

# **Transformative Works and Cultures, No. 31, Fan Fiction and Ancient Scribal Cultures, edited by Frauke Uhlenbruch and Sonja Amman (December 15, 2019)**

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# Editorial

## Fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures

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[0.1] Abstract—Editorial for guest-edited issue, "Fan Fiction and Ancient Scribal Cultures," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 31 (December 15, 2019).

[0.2] Keywords—Ancient Judaism; Bible; Canon; Christian apocrypha; Dead Sea Scrolls; Emotions; Rabbinic literature

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] By filling Jerusalem with the blood of the innocent and promoting abominable idolatrous cults, King Manasse definitely was the worst of all rulers, according to 2 Kings 21:1–18. How can it be, then, that he, of all kings of Jerusalem, ruled for fifty-five prosperous and peaceful years—the longest rule of a king in the entire history of the kingdom? The biblical book of Chronicles, which is a later work based on the book of Kings, rectifies this gap between Manasse's behavior and his success as a king. According to 2 Chronicles 33:1–20, Manasse was indeed the worst of kings, but he came to regret his evil deeds and became a pious king, and he therefore eventually merited his long and peaceful reign. Readers familiar with the genres and techniques of fan fiction will not be surprised by this rewriting of Manasse's story in Chronicles and probably consider it as a piece of fix-it fic.

[1.2] This special issue of TWC explores the potential of fan fiction as an interpretative model to study ancient religious texts. Contemporary fan fiction offers particularly helpful perspectives for the engagement with creative literary production in relation to already existing corpora of material. As such, it can shed new light on the relationship between the reception of existing texts and new text production in early Judaism and Christianity.

Moreover, fan studies provide excellent heuristic tools for exploring questions of textual authority and for foregrounding the role of the audience/fans in the production of texts and traditions.

[1.3] Readers of this issue might approach the articles from different backgrounds; perhaps they have a primary interest in fan studies or derivative/transformative works, or perhaps they have a primary interest in ancient textual traditions. The contributors to this issue on "Fan Fiction and Ancient Scribal Cultures" attempt to bridge gaps by explaining their technical terminology. For biblical scholars approaching fan fiction for the first time, we point to Monika Amsler's contribution, "The Making of Hanina ben Dosa: Fan Fiction in the Babylonian Talmud," where some genres and technical terms are introduced. For scholars new to the field of biblical and related ancient religious texts, we next provide some background.

## **2. Ancient scribal practices**

[2.1] The contributions in this issue draw analogies between the development of ancient religious texts and contemporary fan fiction, focusing in particular on ancient Jewish and Christian texts and traditions. While people nowadays tend to think of the Bible as a book, it is actually a collection of ancient texts; indeed, the word "Bible" is derived from the Greek *ta biblia*, meaning "the books" in the plural. The number of books contained in this collection varies. For example, the Jewish Bible has thirty-nine books; the Bible used by Catholics has seventy-three books; the Protestant Bible has sixty-six books; and the Ethiopian Orthodox Bible has eighty-one books. Moreover, each of these books has its own, sometimes complex history. The original texts were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, roughly between the eighth century BCE and the second century CE. Most of the biblical texts were produced in the ancient Levant (that is, the east coast of the Mediterranean), today's Israel, in the Greek-speaking Jewish community in Egypt and probably in ancient Babylonia. The biblical books were not written all at once by a single person. They do not have individual authors we could know by name. Rather, they are traditional literature, transmitted and copied over centuries by anonymous scribes (Breed, n.d.; van der Toorn 2007; Walker and Wright, n.d.). In the process of transmission, they were supplemented by comments and additions, which early readers added into the texts from the very beginning. In some cases, early readers produced their own version of a text. For instance, the book of Chronicles is based on the books of Samuel and Kings, and both became part of the biblical collection. Other examples include so-called rewritten biblical texts such as the *Book of Jubilees*, *1 Esdras*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, or the *Temple Scroll* (Segal 2005). When speaking about biblical texts, it must be kept in mind that a fixed canon did not exist at the time some responses to the texts were created, so terms such as "rewritten bible" or "noncanonical writings" are anachronistic. Some of these texts may actually be contemporary to those we find in the biblical canon.

