Deconstructing *My Immortal*: Democracy and Accessibility in Fanfiction

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Abstract

Fanfiction, as a field of literary study, is relatively new and unexplored. Ofte1n viewed as a "counterculture," fanfiction frequently subverts the conventional structures and methods of traditional literature, whether through structure, content, or attitudes towards ownership (Goodman 662). Post-structuralism posits that the distinction between "high" and "low" art is, and should be, dissolved. Therefore, fanfiction is a valid field of study. The notoriously poorly written *Harry Potter* fanfiction, *My Immortal* (2006), in which the author creates a persona who interacts with altered gothic, or as the author writes "goffik," versions of existing characters, provides an interesting view into the role of fanfiction, especially considering the debate as to whether or not *My Immortal* is intentionally bad. The style of writing, which devolves in quality as the fanfiction progresses, mocks common tropes or clichés present in popular, and often poorly written, fanfiction of the time. The misspelling and inconsistent lack or presence of continuity, in addition to a superfluity of clichés, exposes the structures of popular contemporary fanfiction. The author also engages in a critique of common themes or elements of contemporary fanfiction, such as the fetishization of queerness and of "Mary Sue's," a subgenre of self-insert characters which are often criticised as being idealised and seemingly flawless. Through the use of language, wordplay, and intertextuality, *My Immortal* exposes a new way to engage with texts and democratises access to both reading and writing.

Fanfiction, or "fiction that utilizes pre-existing characters and settings from a literary or media text," is a relatively new field of study which subverts both the structure and methods of traditional literature, such as novels and poetry published through established publishing houses. (Tosenberger 185). Fanfiction's attitudes towards authorship and subject matter do not conform to what are typically deemed as "acceptable" topics in traditional forms of writing. Its breakaway from the expectations and rigidity of traditional literature allows it to disregard both the form and style of writing as well as subject matter. As a result, fanfiction is typically considered as "low art". Post-structuralism deconstructs the binary between high and low art and the privilege that is placed on high art, thereby enabling fanfiction, a field of writing that is typically looked down upon as being "lesser," to be viewed as a valid field of study and writerly engagement. As well as expanding the type of writing that is viewed as worthy of being studied, fanfiction allows people previously debarred from traditional forms of writing and reading to explore them in a new way. Unbound by the rigid rules of form, structure, and authorship, fanfiction is inherently post-structural and can be playful and create new forms of reading and writing. As an example of fanfiction more broadly, the *Harry Potter* fanfiction *My Immortal* (2006), through the unique use of language, wordplay, and intertextuality, not only exposes a new way to engage with texts, but

also democratises literature and makes it accessible to a broader audience.

Fanfiction, prior to the popularisation of the internet, was originally published in magazines, or "zines". These magazines were run primarily by fans, subverting the traditional format of publication i.e. through established publishers. The magazines allowed fan writers to write on topics and in styles that would never be published by traditional publishers. Henry Jenkins, in his book *Textual Poachers* (1992)*,* discusses how fan magazines often had to choose between "'professionalism' (the development of high technical standards and the showcasing of remarkable accomplishments) and 'acceptance' (openness and accessibility for new and inexperienced writers)" with the magazines often leaning towards "acceptance" in order to "[represent] the fledgling efforts of new fans" (Jenkins 159). Interestingly, acceptance in this context does not refer to acceptance as something to be gained by traditional publishing sources or mainstream society, but rather from fans themselves, displaying the power and importance of the fan community. Almost any writer who wrote fanfiction "had a good chance at publication, since most zine editors [struggled] to find enough acceptable material to fill their zines" (Jenkins 159). The democratising effects of almost anyone being able to publish their writing and gain "national and even international recognition as fan writers and artists" provides an "alternate source of status, unacknowledged by the dominant social and economic systems but personally rewarding nevertheless," subverting traditional routes to literary and artistic acclaim and redistributing the power imbalance between traditional forms of publishing and fan writers (Jenkins 159).

