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# Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online

By Bronwen Thomas

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## Abstract

Fanfiction has been hailed as 'the democratic genre' (Pugh 2000), its proponents celebrated as 'textual poachers' (Jenkins 1994) who radically disrupt but also reinvigorate canonical texts. Over time, aspects of plotting and characterisation introduced by fanfic writers may become 'fanonical', accepted by the fans as being just as intrinsic to the storyworld as any aspect of the 'original' or 'source' text. Focusing on literary fanfiction online, this article will trace the emergence of 'fanons' within specific fanfic communities, analysing the extent to which they either draw on, or depart from, the 'source' texts. Alongside this, the article also explores how far fanons are either openly or covertly self-policing, and address the fundamental tensions between fidelity and deviance, dependence and freedom that underlie the whole fanfiction phenomenon.

## 1. Fanfiction: Some Preliminaries

Fanfiction may be defined as stories generated from the settings, plots and characters of already established fictions, by those who typically hold the source texts in high regard. Such a definition opens up the possibility that fanfiction has been around as long as stories themselves, but it is indisputable that the ability to post and respond to stories on the World Wide Web has led to an upsurge of interest in the phenomenon. Fanfiction has been hailed as 'the democratic genre' (Pugh 2005), its proponents celebrated as 'textual poachers' (Jenkins 1992) who radically subvert but also reinvigorate both canonical and popular cultural texts. For many theorists, fanfiction is inextricably bound up with the concept of a canon. As Sheenagh Pugh (2005) puts it, 'one thing all fanfiction has in common is the idea of the "canon", the source material accepted as authentic and, within the fandom, known by all readers in the same way that myth and folk-tale were once commonly known' (26). However, Pugh equally recognises that for fanfiction writers 'Canon is

a framework to write against' (ibid: 40), exemplifying their complex and often ambivalent relationships with the source texts they draw on.

Of course, as we shall see, the very concept of the canon understood to refer to "great" works of literature, whose "value" remains unchanging, has come in for a good deal of criticism, especially with postmodernism's blurring of the boundaries between high art and popular culture. In fanfiction communities, however, many of these debates are sidestepped and "canon" is used quite loosely to include not just source novels, but also television and film adaptations, and even interviews and comments made by the authors. "Canon" is referred to wherever issues of fidelity arise, and is used almost exclusively in relation to the source text(s), and related materials, rather than to some putative "great tradition" to which that work may belong.

The term "fanon" refers to the process whereby material that is created as an addition or supplement to the canon becomes accepted and used by other fanfiction writers. Thus rather than referring everything back to the source text, as we shall see the fanon includes those variations and departures from the canon that are disseminated across the fan community. The fanon is something that is collaboratively achieved and subject to constant revision and updating. It is rarely prescriptive in the same sense that the canon can be, although usually fanonical material draws on rather than runs contrary to the canon, as fans pour over the minutiae of eye colour, genealogy etc. in the source texts. In rare instances, fanon material may pass back into the canon, for example where the writing of a television series, or a series of novels, stretches over several years, even decades, storylines and aspects of characterisation have been claimed to have been influenced by the emerging fanon. However, this is not to suggest that there is some kind of linear, progressive trajectory whereby canon gives way to fanon. Instead, I shall argue that we can extend Janet Maybin and Neil Mercer's (1996) concept of a 'dialogic' canon to the relationship between canon and fanon, since that relationship is potentially reciprocal and mutually enriching. In this regard, the relationship between the 'profic'<sup>1</sup> (Pugh 2005) *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and its 'source text' *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a good case in point: Peter Childs (2001) has argued persuasively that Rhys's much later work 'has changed the reading paradigm associated with Bronte's novel' (150) and indeed that 'Rhys makes Bronte's novel dependent upon hers' (150).

This paper will explore the relationship between fanon and canon in relation to literary fanfiction as here notions of a "great tradition", and of an aesthetics based on originality and innovation, are both long established and fervently contested. The analysis will focus on two of the most popular literary fanfiction communities online. Both Jane Austen and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* stories have numerous dedicated fanfiction sites. Both also feature as amongst the most popular sections on the 'book' category of [FanFiction.net](http://FanFiction.net). It will be interesting to compare whether fandoms

dedicated to an established “classic” author such as Austen differ in any way from those focusing on “Young Adult” fiction, a category rarely included in the literary canon, as Cindy Lou Daniels (2006) and others have recognised.