[2.2] Moreover, ancient manuscript finds (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls) attest to a diversity of coexisting versions of "biblical" texts in antiquity. Scholars therefore increasingly question the idea that the early Jewish and Christian religious texts constituted an immutable tradition handed down as unchanged. Instead, we are confronted with a fluid textual tradition

with a high degree of continuity between production and reception. The ongoing production of texts enabled the constant reimagining of the textual tradition and a negotiation of this tradition's authority.

[2.3] It is only in the first to fourth centuries CE that the selection of scriptures conventionally used in Jewish and Christian communities became the more or less stable collection known to us as the Bible. However, the increasing standardization of the biblical texts did not set an end to the literary production. When commentary, alternative traditions, and proliferation of stories were no longer directly incorporated into the texts and transmitted as part of the collection of scriptures, they continued to flourish as a separate genre. New texts and new stories were produced using biblical figures as protagonists (the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the books of *Enoch*) and/or as their fictive authors (pseudepigraphy, e.g., *Testaments of the Patriarchs*, *Book of Jubilees*). These writings from Hellenistic and Roman antiquity are known today as Jewish and Christian apocrypha. Because Hebrew was no longer a spoken language in ancient Palestine, Aramaic translations (so-called Targums) —often including expansive interpretations—developed from the first century BCE onward. Early interpretations of biblical law texts were collected in the Mishnah (2nd–3rd cent. CE), which in turn was commented upon and amplified in the Tosefta (2nd–4th cent. CE) and the Talmud (Palestinian Talmud, ca. 4th–5th cent. CE, and Babylonian Talmud, ca. 6th cent. CE). These rabbinic writings even today comprise a part of the foundational traditions of Judaism.

[2.4] What we know today as the Bible was thus shaped in a continuous process of interpretation and use by a community, which led to the addition of variants and stories. This process continued in late antiquity with the production of texts based on biblical figures and traditions. Throughout the redaction of biblical texts up to the canon-based literary production in late antiquity, we can observe literary techniques and socioliterary phenomena that are comparable to the production of fan fiction. The contributions in this issue mainly deal with late antique religious texts. A number of ancient texts are addressed in this issue.

[2.5] The *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a second century CE text assuming the voice of characters from the earlier Jewish tradition and elaborating on the book of Genesis. Tom de Bruin explores how this text negotiates the relatively recent advent of a new Christian identity in the context of its rootedness in Jewish textual tradition.

[2.6] The *Apocryphon of John* is a Coptic text that draws on the biblical book of Genesis and probably originated in the second century CE. Kristine Rosland argues that this rewritten creation narrative uses canonical material to challenge and subvert canon.

[2.7] Late antique rabbinic writings are referred to in several essays. Monika Amsler ("Making") deals in particular with the Babylonian Talmud (approx. 6th cent. CE), which elaborates on traditions found in the Mishnah (2nd cent. CE) and the Tosefta (2nd–4th cent. CE). Rachel Barenblat's contribution deals with the Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (4th–5th cent. CE), a compilation of Jewish traditions that explain and explore the Hebrew Bible, and with the Alphabet of Ben Sira, a medieval Jewish collection of wisdom sayings and tales featuring the well-known character of the sage Ben Sira.

[2.8] Traditions about the queen of Sheba in the Qur'an, in the Targum, in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, and other medieval Muslim, Jewish, and Christian legends are the focus of Barbara Oudová Holcátová's contribution.

[2.9] The Psalm translations attributed to King Alfred of Wessex (849–899 CE) are themselves a response to the Latin translations of the biblical book of the Psalms. In her contribution, Martine Mussies examines their use and reinterpretation in twenty-first-century fan fiction.

[2.10] These ancient texts are brought into a relationship with contemporary fan fiction via a basic analogy: Both kind of texts respond to already existing texts and traditions, and they are "derivative...writing—that is, texts written based on another text" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 5) ([note 1](#)) and can be described as "archontic" texts (Derecho 2006) that add to an existing text's archive.

[2.11] The development and nature of biblical and related literature highlight things such as collective authorship and the role of the community—ideas with parallels to fan fiction. It could even be argued that there is a continuous process of reception, from ancient religious texts and their ancient rewritings to modern fan fiction on ancient religious texts, as for instance in Martine Mussies's examples of fannish reinterpretations of Alfredian Psalms. However, the articles in this issue demonstrate that although there are similarities, there are also significant differences between ancient scribal practice and fan fiction. By placing contemporary practices and ancient practices into dialogue, we hope to learn more about both.