The rise of the subgenre of slash fanfiction, or "fan writing concerned with same-sex romance" created space for marginalized topics and writers (Tosenberger

185). The term "slash" originated from a Star Trek fanfiction in the 1970s, wherein the punctuation mark of a slash (/) was used between the names "Kirk" and "Spock," indicating that "the major romantic pairing was homosexual," although the punctuation mark itself has come to signify any romantic pairing, despite the term "slash" still referring exclusively to "homoerotic romance" (Tosenberger 186).[1] The rise of slash fiction was possible due to fan communities and magazines allowing writers to submit writing that reflected their sexual orientations and desires. In the *Harry Potter* fandom (the name given to a subculture of fans who are all engaged in a specific piece of media, in this case, *Harry Potter*), some of the most popular pairings are slash: Harry/Draco, Sirius/Remus, and Snape/Harry, amongst the most popular. However, even though these magazines allowed for more freedom and access to reading and writing than other traditional structures did, there were issues that limited access and inclusivity. The magazines were run by people who could control what was published in the magazines, thereby censoring some writers who did not fit the moulds prescribed by the magazine publishers. Access to magazines was also an issue. Unless you knew about them, they were hard to find. It was also harder for adolescents and people with limited income to afford the magazines. As a result of these limitations, most of the writing in these magazines is written by adults, and adult women in particular.

Using Hélène Cixous' concept of *Écriture Féminine* as a base*,* Bonnstetter and Ott, in their article "(Re)Writing Mary Sue: Écriture Féminine and the Performance of Subjectivity," posit that as traditional publishing is seen as a male space, the claiming of fanfiction as a space outside of the male-dominated publishing scene constitutes action against the patriarchy and the establishment of an *Écriture Féminine,* or

feminine writing, and thereby grants access to new "feminine" forms of writing that were unavailable to women in the past. Given that, historically, "popular culture was equated with the feminine and consequently critiqued as lowly, frivolous, and passive," the fact that fanfiction, being primarily written by women, is seen as "lesser" or as "low" art accentuates the reasoning behind the genre being seen as "lesser" because of the patriarchal structures of society and an unwillingness to give precedence to female artforms (Bonnstetter and Ott 352). Fanfiction, therefore, is democratising as it is an "instance of feminine writing, [that] rhetorically undermines the patriarchal economy of writing by allowing women to write their own desires" (Bonnstetter and Ott 346).

Fanfiction creates space for subversion and criticism of existing forms, as well as for the creation of new ones. Mary-Sue fanfiction is "a popular genre of fan writing in which (typically) female authors" insert "'glorified versions' of themselves" as main characters "into the universe of a beloved media text" and is often "denigrated" by "scholars and fans alike" (Bonnstetter and Ott 342-44). *My Immortal* provides an example of a fanfiction that utilizes the Mary-Sue trope, as the main character Ebony is a "self-insert" of the author, Tara Gilesbie. In fact, there are several "slip-ups" where Ebony is referred to as "Tara," for example when "Profesor Sinister" (Professor Trelawney) says: "Tara, I see drak times are near [sic]," or when Ebony's friends yell "Good Luck Tara!11" to her, cementing the relationship between the author and Ebony (Gilesbie Chapter 28; Gilesbie Chapter 42).[2] Bonnstetter and Ott posit that underneath the criticism of Mary-Sue characters, critics have failed to notice the "potentially transgressive and liberating dimensions of this genre" (350). Mary-Sue and self-insert fanfiction allow (fan) writers to explore the fictional universe in a more direct and personal sense, as well as makes the writing process more accessible for beginning writers, as many people unfamiliar with creative writing find it easier to write from their own perspective rather than from that of others. Mary-Sue fanfiction is somewhere that the democratising power of fanfiction could expand, as it is mocked within fan communities, yet it increases accessibility and gives a marginalised style of writing a voice.