A key question for exploration will be the extent to which fanfiction sites are truly ‘democratic’ as claimed by Pugh (2005), or whether they police the content submitted by users according to some implicit or explicit notion of canonicity. Most studies of fanfiction to date have been conducted by self-confessed “Aca/Fans”<sup>2</sup> who focus on observing and celebrating fan cultures rather than offering any kind of evaluation of the fictions they produce. This paper will adopt a more critical perspective on the fanfiction phenomenon, exploring the important issues it raises for literary aesthetics and for canon theory in particular.

## 2. Canon Theory and Digital Literatures

The emergence of digital literatures online has led to a revisiting of the concept of canon. Jay David Bolter in *Writing Space* (2001) examines the extent to which the concept of the canon is dependent upon a print culture, and explores the implications of this for electronic texts, and the advent of network cultures. Bolter points out that the idea of a canon relies on readers being able to access the “same” text, whereas electronic texts may change and refresh with each reading, and the reader can interact with and even alter the text (165). Fanfiction precisely aims to extend the fictional world of the source text and to even go beyond it to create alternate universes (AUs). The design of fanfiction websites encourages readers to browse and to read more than one story, grouping them together by genre, title, character pairings etc. so that the concept of an individual piece of fiction as a fixed entity gives way to a more fluid conception of “text”. Moreover, fanfiction stories are frequently updated based on the comments and suggestions of reviewers which appear alongside the stories, and which are usually posted by fellow writers. As with many other kinds of electronic text, issues of permanence and accessibility arise as the technologies associated with these websites change and become obsolete. All of this seems to confirm Bolter’s (2001) claim that traditional concepts of the canon may no longer be adequate or sufficient to account for creative developments taking place electronically or online.

Bolter’s (2001) study also addresses the implications for the concept of canon following the abandonment of the ideal of high culture as a potentially unifying force, and the changes to the notions of intellectual property that arise in the electronic age. This indicates the importance of locating electronic writing within the context of wider social, cultural and economic developments. In particular, Bolter (2001) demonstrates how Romantic ideals of art as a kind of religion, and of the individual

artist as inspired genius, have been challenged by postmodern aesthetics and technological changes affecting the writing process (166). Such issues become especially pertinent with fanfiction, where sites such as [FanFiction.net](http://FanFiction.net) make no obvious distinction between literary classics and popular fiction, and where debates about copyright and intellectual property are fiercely contested. On one level, all fanfiction is a breach of intellectual property, as character names, plotlines, settings are all lifted from the source texts. Nevertheless, attempts by authors such as Anne Rice to block fanfiction have proved controversial, while the policy of writers such as J.K. Rowling to express tolerance of, even enthusiasm for, fanfiction, has equally been greeted with suspicion.<sup>3</sup> For most fandoms, originality takes second place to the ability of users to customise and personalise the source materials and to share their stories with others, but debates continue to rage about the legality and ethics of their actions. For Henry Jenkins (1992), however, the possibility of radical change and subversion is exciting precisely because 'a poached culture requires a conception of aesthetics emphasising borrowing and recombination as much or more as original creation and artistic innovation' (224).

Debates about canonicity have also been explored by Astrid Ensslin (2007), specifically in relation to literary hypertext, questioning whether it is possible to use the concept of canon in a creative rather than a restrictive sense. Although the cases of hypertext fiction and fanfiction are somewhat different, as fanfiction is always going to be considered and evaluated according to some sense of an already existing, antecedent canon, both face similar problems in terms of being accepted by the literary critical establishment.

As Ensslin (2007) reminds us, the idea of the canon carries with it many positive connotations, serving to bind cultures together and foster some sense of belonging, something that is very important to the online communities of fanfiction sites. Ensslin finds emerging within hypertext fiction a new kind of critical apparatus that is sensitive to the unique features of this kind of writing (48). The same may also be said to be true of fanfiction communities where every writer, it seems, is also a critical reviewer of the work of others and claims some authority over, and ownership of, the canon. While reviewers do comment occasionally on the grammaticality and fluency of the writing, and upbraid contributors for departures from the "canon" or implausibilities in plotting or characterisation, critical evaluation also displays awareness of the precise nature of the writing in which contributors are engaged. In particular, great support and enthusiasm are displayed for stories which delve into the more obscure aspects of the texts, or which offer fresh insights into much loved characters and scenes from those texts.