### **3. Canon and authority**

[3.1] One striking point of departure that enables a comparison between fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures might be the fact that the texts that are responded to have been called a canon. The Greek word *kanon* is derived from the Hebrew *qaneh*, "reed, cane, measuring rod." The term was first used in the fourth century CE to delimit a normative corpus of religious texts for the first time. This means that there was no concept of a canon at the time most ancient Jewish and Christian texts—some of which later ended up in a Bible—were produced. As in other ancient literary cultures, collecting authoritative writings was a dynamic process guided by use and transmission rather than by binding official decisions (Shupak 2001; Davies 1998). Scholars of ancient religious texts therefore nowadays tend to include more functional aspects in the concept of canonical writings, such as "a pool of literature that forms the centre of cultural identity" (Steins 2010, 15; cf. Stordalen 2012). Acknowledging the (Christian) notion of canon as "the definitive and authoritative list of the corpus of inspired books...officially determined by the leaders of a major religious community, and recognized and accepted as such by the community, as permanently determinative for belief and practice" (Ulrich 2012, 891) applies only to particular, much later historical contexts ([note 2](#)).

[3.2] The use of the term "canon" in fan fiction is most likely based on the religious use of the term. It is first attested in Sherlock Holmes fandom following a satirical lecture by

Ronald A. Knox, in which he applied methods of biblical studies to Sherlock Holmes stories (Busse 2017; see Kristine Rosland's contribution in this issue). It commonly denotes "the collection of texts considered to be the authoritative source for fan creations" (Busse 2017, 101).

[3.3] The term is debated and contentious in both the fan fiction community and in scholarly communities investigating ancient texts. Several essays in this issue address the difficulties with defining and using the notion of a canon. Monika Amsler ("Martyrs, Athletes, and Transmedia Storytelling in Late Antiquity") points out differences between ancient and modern uses of the term. For instance, the use of the term in fan fiction is often tied to the (modern) idea of authorship and presupposes a stable form of the text (or medium). This is not the case in antiquity, when texts were often anonymous and not necessarily transmitted as books (Mroczek 2016). In some fannish definitions of canon, shifts between ancient and modern modes and contexts of literary production become even more apparent. Thus, to apply the term "canon" to "the source contents of franchised work...which are heavily protected by intellectual property law and the ruthless commercial practice of corporate multinationals" (Kahane 2016, ¶ 5.2) is far removed from ancient scribal cultures. Moreover, scholars both of ancient religious literature and of fan works have criticized the hierarchy implied in the notion of canonical material (Derecho 2006; Mroczek 2016). Monika Amsler ("Martyrs") thus proposes to abandon the biased notion of canon and instead uses the template of transmedia storytelling.

[3.4] In many cases, canonical material on which derivative writings are based cannot be identified with a single specific text. Rather, a fictional universe is constructed out of many texts, and a story used as canonical goes beyond a mere textual document (de Bruin, this issue). This applies particularly in the ancient context, where—at least before the Hellenistic period—transmission of knowledge was based primarily on oral traditions. As Carr (2005, 4) writes, ancient texts functioned "more the way a musical score does for a musician who already knows the piece." They did not need to include all the information necessary for their understanding, and they allowed for extemporization. Even in later periods, we can observe that the textual tradition remains fluid and integrates and conserves a variety of readings (cf. Nihan 2013 on the example of David traditions).

[3.5] Contemporary fan and media studies provide analogies for the phenomenon of a fluid canonical story that cannot be identified with one particular (form of a) text. In the transmedia storytelling paradigm used by Monika Amsler ("Martyrs"), this is particularly obvious because the fictional universe is not based on a single specific text (or film) but rather is constructed from elements delivered via multiple channels.

[3.6] The term "canon" is thus potentially problematic both in fan fiction and in biblical studies; it cannot be used without qualification. Applied to ancient religious texts, the term is prone to anachronistic pitfalls. Ideally, therefore, a discussion of any derivative text—be it fan fiction, rewritten scripture, pseudepigraphy, or midrash—should take into account what canonical material its writers presuppose and are responding to, how they relate to a canon, and if there even was a canon or whether we are imposing that concept on the ancient world.