The rise of the internet, primarily in the 1990s and 2000s, was essential in the further democratisation of fanfiction. Anyone, "of any age, with a computer and a modem," can have access to the internet, and it is free on free sites such as fanfiction.net, archiveofourown.org (AO3), wattpad.com, etc. (Tosenberger 189). This increased accessibility allows teenagers to have relatively unimpeded access to fanfiction and exposes them at an earlier age to types of literature that enables them to explore things such as sexuality and desire at their own leisure rather than by what is dictated by the invisible rules of sexuality and desire published in traditional Young Adult (YA) fiction. Catherine Tosenberger, in her article "Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction" asserts, in contrast to YA fiction, that fanfiction, specifically *Harry Potter* fanfiction (fanfic),

operates outside of the institutional paradigms that control children's and YA literature; unlike the Potter books themselves, it is not bound by publishing conventions that obligate it to contain sexuality within parameters of page (of both characters and readers) or of pedagogy. What makes Potter fanfic different is that teens have unprecedented license not only to read stories that might not meet with adult approval, but also to write and distribute them. (Tosenberger 188)

The mainstreaming of the internet coincided with the rise of the *Harry Potter* books from 1997 to 2007, enabling "young fans not only to access slash," and by extent fanfiction in general, "but also to write and distribute their own" (Tosenberger 198). The sheer size of the *Harry Potter* fandom and the range of interests that it necessarily encompasses, along with practically unimpeded access to both reading and writing fanfiction, created a breeding ground for *Harry Potter* fanfiction. *Harry Potter's* "enormous success among reluctant readers" in particular "offers a safe space for them not only to improve their writing skills, but also to explore discourses of sexuality […] outside of the various culturally official stances marketed to them (Jenkins qtd. in Tosenberger 202; Tosenberger 202). This means that adolescents, and adults, can read and create fanfiction at any level, and creates a community where the intimidation, formality, and inaccessibility of traditional literature is removed and allows people to feel more comfortable in engaging with texts through both reading and writing. They can inhabit the role of "Author," a role "which traditional publishing reserves for a cultural elite" (Tosenberger 186). When adolescents begin to inhabit this position, they are inherently subverting the traditional processes of writing by not going through the typical channels and by writing about "taboo" topics, such as queer or female desire, they subvert the roles, arbitrarily and societally decided upon as ideal roles, laid out for them by society. By writing fanfiction, they, in turn, are making it more accessible for other readers.

My Immortal is an example of *Harry Potter* fanfiction published during the initial surge of its popularity that allowed its author to explore her writing and sexuality. The notorious fanfiction *My Immortal* was originally published on the popular fanfiction website fanfiction.net in 2006, during the height of the popularity of *Harry Potter*. Ebony Dark'ness Dementia Raven Way, the main character, is a vampire and a "goth," a popular subculture amongst teenagers at the time, and attends Hogwarts. She is in a relationship with an altered version of Draco Malfoy. The "plot" follows Ebony's struggles in love and her adventures at Hogwarts. The internet creates a space for the author of *My Immortal* to step into the position of an author and create something outside of what is considered acceptable. She is able to explore things such as desire, notably her attraction to members of the band My Chemical Romance (MCR), for example, describing Gerard Way as a "major fucking hottie," writing in general, and, more specifically, writing sex scenes between her self-insert character, Ebony, and established character Draco Malfoy (Gilesbie Chapter 1). The fact that the author was a (young) teenager when she wrote the fanfiction is apparent in how she approaches sex and sexuality, describing Ebony and Draco "[making] out keenly" and Draco putting his "thingie into [her] you-know-what and [they] did it for the first time" before writing: "'Oh! Oh! Oh!' I screamed. I was beginning to get an orgasm" (Gilesbie Chapter 4). However, despite mockery and criticism of the immaturity displayed in the handling of the sex scenes, writing fanfiction allowed the author to explore and discover her relationship to sex and sexuality in a space that would not have existed prior to the development of fanfiction, and specifically the accessibility of it through the rise of the internet.