In her survey of canon theory, Ensslin (2007) demonstrates that the concept of the canon has never been fully stable, but is always evolutionary, and very often highly contested (49). For example, feminists (e.g. Elaine Showalter 1977), postcolonial critics (e.g. Bill Ashcroft et al. 1989) and queer theorists (e.g. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

1990) have for decades voiced the need to “refire” or “queer” the canon taken in its most restrictive sense, as representing the works of dead white European males. Critics (e.g. Cindy Lou Daniels 2006) have also contested the exclusion of children’s and Young Adult’s fictions from the canon, so it is significant that these fictions feature prominently on fanfiction sites, or have their own dedicated websites.<sup>4</sup> A key question facing fanfiction theorists, as for writers of other kinds of digital literatures, is whether the evolution of any critical apparatus for evaluating and classifying the work inevitably brings its own forms of exclusion and marginalisation.

Even the most ardent supporters of fanfiction acknowledge that the ability to ‘call into question the logic by which others order their aesthetic experiences’ (Jenkins 2006: 39) inevitably means the possibility of imposing new forms of “logic” which themselves contribute to the process of “othering”. Jenkins (2006) claims that ‘the ideology of fandom involves both a commitment to some degree of conformity to the original & materials, as well as a perceived right to evaluate the legitimacy of any use of those materials’ (55), but it is far from clear who preserves these rights and legitimacies, or whose definitions of the ‘democratic’ (Pugh 2005) are being subscribed to. Many fanfiction sites ban “Real Person Fiction” (RPF) because of the potential for libel involved in stories based on the lives of celebrities, politicians, sports personalities and the like. This is despite the fact that there is a long tradition in prose fiction of incorporating real world personages, or characters who are thinly veiled versions of those personages. Fanfiction sites often discourage or explicitly embargo “self-insertion” stories, where the writer imagines him or herself entering the fictional world, again a practice not uncommon in literary fiction since its earliest days. But perhaps the cause of most opprobrium within fan communities is the “Mary Sue”, an impossibly idealised character (of either sex) regarded as little more than adolescent wish fulfilment fantasies by their critics. Most fanfiction sites have sections giving guidelines to potential authors, with advice ranging from practical editorial matters and issued of presentation, to mission statements setting out the aims and ethos of the site. Many of these guidelines and the practices associated with them are common to many, if not most, fanfiction sites, such that a kind of evaluative consensus arises which gradually gains its own legitimacy and authority.

### **3. Case Studies: Jane Austen and *Harry Potter* Fanfiction**

Issues of gatekeeping arise most explicitly in relation to fanfiction devoted to “classic” canonical authors such as Jane Austen. Austen fandoms are often fiercely protective of her “legacy”, and tend to steer clear of anything that might lead to a questioning of the quality of the source texts. Nevertheless, implicitly the fictions

point to gaps in the plots of Austen's novels and an appetite for learning more about minor characters. For example Pugh (2005) discovered that a large proportion of Austen fanfiction focuses on the perspectives of the male characters, whose emotions and thought processes are never directly represented in the novels.

The self-styled *Republic of Pemberley* is arguably one of the most prescriptive of sites, demanding a high level of faithfulness and respect for the source texts and their author. The guidelines to contributors state that the site is intended to 'honour Jane Austen, appreciate her genius, and share this with others who feel the same'. With regard to editorial policy, the advice is that 'the guide is Jane Austen's own sense of taste and humanity', characters must be presented 'in a manner faithful to their original conception' and the action has to take place in the same historical era as the 'original' texts. Such sites seem to fall into the 'more of' rather than the 'more from' categories of fanfiction established by Pugh (2005), since the implication is that participants want more of the same, rather than to expand on or rework the source texts. The almost Leavisite tone of the *Republic of Pemberley* site is testament to the continuing influence of the concept of canon not just as some kind of badge of quality, but also as guarantor of moral improvement and education. Although the site does display some openness in making these criteria for inclusion explicit to potential contributors, and names the members of the 'volunteer committee' who run the site on the home page, no apology is made for its 'matriarchal governance' (there is only one male committee member). Indeed, the desire to create an intimate community for 'the Truly Obsessed' is frequently asserted, suggesting that for contributors to this site, acting as custodians for the canon is an important part of feeding that obsession.

Yet even here there is the potential for some leakage, as aspects of Darcy and Elizabeth's married life together, the names and characteristics of their children, become fanonical through repetition and uptake by other contributors. The question of faithfulness is also perpetually muddled by the fact that many participants blur the boundaries between the novels and various television and film adaptations of Austen's work. The lack of medium specificity is an interesting phenomenon in fanfiction, as stories based on the original print texts frequently sit alongside stories based wholly on screen adaptations. This suggests that for fanfiction, at least, the concept of canon may need to stretch across different media as well as different time periods, genre and so on.