[3.7] If used in such a nuanced way, the concept of a canon can still be heuristically useful. Several essays in this issue distinguish between earlier canonical material and interpretive traditions that developed later as conventional readings of the canon. For instance, Barbara Oudová Holcátová provides examples of how many developments and conventions in later traditions are not drawn from canonical material. Such conventional elements—like the queen of Sheba's hairy legs—can be discussed in terms of cultural meme. Using terminology from fan studies, they can be described as part of fanon as opposed to canon. Monika Amsler ("Making," ¶ 3.7) defines "fanon" as "agreed-upon extracanonial knowledge by the fan community resulting from their shared interpretations" ([note 3](#)). Amsler applies the concept of fanon as a new tool for the analysis of ancient religious traditions. Her use of the concept of fanon to distinguish between interpretive communities illustrates well how the conceptual toolbox of fan studies can generate new insights in the field of ancient religious traditions.

[3.8] As with the contentious term "canon," which is one site where one might drill deeper into the differences and discontinuities between ancient writings and fan fiction, the related concept of authorship warrants some preliminary discussion. Writing fan fiction can be regarded as an act of appropriation, as illustrated by one fan fiction writer's remark: "This is my story and this is how I wanted to write it" (Herzog 2012). In contrast, the ancient scribes do not highlight the "I" of the writer. Individuality or novelty are not desirable in ancient religious writings; rather, they foreground the tradition. De Bruin points out the difference in concepts of authorship, noting, "There is a significant difference between fan fiction, which is overtly framed as secondary to a source text or famous person" and ancient writings such as the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* "which claims to be primary" (¶ 1.4). De Bruin's contribution also compares differences in the paratext—that is, the information surrounding a text. Author's notes in fan fiction, which may specify the relation of the fannish writing to the canonical material, show a concept of authorship quite different from the concept underlying the title and author attributions in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which place the work within traditional material. Other examples of ancient paratexts show that the attribution of texts to an authoritative figure from the past was a common practice. In some cases, paratexts attributing a text to a well-known biblical figure were added to existing texts at a later stage of their transmission—for example, superscriptions attributing psalms to King David (Mroczek 2016) ([note 4](#)). In other cases, newly written texts were written in the name of a well-known biblical figure—that is, pseudepigraphy. For instance, the opening statement of the Letter of Jeremiah (3rd–2nd cent. BCE) attributes this text to the sixth-century prophet and places it within this prophet's story: "A copy of a letter that Jeremiah sent to those who were to be taken to Babylon as exiles by the king of the Babylonians, to give them the message that God had commanded him" (Letter of Jeremiah 1, New Revised Standard Version).

[3.9] Such superscriptions emphasize the continuity with the traditional material. This practice raises the question of how anonymous writers of ancient religious texts conceived the relation of their writings to earlier traditional or canonical material. Biblical scholars investigating rewritten scripture often wonder about the purpose of rewriting. Was the rewritten text intended to replace the earlier text? Or do authors of rewritten texts strategically draw on the authority of the earlier text to pass on their own message? What canon may have meant to ancient commentators and rewriters is not as clearly defined as in

fan fiction; therefore, it is possible that a writer of a derivative work "attempts to portray this writing as superior to canon itself," as de Bruin (§ 3.11) argues for the *Testaments*. In ancient rewritings, we can observe various strategies to substantiate their authority, such as pseudepigraphy, where the historical author recedes behind a pseudo author, most often a well-known figure attributed with significant authority; special revelation, where a text is framed as a (secret) message not (yet) revealed in the traditional material (cf. Kristine Rosland's contribution); or prophecy, whereby a writer substantiates the authority of characters of the past by putting in their mouth predictions about events the writer already knew would occur (cf. de Bruin).

[3.10] A dichotomy has often been assumed in the relation between rewritten texts and canonical material. An ancient religious text written in response to canonical material could constitute a subversion of the canonical material, or it could build on its authority. De Bruin discusses this issue in his contribution; using the continuum of nostalgia and novelty, he argues that fan fiction shows that the two strategies are not in contradiction with each other. Rather than either undermining or substantiating its authority, a text written in response to canonical material could have been intended as a supplement, a clarification, or a guideline for the interpretation of the earlier text (Collins 2011).

