Charlotte Lennox moralizes that “the immediate tendency of these books . . . is to give new fire to the passions of revenge and love: two passions which, even without such powerful auxiliaries, it is one of the severest labours of reason and piety to suppress” (qtd in Flint 25).

Flint states that imaginative reading for pleasure was believed not only to promote unwise behavior but also the neglect of one’s proper duties. Critics believed this intense reading of fiction to be useless and non-educative, good only for wasting time and taking women away from their education and household duties: “the tastes and attitudes stimulated by a girl’s reading were . . . habitually ideally seen as preparation for her role within marriage. Romances, on the other hand, could instil false expectations” (24).

These critics that Flint quotes assert that uncritical imagining readers, particularly the young and female, might accept, believe, and enact what they read in books, even when it is dangerous to their happiness or morally questionable. Even feminists, Berggren points out, have frequently depicted women’s imaginative reading as naïve, sentimental, and useless and recommended that women employ more critical—that is, as some believe, more masculine, rational, and scholarly—reading practices in order to advance their own education and the position of women. Early feminists urged a more critical
reading of fiction: Flint notes that in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft “criticizes sentimental fiction for encouraging ‘a romantic twist of the mind,’ a false view of human nature, and for teaching women to articulate ‘the language of passion in affected tones,’ placing more reliance on their sensations than on their reason. The best way to correct a fondness for novels, she believes, ‘is to ridicule them’” (25). Ridicule requires a critical, emotionally distanced stance toward the text: the vulnerable female reader is therefore thought to be protected from the potentially damaging sentimental novel by a less emotionally and imaginatively involved reading practice.

A prominent example of the way that critics have historically discussed women’s imaginative reading of culturally devalued texts appears in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Novels were a relatively new genre with little cultural cachet—and particularly associated with imagining women readers—at the time. Austen wrote a novel that mocks Gothic novels, defending novel readers while simultaneously warning them against the power of novel-reading. *Northanger Abbey* both repudiates the harsh judgments made of its own genre and internalizes and displaces these judgments onto other novel writers and readers. In order to defend the reading of novels such as those she writes, Austen claims that it is the even more culturally devalued Gothic novels that pose the real danger to naïve female readers. At the beginning of the work Austen initially defends novels from their detractors:

> I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very
performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. . . . Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body.

Nonetheless, Austen follows this defense with a story about a young woman, Catherine Morland, whose deep interest in Gothic novels and her imaginative reading of them leads her to believe that real life works like a novel. She makes a fool of herself in front of Mr. Tilney, the man she loves, by baselessly accusing his father of murdering his late wife, an occurrence that, Mr. Tilney is quick to assure her, may happen frequently in Gothic novels but does not happen nearly so much in nineteenth-century England. Austen simultaneously claims to be defending novels, so often believed to mislead the young female reader, and warns the young female reader against the imaginative reading of them.

Some of the criticisms of the imagining woman reader quoted by Kate Flint may seem out of date, but critics still use many of the same arguments against women’s intensive imaginative reading: these same fears and criticisms are still extant and powerful. Take, for example, the reactions of popular culture to the bestselling Twilight novels by Stephenie Meyer. Some commenters are concerned that women will never be satisfied in real-life relationships because they want an idealized boyfriend like Twilight’s Edward Cullen. One, posting on a feminist blog, writes, “A common complaint I’ve
heard from the female fans of Twilight is that Edward ruined men for them. He’s the perfect man; the boyfriend they desperately want. Nobody is as ‘good’ as him. I’ve heard married women say in all seriousness that they’d leave their husbands for Edward Cullen” (Emily [The Slut]).

Critics frequently depict older women who like the Twilight series, sometimes called “Twimoms,” as pedophiles. Like critics of the eighteenth century, these individuals characterize women who are too emotionally involved in romance novels (and films) as sexually perverse: a pie graph by Lukipela on the meme site Cheezburger.com titled “People That Should Have to Register as Sex Offenders” shows two equal sections labeled “Actual sex offenders” and “Twilight Moms.” AlucardTheNoLifeKin posts on Yahoo Questions, “Anyone else creeped by [how] Twimoms go on and on about how hot Taylor Lautner [an actor in the Twilight movies] is? I mean, it's basically pedophilia.” One of the most interesting aspects of this rather banal post is how the commenters responded to it. Many of them take pains to define themselves against Twilight fans, particularly middle-aged ones. Dara comments that Taylor Lautner isn’t bad looking, and feels the need to add, “And I'm below the age of twenty.” An anonymous commenter finishes with, “I think I am one of the furthest things from a twi-hard [a die-hard Twilight fan]. I sit back and laugh at the stupidity of some of them.” Baby♥bop writes, “taylor is hot...rob is not...simple as that (im not a "twimom" either).” In each case, the commenter seems to have felt the need to protect her credibility by emphasizing that she is either not a Twilight fan or not middle-aged.
Critics also frequently characterize middle-aged women who are fans of *Twilight* as neglectful wives and mothers: “The *Times* found women who have nearly lost their marriages by neglecting their husbands in favor of ‘Twilight’ fan sites, blogs, and message boards,” one *Yahoo* article claims (qtd in Lylestyles). Likewise, the most popular definition of “Twimom” on *Urban Dictionary* reads,

> A group of “adults” who have children and/or are married, who are overly obsessed fans of the overrated “Twilight” book series. They usually spend their time, neglecting their children, ie—forgetting to feed them.

"*Hey, that kid looks pretty down, underfed and neglected.*"

"*Oh. His mother must be a twimom.*" (twimomsdiaf)

In fact, some articles on *Twilight* read like an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century complaint about women’s imaginative novel reading in general. One, “The Twilight Obsession and Its Effect on Marriages” by Laura M. Brotherson, runs the entire gamut of Flint’s historical fears about women’s reading: Brotherson worries that *Twilight* “paints an unrealistic picture of what love and relationships are all about” and that it wastes time “that could be better spent . . . [on] one's spouse and family, or other worthwhile endeavors.” Brotherson complains that *Twilight* creates “pretty impossible expectations for a real-life husband (or boyfriend—for the young women also obsessed with *Twilight*) to meet.” She asserts, “An over-abundance of chick flicks or other romance novels can have the same effect.” Brotherson compares a wife’s obsession with *Twilight* to a husband’s obsession with pornography. Furthermore, she suggests that women will get
the psychological excitement of sex from these books and then not want to have sex with their husbands.

In *The True Story of the Novel* (1996) Margaret Anne Doody notes the sexism in the way critics still discuss dangers to the reader: “Outside the academy, the reader is still a bit of a problem—the female more than the male. We produce anxious books on women’s reading of cheap paperback formulaic love-stories. Nobody studies male reading in that way, although there is a tendency to agonize over what males are not reading: the Great Books. It is comforting to suppose that young men are kept from their rightful Iliad by the vicious interposition of feminists or multiculturalists, rather than to inspect young men’s ingestion of Tom Clancy” (281).

Modern feminists frequently criticize women’s imaginative reading of fiction, particularly romances, out of fears of how this reading may be reinforcing sexist thought patterns and behaviors. For example, in “Soft-Porn Culture” (1980), Ann Douglas compares Harlequin romance novels to hard-core pornography in its depiction of women as “either haughty or humiliated”: “Harlequins focus on one aspect of female experience, courtship . . . coupling in the wary primitive modes of animal mating” (26). For Douglas, the popularity of Harlequins

provokes . . . serious concern for their women readers. . . . The women who couldn’t thrill to male nudity in *Playgirl* are enjoying the titillation of seeing themselves, not necessarily as they are, but as some men would like to see them: illogical, innocent, magnetized by male sexuality and brutality. It is a frightening measure of the still patriarchal quality of our
culture that many women of all ages co-sponsor male fantasies about
themselves and enjoy peep-shows into masculine myths about their
sexuality as the surest means of self-induced excitation. (28)

Some feminist critics have echoed these same concerns for women’s social
progress and emotional independence in their discussion of Twilight: many readers
consider the relationship between the main characters Bella and Edward to be an abusive
one and worry that young women who enjoy the novels will see abusive behavior as
acceptable and even romantic in their real-life relationships. Anna Silver’s summary of
these fears in an article on Twilight demonstrates how they are especially linked to young
women’s imaginative, uncritical reading:

Claims such as these reveal the concern that many critics and readers feel
about the books’ tremendous popularity and the messages that they impart
to girls about romance and women’s roles in sexual relationships. Do the
books promote retrograde ideas about female submission to male
authority? Are the books particularly troubling in the genre of young adult
(YA) literature, whose readers might not yet have developed the critical
apparatus of the adult reader? (122)

The feminist critics Silver reviews fear that young readers who are not yet capable of a
more emotionally distanced and critical reading practice will absorb from their
imaginative reading of romances like Twilight a retrograde view of sexual relations.

As many of the above examples indicate, the level of criticism of imaginative
fiction consumption is also a function of the cultural respect—or lack thereof—for the
fictions being consumed. Texts that are popular but considered to be of poor quality are frequently reviled in terms that depict them as a danger to the imagining reader/consumer. In *Textual Poachers* (1992), Henry Jenkins’ seminal work on fandom, Jenkins explicates this connection between the supposed quality of the work and the fears for its imagining readers:

Debates about aesthetic choices or interpretive practices . . . necessarily have an important social dimension and often draw upon social or psychological categories as a source of justification. Materials viewed as undesirable within a particular aesthetic are often accused of harmful social effects or negative influences upon their consumers. Aesthetic preferences are imposed through legislation and public pressure; for example, in the cause of protecting children from the “corrupting” influence of undesired cultural materials. Those who enjoy such texts are seen as intellectually debased, psychologically suspect, or emotionally immature. (16-17)

It is not coincidental that the popular genre fiction that is most obviously written for imagining readers—the supposedly most “intellectually debased, psychologically suspect, or emotionally immature,” imaginatively vulnerable consumers—are the least likely to have a high cultural cachet. Genres like popular romance that are considered feminine or likely to appeal the most to female imagining readers may be the most strongly censured for their potential effects on said readers. Critics are more likely to speak disparagingly of the feminine genre of Harlequin romance novels than of the more
masculine murder mysteries—this despite the fact that mysteries and detective novels are frequently enjoyed by female readers, as the emerging genre of the “cozy mystery” indicates. Nonetheless, the romance novel is considered more stereotypically feminine, more likely to have a female protagonist, and more concerned with feminine issues than the supposedly masculine, violent subject of murder and the frequently male detective.

This confusion in the causes of danger to the imagining reader—Is it the fault of the reading material, the reader, or both?—has been extant from the beginning. Flint’s examples of criticisms of women’s reading begin at the time when she first sees women both being recognized as a significant reading population and when their tastes were first being consulted in the writing of books: “The latter half of the sixteenth century seems to have been . . . the first time in English literary history that women were recognized as constituting a specific secular readership. . . . The growing number of romances, focusing on love and courtship rather than on chivalric adventure as their predecessors had done, were usually directed, sometimes specifically dedicated, to women” (22).

On the other hand, there is rarely any public outcry against the great works of the literary canon that have been most frequently analyzed using the decidedly critical, intellectual, and non-imaginative reading techniques of the literary academy. The exception is when they are being consumed by readers considered too young to be able to correctly interpret them: thus the phenomenon of classics like Huckleberry Finn relegated to the Banned Books category in schools.

Finally, the emotional and imaginative intensity with which readers approach texts also plays a role in how much critics condemn their imaginative reading. While the
supposed literary quality of a work affects how its readers are perceived, the reading techniques those readers are believed to bring to the works—or the kinds of reading techniques those works seem to invite—also affect judgements of the work’s literary quality. Blogger Rod Kolke, on his Christian religious site *Daily Freedom*, posted an article called “The Four Stages of Escapism,” which deals with what Kolke sees as increasingly unhealthy levels of escapism. The escapism he discusses can take many forms, one of which is imaginative reading: “Maybe you drift off into another world with a novel, fantasizing about a different job in a different city with a different person in your bed.” He doesn’t condemn escapism altogether: “In some ways the ability to escape is a close cousin to the ability to create. To imagine. It’s a very good thing. But for some of us escaping has become harmful. Where is the line?” Kolke categorizes escapism into four levels, from most to least healthy: Healthy enjoyment, avoidance, neglect, and obsession. At the level of neglect, the article indicates that escapism becomes a serious problem: “Technology allows us to escape reality and even to neglect part of our lives. You cross the line from avoidance and into the territory of neglect when your escapist behaviors begin interfering with your ability to function. When you’re late for work or school because you couldn’t stop playing Cooking Mama on your Wii.” The imagining reader who is so absorbed in her book that she neglects household duties would fall into this category. The imagining reader whose reading has not yet become so intense that she neglects the outside world or becomes obsessed with her books would be less harshly criticized.
This fear of overly intense imaginative reading appears in the recent British television miniseries *Lost in Austen*. The protagonist Amanda Price is a *Pride and Prejudice* fan who would “rather stay in with Elizabeth Bennet” than socialize in the evening. She is an imagining reader of Austen: in the opening scene Amanda declares, “I’ve read *Pride and Prejudice* so many times now that the words just say themselves in my head and it’s like a window opening. It’s like I’m actually there. It’s become a place I know so—intimately. I can see that world, I can—touch it! I can see Darcy.” But even in the narration, the character feels the need to defend her intensely imaginative reading to the audience: “I know I sound like this terrible loser. I mean, I do actually have a boyfriend.” Amanda has to assert her connection to reality, assert her social success and real romantic relationships, to avert criticisms of her obsessive engagement with fiction.