The interesting status of authorship in fanfiction contributes to its democratisation. Unlike conventionally published texts, fanfiction writers are not paid for their writing and are therefore not "restricted to institutionalized discourses" as with traditional writers. (Tosenberger 185). Henry Jenkins discusses the idea that "fan

publishing constitutes an alternative source of status, unacknowledged by the dominant social and economic systems but personally rewarding nonetheless" (159). Fan writing is a non-commercial form of writing, subverting the power that the traditional publishing systems have over writers who can only publish their work through the systems set up for them by profit-driven publishers, and that makes fanfiction accessible to everyone (Jenkins 160). The "conception of authors as owners of their texts arose alongside the development of copyright laws" which themselves are "of recent date since it was only really legalized at the time of the French Revolution" (Goodman 668; Barthes "Work" 118). By disregarding the intellectual property of the author, and therefore the "*respect* for the manuscript and the author's declared intentions," fan writers are able to explore and write what they want (Barthes "Work" 118, emphasis original). By subverting the traditional capitalistic forms of publishing and writing and being unbound from the limitations that these forms place upon its participants, fanfiction makes writing (and therefore reading) more accessible.

The concept of an author, and of an author having ultimate authority over their work, is deconstructed by Roland Barthes, a foundational post-structuralist, in his 1968 article "The Death of the Author". On one side of the binary, the image of an "Author-God," as Barthes terms it, on the other, the reader, historically undervalued by scholars. Barthes deconstructs the power imbalance between the Author-God and the reader, thus placing the reader in a position of power over the work. He claims that once the author has written a work, it ceases to belong to them; they die and cease to be relevant; their intentions no longer matter. Barthes posits that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author," allowing the reader's interpretation and interaction with

the text to rise to prominence (Barthes "Death" 87). In this model, the reader has a responsibility to engage with and build on the text. Fanfiction, as a whole, depends on the metaphorical death of the author. Fan writers take the fictional universes that the original author constructed and repurpose them to meet their own expectations of the characters and the fictional universe. In *My Immortal*, for example, numerous MCR and Good Charlotte concerts are held in Hogsmeade, even though this could never happen in the original text. However, since this is what she wanted to do, she was able to disregard the author's intentions, i.e. Rowling's.

Interestingly, Lesley Goodman, in her essay "Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author," claims that rather than seeing the author as dead, fan writers see the author as a disappointment. Working with a distinction between texts and universes, Goodman asserts that "fan interpretation privileges the coherence of the fictional universe while downplaying the authority of the text and insisting that the author is not dead, but a failure and a disappointment" (Goodman 663). The distinction between the author dying and the author being a disappointment indicates that fans are aware of the author's supposed intentions and that by calling it a disappointment they destroy the power imbalance between Author and reader even more violently, as it is almost a direct attack on the author, rather than a passive ignoration. The removal of the author and the democratisation of writing exposes fanfiction's relationship with authorship as an inherently post-structuralist form of writing.

To give a Text an author is to "impose a limit in that text, to furnish it with a final signified" (Barthes "Death" 86). By limiting the reading of a Text to one definitive answer, or signified, because that is what the author "intended" discredits all other possible

readings of the Text and places all power into the author's hands. There can be no final or singular "correct" meaning to a Text, therefore the author's intentions and power over the Text, once published, are irrelevant, thereby allowing the reader to do as they please with the Text. The Text plays with the "infinite deferment of the signified," and can never reach "closure" or a final meaning (Barthes "Work" 117). Essential to the functioning of fanfiction is this distinction between Work and Text. The Work refers only to the physical book; a tangible object. In his discussion of the qualities of the Text, Roland Barthes establishes the plurality of the Text. The Text has "accomplished the very plural of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing" (Barthes "Work" 117, emphasis original). He describes the Text as a "weave of signifiers" or as a "tissue," echoing Derrida's chain of signifiers (Barthes "Work" 117). By separating the Work from the Text, it allows fanfiction writers to engage more intimately with the Text and removes the emphasis on and power of the author. Another point made by Barthes is the fact that the "Text does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres. What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications," which supports fanfiction's deconstruction of low and high art (Barthes "Work" 116).