[3.11] In discussing the issue of textual authority, it can thus be fruitful to consider the interaction with canonical material as similar in fan fiction and in ancient religious writings—at least in some respects. The relation of ancient religious writings to authoritative tradition actually provides a better analogy to the idea of canon in fan fiction than certain contemporary ideas of canonical authority of religious texts. Thus, we could question Herzog's (2012, § 3.2) use of the term "bible" when she writes that fan fiction writers can relegate canonical material to "a reference work that one might consult for character names and general ideas instead of being considered a bible that needs to be treated with reverence and awe and would conventionally represent the only valid text." The fannish use of canonical material she describes should probably not be seen in opposition to "reverence and awe" (cf. de Bruin, § 2.4). The history of the transmission of biblical texts indicates that in antiquity, reverence for an authoritative tradition does not mean it should be transmitted unaltered. Rather, it seems that ancient scribes took care to transmit (what they assumed to be) the correct meaning of a text, updating and changing its wording where necessary. Moreover, the texts discussed in this issue show that creative rewritings of revered texts flourished not only in the very early period before an increasing standardization of authoritative scriptures, but also throughout late antiquity. The biblical texts must have been open (and open to interpretation) to sprout such a wealth of creative extension, subversion, and commentary. We should therefore avoid unhelpful assumptions such as the idea that "authoritative" means "untouchable." To love a text and to take it seriously have always meant to use it.

#### **4. The role of the fan communities, or Who makes the rules?**

[4.1] The ancient scribes who produced, transmitted, and altered ancient religious texts were at the same time their most attentive readers. Additions, corrections, and rewritings are traces of their reading and use of the texts. We can apply the recent portmanteaux "prodsumers"



(Jenkins) or "producers" (Axel Bruns) (Jenkins quoted in Amsler, "Making," ¶ 3.1) to writers of fan fiction and the writers of ancient transformative works: readers and fans are at the same time authors, contributing both to reception and redaction. No text can exist without an audience. In this respect, the comparison of transformative writings in fandoms and in ancient religious communities draws our attention to two aspects in particular. First is the influence of the audience on the development of texts and stories. In oral cultures, but also in contemporary media operating under commercial pressure, the audience's feedback affects the way a story is told. Moreover, both in antiquity and in contemporary fandom, the audience refuses the role of passive consumer and instead takes an active role by creatively engaging with the texts. This leads us to the second aspect. In fan fiction and ancient transformative writings, we are dealing with a particular kind of audience. These producers are active, creative, often rebellious, educated stakeholders. Engaging with the texts in a transformative, responsive way requires and presupposes prior knowledge and in-depth familiarity with the canonical material. As Amsler puts it, in both contexts, "the audience is made of like-minded experts" ("Making," ¶ 2.2). Some scholars believe that the circle among which biblical texts were written, read, interpreted, and rewritten in antiquity comprised a relatively small group of literati (Ben Zvi 2012)—quite comparable to fan communities of preinternet times.

[4.2] The heuristic analogy between fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures therefore goes beyond mere literary phenomena and techniques of rewriting. As many of our contributors show (Barenblat, Oudová Holcátová, Rosland), fan fiction is not just produced in the dialogue of a fan with the canonical material but also in dialogue with the community of fans. Anna Wilson points out that when "venerable literary traditions" (the Aeneid, in Wilson's passage) and fan fiction are compared, there is a risk of "neglect[ing] one of the defining characteristics of fan fiction: its creation and circulation within communities of fans" (2016, ¶ 1.2). Fan fiction is essentially a social practice (Busse 2017; Coppa 2017; Larsen 2019). Francesca Coppa spells out the implications of this observation: "Fanfiction is not just any continuation or interpretation of a story, but one that happens within, because of, and for a particular community. This isn't a simple matter of fandom being the audience or the marketplace for the work; rather, the key point is that fanfiction is shaped to the literary conventions, expectations, and desires of that community, and is written in genres developed by and in community" (2017, 9). The same is true for the rewriting of ancient religious texts. Like the issue of canon, ancient religious texts were produced within and for a community. This community not only determines which texts are read and used but also which rules apply for the interpretation and rewriting of texts. Both fan fiction and the rewriting of ancient religious texts can therefore be studied as socioliterary practices. From this perspective, we can observe continuities as well as discontinuities in several aspects.