Amanda’s mother fears that her daughter’s escape into the pages of fiction will ruin her grasp on reality, that her imaginative reading will lead her to believe that she is like a fictional romantic heroine and will be treated like one. Because of this mindset her daughter may fail to take advantage of real-world opportunities, like marriage to her boyfriend. She feels the need to warn her daughter, “I’m reminding you, Amanda, that you are what you are. If you waste your life pretending to be something else, you’ll regret it.” Amanda and her mother tacitly agree that obsessed reading of fiction can lead to social isolation and poor life choices. Where they differ is on whether Amanda’s reading qualifies as obsession or merely avoidance.
Criticisms of the Fan as Imagining Reader

Fans are frequently tarred with the same brush as obsessed imagining readers. They fulfill each of the criteria for the most stringently censured readers: they are often young and female, they become deeply emotionally and imaginatively involved in their favorite works, and these works frequently have little cultural cachet. When discussing fans, critics often mix together concepts of age, gender, literary quality, genre, and imaginative reading in such a way that causes and effects become difficult to distinguish. In such criticism, concern frequently gives way to ridicule. Fan writers, therefore, often feel the need to defend themselves and their work against these accusations, a defense that frequently appears in the fanfiction itself.

Fans fulfil the first criterion for supposedly at-risk imagining readers: they are frequently young and female. In an article on the stereotype that “Most Fanfic Writers Are Girls,” *TV Tropes* draws on statistics to indicate that this characterization is probably true: “Studies of early *Star Trek* fanfiction showed as many as 90% of authors were female in the 1970s” (“Most Fanfic Writers Are Girls”). Establishing how many fans involved in fanfiction are female is a tricky proposition; a study of age, sex, and country of *FanFiction.net* users noted that only 10% of users identified their sex in their profiles. Of those 10%, 78% self-identified as female (Sendlor). In a 2013 survey by Centrumlumina on *Tumblr* (a blogging website popular among fans) of users of the popular fanfiction site *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), 80% of the 10,005 voluntary respondents self-identified as female—in fact, more respondents identified as “genderqueer” (6%) than as “male” (4%) (Centrumlumina “Gender”). Whatever the
actual numbers are, it is clear that women are at least a sizeable majority in the part of fandom that creates and consumes fanfiction.

Centrumlumina’s survey also indicates that many fans involved in fanfiction on *Archive Of Our Own* are young. The largest group, 23%, self-identified as being between the ages of 19 and 21. Twenty percent were between 22 and 24, 19% between 25 and 29, and 16% between 16 and 18. The average age of respondents was 25 (“Age”). FFN Research’s study indicates that users of *Fanfiction.Net* are younger than users of *AO3*: 80% of those users who revealed their age were between 13 and 17 years old (FFN Research “Fan Fiction Demographics”).

Just as the age of readers supposedly makes them more susceptible to the dangers of imaginative reading, critics link the age of fanfiction writers with the quality of work they both consume and produce. *Fanfiction.net* is the most popular fanfiction website and, partly because of the average age of its users, has gained a reputation among some fans for hosting worse fanfiction than *Archive Of Our Own*: it is sometimes referred to derogatorily as the “Pit of Voles.” In his definition of *Pit of Voles* on *Urban Dictionary*, Treehouseman links this nickname to the quality of fanfiction on the site and the age of the writers: “After banning all adult content, ff.net became known for an absurd ratio of incredibly bad and juvenile fanfiction. Thus, the name ‘Pit Of Voles’ was born on the TWoP [Television Without Pity] Forums.”

Critics also consider fans to be an at-risk population for imaginative reading because of the quality of media they consume and write about. Henry Jenkins observes that one of the stereotypes of fans is that they “place inappropriate importance on
devalued cultural material” (10). Fans write and consume fanfiction based not only on books, but on the less culturally valued media of films, television shows, cartoons, anime, and video games. Jenkins identifies a supposedly transgressive obsession with such culturally devalued materials in the behavior of fans:

The stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies. The fans’ transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of those standards (even by those who may share similar tastes but express them in fundamentally different ways). . . . Fan culture muddies [taste] boundaries, treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts. Reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading, etc.) acceptable in confronting a work of “serious merit” seem perversely misapplied to the more “disposable” texts of mass culture. (17)

With its historical connection to science fiction fan communities, fandom frequently embraces works in the sci-fi/fantasy genre, a genre that critics especially associate with imaginative, escapist reading and the risks thereof. Centrumlumina’s survey of AO3 users asked respondents, “Do you regularly read and/or produce works for any of the following popular fandoms?” Fans were permitted to indicate multiple
fandoms they were a part of. While the most popular fandom among respondents was the television show *Sherlock* (41%), almost all the rest of the twenty top fandoms were in the science-fiction/fantasy genre: Marvel films, *Teen Wolf* (TV), *Supernatural* (TV), *Harry Potter*, and *Merlin* (TV) filled the next five spots (“Popular Fandoms”). Likewise, as of 27 October 2015, the most commonly represented fandoms on *Fanfiction.net* were almost all science-fiction/fantasy: the top five were *Harry Potter*, *Naruto*, *Twilight*, *InuYasha*, and *Hetalia: Axis Powers* (“FanFiction.Net”).

In an article defending escapist fiction, Sana Hussein notes that, in Western culture, science fiction and fantasy do not frequently enjoy the reputation of being in good taste: “Critics and academicians classify escapist fiction and the genres of science-fiction, thriller, mystery, romance and fantasy, commonly classified under it, as sub-literary, deeming them unworthy of being regarded as true literature. Charges of shallowness and superficiality are brought up against escapist genre fiction, with its worth denigrated to entertainment alone.” Likewise, in “Fantasy, Reading, and Escapism,” Jo Walton describes how tastes for different genres are received differently: “I love reading. If I say this, people generally look at me with approval. Reading is a culturally approved practice, it improves my mind and widens my cultural capital. But if I admit what I read—more fiction than non fiction, more genre books than classics, fantasy, science fiction, romance, military fiction, historical fiction, mysteries and YA [young adult literature]—then I lose that approval and have to start justifying my choices.”
Fans most frequently write fanfiction based on media and genres that are considered by critics to be in bad taste and strongly and negatively associated with the imaginative reading process of escapism. John Rogers responds to and resists this cultural association of fantasy literature with the negative effects of imaginative reading when he writes, “There are two novels that can change a bookish fourteen-year old's life: The Lord of the Rings and Atlas Shrugged. One is a childish fantasy that often engenders a lifelong obsession with its unbelievable heroes, leading to an emotionally stunted, socially crippled adulthood, unable to deal with the real world. The other, of course, involves orcs.”

Fans are not only frequently young, female, and readers of devalued cultural material, but they also perform a particularly intense form of imaginative reading. Fan reading is obviously strongly imaginative, as is indicated by fans’ frequent movement from simply consuming media to producing more of it. Fans also read with close attention to the details of the canon. This close attention, combined with emotional engagement, is clear in the analysis that fans do of their favorite fictions. In my Tumblr blog dedicated to fandom and fanfiction, I have taken to tagging some posts “close reading” because their contents are so similar to the close readings scholars do of texts in order to divine their deepest meanings (see Barner “#Close Reading”). Fans in these posts analyze in great detail how Black Widow saves two comrades in a three-second clip from Captain America: The Winter Soldier, explicate how Belle’s movements in defense of her horse in a single scene from Disney’s Beauty and the Beast reveals her courage, and describe the differences in wand motions between Harry, Ron, and Hermione in a short
fight from the film of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, connecting these differences to the characters’ personalities and backgrounds.

Other *Tumblr* posts reveal fans’ intense emotional attachment to characters. One anonymous user asks another fan, “Will it ever stop? Will I ever stop falling in love with fictional characters? I'm 30 and married, for God's sake!” Anunexpectedhotdwarf’s reply celebrates fans’ intense emotional engagement: “A day may come when we will stop falling in love with fictional characters [gif of Aragorn in *Return of the King:*] *but it is not this day!*” (Anunexpectedhotdwarf). User Mandalorianed, whose real name is Dora, posts about how deeply she feels the emotions of the characters in the television show *Criminal Minds*, a result of her intense imaginative consumption: “‘hey dora how bad is your second hand embarrassment for fictional characters?’ well, spencer reid was about to embarrass himself in front of a bunch of college students and i literally had to pause the episode and walk it off” (Mandalorianed). Forablueeyedmiracle celebrates the community of fans for their shared, intensely emotional experience of watching their favorite television programs: “Fandom is knowing that, across the globe, hundreds of other people are screaming ‘NO FUCK YOU’ at their televisions and curling up on the floor and crying at exactly the same moment as you are” (Forablueeyedmiracle). These fans are all engaged in an especially intense form of imaginative reading/consumption of fictional texts. In fact, Hesychasm begins a long celebratory description of fandom by identifying it with obsessive imaginative reading and consumption practices: “Fandom is focus. Fandom is obsession. Fandom is insatiable consumption. Fandom is sitting for hours in front of a TV screen a movie screen a computer screen with a comic book a
novel on your lap. Fandom is eyestrain and carpal tunnel syndrome and not enough exercise and staying up way, way past your bedtime.”

Cultural disapproval of fans’ particularly intense engagement with texts appears in Jenkins’ discussion of the derogatory term Trekkie:

Even within the fan community, [labels are] evoked as a way of policing the ranks and justifying one’s own pleasures as less “perverse” than those of others. . . . There is always someone more extreme whose otherness can justify the relative normality of one’s own cultural choices and practices. As C. E. Amesley (1989) notes, “I have yet to find a self-identified ‘hardcore Trekkie.’ Whether fans watch the show every night, miss other events to come home to watch, go to conventions, participate in contests, collect all the novels or study Klingon, they always know others who, unlike them, are ‘really hardcore.” (20)

These fans attempt to evade the negative stereotypes associated with intensely imagining reception of texts by displacing these stereotypes onto other, even more intensely involved fans.

Fans therefore unite the characteristics of the most vulnerable and transgressive imagining readers: they are young and female, consume culturally devalued materials, and consume them in especially intense and imaginatively involved ways. It is therefore unsurprising that fans receive a great deal of backlash. Henry Jenkins describes a Saturday Night Live sketch based on stereotypes of “Trekkies” as an example of how fans
are frequently viewed and ridiculed. All the stereotypes Jenkins enumerates in his description are also stereotypes of the imagining reader:

Its “Trekkies” . . . devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge . . . place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material . . . are social misfits who have become so obsessed with the show that it forecloses other types of social experience . . . are feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture . . . are infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature . . . [and] are unable to separate fantasy from reality (10).

Because fanfiction has its source in imaginative reading, critics often associate fans and their work with that reading practice’s reputation for delusion, social isolation, sexual perversion, etc. Imaginative reading is both the source of fanfiction and the source of fanfiction’s harshest criticisms.
CHAPTER 2: MARY SUES AND BOVARYSME

Fanfiction’s source in imaginative reading is most strongly indicated by the ubiquitous Mary Sue character in fanfiction, itself an objective correlative for intense imaginative reading. Because of Mary Sue’s strong connection to the often-criticized practice of imaginative reading, this character is not only ubiquitous in fanfiction but also frequently censured by fans.

Every narrative includes gaps that readers can imaginatively fill. What happened before the action described in the text began? What happened after? Fan writers may wish to create those scenes that must have happened but were not depicted on the page, or may wish to view the narrative through a different character’s point of view. Besides filling these gaps, they may add elements to the story, including new situations for characters to deal with or new people for them to interact with. One of the most common kinds of these original characters is the Mary Sue, which acts as an objective correlative for the fan writer’s imaginative reading.

What Are Mary Sues?

Fans identify two major traits in Mary Sues: the character’s idealization and her role as an author avatar. Fan definitions often emphasize Mary Sue’s unrealistic perfection: the first definition of Mary Sue on Urban Dictionary begins, “A female fanfiction character who is so perfect as to be annoying” (nscangal). Another definition, by monkmunk, agrees: “A female character, usually an authorial self-insert in a fan
fiction, that is annoyingly perfect. Often unique in some implausible way, any problems they face are typically intended to make them seem tragic or emotionally deep, rather than complex or flawed.” Fanlore’s article on Mary Sue also emphasizes this idealization: “A character may be judged Mary Sue if she is competent in too many areas, is physically attractive, and/or is viewed as admirable by other sympathetic characters” (“Mary Sue” Fanlore).

Many fan definitions of the term Mary Sue, like monkmunk’s, tie together the character’s unrealistic perfection and her role as an idealized author avatar. About half of the definitions of Mary Sue on Urban Dictionary refer to this aspect of the character: the most popular notes, “Often, the Mary Sue is a self-insert with a few ‘improvements’ (ex. better body, more popular, etc). . . . The Mary Sue usually falls in love with the author's favorite character(s) and winds up upstaging all of the other characters in the book/series/universe” (nscangal). Another Urban Dictionary user, Aesi, explains this self-insertion in the Mary Sue: “The most common type of Mary Sue is a character based [on] the author's idealization of themselves [sic]. Furthermore, because the author is imagining a preferred version of themselves, and because faults are overlooked in favor of optimization, a Mary Sue tends to have only superficial resemblance to the author, sharing similar likes/dislikes and a similar spirituality (when applicable).”

The term Mary Sue comes from “A Trekkie’s Tale”: a Star Trek fanfiction written in 1974 by Paula Smith and published in the fanzine Menagerie. It is a parody mocking the trope of the perfect female original character. This parody delineates the characteristics of what came to be known in fandom as the Mary Sue. Mary Sue is young
and surprisingly accomplished: she reflects in the opening lines, “Here I am, the youngest lieutenant in the fleet—only fifteen and a half years old” (qtd in Bacon-Smith 94-96). She, like Spock, is half-Vulcan, and easily wins the admiration of canon characters like Spock and Captain Kirk. Mary Sue, her popularity among the most beloved characters established, participates in the canon characters’ adventures, joining in a landing party and saving her comrades: “Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott beamed down with Lt. Mary Sue to Rigel XXXVII. They were attacked by green androids and thrown into prison. . . . She sprung the lock with her hairpin and they all got away back to the ship.”

Mary Sue is highly competent: on their return to the ship she takes command while the other officers are incapacitated, and is awarded “the Nobel Peace Prize, the Vulcan Order of Gallantry and the Tralfamadorian Order of Good Guyhood” for her excellent leadership. Smith’s parody resonated with fans who had also noticed this trend in fanfiction. Original characters like the one Smith describes here—young, perfect, attractive, admirable to canon characters, heroic—soon became known in fandom as Mary Sues.