Regarding how *My Immortal* deals with the issue of authorship, one interesting and playful way it plays with authorship is through the Author's Notes. Because it was taken down after it was originally uploaded, the version of *My Immortal* that I am using has Author's Notes from both the original author of the fanfiction and from the person who re-uploaded the fanfiction to the website. Author's Notes themselves are interesting as they are supplementary to the text, and yet are inextricable from it once added. Jacques Derrida, foundational post-structuralist, discusses the idea of supplementary texts in his 1967 essay "…That Dangerous Supplement…". While supplements to the text, in this case Author's Notes, are inherently "*exterior,* outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it," once read with the text they cannot be separated from it (Derrida "Supplement" 145, emphasis original). The Author's Notes, both at the beginning of chapters and throughout the chapters themselves, and reader's comments at the end of chapters allow for conversation between reader and writer, democratizing the process and dismantling power imbalances between them.

Post-structuralism is inherently playful, and so, therefore, is fanfiction. Aside from playing with authorship, the intertextuality of fanfiction plays with and often dissolves the line between different works.[3] *My Immortal*, through the use of Author's Notes in particular, is able to play with intertextuality between different aspects of the *Harry Potter* universe, specifically between *Harry Potter* books, movies, and "fanon" or the "events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext [body of fan creation]" (Goodman 667, addition original). In one instance, the author states in an Author's Note (AN), after receiving criticism in the comments section of the previous chapters about Dumbledore being out of character (OOC) because he yelled "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING YOU MOTHERFUCKERS!" at Ebony and Draco, that she "dntn red all da boox! dis is frum da movie ok so itz nut my folt if dumbledor swers! [sic]" (Gilesbie Chapter 4; Gilesbie Chapter 9). The infamous shift in the characterisation of Dumbledore between the books and the movies is subtly

poked fun at here, specifically in reference to the scene in the *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005) movie where instead of "calmly" asking Harry whether he put his name in the Goblet of Fire as he does in the book, Dumbledore violently pushes Harry against a trophy table and shakes him while loudly and angrily demanding to know if Harry put his name in the Goblet of Fire (Rowling 276). This moment in the movie has since been roundly mocked and criticised by fans for being extremely out of character for Dumbledore. Intertextuality in fanfiction is not confined solely to other works and texts within the fictional universe in question. Texts from other sources or fictional universes are also often incorporated and blended to create new interactions between characters who ordinarily would not meet within the confines of their own fictional universes and also allows fan writers to explore new possibilities within these universes to explore their own desires.[4]

The Author's Notes in *My Immortal,* following Derrida's discussion of supplementary texts, also convey a parallel narrative that can both be read separately from the main text, but at the same time cannot be disentangled. The author, Tara, allegedly took her friend, who had been editing the chapters and checking for spelling, Raven's poster of Gerard Way because he "is such a fokin sexbom [sic]!" (Gilesbie Chapter 13). It appears Raven retaliated when an Author's Note says: "raven u suk u fuken bich gimme bak mah fukijn swteet [sweater]," followed by the author killing off Raven's character, Willow: "'BTW Willow that fucking poser got expuld. […]' (an: RAVEN U FUKIN SUK! FUK U!) [sic]" and "after she got expuld [Ebony] murdered her [sic]," and changes Ebony's name to "Ebondy dark'ness dementia TARA way" from "Ebony Dark'ness Dementia Raven Way" (Gilesbie Chapter 16; Gilesbie Chapter 1). However, in the next chapter's Author's Note, the author begs Raven to come back and Willow is resurrected and described as "really pretty and everything" (Gilesbie Chapter 17). These extratextual interactions demonstrate the influence Author's Notes have on the rest of the fanfiction, something previously rare or unheard of in traditional literature.