On *FanFiction.net* Austen fanfiction includes a story recasting Mr Darcy as a private eye ('*Through the Fog*' by Hartabound), poetry ('*To Mr Darcy, With Love*' by PhoenixFairie) and science fiction. *Pride and Prejudice* forms the basis for most of the fanfiction on this site, with many contributors acknowledging that they have worked on the novel as a "class text", again providing testament to the enduring power of the canon, but equally the resistance of readers to its imposition, evident in the number of parodies and AU versions of the novel that feature. Many

contributors also openly acknowledge their debt to television adaptations of the novel, most notably the 1995 BBC production, featuring Colin Firth as Mr Darcy. In contrast to stories featured on the *Republic of Pemberley*, the language of Austen fanfiction on *FanFiction.net* is often very far removed from the source texts, with many stories transposing the characters to the United States, and using various forms of (especially adolescent) vernacular.

*FanFiction.net* also features crossover fictions based on Austen's novels, where characters, settings and scenes are "crossed" with those from other novels, films or TV shows. Austen's novels are crossed with *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Master and Commander*. Intriguingly, *Pride and Prejudice* is crossed with the *Harry Potter* stories in both 'Malfoy, I shall never understand' by The Norse Goddess and 'Pride, Prejudice and Potions' by darksider69. The latter begins with the following lines: 'It is a generally acknowledged truth that life for a wizard residing in the world of non-magical folk is fraught with difficulties and requires a significant amount of deception', specifically alluding to the opening line of Austen's novel. The action is set in 'Hertfordshire, England, 1811', but imports characters from the *Harry Potter* stories into the fictional world of *Pride and Prejudice*. Such crossovers receive enthusiastic responses from reviewers for the boldness and innovation of the crossing (for example ImAmandaJulius calls it 'ingenious'), although occasionally criticism for lack of faithfulness to the "canon" is raised (merielrose comments that 'making Ron into a girl is not agreeing with my brain'). Another concern is with the classification of such fiction, one reviewer (Rxc) suggesting that 'Pride, Prejudice and Potions' should have been placed in the *Harry Potter* section of the site, rather than in the Jane Austen section. Although this suggestion seems to be made on the basis of the relative weighting between the two source texts, it also carries a hint of a process of hierarchisation whereby "classic" novels are ranked higher than Young Adult fiction.

Such discussions point to the significance of classification for canonical texts, and the importance readers often place on being able to locate texts in terms of their relative centrality to that canon. The design of most fanfiction sites works against creating hierarchies according to taste or preference, listing stories by genre or recency instead. Moreover, no distinction is made in terms of the length of the stories, whether these are "drabbles" (stories of exactly 100 words) or novel-length contributions. Nevertheless, a process of peer evaluation is encouraged through the activity of reviewing, and many sites allow users to select their favourite authors and stories. Some sites even give awards for the best stories as voted for by users, for example the *Harry Potter* fanfiction site, *The Sorting Hat*, which purports to only feature "quality" fanfiction.

The *Harry Potter* stories by J.K. Rowling have generated vast amounts of fanfiction online, with many sites dedicated to the stories, such as *The Sugar Quill*, and *MuggleNet*. One reason for this is the mythology often perpetuated by fanfiction



*sites that Rowling allows herself to be influenced by the fanon, incorporating aspects of it into her own work. On Rowling's own website, a regular feature is the 'Fan Site Award', and the author writes of her enthusiasm for, and familiarity with, many of these sites ([JKRowling.com](http://JKRowling.com) 2007). Whether or not this extends to fans' opinions influencing her writing, the fact that Rowling has stated her intention to write seven books in the series, and that the writing and release of the novels is punctuated by film versions of texts already published, fosters huge anticipation and excitement. Fans of Rowling's work therefore have a different relationship to the author and her work than is possible with Jane Austen, as they experience the illusion of growing up alongside characters whose fictional world is constantly evolving and being refined.*

*Nevertheless, like Austen fan communities, Harry Potter fandoms often see themselves as custodians of the fictional world created by Rowling. [\*The Sugar Quill\*](#) defines the *Harry Potter* canon as consisting of books, interviews and websites featuring the author, but explicitly excludes the films. Participants are encouraged to keep close to the canon, and are referred to websites such as Rowling's own where they can check on the accuracy of their material. Some prescriptions are also made in terms of language and content, for example cross-over fictions and Real Person Fictions are banned and AUs are only accepted on the basis that the writer can justify departures from the canon. As with the [\*Republic of Pemberley\*](#), profiles of those involved in running the site may be accessed in the 'Staff Room', and a mission statement and list of guidelines to contributors is also made available. As with all *Harry Potter* sites, it is assumed that contributors and visitors are cognisant with the *Harry Potter* lexicon, and expressions such as "muggles" and "purebloods" are used to distinguish between different types of characters. [\*The Sugar Quill\*](#) also makes explicit its own take on the relationships existing within the fictional world of the *Harry Potter* stories, stating a preference for Ron/Hermione stories and expressing a general approbation for the Weasley clan.*