Mary Sue as Objective Correlative for Imaginative Reading

Mary Sues, as self-inserted characters, are objective correlatives for the act of entering the text through imaginative reading. The imagining reader, experiencing the text as a location she can enter, a story she can herself imaginatively experience, filled with fictional people whom she feels she knows, creates in her own fanfiction a fictional
character through whom she can experience all these things more fully. The Mary Sue can inhabit the setting alongside the canon characters, experiencing the action as an imaginative placeholder for the fan reader/writer, becoming friends with the other characters, or even becoming romantically entangled with them. Mary Sues result when the imagining reader makes her reading experience visible in her fanfiction. The Mary Sue can then interact more directly with the characters and the plot than even the imagining reader can on her own: the Mary Sue can have a two-way relationship with other characters, can witness new details about the setting, and can participate in the plot directly, even changing events. The Mary Sue thus becomes a vessel, not only for the fan writer to experience the canon, but also for readers of the fanfiction to become imaginatively absorbed into. Mary Sues provide a character for imagining readers to inhabit.

This metaphorical relationship between Mary Sues and imaginative reading is even more obvious in a popular Mary Sue variant: the modern fan who is transported into the world of the source material. Unlike Smith’s Mary Sue, who is a native of the world of Star Trek, these Mary Sues travel from reality into the fictional setting: a Narnia fan might find herself in Narnia; a Trekker might suddenly appear on the bridge of the USS Enterprise. Such characters are often identified as Mary Sues even without being obviously perfect, because the movement of the fan into the work is the essence of Mary Sue.

The Mary Sue story “Changing History: Choices” by fogisbeautiful provides an example of how imaginative reading is figured in the Mary Sue character. Like the
imagining reader, who feels as though she has entered the text of the story through her intense emotional and imaginative engagement, the Mary Sue in this piece, Melody (Mel) Bernston, magically enters Tolkien’s Middle-earth and becomes part of the story of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Melody is a Tolkien fan who just wants “to be in a place where she could just be her crazy, *Lord of the Rings* obsessed,[sic] self, with no one around to judge” (Chapter 1). A fan who wishes to escape from her everyday life into a book, Mel goes to a local park to be her “obsessed,” fannish self. Like an imagining reader entering into the fictional world of the book, Melody is then transported into Tolkien’s Middle-earth by a magical ring, meets the character Boromir, and travels with him to Rivendell.

Mary Sues like Melody get to experience the setting of the novel in the same way the imagining reader does, but even more intimately. The description of Melody’s first actual sight of this place she has only read about is full of emotion. When they first reach Rivendell, Boromir shows it to her with the words,

“Look, my lady . . . The place of tales, both yours and mine.”

They stood upon a ridge looking down into a quiet little valley, white buildings half hidden in the forest, blending perfectly into the surroundings. As Mel watched, tiny lights began to blink on throughout the valley, flaring up and lighting the darkness that descended on the place, like tiny stars come to earth.

"Rivendell . . .” she whispered, feeling a hush fall over her, an almost reverent awe. (Chapter 1)
Just like imagining readers, who feel that they know the fictional characters they read about personally, Mary Sues often become friends with characters from the canon. They do what imagining readers long to do: they interact directly with the characters, responding to them physically and emotionally. Melody does the same. When Legolas introduces himself to her, her reaction to him is physical: “Mel heard very little beyond the name Legolas. Her mouth went dry and she was sure that all color left her face. She swallowed and tried not to lose the little bit of breakfast she'd managed to get down” (chapter 2).

Mary Sues take imaginative reading a step farther: they are in real relationships with these fictional people. While the imagining reader feels as though she knows the characters she reads about, the relationship is only one way: they don’t know her. But Melody gets to spend time with characters and establish two-way relationships with them. She and Legolas soon become friends and Melody recognizes this new two-way relationship between them: “Sometime in the last few weeks, Legolas had transformed, so slowly that she hadn't even realized it was happening until this moment. He was no longer a character in a book, a prince in a fairy tale. Now, when she looked at him, she just saw her friend. They really were friends now” (chapter 9).

Melody’s relationships with the characters are not limited to friendship: over the course of the fanfiction, she and Boromir fall in love with one another. Melody recognizes her own love for Boromir first, and believes it to be unrequited. This one-way relationship once again mirrors the position of the imagining reader who is attracted to a fictional character:
He doesn't love me.

Those were words that, until now, she hadn't even dared to think. But now cold reality settled in the pit of her stomach. She loved him. She knew it, deep down in her soul, where she had been trying not to stray too often. And the hard truth of it made her feel hollow and very lost... What good was it to come to this place, only to fall in love with the one man that she knew wouldn't live to love her back? What crazy, twisted reality had Yavanna dropped her in? (Chapter 27)

However, as in the case with Legolas, Boromir eventually returns Melody’s affections—though not until one of the sequels. The Mary Sue character gets what the imagining reader longs for: a two-way relationship with the characters she feels she knows so well.

Along with interacting with the characters, the Mary Sue also gets to participate directly in the action of the story. Julie Donaldson’s poem describes the imagining reader feeling as if she were the one having the hero’s adventures, through an imaginative absorption into the character. However, Mary Sues like Melody have the opportunity to engage in the action in propia persona, and to the fan author who has written the Mary Sue as a self-inserted character, this is one step closer to participating in the action herself. Creating a female character for imaginative absorption may be particularly useful for female readers when, as in The Fellowship of the Ring, all of the characters who participate directly in the action are male. “Changing History” is a “tenth-walker” fic, a term used by the Lord of the Rings fandom to describe works in which an original
character joins the nine members of the Fellowship of the Ring on their quest to destroy the One Ring: Melody gets to participate in the Fellowship’s adventures.

As the Mary Sue has now become one of the heroes, she is herself transformed into a heroic character. Just as many of the members of the Fellowship have special talents and abilities, Melody discovers her own magical power, one that comes with a special destiny. The ring that brought her to Middle-earth turns out to be the Yavannacor: a ring of great power, made by the dwarves and incorporating the power of Yavanna, the goddess of nature. This ring, invented by fogisbeautiful, allows Melody to talk to plants, particularly trees. Like other characters in Tolkien’s story, Melody has a special destiny: a rhododendron tells her,

Yavanna took this ring and sent it far away, across land and sea, and spoke that it would only be found by one who could honor the bond between all children, be they of earth, or stone, or light. This one she would name as her own and would call upon her only at great need. . . . The one who wears the Yavannacor carries a great burden. . . . Her work is not complete until all of Yavanna's children have been brought to the light. (Chapter 6)

Frodo’s destiny is to destroy the One Ring; Melody’s is to fulfill Yavanna’s prophecy.

One way the Mary Sue figure functions is to create actual changes to the plot. Melody, now a heroic figure like her comrades, does not merely participate in the action but actually changes the story by her presence. The imagining reader may wish she could save the heroes of the fictions she consumes: a Mary Sue actually can. As the prophecy about the Yavannacor and the title “Changing History” indicate, Melody’s role is to
change Tolkien’s narrative. In the original novel, Boromir is seduced and corrupted by the power of the One Ring and then redeems himself by sacrificing his life to save his comrades. In “Changing History,” Melody realizes that she can save Boromir. Galadriel sees hope for things to turn out differently. The element that has the power to change the outcome of the story is the original element the fanfiction writer has included: the Mary Sue character.

"I can save him?"

Mel's jaw had finally loosened and the spark had built into a fire in her chest, burning steadily brighter, but she had to ask. She had to be sure. Galadriel turned back to her, and then hesitantly reached out and took her hand, her blue eyes piercing.

"Only you can save him," she said. (Chapter 28)

Melody uses the power of the Yavannacor to reach Boromir: when she is chasing after him, the trees guide her along the best and fastest path. She interrupts Boromir as he tries to attack Frodo in his madness, thereby saving Frodo and breaking Boromir out of the mental grip of the One Ring. She also fights by his side when they are attacked by the monstrous Uruk-Hai, who kill Boromir in the original novel. Fogisbeautiful implies that it is Melody’s actions, the catalyst for the changes to Tolkien’s narrative in this fanfiction, which lead to a new outcome and Boromir’s survival in this fight.
The Ubiquity and Censuring of Mary Sues

As Mary Sues like Melody act as an objective correlative for the practice of imaginative reading, a vessel through which the writer and readers of the fanfiction can experience even more intensely the act of entering the stories they love, they are a natural first fanfiction creation for fan writers. As Sheenah Pugh explains, the imagining reader transitions from consuming to creating fiction by moving from merely rehearsing the stories into which she has felt herself imaginatively absorbed to adding her own. It is therefore unsurprising that many of these first fanfictions should contain within them an objective correlative for the imaginative reading experience itself. Consequently, Mary Sues are extremely common in fanfiction, particularly in fans’ first forays into the genre. Camille Bacon-Smith comments on the trope’s ubiquity in Enterprising Women (1992): “Most fans will readily admit to having written at least one Mary Sue story. . . . Usually it is the first story a fan writes, often before she knows about the literature or its forms” (97). Fanlore’s article on Mary Sues agrees: “It is not uncommon for an author's very first pieces of writing to contain Mary Sues” (“Mary Sue” Fanlore).

However, despite the trope’s ubiquity in fanfiction, Mary Sues are often strongly censured by fans. Part of this censure derives from Mary Sue’s close association with the act of imaginative reading itself, which is also a frequent target for criticism. The connection of Mary Sues with conceptions of poor writing and poor taste is so strong that Fanlore’s article on the trope begins, “A Mary Sue is an original character in fan fiction, usually but not always female, who for one reason or another is deemed undesirable by fan critics.” The article goes on to express one of the most common reasons fan critics
see this kind of character as undesirable: a Mary Sue becomes the new heroine of the narrative. “Someone at *TvTropes* observed that ‘Mary Sue’ is actually the reaction that fans may have to a work that ‘is unduly favoring a character by changing other characters or the environment in inappropriate ways’” (qtd in “Mary Sue” *Fanlore*). The *Fanlore* article calls such Mary Sues “Attention Hogs” or “Warpers”: “The focus of reader and character attention is unduly placed on the guest star rather than on the leads. . . . The primary defining characteristic of these stories is that the ‘canon characters and plot warp around her to fit the author's wish fulfillment,’ allowing the Mary Sue to make the decisions and take the actions normally taken by others” (“Mary Sue” *Fanlore*).

These criticisms of Mary Sue for usurping the position of hero from the canon characters ultimately derive partly from fans’ love for and desire to see more narratives about their favorite canon characters, but also partly from criticisms of imaginative reading. Critics have frequently expressed fears that imagining readers, especially women, may develop *bovarysme*, escapist and heroic delusions. They fear that too imaginative an absorption into texts may cause the boundaries between text and real life to break down, and that these imagining readers will come to view their lives as novelistic romances or adventures and themselves as heroines. These imagining female readers may then unwisely enact the behaviors they have read about in fiction.

In *The True Story of the Novel*, Margaret Ann Doody describes this common fear that imagining readers would see themselves as fictional heroines in their own lives. The criticisms she describes partly derive from a desire to keep certain imagining readers in their place:
It was always to be feared that the novel allowed both young men and young women too much scope for protest and discontent. That is, it is inconvenient to society for young persons or the poor to feel their individual life as myth. Such discontent was hastily labeled idle self-indulgence. *Bovarysme* is the result of much novel reading, as Molière had foreseen. The proliferation of conduct books in the eighteenth century bears witness to social fears that females, influenced by the pernicious novel, might get above themselves, take themselves too seriously. (280)

*Bovarysme*, as defined by Chris Baldick in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is

a disposition towards escapist day dreaming in which one imagines oneself as a heroine or hero of a romance and refuses to acknowledge everyday realities. This condition (a later version of Don Quixote's madness) can be found in fictional characters before Emma Bovary, the protagonist of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1857), gave it her name: for example, Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) makes similar confusions between fiction and reality. Novelists have often exposed *bovarysme* to ironic analysis, thus warning against the delusive enchantments of the romance tradition. (29)

Critics of imaginative reading, both historical and modern, have frequently expressed this fear that imagining readers, especially the vulnerable young or female readers, may read devalued cultural materials too imaginatively and may then enact the
dangerous lessons of these materials in their real lives. The Mary Sue is not only an objective correlative for the act of imaginative reading; she is a correlative for *bovaysme*. Female fan writers insert fictional, idealized versions of themselves into texts and turn themselves into fictional heroines. They are therefore reconceptualizing themselves as heroic, an act that, as Doody observes, is frequently described by critics as self-indulgent. A Mary Sue is both an indicator that the fan writer has read the text with intense imaginative involvement and an opportunity for other fans to inhabit the character imaginatively through their own reading of the fanfiction: Mary Sue is a site of female imagining readers enabling other female imagining readers to reinvent themselves as fictional heroines.

Fan critics take the very characteristics of the Mary Sue to be warning signs of female fans’ self-indulgent appropriation of the text, of their imaginative reinvention of themselves as heroines. Aesi’s example of the usage of *Mary Sue* on *Urban Dictionary* figures the writing of a Mary Sue as an act of self-indulgence: “That fic was ridiculous. I could overlook the atrocious grammar, but not such an obvious and annoying Mary Sue. What's the point of releasing a story to the unsuspecting public if it's only written for the masturbation of the author's ego?”

Likewise, Valis2 points out the role of transgressive wish-fulfillment in the condemnation of Mary Sues, which she contrasts with the minor form of self-insertion that occurs in the writing of any fictional character whatsoever:

I think that there are two different kinds of self-insertion: a) regular self-insertion and b) wish-fulfillment self-insertion. "A" happens all the time in
all writing, because you need some little bit of yourself to put in the clay

to make it come to life. "B" is where the problems begin. They usually

start internally with the words "Wouldn't it be cool if..." and snowball

from there. Wish-fulfillment is usually only satisfying to the one making

the wish. To everyone else, it can be annoying because the character has

so many unusual qualities and, more upsettingly, she warps the story until

everything and everyone references her in some way. The Sue becomes

supreme, whether in her glorious inner beauty or her uber-angst, and she

wreaks havoc on the canon world, ignoring or changing the ground rules.