Playing with the slipperiness of language is common in post-structuralist works. Wordplay is a key aspect of the playful nature of post-structuralism. *My Immortal* plays with wordplay, primarily through misspelling and puns. One of the defining aspects of this fanfiction is the incorrect spelling of almost all words. The spelling gets gradually worse as the fanfiction progresses, for example "I tohot he wuz in Azerbaijan" instead of "I thought he was in Azkaban" (Gilesbie Chapter 42). One of the reasons that fanfiction is looked down upon by established institutions is because of its lack of regard for conventional writing standards, such as spelling, grammar, and structure. The distinction between low and high art, or in this case writing, is deconstructed. Some misspelling, such as "fangz" instead of "thanks" serves to heighten the alignment with a stylistic choice to further the association with "gothic" fashion and lifestyle that Ebony is associated with. Others, like misspelling the name "Sirius" as "Serious" almost every time and then the spelling of "seriously as "siriusly" plays with the confusion surrounding the spelling of Sirius' name in real life (Gilesbie Chapter 16; Gilesbie Chapter 35). The use of puns is also present throughout *My Immortal*, notably by referring to Sirius Black as Harry's "dogfather" instead of his godfather, amusing because of Sirius's ability to transform himself into a black dog (Gilesbie Chapter 20). By purposely misspelling words and flagrantly disregarding conventional grammar and syntax, *My Immortal* subverts this binary further than many fanfictions

generally do, in order to underline the existence of said binary, and its power imbalance.

In conclusion, because fanfiction can be accessed by almost anyone at any time, it democratises both reading and writing. Reading and writing are no longer exclusive to those who can pay for it or for those who fit into societally prescribed moulds. *My Immortal* is an example of a fanfiction that does this, to an exaggerated degree, and demonstrates how the subversion of traditional techniques and new relationships to accessibility and authorship, amongst other things, democratises reading and writing. Going forward, the development of the internet, and therefore various accessible artforms, will create even more democratic circumstances, as is already beginning to be seen with the increase in whole books being uploaded as free pdfs, amongst other things.

Notes

1. The divergence of the meanings of "slash" and "/" illustrates the slipperiness of the relationship between sign, signified, and signifier, as explained by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, as well as the broadening gap between them

2. The identity of the author of *My Immortal* is often disputed. I have chosen to go with whom it is attributed to in the Author's Note of the reuploaded version I have been using for this paper.

3. This dissolution between different works can be seen in the distinction between canon and fanon. Canon, "refers to the original text(s) and their contribution to the fictional universe," in other words what the author of the original text wrote in the source material (Goodman 667). Fanon, on the other hand, "describes 'the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and [are] repeated pervasively throughout the fantext [body of fan creations]. Fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it— or, at times, outright contradicts it (Hellekson and Busse qtd. Goodman 667). However, the distinction of what counts as Canon is hotly disputed amongst fans, resulting in two contesting answers. Canon is either anything that the original author adds to the fictional universe they created, including the book(s) and, controversially, further statements and material the author publishes or releases that add supplementary material to the text. In the case of *Harry Potter,* this would include the seven books of the series along with the supplementary books, such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001) and *Quidditch Through the Ages* (2001)*,* as well as the numerous, extremely controversial, retroactive statements that J.K. Rowling has released through the years, for example the interview wherein she claimed that Dumbledore was gay. The other option is only to consider the original books, meaning in the case of *Harry Potter* just the seven main books, as canon, disregarding the rest. Then there is the question of whether or not the movies count as canon or not.

4. The genre of cross-over fanfiction exemplifies this idea. In *My Immortal,* one instance where the author plays with intertextuality with a non-*Harry Potter* related source is when she refers to the young Voldemort, who she time-travels to in order to seduce him to prevent him from becoming evil, as "Tom Bombodil", who is a character from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), a text that is generally associated with high art, that is only included in the book, despite the fact that the original Tom Bombadil has no association with young Voldemort (Gilesbie Chapter 31).

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