## 4. Slashfiction

As the characters in the *Harry Potter* series (and the readers of the stories) mature, more and more interest is expressed in the developing romantic and sexual relationships between the characters. Indeed, many sites explicitly campaign for or against certain pairings. This is especially true of fanfiction's more controversial offshoot, slashfiction, which contributes significantly to the development of various fanons, not least the *Harry Potter* fanon. As Pugh (2005) amongst others has noted, slashfiction, like fanfiction, is mainly written by women but focuses on sexualised relationships between pairs of characters, most often two male characters. Perhaps

the most notorious but also best established example of *Harry Potter* fanon centres on the relationship between Harry and Draco Malfoy, his arch-enemy in the series. Whether or not stories explicitly depict this as an erotic relationship, the idea of Draco as a “bad boy”, misunderstood rather than inherently evil, has become an established part of the *Harry Potter* fanon.

By its very nature, slashfiction enjoys a somewhat more complex relationship with the canon than fanfiction, but it, too, has its own boundaries and preferences. One of the sites dedicated to Harry/Draco slash, *The Hex Files* insists that stories comply with the canon and that contributors and visitors to the site are over 18. It also advises against including heterosexual storylines involving either Harry or Draco, unless in a very limited capacity, for example suggesting some adolescent confusion over their sexuality. Such stipulations demonstrate how quickly and how powerfully certain plot and character developments become fanonical, and how passionately these are defended by their proponents.

## 5. Implications

As technological and theoretical developments increasingly disrupt notions of the stability of texts and canons, paradoxically perhaps this makes even more pertinent the extent to which ‘canons are compliant with power’ (Kermode 1988:115). We have seen that fanfiction sites and those who run them can exert considerable control over the fanon, and often seem to consider themselves to be beyond criticism or scrutiny. The “democratic” process, here as elsewhere, is a matter of access and opportunity, and so prone to abuse by those who would dictate to and bully others. Maybin and Mercer (1996) question ‘whether canon can ever be a truly unifying force, or whether they will always inevitably represent the interests and power of a particular social group’ (265).

It would be tempting, but perhaps rather simplistic, to suggest that we should replace “canon” with “fanon”, as this would erode the sense of dialogue and interplay between the two that is so enriching. The term “fanon” has a lot to commend it, reflecting as it does both the extent to which fanfiction draws on an already existing body of work, but also the fact that fans are able to contribute to and influence that work. As we have seen, unlike the process by which most print texts are published, fanfiction sites display considerable openness in profiling those involved in the selection and editing of stories, and making available the criteria by which those judgements are made. The ongoing reviewing process also ensures that, once on the sites, stories are evaluated and revised by the fans themselves. This highlights the extent to which traditional concepts of the canon have always excluded “the common reader”, when in fact no text can truly be part of a canon if it is not bought,

read and written about by its readers. Moreover, it demonstrates how those same readers may vary in the extent to which they accept and feel some kind of ownership of the "canon", some seeking 'more of' the same, others expecting 'more from' the source texts (Pugh 2005). Perhaps the main contribution of fanfiction to the evolution of the concept of canon will be the way in which its terminology and critical and aesthetic practices foreground and make more transparent the role of discussion and dialogue in building and sustaining any kind of interpretive community.

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## Notes

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1. The term "profic" is used to specifically refer to fictions produced by professional authors. It is not intended to suggest some kind of hierarchy based on quality or success, but to distinguish between commercially produced fictions and those made freely available on the web and elsewhere.
2. 'Confessions of an Aca/Fan' is the title of Henry Jenkins' weblog on [www.henryjenkins.org](http://www.henryjenkins.org) (accessed 10 June 2007)
3. Anne Rice issued a statement on her website setting out her objections to fanfiction, leading to the removal of thousands of her stories from fanfiction sites (see Pugh 2000 for an account of this). J.K. Rowling's website carries links to selected fanfiction sites, and Rowling has given an interview to The Leaky Cauldron (July 16, 2005) in which she expresses her gratitude to her fans.
4. Other popular Young Adult fiction featured on [FanFiction.net](http://FanFiction.net) and elsewhere includes C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* stories, the *Artemis Fowl* books and the novels of Philip Pullman.