Not only does the Mary Sue change the canon characters that are beloved by the reader,

but she aggrandizes herself in the process: she displays the female author’s ego through

the process of imaginative reading, which may allow this ego to bleed over from fantasy
to fiction to real life.

TVTropes’ article “So You Want To: Avoid Writing a Mary Sue” especially
censures the indulgence of the Mary Sue character (and thus, since the Sue is considered

a self-insert, the self-indulgence of the author) in the section “Falling In Love (You, not

the Sue)”: The author should care about her characters to some degree. But Mary

Sues are fundamentally about authorial favoritism. If the author falls in

love with one of her characters over the others (particularly for a story

about a group), then she's skating on thin ice.
It is very easy for an author to subconsciously push a character into Mary Sue territory when she loves her too much. Think of it like if you had three children. If you loved one of them the most, then the other two would feel pretty terrible. You don't have to remove her... but you should give her parts the most savage of goings over. Writing good stories means giving everyone in the story their due attention and development.

It isn’t actually true that “Writing good stories means giving everyone in the story their due attention and development.” Authors of original fiction always give their protagonists more time in the spotlight, more careful development, than other characters. However, while some fans may call such characters “Canon Sues,” many of them are not censured as harshly as the Mary Sues in fanfiction. One of the reasons for this is the gender of Mary Sues versus the most common Canon Sues. Most fanfiction Mary Sues are female, and many of the most obvious Canon Sues are actually “Canon Stus”: they are male.

Ladyloveandjustice on *Tumblr* has written a popular short essay on Mary Sues that points out the misogynist application of the term Mary Sue to female characters:

So, there’s this girl. She’s tragically orphaned and richer than anyone on the planet. Every guy she meets falls in love with her, but in between torrid romances she rejects them all because she is dedicated to what is Pure and Good. She has genius level intellect, Olympic-athlete [sic] level athletic ability and incredible good looks. She is consumed by terrible angst, but this only makes guys want her more. She has no superhuman
abilities, yet she is more competent than her superhuman friends and defeats superhumans with ease. She has unshakably loyal friends and allies, despite the fact she treats them pretty badly. They fear and respect her, and defer to her orders. Everyone is obsessed with her; even her enemies are attracted to her. She can plan ahead for anything and she’s generally right with any conclusion she makes. People who defy her are inevitably wrong.

God, what a Mary Sue.

I just described Batman.

Male idealized characters that are also available for male imaginative identification—Superman, Captain Kirk, John Carter, Hector and Achilles, King Arthur, Robin Hood—often go unidentified and unstigmatized. It is female idealized characters who are seen as transgressive, especially in the particularly intensely imaginative genre of fanfiction. Western culture thereby encourages a sort of bovarysme in male imagining readers, for whom critics have expressed less concern than the supposedly more impressionable and less rational and critical female imagining readers. At the same time, critics strongly discourage bovarysme in women, attacking the Mary Sue character because she is such a strong correlative for this bovarysme.

One example of how female Canon Sues have been discouraged by critics is in George Eliot’s “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1883). Eliot describes the heroines of these novels in terms of idealism much like modern Mary Sues: “Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity;
she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues. . . . She is the ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces” (178-79).

Eliot indicates that these female writers, as demonstrated by their female characters, are getting above themselves. She frequently elides the writers with their heroines: for example, while mocking the excessive erudition of these female characters, Eliot observes, “Greek and Hebrew are mere play to a heroine; Sanscrit is no more than a *b c* to her; and she can talk with perfect correctness in any language, except English. She is a polking polyglot, a Creuzer in crinoline. . . . There can be no difficulty in conceiving the depth of the heroine’s erudition when that of the authoress is so evident” (181-82).

Eliot condemns these female authors who show off their education through their female characters for an egotistical belief that they understand and can discuss great questions in their novels:

To judge from their writings, there are certain ladies who think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life, is the best possible qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions. Apparently, their recipe for solving all such difficulties is something like this: Take a woman’s head, stuff it with a smattering of philosophy and literature chopped small, and with false notions of society baked hard, let it hang over a desk a few hours every day, and serve up hot in feeble English when not required. You will rarely meet with a lady novelist of the oracular class who is diffident of her ability to decide on
theological questions—who has any suspicion that she is not capable of
discriminating with the nicest accuracy between the good and evil in all
church parties—who does not see precisely how it is that men have gone
wrong hitherto—and pity philosophers in general that they have not had
the opportunity of consulting her.

Likewise, Eliot describes in critical terms how these authors’ idealized heroines
take over the spotlight, relegating male characters to mere supporters, a criticism of these
Sues that she shares with fan critics like Valis2: “The men play a very subordinate part by
her side. You are consoled now and then by a hint that they have affairs, which keeps
you in mind that the working-day business of the world is somehow being carried on, but
ostensibly the final cause of their existence is that they may accompany the heroine on
her ‘starring’ expedition through life.”

Particularly interesting to consider in this criticism of Eliot’s is the fact that
female characters frequently play this negligible and supporting role to male characters in
western literature, but it is rare that anyone calls such texts “silly novels by male
novelists.” The frequency with which narrations contain female characters only as
supporting characters for their male counterparts is indicated by the Bechdel Test for
films. This test, originally suggested by cartoonist Allison Bechdel in 1985, contains
three criteria by which one can tell if a film allocates “a bare minimum of depth” to its
female characters (Hickey). One, the film must have at least two named female characters
who, two, speak to one another, three, about something other than a man.
Walt Hickey, writer for *FiveThirtyEightLife*, did a study in which he tested 1,615 films released from 1990 to 2013 to see if they passed the Bechdel test and whether that affected their box office earnings. Hickey observes, “You’d be hard pressed to think of a single film that doesn’t have a scene where two men have a conversation that isn’t about a woman. Plots need to advance, after all. But it’s remarkable how many iconic films disastrously fail the Bechdel test. . . . In a larger sample of 1,794 movies released from 1970 to 2013, we found that only half had at least one scene in which women talked to each other about something other than a man.” Eliot and fan critics criticize female characters in both original fiction and fanfiction for taking the spotlight away from male or canon characters (themselves often male as well) because they take this as a sign of these female characters—and therefore their self-inserting, imagining female authors—getting above themselves. In fact, these female characters are inverting the gender dynamics western culture is used to seeing in fictional narratives.

Eliot, like many other feminists before and after her, argues against “silly novels by lady novelists” by claiming that they set back the goal of female education by making men believe that women are incapable of truly serious thought:

> When men see girls wasting their time in consultations about bonnets and ball dresses, and in giggling or sentimental love-confidences, or middle-aged women mismanaging their children, and solacing themselves with acrid gossip, they can hardly help saying, “For Heaven’s sake, let girls be better educated; let them have some better objects of thought—some more solid occupations.” But after a few hours’ conversation with an oracular
literary woman, or a few hours’ reading of her books, they are likely enough to say, “After all, when a woman gets some knowledge, see what use she makes of it!”

Eliot prefers, instead, that a woman “of true culture, whose mind had absorbed her knowledge instead of being absorbed by it” should present her ideas in debate with men with more humility, enacting the more feminine role of comforting her male interlocutors emotionally: “She does not write books to confound philosophers, perhaps because she is able to write books that delight them. In conversation she is the least formidable of women, because she understands you, without wanting to make you aware that you can’t understand her. She does not give you information, which is the raw material of culture—she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence.” In short, Eliot believes that the female novelists who write the “silly novels” she inveighs against have gotten above themselves, and she would prefer a woman who “does not make [her education] a pedestal from which she flatters herself that she commands a complete view of men and things, but makes it a point of observation from which to form a right estimate of herself.”

This difference in the way fictional vessels for men’s and women’s *bovaysme* are received is explained partly by cultural gender roles: western culture values selflessness and humility in women and still sees women’s desire to personally excel as especially self-centered and ungenerous, while men are expected to strive for excellence, success, and notoriety. Bacon-Smith compares the reception of Canon Stus to fanfiction Mary Sues, seeing the difference in their reception as an indicator of misogyny: “Other fans
have noted that James Kirk is himself a Mary Sue, because he represents similarly exaggerated characteristics of strength, intelligence, charm, and adventurousness. They note that the soubriquet ‘Mary Sue’ may be a self-imposed sexism—she can’t do that, she’s a girl” (97).

Fan critics particularly censure the act of imaginative reading and *bovarysme* demonstrated by the Mary Sue because it both expresses and engenders a supposedly unfeminine ambition and self-indulgence in female fans. Fans who are aware of this criticism of Mary Sues frequently take steps to avoid it by reducing the apparent self-indulgence demonstrated by their female original characters. This self-censorship in female fan writers is troubling, as it may indicate internalized misogyny. At the very least, fans’ criticisms of one another’s Mary Sue characters on these grounds indicate that they are displacing misogynist criticisms of fanfiction onto one another’s work to avoid it for themselves rather than combating it head-on.
Despite some clear distinctions between critical and imaginative reading, they are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Fanfiction has its source in imaginative reading, but critical reading also strongly affects the genre. Fanfiction frequently demonstrates this in two ways: through the criticisms of the canon implicit in fanfiction’s changes to that canon, and in the fan-constructed standards of literary quality fandom frequently imposes on fanfictions themselves. This combination of imaginative and critical reading in the creation of fanfiction has a number of effects on the genre.

Criticizing Canon

In her description of the make-believe game that she likens to the first step in the creation of fanfiction, Sheenagh Pugh describes authors’ desires not only to have more stories about their favorite characters but to have different ones: she indicates that she, like many other fans, is engaged not only in imaginative reading of the canon, but also in critical reading. “Now and then, we departed from the canon altogether to produce a ‘what if.’ This tended to happen when the children, or I, didn’t like some aspect of the canon. They disliked the sad ending of Robin’s betrayal and death and preferred alternatives, while I got bored with the canonical Marian and liked to speculate that she was herself a mean hand with the bow and arrow and joined in the battles” (9).

Dissatisfaction with the canon is as much the impetus for fans to create fanfiction as enjoyment of the canon is. In an interview about his novel *The Magician King*, which
has been compared to a fanfiction criticism of Lewis’s Narnia series, Lev Grossman
describes the criticism of canon inherent in much of Internet fanfiction:

> I adore the way fan fiction writers engage with and critique source texts,
> by manipulating them and breaking their rules. . . . Some of it is straight-
> up homage, but a lot of [fan fiction] is really aggressive towards the source
text. One tends to think of it as written by total fanboys and fangirls as a
kind of worshipful act, but a lot of times you'll read these stories and it'll
be like “What if Star Trek had an openly gay character on the bridge?”
And of course the point is that they don't, and they wouldn't, because they
don't have the balls, or they are beholden to their advertisers, or whatever.
There's a powerful critique, almost punk-like anger, being expressed
there—which I find fascinating and interesting and cool. (Qtd in Canavan)

Implicit in changes to the canon, then, is a criticism of the source text: evidence of
fans’ critical reading. This critical reading is therefore a source of fanfiction almost as
much as imaginative reading is. Fans engage in both of these reading practices, and both
of them inform their fanfiction. Imaginative reading therefore is not purely passive, as its
critics sometimes imply, and it is not in complete opposition to critical reading: even the
most intensely imagining reader is probably performing a combination of both.

Fans often display their critical reading in discussions of the canon that occur on
*Tumblr*. These discussions often involve fans’ criticizing the media they consume on the
basis of liberal-progressive politics. One political criticism that appears frequently in fan
discussions of media narratives is their lack of diversity and minority characters. This
criticism is strongly connected to fans’ imaginative reading: fans who do not see characters like themselves represented as protagonists in the media they consume have greater difficulty in finding characters to imaginatively inhabit. Fans therefore frequently criticize media narratives that do not demonstrate character diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, etc. And of course, if the narratives fans read do not have something they want, they create fan works that do: lack of interesting female characters in the canon, for instance, is part of the impetus for fans, frequently female, to create Mary Sues.

Along with adding characters, fans change the characteristics of the canon characters in order better to represent a diverse readership: fanfictions change characters’ races and ethnicities, their genders, their sexualities. In fact, shipping two male characters (or female characters) who are depicted as straight in the canon is extremely common in fanfiction and has been since its inception: homoromanticism or homoeroticism in fanfiction is known as “slash.”

These altered characters result from fans’ critical reading, of their desire for greater diverse representation, of their criticisms of the canon. Fans may produce “racebent” versions of the canon, as in a photoset where the various incarnations of the Doctor from Doctor Who, always white and male in the canon, are reimagined as people of color, half of them women (see fistoffight). Fan artists take screenshots of Disney princesses and change their races and ethnicities (see lettherebedoodles). Lilian-Ann Bonaparte describes the immense impact such racebending in fan art can have for fans of
color, who consequently have the opportunity to immerse themselves imaginatively in a wider variety of characters:

To behold an Aurora, with dark skin and a wide nose like mine, is an act of revolution. Her adornment of pigmented skin and black long locs is revolutionary. Her full lips signify the coveted trait possessed by numerous Black women like me. A brown Rapunzel, wrapped in a marigold sari is revolutionary. Her defiant brown skin distinctively pairs with a gold barrette in her long mane. These crucial depictions remind women and people of color of their beauty, existence and visibility. Black girls need not limit themselves to Princess Tiana. Latina girls need not limit themselves to Sophia the Great. Southeast Asian girls need not limit themselves to Mulan. Middle Eastern girls need not limit themselves to Jasmine. Native American (NDN or indigenous Americans) need not limit themselves to Pocahontas.

It is not only individual characters that fanfictions change. Entire fanfictions can be devoted specifically to fixing what fans perceive as flaws in the canon: such fanfictions constitute the genre of “fix-it fics.” *Archive of Our Own* hosts over ten thousand fanfictions tagged “Fix-it.” I’ve written a fix-it fic myself: unhappy with the sad ending in the final season of BBC’s *Merlin*, I rewrote the entire fifth season, included larger parts for sidelined female characters, reincorporated some Arthurian legends the writers skipped, added a self-inserted Mary Sue, gave my favorite character Gwaine (played by the gorgeous Eoin Macken) a happy ending with the self-insert, saved Britain
from the Anglo-Saxons, and redeemed Morgana (see Barner “New Faces”). The very fact that fans have invented this term for fanfictions that “fix” the canon indicates how often they have used fanfiction as a form of critical reading.

One fan, glitterarygetsit, expresses her appreciation of the fan criticism implicit in fanfiction and the improved narratives fans produce: “The fact is that you’ve got thousands of intelligent people thinking about a problem, and statistically speaking some of them are likely to come up with something more clever than the creators. . . . There comes a point at which, frankly, fandom IS better than the creators. We have more minds, more cumulative talent, more voices arguing for different kinds of representation, more backstory” (qtd in imorca).

While fans may celebrate fanfiction’s critical reading of source material, the authors of that source material may be less pleased. Annie Proulx, author of the short story “Brokeback Mountain,” later adapted as a film of the same name, complains in an interview with The Paris Review that critical fans keep writing fanfiction that changes her story. She implies that she would not mind if the fanfiction merely used imaginative reading to “fill in spaces” left in the text, or to see themselves and their experiences in the narrative, but she objects to fanfiction that has used critical reading to change the text in what she sees as fundamental ways:

I think it’s important to leave spaces in a story for readers to fill in from their own experience, but unfortunately the audience that “Brokeback” reached most strongly have powerful fantasy lives. And one of the reasons we keep the gates locked here is that a lot of men have decided that the
story should have had a happy ending. They can’t bear the way it ends—they just can’t stand it. So they rewrite the story, including all kinds of boyfriends and new lovers and so forth after Jack is killed. And it just drives me wild. They can’t understand that the story isn’t about Jack and Ennis. It’s about homophobia; it’s about a social situation; it’s about a place and a particular mindset and morality. They just don’t get it. I can’t tell you how many of these things have been sent to me as though they’re expecting me to say, Oh great, if only I’d had the sense to write it that way. And they all begin the same way—I’m not gay, but . . . The implication is that because they’re men they understand much better than I how these people would have behaved. And maybe they do. But that’s not the story I wrote. (Qtd in Cox)

Proulx admits that male readers may understand her male characters better than she does. Imaginative reading, because it lends characters a seeming reality, can sometimes cause readers to feel that they understand the characters even better than their authors do. Therefore, when fans see characters act in a way that does not ring true for them, they may react critically. Sheenagh Pugh argues that once characters have been conceived in the minds of readers as having this kind of imaginative reality, they have passed beyond the control of the original creator:

It is possible for [a character’s] creator, by understanding her imperfectly, to make her say or do something which goes against that reality, against the essence of herself. . . . Most of us have at some time thought “this
doesn’t ring true” even when reading the best authors. . . A writer can create fictional characters who come alive so fully that readers feel they know them, can understand their motives, predict their actions, continue their stories and grieve when they “die.” . . . But once that has happened, they can no longer be solely “my characters.” (17)

Quality Control

Fans display their critical reading not only of canon but of fanfiction itself. So far from eschewing critical reading in their intense acts of imaginative reading, fans are very critical, not only of the canon, but also of one another’s fanfictions. Fanfiction is therefore a genre highly informed by a web of multidirectional criticism from both within and without. Fan writers are frequently concerned that their fanfiction should be well received, and they take steps to ensure that their fellow fans will see it as being well written and in good taste. For instance, fans frequently try to avoid writing characters that will be labeled Mary Sues. One example of a fanfiction that attempts to avoid the label of Mary Sue is “Don’t Panic!” by Boz4PM.

“Don’t Panic!” is itself a long implicit criticism of Mary Sue characters. Boz4PM wrote it in response to a fanfiction prompt by Viv on the Open Scrolls Archive which implies that the experiences of Mary Sue characters in fanfiction are generally unrealistic:

Stuck (Really) in Middle-earth—We've read them before: 21st c. gal is zatted back to Middle-earth. But what would it really be like for a modern person to find herself (or himself) in Middle-earth? Fic should tackle such
issues as getting lost, not having appropriate survival skills, craving Twinkies and other processed-food treats, having no air conditioning, being surprised by the plumbing (or lack of it) situation, experiencing uncomfortable allergies to dragon scales, etc. The intrepid time-traveller could also answer, once and for all, those niggling questions (do elves wear underwear?) and set the record straight. (Qtd in Boz4PM Chapter 1)

That Boz4PM wrote “Don’t Panic!” and its sequel “Okay, NOW Panic!” as an implicit criticism of Mary Sues is clear from the fanfiction’s opening lines, which present a parody of such Mary Sues. Boz4PM’s heroine, Penny Baker, is dreaming about a Mary Sue named Roxanna. Roxanna has the classic hallmarks of a Mary Sue: she is beautiful, a member of a special fictional race (elves), has been picked on at school, and is thrilled to find herself in Middle-earth.

This was a good dream...

Roxanna opened her eyes and found herself staring at a clear blue sky. The sun was shining, the birds were singing in the nearby forest. She sat up and looked around herself. She beamed.

On the other side of the nearby river she could see delicately carved buildings that shone brilliantly in the sunshine. She gasped in wonder. She recognised it immediately as Rivendell, home of Elrond (that bloke who looked exactly like the one from that computer film with Keanu Reeves in it⁶). She closed her eyes and opened them again. No, she was

⁶ Hugo Weaving played Elrond in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as well as Agent Smith in *The Matrix*, opposite Keanu Reeves.
not dreaming: she was really here. Here, in Middle Earth, by some wonderful miracle.

This was her destiny. Aged fourteen and with perfect skin, teeth and nose, she knew she was meant to be here. Her pointy ears had always meant she was picked on at school but here things would be different.

Roxanna has high hopes for her Middle-earth experience, believing that, like other Mary Sues before her, she will be popular with the characters from the canon, will experience a romance with the most good-looking of them, will change the narrative to save these characters. When she meets canon characters, she greets them like old friends. She would fall in love with Legolas and the entire Fellowship would fall in love with her. She would save Boromir, warn them about the Balrog, perhaps persuade Theoden not to fight and die in battle.

She heard the sound of hooves and turned, smiling, to see two horses approaching. One had a tall man atop its saddle who was unkempt in appearance but stunningly good-looking underneath his stubble. The other horse, also with a saddle and bridle, carried an even taller figure with long flowing blonde hair and behind him sat a short squat bearded man in a helmet.

She beamed again, flashing those perfect teeth at them. “Hello there, Aragorn! Legolas! Gimli! Wow, it’s really great to see you guys, you know!”
However, this is where Boz4PM’s criticism of such Mary Sues begins. The characters do not know Roxanna and are suspicious of her. This suspicion deepens when they realize that she is a Mary Sue, and then they execute her as a “spawn of Morgoth”—essentially, the devil. Boz4PM reveals that Penny finds this a good dream, not because she is indulging in imaginative absorption into the Mary Sue character of Roxanna, but because she gets to see the Mary Sue beheaded.

They stopped their mounts and descended, eyeing her warily. Aragorn spoke. “What are you doing here? You are young to be wandering unaccompanied in these parts.”

“Ah, but Aragorn, you gorgeous hunk you,” she grinned, "I am Elrond’s long lost niece.”

Aragorn smiled.

Legolas smiled.

Gimli smiled.

Roxanna suddenly felt slightly nervous.

The man, elf and dwarf exchanged a look. “What do you think?” asked Gimli.

Legolas shook his head. “No doubt about it.”

Aragorn nodded. “My sentiments exactly.” He drew his sword.

“Die, Oh Mary-Sue, spawn of Morgoth!”

Roxanna’s head flew several yards before it rolled into a hollow.
There was a snort of laughter from Penny as she turned over in her
sleep. Yes, this was a very good dream. (Chapter 1)

Boz4PM spends the rest of the fic writing against the Mary Sue trope as
demonstrated by Roxanna. Each of the major characteristics of Roxanna is reversed in the
character of Penny Baker. Penny has a common English name, she is twenty-three rather
than fourteen, and she is described as merely passable in looks rather than having
“perfect” features—in fact, the inhabitants of Middle-earth find her strange-looking, with
hair considerably shorter than usual for their medieval culture.

Furthermore, Penny does not immediately become friends with the characters
from canon in the way that, for instance, fogisbeautiful’s Melody does. Penny’s
relationship even with the character she becomes closest to, Halbarad, is initially fraught
with annoyance, increased by the fact that they do not speak the same language (Halbarad
speaks Sindarin and Westron, which in The Lord of the Rings is represented as English).
The cultural differences between Penny and the people of Middle-earth initially produces
annoyance rather than friendship:

As far as Halbarad was concerned, she was really beginning to annoy him.
She did not have a clue. Fine, he did not expect everyone to be completely
“au fais” with outdoor living but she behaved like she was some rarefied
princess. Her reaction to the [dead] rabbit had really irritated him as had
her sighing and ‘hrumph’ing at having to help wash the meat. Who in
Mordor did she think she was? (Chapter 2).
Boz4PM’s critical reading of Mary Sue fanfictions also appears in Penny’s helplessness to change the fates of Tolkien’s characters. Boz4PM rejects the trope of modern *Lord of the Rings* fans traveling to Middle-earth and interfering with the plot in order to save their favorite characters. Penny certainly understands the urge, which she implies is caused by imaginative reading: she tells some of the main characters, “Perhaps it is hard for you to understand but for me, for many like me, this story, the people in it, she looked round at them for a moment, ‘all of you . . . it is like we know you. Of course we do not, but to those who know this story, we love it so, we feel for you, we . . . care’” (Chapter 26).

Penny, of course, comes to care for them even more than a typical fan would because she meets the characters and gets to know them personally. However, she is barred from saving any specific characters. Boz4PM’s rejection of this particular trope of Mary Sues seems to stem from two motives: a rejection of changes to the canon, and a belief that such changes are ultimately unrealistic.

As displayed in earlier discussions of Mary Sues “warping” the canon, fans sometimes view extreme changes to the canon in fanfiction with distaste. For example, *Fanlore*’s article “Canon Compliant” implicitly attributes large changes to canon in fanfiction to fan writers’ carelessness:

Canon Compliant is a term used to describe a fanfic's relationship to canon. It is applied to fanfics that are not set in an alternate universe, and is usually an indication that the fan writer made an effort to at least not contradict known canon details, plot developments, character back story,
etc. However, in practice, canon compliance is more of a sliding scale and less of an absolute in fanfic, except perhaps for Canon Nazis. ("Canon Compliant")

"Canon Nazis" is a controversial term for fans whose critical reading of the canon and of fanfictions on the basis of previously established canon is extreme enough to be criticized by others: “A canon nazi is a fan who: 1, strictly adheres to canon in their own fanworks or 2, notices deviations from canon in others' fanworks or 3, decries continuity errors in the source text” ("Canon Nazis").

Besides rejecting large changes to the canon as a sign of poorly written fanfiction, Boz4PM indicates that large changes to canon are not likely to end happily, at least in a realistic fanfiction. Penny and Gandalf both firmly believe that if Penny changes any decision that the main characters make in their pursuit of the destruction of the One Ring or their defense of Middle-earth against the dark lord Sauron, the results could be disastrous, and the forces of good might lose the war. Penny is therefore helpless to save anyone, including Halbarad, of whom she has grown very fond, and who she knows will die at the Battle of Pelennor Fields. At one point, Penny implies that Mary Sues who enter and change events—and the fan writers who have Mary Sues do so—are foolish to believe they can realistically improve the narrative this way:

“In my time, those that know this story well, sometimes ask ‘what if’ of many parts of it. It is true we can bend the story to fit so that Sauron still falls, but if we are honest, if we are really honest, then we know the slightest thing will have such a great effect that it puts it entirely at risk. It
was a very slim chance indeed that [Frodo] would succeed, and it was only by the series of events as they occurred that it was possible. Perhaps by other events it may also have worked, but very likely not.” (Chapter 26)

Finally, Boz4PM incorporates an implied criticism of Mary Sue stories in “Don’t Panic!”—and attempts to avoid the label of Mary Sue—by leading her character through an emotional hell. If the bovarysme of creating Mary Sues for personal wish-fulfillment is labeled self-indulgence by critics, then an author trying to avoid such criticisms may attempt to reduce apparent self-indulgence by giving the potential vessel for wish-fulfilment a long string of terrible and uncomfortable experiences. Boz4PM describes Penny in just such terrible situations: in Middle-earth she must deal with a language barrier, Medieval sanitation, dreadful homesickness, the lack of modern medical technology, and more. The author takes every opportunity to keep accusations of self-indulgence at arm’s length.

The prompt indicates that Mary Sues are unrealistic, and Boz4PM’s depiction of Penny’s difficult experiences in Middle-earth avoid the supposed self-indulgence of Mary Sues in order to establish a form of emotional realism. At one point, Penny tries to calm herself and ends by meditating on the difficulties that supposedly unrealistic Mary Sue stories skip over:

She needed to just NOT think about the questions or implications of it all for a while. She just . . .

What did she ‘just’ need to do? Enjoy it? Hah! That was a laugh. Tolkien nut finally in Middle Earth yet too freaked out to enjoy it? Of
course! How COULD she? It was all too weird. Too real. Too bloody terrifying.

She thought of all those Mary Sue fics she had enjoyed loathing all these years. She chuckled. She’d like to see some fourteen year-old Orli\textsuperscript{7} fancier cope with THIS lot. Could ANYONE cope with it? She seriously doubted it. SHE couldn’t, that was for damn sure! (Chapter 10)

Ironically, the very techniques that Boz4PM employs to maintain realism in her narrative are sometimes criticized by fan writers as unrealistic. One writes on \textit{TVTropes},

The story can come as too much: Too much drama, too much crying, too much angst that it robes [sic] the "Real Life" sense [it] is trying to implement and it seems to hurl it to parody. This troper [reader] couldn't finish because [he/she] … was simply tired (not to mention disturbed by [Penny’s] lack of sickness) of her crying/screaming over the top at every single action around 15 to 20 times [per chapter]. I wouldn't recommend it unless you had seen too many Mary Sue Insert Fic and want something to mock them. (“Fanfic Recs”)

\textbf{Fanfictions as Critical Readings of Fanfictions}

Fans, aware of their sometimes critical audience, are often very careful about the way they present their own fanfiction. They are also often highly critical of one another’s writing. Part of the reason for this preoccupation with literary quality is fanfiction’s poor

\textsuperscript{7} Orlando Bloom, the actor who played Legolas in Peter Jackson’s \textit{Lord of the Rings} trilogy.
reputation with critics. Because fans and fanfiction are so often mocked for poor taste, fan critics may become sensitive to such criticisms and are therefore frequently harsh in their condemnations of what they see as other fans’ poor writing.

In an article on *Bustle*, Emma Lord describes the harsh judgments that fanfiction often garners from non-fans:

> Unfortunately, fan fiction writers are in a constant stream of . . . judgment on all sides. . . . Even in the last week, I had a friend *seven years older than me* tag me in a mocking tweet that revealed that he and two other of my friends had been poking fun at my fan fiction behind my back. It can be even less subtle than that, though. It's the friend that feels the need to embarrass you by loudly mentioning your fan fiction in a place where they know it would make you uncomfortable; It's [sic] the people whose overly-aggressive "supportiveness" of your hobby is one faint shade away from mockery; It's [sic] the shared look between two of your non-fangirl friends when the topic comes up.

This kind of mockery can ruin fans’ fun by making them feel bad about their writing. Fans want to take what steps they can to defend their fanfiction: Lord writes, “I think the reason people feel so comfortable mocking fan fiction authors is because we're somehow less ‘real’ or ‘legitimate’ than other writers in their minds, and they don't think we'll take personal offense to them mocking our work.” In order to defend their writing as real and legitimate, fans may feel the need to impose quality control on fanfiction. Consequently sometimes fans create metafictional fanfictions that actually
function as critical readings themselves. One such series of critical fanfictions is the

Protectors of the Plot Continuum

The Protectors of the Plot Continuum, or the PPC, is a shared metafictional

universe, begun by fans Jay and Acacia after the explosion of Lord of the Rings fanfiction

subsequent to the release of the Peter Jackson film The Fellowship of the Ring in

December of 2001 (“History of the PPC”). The PPC is an agency that sends assassins into

bad fanfiction. The assassins draw up a list of charges against the Mary Sue character of

the fic and execute her, often in poetically just fashion. The concept of the PPC became

very popular, leading to a large number of other fans writing works about their own

assassins/agents. In March of 2003 the PPC Posting Board was founded, where those

who wrote PPC fanfiction could meet for discussion and to share fanfiction. This group

also boasts a wiki, started in December of 2007, which contains 2,603 pages of

information about the PPC. PPC stories continue to be published. According to the

“Latest Story Releases” on the front page of the PPC wiki, as of early April 2015

members were still collectively publishing an average of two stories a week (PPC Wiki).

The original PPC stories by Jay and Acacia demonstrate a number of

characteristics regarding how critical reading and literary criticism function in fanfiction.

For example, because of the close association of Mary Sue characters with their authors,

fan critics frequently elide the two and criticize the author directly instead of merely

criticizing the author’s work.

The PPC as an organization attempts to limit direct attacks on fan authors,

probably because they have had to deal with accusations of bullying from the fans whose
work they have criticized. The “Mission Writing Guide” on the PPC wiki lays down this rule:

*Sporking is NEVER about the fic's AUTHOR.* This point cannot be emphasised enough. Authors of a badfic are not equal to the badfic. Moaning and complaining about the badfic should *never* turn into insulting the author. It's rude, it's cruel, and it's created far too many dramas already. Leave authors out of it. Don't even mention them in your mission if you can possibly avoid it. Yes, that can be hard. Yes, we used to call the possessing force that makes canon characters OOC [Out Of Character] "author-wraiths"—they're now called Sue-wraiths . . . for a reason. You can mention the author if you have to (e.g., when complaining about author's notes), but no bad-mouthing them. Aim it at the fic itself.

Please. Trust me. It's better that way.

Nonetheless, the PPC clearly has a problem with this rule, as indicated by the change in vocabulary they had to institute. The original PPC stories by Jay and Acacia, which serve as examples to other PPC writers of how to write a mission, also include attacks on the fan authors, most memorably in “Mission 24: A Taste of Blood.” In the fanfiction Jay and Acacia criticize through this mission, the character of Legolas becomes suicidal after the death of Damien, the Mary Sue character with whom he was in love. The agents deem him to have been possessed by the spirit of the author. One of them exclaims, “What have they done [to Legolas], the author deserves to die for torturing him!” (Jay and Acacia). They then exorcise Legolas of the fan author’s influence. Most
telling here is Jay and Acacia’s use of “the authoress/Damien,” indicating that the Mary Sue and her self-inserting creator are one and the same:

She took a copy of *Return of the King* from her pouch, opened it, and held it up to the air. "Begone foul authoress from this place! You have no more control here!" The circle started to glow and a gust of wind went through it, blowing out the candles (for dramatic purposes).

The Authoress's essence coalesced above the grave. "Noooo! My Story Is Just Beginning! All will know the tragedy of Damien, second daughter of Elrond! And her doomed love of Legola—!"

"Oh, quiet," Jay said, and slammed her over the head with *The Two Towers*. The authoress/Damien crumpled in a heap. The grave shivered, and collapsed dramatically in on itself. (Jay and Acacia Mission 24)

Though the PPC has taken steps since the writing of this fic to separate criticisms of the Mary Sue from criticisms of the author, PPC writers are unable to conceive of them entirely separately because of the persistent idea that the Mary Sue is an author avatar. PPC writers often punish the Mary Sue because they cannot punish the author. In an article on authors, the PPC wiki employs hair-splitting to argue that attacks on Mary Sues are not attacks on authors:

The PPC's problem with bad writers is their badness, not the character of the writer him/herself: more often than not in a mission, the Mary Sue or the Sue-wraith can be deemed the manifestation of this badness, containing all of the shortsighted stupidity that the author may temporarily
be under the influence of. This is why Mary Sues are charged with the
crimes of badfic, rather than the authors being charged. (“Author”)

Nonetheless, it is the author’s deeds that are being charged to the Mary Sues. In
one PPC work by Tungsten Monk, the extensive charges read to the Mary Sue include
quite a number of acts that the Mary Sue character herself did not commit, but rather the
author: “Ranariel Tindomiel: the Protectors of the Plot Continuum charge you with . . .
mental torture by clichéd romance, . . . gratuitous angst, . . . making Boromir a sexist
bastard, . . . [and] lack of paragraph differentiation. . . . Do you want last words, or shall
we just bludgeon you into oblivion now?” (Tungsten Monk Mission 1). A character could
do terrible things—murder, rape, steal, lie, hurt others physically or emotionally—but
charges of “making Boromir a sexist bastard,” “gratuitous angst,” and, of course, “lack of
paragraph differentiation” are acts that the author committed, not the character.

It is true that criticisms of a work of literature could include complaints about
“gratuitous angst” and “lack of paragraph differentiation.” What makes PPC stories like
this one attacks on the author is the fact that the agents are punishing a person for the
commission of these acts, and that person is, because of Mary Sue’s connection to the
author through the concept of imaginative reading, a stand-in for the author herself.
Therefore, when the PPC agents kill the Mary Sue it is clear to the readers that the one
they are “bludgeoning into oblivion” is symbolically the author, not the character.
Because Mary Sues are so widely considered to be self-inserts, the PPC cannot attack a
Mary Sue character without breaking their own policy and symbolically attacking the
author of the work.
The PPC and other fan critics have another difficulty in writing fanfiction criticism because of the genre’s connection with pleasure reading. There are a number of minor reasons that fans may write and consume fanfiction—group cohesion, recognition from the fandom, demonstration of their political beliefs through specific changes to the canon—but the primary purpose of fanfiction is personal pleasure. Sheenagh Pugh’s description of the basis of fanfiction in the act of imagining new stories for characters is entirely couched in terms of personal pleasure. She and her children are playing with their Robin Hood figurines for fun, the motive which sparks their creation of fanfictions: “We had a canon of stories invented by others, but we wanted more, sometimes because the existing stories did not satisfy us in some way, sometimes because there are simply never enough stories and we did not want them to come to an end. So we invented the ones we wanted” (9).

Emma Lord points out that fanfiction is written from passion, not for the desire for profit. In fact, because of copyright laws, most fanfiction is in a legal gray area and cannot be sold for profit (see Chapter 4). Fans therefore have no monetary reason for writing fanfiction: they write it for pleasure. Lord explains,

Props to E.L. James. I never actually read the books, but as a fan fiction author, I have to feel proud of anybody whose work launched such a successful career, because I can bet you on your life that none of us, including James herself, ever writes fan fiction with the intent of it becoming wildly profitable. We write because we love it. We write

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8 E. L. James turned a *Twilight* fanfiction into the bestselling erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* by disguising the work’s fanfiction origins.
because we *must*. I think a huge part of what makes fan fiction so singularly special is that there is no ambition in it, only passion.

If fanfiction is written primarily for pleasure, then fan critics will have a difficult time formulating and enforcing rules of literary quality. There are no universal rules of what will bring pleasure to a reader or writer: pleasures are by nature idiosyncratic and personal. Those fan critics who attempt to impose some sort of universal rules or guidelines on what makes good or bad fanfiction will find themselves hindered by fans who actually enjoy the very elements they are criticizing.

An example of this problem for fan critics appears in “The Official Fanfiction University of Middle-earth” (OFUM) series by Camilla Sandman. “OFUM” depicts a metafictional universe where the characters from *The Lord of the Rings* teach fans how to write better fanfiction. In “Once More into the Urple Depths of OFUM,” Túrin (a character from Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*) teaches “Angst and Proper Woes 101,” imitating some angsty fanfiction in the hopes that his students will see how ridiculous such over-the-top misery sounds in fanfiction:

He fell to his knees, now sobbing heavily. “Thingol hit me because my ears were round! Then he raped me! And I accidentally killed my friend! My one true love turned out to be my sister! A dragon outsmarted me! Wah! My life is horrid! And to think all that was needed to save me was hot, healing sex with my one true love! Woe, woe, woe is me!”

. . . “Now this is how you don’t do it. You see how silly that was, all overblown and much too dramatic?” Túrin asked.
Unfortunately for Túrin, his students actually enjoy this performance. Túrin’s only argument against supposedly excessive angst is based on his expectation that readers will find it silly when they see it. However, they disarm him by finding it attractive, instead:

There was a silence.

“That was so hot,” Bjam muttered finally.

. . . “Oh, shut up,” Túrin broke in, sounding annoyed. “You honestly found that pathetic self-pity display hot?”

“Yes,” Evil Munky replied after a moment. “Could you do it again?” (Sandman Chapter 32)

There seems to be no objective standard from which a fan critic can argue about matters of taste in a genre that is so closely allied with reading for pure pleasure. However, fans do seem to wish to have writing standards to hold one another to, perhaps partly because of fanfiction’s poor reputation outside of fandom.

Despite the difficulty of creating a standard of literary quality for a genre that is all about personal enjoyment, the PPC have managed to create a test for good writing based on the imaginative reading experience itself. The entrance of the PPC characters into the text, their experience of the text as objective reality, makes their missions objective correlatives for imaginative reading, like Mary Sue stories themselves. Sharing with other fans an appreciation for the immersive imaginative reading experience, the PPC authors can then condemn anything in the fanfiction they experience as disrupting that immersive experience.
One of the ways in which the PPC stories depict the imaginative reading experience is through the agents’ perception of the words of the actual fanfictions they enter. Imaginative readers perceive the words mostly as a trigger for the reading experience in which they have immersed themselves. Though they are reading the words, their focus is not on the words themselves, but on the images and feelings that the words conjure up in their imaginations. Imaginative readers must do a careful balancing act of attention in order to think about the words themselves along with the images they provoke.

In the same way, PPC agents generally experience the fanfiction as the action, the play, which they have entered. However, they can focus on the words that create these fictional worlds they enter, sometimes glancing ahead at future events. The wiki states, “Agents can see the Words that make the world while in a fic if they squint, let their eyes unfocus, gaze at the sky, or do some other trick they've invented; seeing the Words appears to be akin to seeing a Magic Eye picture” (“Word World”).

However, though the agents can access the words, they cannot build their charge sheet based on merely looking at the words: PPC policy requires that the agents draw up charges based on their imaginative, immersed experience of the world that the words create rather than the words themselves. The wiki indicates that the test of whether the fanfiction is acceptable or not requires the reader to experience the fanfiction through imaginative reading:

Reading the Words can be useful when agents don't want to be exposed to traumatizing or dangerous situations or when it would be impossible to
observe the action without being caught. However, it is PPC policy to observe badfic in person rather than just reading the Words; charges are based on how the fic affects the canon, not on the agents' judgment of how bad the writing is. . . . Agents have been known to read ahead in the Words to warn themselves of approaching danger. This is by no means foolproof, since the exact way the Words play out cannot be known until they actually express themselves. (“Word World”)

With a shared value for the imaginative reading experience which infelicities in fanfictions may disrupt, fan critics like the PPC have a foundation from which to make apparently objective criticisms about the literary quality of fanfictions. Any problems in the writing that might jolt imagining readers out of their absorption or create bizarre mental images can be decried. In the PPC’s depiction of imaginative reading the consequences of narrative flaws are literal. For instance, in one of Tungsten Monk’s stories, set in the magical school Hogwarts from J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, the author misspells silverware as silverwear. The bizarre mental image this misspelling might create in the mind of a reader is, in this work, objective: the tables of the Great Hall of Hogwarts are suddenly covered in silver clothing. The agents pause the story, steal the valuable apparel, and charge the author with “mistreatment of clothing.” In the same fanfiction, the author leaves the character of Dumbledore alive, despite the fact that the fic was set in year seven of the Harry Potter series, and Dumbledore died at the end of year six. In the PPC work, this inaccuracy regarding the canon means that Dumbledore
appears as a walking corpse: an *inferius*, as zombies are called in the Harry Potter universe (Tungsten Monk Mission 5).

Misspellings of proper names cause even greater problems in PPC stories. Every time a proper name is misspelled, the misspelling spawns a miniature monster. (This trope originated in OFUM, which exists in the same fictional universe as the PPC, and the trope was adopted by PPC writers.) In the imaginative reading experience, the reader may pause at or be confused by misspelled proper names. In PPC stories, this disruption of the flow of imaginative immersion has an objective form. The form of the monster depends on which fandom the fic is in: misspellings in Middle-earth create mini-balrogs, in Narnia mini-dragons, in Harry Potter mini-Aragogs, etc. In one memorable Tungsten Monk work, the misspelling of an Egyptian goddess’s name spawns an adorable mini-Ammit: ironically, Tungsten Monk seems to have misspelled this creature’s name as “Ammet” (Tunsten Monk Mission 6). These minis are frequently kept by the agents as pets.

Other errors that would make for distracting reading also have objective results. Inaccuracies about the passage of time or distances within the canon, which might cause confusion for the imagining reader, can cause temporal/spatial distortions which may give the agents hangover-like headaches (Tungsten Monk Mission 1). Notes from the author inserted directly into the text, which would disrupt the imagining reader’s immersive experience, can boom down from the sky like the voice of God, or even cause injury as they fly past:

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9 Aragog is a giant spider in the Harry Potter series.
Rowen was prevented from outright attacking the Sue when she was hit with a flying author's note. *(IMPORTANT A/N—DRACOna is not named after Draco Malfoy, I just changed the spelling of DRAGON abit...just so you know!)* . . . Rowen sputtered incoherently and gingerly touched her nose. There hadn't been a crack, but it hurt like hell getting hit in the face with an author's note. *(Tungsten Monk Mission 5)*

Likewise, agents can be injured by unannounced scene changes, which may also confuse the imagining reader, giving them “mental whiplash.”

*For the PPC agents, the whiplash is physical.*

Despite the problems of establishing a standard of writing in a genre that is all about personal preferences, the PPC have harnessed fans’ shared value for imaginative reading as an objective ground from which to criticize what they see as poorly written fanfictions. Though fans perform a particularly intense variety of imaginative reading in order to create fanfiction, the genre is also strongly influenced by fans’ critical reading, both of canon and of other fanfictions. Fans then display this critical reading, both in how they fashion their own fanfictions and in how they depict one another’s.

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10 A term of my mother’s.
Fanfiction writers’ imaginative reading often leads to their appropriation of characters created by other authors. While commercial authors, associating copyright and originality with profits, frequently describe this fan appropriation as stealing, fan writers often figure themselves as creating alternate versions of events that supplement but do not negate the canonical text.

Imaginative reading is a highly individual reading practice: every reader’s perception of characters, scenes, etc., differs. Therefore, fanfiction views the act of appropriation on which it is based as minimally transgressive, because multiple versions of the canon already exist in the mind of multiple readers. The canon is therefore not a single entity that can be stolen, but a multiverse that can be expanded.

Copyright and Commerce

Fanfiction subscribes to a derivative concept of literature that was in many ways abandoned with the advent of the financially motivated copyright laws in the early eighteenth century and the subsequent valorization of originality. This valorization, which is part of the stigma attached to the apparently unoriginal genre of fanfiction, is inextricably tied to the concept of legal copyright. In Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820, Catherine Gallagher gives a brief overview of the first law to protect intellectual property: the Statute of Anne (1710). Before that time, rights to written works belonged to the publishers. Gallagher explains
that the Statue of Anne was the first law in England to grant the right of ownership to the author, linking together ideas of intellectual property and profit:

The Licensing Act that had lapsed in 1695 had granted the “copy,” or right to print a book, to the member of the Stationers’ Company who registered its title. . . . No law for the regulation of the press previous to 1710 made any mention of an author's rights or property, and hence the Statute of Anne might be said to have initiated the idea that texts, as opposed to manuscripts, were exchangeable commodities belonging ultimately to their authors by virtue of being "the product of their learning and labour." . . But although the establishment of copyright as an author's right was originally intended merely to secure the property of booksellers, the interpretations of the law increasingly stressed the author's prerogative.

(155-56)

This concept of an author’s ownership of his or her text and the elements therein, Gallagher explains, led directly to a new emphasis on originality, as originality was the criterion on which the right of ownership could be legally determined:

When one looks at the decisions handed down under the Statute of Anne in early copyright disputes, one is struck by the emphasis the courts placed on “invention” or “originality” as the definitive characteristic of authorship. Determining "wherein consists the identity of a book" became a task of discovering authorship, which in large part became the task of discovering "invention." As the century progressed, copyright disputes
became occasions for articulating even more radical notions of originality than have ever been incorporated in the law itself. In 1769, for example, one justice suggested copyright should protect the ideas of the work, and hence that the requirement of invention might not be satisfied by mere reformation or rewording, although he simultaneously admitted that ideas, divorced from the particulars of their expression, "were 'quite wild' and incapable of indicia certa." The question whether an author was commonly, if not legally, definable as someone whose thoughts are original had, however, been broached, and the affirmative response was to gain wider acceptance over the next two centuries. (157-58)

This concept of the author as the originator—and thus sole rightful proprietor—of his or her own ideas progressed from the realm of law to the realm of literary criticism. To have the legal right to one’s work, that work must demonstrate original invention. Gallagher observes that it was a small step to the idea that good literature must be original:

It is not surprising, then, that a similar valorization of unprecedented, unique conceptualization appeared in numerous discussions of literature. Indeed, literary criticism at mid-century was often an inquiry into what could properly be attributed to various writers as their own inventions, as if the critics, like the courts, had been set the task of ferreting out infringements of literary property. (158)
Copyright law, which assigns a monetary value to originality, is concerned primarily with profits: violations of copyright are illegal because violating works may take a share of or otherwise harm the profits that should belong to another writer. Derivative genres like Internet fanfiction give rise to ethical qualms that derive partly from a legal concern for profit. These ethical qualms, in turn, cause some critics to assign potentially violating texts a lower literary quality. The accolade that is awarded to texts that can legally make money is clearest in the distinction authors of tie-in novels make between their work and Internet fanfiction.

*Fanlore* defines a *tie-in* as “a published work meant to complement (and derive a profit from) another published work. In general, tie-ins are novels or graphic novels that spring from a movie or television show” (“Tie-in”). Widely known examples include the hundreds upon hundreds of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* tie-in novels.\(^\text{11}\) One author, Lee Goldberg, who writes tie-in novels for television series like *Diagnosis Murder* and *Monk*, defends his writing and attacks authors of Internet fanfiction partly on the grounds that his work is paid and their work is unpaid:

[S]omeone asked what the difference is between someone who writes tie-ins and someone who writes fanfic . . . beyond the fact that tie-ins are written with the consent of the author/right's holder.

There's a big difference.

I was *hired* to write *Diagnosis Murder* and *Monk* novels. It's something I am being paid to do. It's not like I woke up one morning with

\(^{11}\) See “List of *Star Trek* Novels,” “List of *Star Wars* Books.”
a burning desire to write *Diagnosis Murder* novels, wrote one up, and sent it off to a publisher (or, as a fanficcer would do, posted it on the web). The publisher came to me and asked me to write them.

I would never write a book using someone else's characters unless I was hired to do so. It would never even occur to me because the characters aren't mine.

Given a choice, I would only write novels and TV shows of my own creation. But I have to make a living and I take the work that comes my way . . . and that includes writing-for-hire, whether it's on someone else's TV show or original tie-in novels based on characters I didn't create. Ultimately, however, what motivates me as a writer is to express myself . . . not the work of someone else.

That's the big difference between me and a fanficcer.

Given a choice, fanficcers "write" fanfic. (Qtd in Young)

Goldberg seems to be trying to argue that originality is his lodestar, so that he would never consider writing in another writer’s fictional world for pleasure without that author’s express request. However, his argument does come off as a rejection of the idea that he enjoys creating the tie-in novels that he writes. Enjoyment of writing in someone else’s world, he seems to assert, belongs to fanfiction, whereas he writes only because he was hired to. Though this is probably not how he would like to summarize his arguments, it did lead Cathy Young to state that Goldberg defends the contradiction between
attacking amateur fanfiction while writing professional fanfiction “on the grounds that he
does it only for the money.”

Fan writers have the luxury of concerning themselves little about the originality of
the characters they write about because they are not writing for profit. This lack of profit
makes Internet fanfiction a gray area under the financially concerned copyright laws.
Fanfiction of works whose copyright has lapsed and which are in the public domain is
perfectly legal and can be published for profit, as the many fanfiction novels based on
Jane Austen’s work12 and the myriad adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock
Holmes stories demonstrate.

However, the online publication of fanfiction based on works still protected by
copyright has a somewhat more ambiguous legal status, and the debate over this status is
strongly concerned with profits. The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), “a
nonprofit organization established by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing
access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms,”
provides a number of articles regarding the legality of fanfiction (“What We Believe”).13
The OTW argues that fanfiction, as “transformative work,” is legal under the fair use
document:

Copyright is intended to protect the creator's right to profit from her work
for a period of time to encourage creative endeavor and the widespread
sharing of knowledge. But this does not preclude the right of others to

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12 See, for instance, “Best Jane Austen Fan Fiction.”
13 The OTW also runs Archive Of Our Own.
respond to the original work, either with critical commentary, parody, or, we believe, transformative works.

In the United States, copyright is limited by the fair use doctrine. The legal case of Campbell v. Acuff-Rose held that transformative uses receive special consideration in fair use analysis. (“Why Does the OTW Believe”)

The two criteria on which the OTW bases its claim that fanfiction is a legal “fair use” are degree of transformation—that is, the degree of originality in the fanfiction’s use of the canon—and lack of profit: “Profit matters, and the degree of transformative quality matters: telling stories around a campfire, freely sharing nonprofit fanfiction, summarizing plot in a book review, or making a documentary film about fans is not the same as a major commercial derivative enterprise like making a major TV miniseries out of a novel” (“If Fanfiction Is Legitimate”).

As Emma Lord noted, fanfiction is written for love of the canon and for the pleasure of writing and reading about it, not from a desire for money. Since commercialization is so often linked with originality, fanfiction also offers fans a wider range of appropriation than is possible for commercial fictions that must operate under copyright laws.

Author Objections to Fan Appropriation

Fanlore maintains a list of popular authors who have commented, either positively or negatively, on the creation of fanfiction based on their work (“Professional
Author Fanfic Policies”). While many authors have expressed their approbation of or indifference to fanfiction, other authors feel strongly that fanfiction is a violation of their intellectual property rights. Because western culture, following the concerns of copyright law, associates originality with money, authors frequently describe the appropriation of their characters by fanfiction authors in financial terms: as stealing. For example, science fiction author Stina Leicht likens fans’ use of her characters to stealing her car or her DVD player:

To be honest, my feelings on fanfic run more in the territory of "Keep your grubby paws off other people's shit. It's not yours. Buy or make your own. I don't give a tinker's damn how much you claim to love it. If you can't refrain from playing with other people's belongings, then show some respect. Ask permission to borrow it first. You would if it were a car. If you don't ask permission that means you've stolen it. Intentions don't come into it. See, if it were a car or a DVD player the police would pretty much agree with me on that front. So, don't get pissy about being asked to quit."

(Leicht)

Authors like Leicht can compare fan appropriation to stealing partly because the fan writer takes the monetary value of the item away from its rightful owner. This view requires that the characters being stolen be considered singular objects that belong entirely to their creators. Leicht does not consider another author’s use of her characters to be like another person making a DVD player that happens to be exactly like hers: she sees the DVD player as being singular and only belonging to one person at a time.
George R. R. Martin, author of the Song of Ice and Fire series (adapted by HBO as *Game of Thrones*) expresses a similar view of his characters: not as singular objects that can only be owned and used by one person at a time, but as singular people who can only be controlled by one person at a time:

Before I close, let me put aside the legal and financial aspects of all this for a moment, and talk about more personal ones. . . . Many years ago, I won a Nebula\(^{14}\) for a story called "Portraits of His Children," which was all about a writer's relationship with the characters he creates. I don't have any actual children, myself. . . . My characters are my children, I have been heard to say. I don't want people making off with them, thank you.

Even in Wild Cards, a shared world created by a number of authors, Martin argues that he still has control over his own characters: “A shared world is a tightly controlled environment. In the case of Wild Cards, it's controlled by me. I decide who gets to borrow my creations, and I review their stories, and approve or [disapprove] what is done with them. ‘No, Popinjay would say it this way,’ I say, or ‘Sorry, the Turtle would never do that.’” Though Martin sees his characters as people rather than objects, he believes that only one person can have creative control over them at a time, and that that person should be him.

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\(^{14}\) The Nebula Awards are annual prizes awarded by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America for the best science fiction or fantasy published in the United States during the previous year.
Appropriation According to Fans: Schrodinger’s Legolas

These authors’ views of fan appropriation, partly informed by copyright law, consider characters to be singular objects or people who can only be owned, used, or controlled by one person at a time, and only legally by their creators. Fanfiction, informed by imaginative reading, frequently figures its own appropriation of characters very differently: not as stealing a singular character, but as adding potential variations to that character.

In a system of imaginative reading like the one that gives rise to fanfiction, a character can never be a singular entity. Every reader’s imagined interpretation of the character will be slightly different. Fandom displays this concept most clearly in the term headcanon. As defined by Fanlore, “Headcanon (or head canon, head-canon) is a fan's personal, idiosyncratic interpretation of canon, such as the backstory of a character, or the nature of relationships between characters. . . . Headcanon may represent a teasing out of subtext present in the canon” (“Headcanon”). The less detailed the descriptions of characters, the more headcanons fans may create about them. For example, Tolkien spends little time describing the elf Legolas’s backstory or his personal appearance: fans may therefore develop headcanons about Legolas’s family, his childhood, his age, and even his hair color.

As all of these headcanons are permitted by the text, fans, as a community of imaginative readers, perceive them all as potential truths about the character. These various interpretations of the character exist side by side without canceling one another out. As in the famous thought experiment of Schrodinger’s Cat, which could be
considered both alive and dead simultaneously, fans see many contradictory versions of fictional characters and events as simultaneous potential truths. This concept of fiction expands to fit not only headcanons limited by the canon, but headcanons that may contradict the canon. *Fanlore* observes, “[Headcanon] can be affected both by professional transformative works, such as art, movies and audiobooks, and by fanworks such as fanart, fanfiction, cosplay, manips, vids and podfic. Headcanon may . . . directly contradict canon” (“Headcanon”). This makes canon only one more version of the characters or plots, simultaneously productive of and equal to any fanfictions based on it.

As *Fanlore* points out, authoritative versions of the canon may contradict one another just as fanfiction may contradict the canon. Fandom uses special terms to signal which authoritative version of the canon a fanfiction is based on: *bookverse* and *movieverse*. As these terms indicate, officially authorized and/or legal film adaptations of books may contradict elements from the books they are adapting, so fanfiction writers sometimes find it helpful to indicate which canonical universe’s version they are operating within. As the terms *headcanon*, *bookverse*, and *movieverse* indicate, fictional characters have never been singular entities entirely controlled by one person at a time: imaginative reading, legal adaptation, and fanfiction create innumerable variations of those characters, inspired partly by the canonical text and partly by the readers and interpreters of that text.
Appropriation as Figured in Fanfiction

A number of metafictional fanfictions depict this manifold aspect of fictional characters. The “Owner’s Guides” series by Theresa Green, for example, figures each fictional character as being a model of mass-produced androids that can be purchased and manipulated (within limitations) by their new owners. These fics are written as instructions for owners of these fictional “Aragorn,” “Legolas,” and “Boromir” units. Each of these guides begins with a section of “technical specifications.” The “operating procedure” section offers a number of suggestions of uses for each unit, including doctor, children’s party organizer, and bloodhound (Green “Aragorn”); snow plough, child-carrier, fencing instructor, and waiter (Green “Boromir”); and illumination, child-minding, horticulture, recitation, and winter chores (Green “Legolas”). The guides also include sections on compatibility with other models, programming, frequently asked questions, and troubleshooting.

In a metaphor for writing fanfiction, Green depicts Tolkien’s characters not as the intellectual property of their creator but as androids that she and other fans can own and manipulate. Knowing the characters’ “specifications,” fan writers can acquire a Legolas or a Boromir and use them in their own writing to achieve their own ends. Each Guide begins with some variation indicating ownership of a mass-produced unit and the freedom of the new owner to manipulate said unit: “CONGRATULATIONS! You are now the proud owner of an ARAGORN! Please follow the procedures detailed in this manual in order to use your Heir of Isildur to his full potential” (“Aragorn”).
This literal objectification of another author’s characters may seem to support the metaphor of stealing. However, there is one major difference: the androids described by Green have been apparently mass-produced. If a fan uses her Legolas unit, she hasn’t stolen it from Tolkien’s garage: she has her own. There is more than one Legolas to go around. In this metaphor, characters are objects, but not singular objects. Therefore, the fan writer’s use of the character is not transgressive because the fan is not stealing.

In “Mary-Sue Mockfest,” Carrie Rivard (screen name Noble Platypus) offers two different views of fanfiction characters: as singular beings whom Mary Sue writers hypnotize into enacting their personal fantasies, and as actors who play roles in various fans’ fictions. The first depiction of the nature of fictional characters, in order to mock Mary Sue stories, follows offended authors’ concept of fanfiction writers stealing and manipulating the singular character for their own purposes. The main character, Randi, is kidnapped by Celestina Windbreaker, the Goddess of Mary Sues, and forced to act out the part of a tenth walker. Celestina, a stand-in for the fan writer, has warped Tolkien’s characters’ personalities so that they will play along with her plans. The characters themselves, when they are not under Celestina’s sway, are disturbed by the way she has controlled and changed them and their friends, in much the same way that authors are sometimes disturbed by the use fans put their characters to in fanfiction: “Legolas stopped pacing and turned towards Randi with an almost panicked gleam in his eye. ‘What of Aragorn, Frodo and the others? Are they not themselves as well? . . . There has to be something we can do to . . . to lift this enchantment’” (chapter 13).
While Rivard uses the objection of stealing and controlling a singular object in her criticism of Mary Sues, she utilizes the concept of manifold variations of those characters in her celebration of her own fanfiction. The epilogue of “Mockfest” consists of a series of interviews with the characters, based on the interviews with the cast of Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy that appear in the DVD special features. Unlike the vision of fanfiction Rivard presents in the main narrative, in which the fanfiction writer controls the characters against their wills, here the characters are actors who are offered and voluntarily accept the roles they play in the narrative:

Randi: Well, when Platy offered me the role, I said yes right away. . . .

. . .

Legolas: (looking kinda at the ground) I’ve done a lot of serious stuff, a lot of romances . . . God, a lot of romances . . . and I kind of wanted to break out of that, you know . . . show my versatility. I didn't want to limit myself, if . . . does that make any sense? (looks thoughtfully up at camera)

In this epilogue, characters are both singular people whose primary existence is in the canon, and actors who can appear in multiple fanfictions without altering their original personalities or the depiction of events presented in the canon. Rivard points to this inviolate canon through an interview with a fictionalized version of herself who appears as the director of this fanfiction:

Platy: This project was really something special, I think. We got the entire Fellowship back together, which I know was fun for all of them.
This conception of characters from the canon as actors who can appear in fanfictions as if they were films both preserves the idea of an original version of the character, as presented in the canon by the original author, and simultaneously allows for innumerable variations on that character in innumerable fan versions of events.

Because fanfiction has its source in imaginative reading, it often presents fictional characters not as singular objects that can be stolen and controlled by only one writer at a time, but as multitudinous variations of the same person, existing side-by-side in parallel versions of the story. Though fans may echo authors’ copyright-inspired stolen object or hypnotized child paradigms in criticisms of one another’s fanfiction, they may just as easily deploy the parallel variations paradigm in celebration of their own. An understanding of imaginative reading reminds us that characters are already multitudinous the moment they are read by multiple readers with their own imaginative interpretations of those characters. Fictional characters are always, to some extent, out of the author’s control and in the hands of readers. Fan writers’ fictional appropriation of these characters merely makes this truth more visible.
CONCLUSIONS

Fanfiction is an old and time-honored genre. It includes works like the Arthurian legends and the retellings and expansions of these by authors like Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Thomas Malory, Edmund Spenser, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and John Steinbeck. It also includes the retellings and expansions of even older works, like Homer’s *Iliad* in the tales of Troilus and Cressida by Benoît de St-Maure, Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, and William Shakespeare. Though frequently casually stigmatized by critics, Internet fanfiction and the fans who create and consume it are the modern inheritors of this derivative literary tradition.

What I am calling imaginative reading is the source for Internet fanfiction, and, as such, it explains a great many of the genre’s characteristics. Imagining readers, rehearsing the stories they have read, may wish to create more narratives about their favorite characters and, following a combination of imaginative and critical reading, may want stories that are different from those the authors of the canon have presented them with.

While this intense imaginative reading thus draws fans on to create fanfiction, it also complicates the writing project. Critics frequently stigmatize imaginative reading, especially when readers’ reactions to the work indicate that their reading is especially intense, when it is done by women or young people, or when the texts being read imaginatively are devalued by the culture. Such critics apparently fear that women and young people are particularly susceptible to imaginative and emotional impressions, that intense imaginative reading will break down the boundaries such readers perceive
between the fictional world and the real world, and that devalued cultural materials will teach imagining readers particularly dangerous lessons and therefore negatively affect the behavior of these vulnerable readers. Critics are therefore often highly censorious of Internet fanfiction, characterizing it as a genre written mostly by intensely imagining young women about popular, rather than classic, texts. Very common subgenres of Internet fanfiction, such as stories with Mary Sue characters, reinforce the perceived connection between women’s imaginative reading and the supposedly dangerous effects of this reading practice on women, such as bovarysme.

In response to the poor reputation of fanfiction, fan writers frequently take steps to ensure that critical readers accord their work more respect. Fans may take particular care to avoid what they perceive as signs of bad writing, such as mechanical errors, stylistic infelicities, or the creation of Mary Sues. However, fans may also try to defend their own work by attacking others’, displacing the criticisms they wish to avoid onto other fans’ writings.

This second reaction in particular implies that the fans accept and internalize the often sexist criticisms of imaginative reading. If the general public and fans themselves better understood many of the traditional criticisms of imaginative reading and these criticisms’ misogyny, they would be able to question this critical framework. Fans especially, so frequently passionately interested in gender politics, should understand that many of the criticisms of the fans who create Internet fanfiction as unthinking, naïve, dangerously obsessed, lacking in taste, and self-absorbed are based on sexist conceptualizations of the effects of fiction on female readers. Because of this, fan
responses that directly dismantle these concepts are far more effective than those that accept the underlying misogyny of such criticisms and merely displace them onto other fan writers. Furthermore, as feminists both inside and outside of the fandom community increase pressure on the creators of various media to be more gender-inclusive in the narratives they choose to tell, an understanding and rejection of the misogyny of these concepts of women’s imaginative reading and bovarysme will help to broaden the kinds of narratives by and about women that such media creators will be empowered to tell.

Fanfiction is a popular, widespread literary genre that figures readers’ interactions with and responses to texts. It presents both a celebration of favored stories and characters and what some have called a “literature from below” that responds critically to these stories and characters. It is the inheritor of a millennia-old tradition of derivative literature and a site for the discussion of imaginative reading. As such, Internet fanfiction deserves greater respect and attention from the literary academy. Literary scholars are more and more studying fanfiction, recognizing that ignoring fanfiction means ignoring a large and growing genre of literature. Scholars like Camille Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins have led a surge in fanfiction studies, bolstered by such scholars as Katherine Larsen, Lynn S. Zubernis, Karen Hellekson, and Kristina Busse. These writers and others like them have recognized that failing to think beyond traditionally vetted and published fiction means ignoring some of the most imaginative and witty—and perhaps gender-inclusive—work currently being written.

Scholars should be especially motivated to combat the frequent stigma of the genre of Internet fanfiction as the domain of young, shallow, self-important female
writers. This stereotype derives from centuries-old criticism of women readers and writers and the narratives they create and enjoy and represents a sexist cultural construct; it should be a particular mission of literary scholars to dismantle it. Studying fanfiction is one of the many ways that scholars can begin to confront criticisms of women’s imaginative reading.

The study of fanfiction itself will become easier when scholars find a way to reincorporate imaginative readings into their scholarship. As an extremely common reading practice and a producer of different effects and meanings than critical reading allows, imaginative reading itself also deserves greater attention and study from scholars. Not only will academic work on imaginative reading benefit scholars by giving them a broader set of analytical tools to draw on, but it could also have a beneficial effect on the broader culture. Many scholarly attitudes towards texts and reading practices eventually trickle down to the general culture, which has traditionally viewed scholars as arbiters of literary taste, partly because of their role in forming the canon of great works that, while currently questioned by the academy, is still in force among the general public. Scholars’ greater use of imaginative reading and greater attention to genres that respond to this reading could make both more acceptable to the public in general.

Some scholars fear that the emotions and images imaginative reading produces in readers may be too idiosyncratic to be generalized and studied. However, critical readings frequently indirectly study mental impressions, concepts, and threads of reasoning triggered by texts without their writers having to assume that all readers are mentally affected by texts in the same way. Latent in texts are many imaginative and emotional
possibilities that can be studied by scholars as easily as conceptual and mental possibilities.

As the technique a reader uses to engage with a text can greatly change the effects and meanings of that text, ignoring imaginative reading in the analysis of literature greatly impoverishes scholarly understanding of the texts under scrutiny. As Rebecca Black has shown, professors already use imaginative reading and fanfiction as pedagogical tools in the classroom, but even greater benefits could accrue if scholars employed imaginative reading in their scholarly writing, as well. While the great differences between imaginative and critical reading suggest the need for the former to be studied as a separate category from but just as rigorously as the latter, the great similarities between the two provide ways for scholars to answer that need. The use of imaginative reading in scholarly analysis of texts can reveal new horizons for literary studies, both in finding fresh meanings and effects in more commonly studied genres and in opening other genres like Internet fanfiction to scholarly scrutiny.

Many readers have long enjoyed the experience of imaginative reading and the sense of escape, of travel, of meeting—and becoming—new people that this practice engenders. Scholars have the opportunity to tap into this source of enthusiasm, enjoyment, and escape in their scholarly work, both by incorporating the practice of imaginative reading in their critical discussion of texts and by studying genres like fanfiction that respond to such reading. A scholarly show of acceptance of women’s imaginative reading, such as female fans display in their creation of Internet fanfiction,

15 See the survey of scholarship in chapter 1 of Black for a discussion of fanfiction as a pedagogical tool.
could help to bolster a cultural movement away from centuries-old misogynist criticisms of women’s reading and writing. As literary scholars, we should defend readers’ freedom to read and to write with imaginative intensity and to enjoy literary genres that have their source in imaginative reading.
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