[4.3] One aspect is access. The social groups sharing fan fiction and ancient religious texts are both formed around the authoritative and/or canonical texts they relate to. In the ancient context, the notion of textual community has been applied to such groups. The concept of textual communities was popularized by Brian Stock and applied to ancient contexts by Jan Assmann, Judith Lieu, Guy Stroumsa, and others. A textual community is a community whose identity is defined by the use of an authoritative text. Within a textual community, defined as such, specialists handle and interpret the text, and the rest of the community is

socialized in the education about the text. The central role of a text creating social coherence might be considered similar to fan communities. However, when we imagine ancient textual communities of rewriting, we must keep in mind the issue of authority that comes with the term "specialists." A specialist with authority and access to interpretation of this text, to which the rest of the community is socialized, used to be a privileged and potentially powerful figure. Depending on the historical context, literacy would have been rare, and only a small elite would have had access to the texts. Fan communities, in contrast, have a far different social structure. In the age of the internet, fan communities are more diverse; the access and education required to be able to contribute is available to many, though certainly not universal. The creation of fan works in modern times is more open to the self-educated, self-appointed expert than ancient responses to texts were. This in turn affects how many fan works were produced, transmitted, and archived.

[4.4] Another aspect comprises rules and conventions. Today, fan fiction exists within copyright constraints as a derivative or parodic work. The ancient texts our contributors discuss were created before the existence of concepts like copyright or intellectual property, so they wrote and re(d)acted without those particular constraints. However, we can mitigate this discontinuity by discussing a continuity that occurs alongside it. In addition to constraints placed on creation by copyright laws, the fan community has its own conventions of what can and cannot be done when responding to a canonical text. Such constraints of the system (Farley 2016)—the "contextual expectations and norms" (Rosland, ¶ 3.6)—influence the rewriting. Copyright laws are comparatively recent, but ancient rewritings were also governed by rules and conventions, whether they were stated explicitly or adhered to implicitly. One example of an explicit set of rules governing the interpretive response to biblical texts in the Jewish tradition were the hermeneutic rules attributed to the sage Hillel. The seven rules of Hillel are a list of logical operations (such as concluding from the general to the particular) that are deemed valid in biblical interpretation. Yet although the rules were authoritative, they were not written in stone: there are also the thirteen rules of Rabbi Ishmael and the thirty-two rules of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose ha-Gelili (Stemberger 1996).

[4.5] A third aspect relates to commercial and technological aspects. This discontinuity does not remain so clear cut upon closer examination, so we must also address the commercial aspect and the technological possibilities of contemporary fandom. Contemporary technology allows for new forms of storytelling that were not possible in antiquity (Amsler, "Martyrs"), but stories did spread widely (as Oudová Holcátová shows in her contribution), and certain elements could go viral (as Hugh Pyper pointed out in one of our conference sessions), even in a mainly oral culture.

[4.6] Nowadays, for better or for worse, the internet serves as a vast archive. When we consider ancient texts, we should reckon with a much broader oral and written tradition of ancient religious texts than we are aware of today, most of which have been lost because they were not archived or transmitted, as Oudová Holcátová points out ([note 5](#)). The situation is different for contemporary fan fiction; everything is preserved if it is published online.

[4.7] As Amsler ("Martyrs") shows, producers of contemporary media use conscious

mechanisms to trigger fandom, but there may have been pecuniary aspects to ancient fandoms too. Amsler argues that these aspects should also be considered when we look at the ancient contexts: "Fandom can be exploited profitably, and so we also find in late antiquity that smart businessmen and women quickly understood how to make money from people's affection and passion for the saints" (§ 5.9). To us, the insight that fandom was already exploited for financial gain in antiquity was a direction of inquiry we had not foreseen—and one of the surprising insights that our research group discovered by applying fan fiction as a heuristic lens to address ancient religious texts.

[4.8] We will encounter similarities and differences like the ones mentioned above everywhere we look when attempting to compare ancient transformative works to contemporary ones. This fact points us ever more certainly to one of our larger, overarching conclusions: discussing these literatures using either/or dichotomies is not a constructive approach.

## **5. Playful writing and deep emotions**

[5.1] In August 2019, the Archive of Our Own (AO3; <https://archiveofourown.org/>) was awarded the Hugo award in the category Best Related Work. As Casey Fiesler (2019) writes,

[5.2] So AO3's nomination for the prestigious award—both for the platform itself and for the platform as a proxy for the very concept of fan fiction—is a big deal. Many, both inside and outside the sci-fi and fantasy community, deride fan fiction as mostly clumsy amateur works of sexual fantasy—critiques that, as those who have looked at them closely have pointed out, have a glaringly gendered component....[Fan fiction is] also about critiquing source texts, pushing back against harmful narratives, and adding and correcting certain types of representation (including the ways women and LGBTQ people are portrayed in these genres).

[5.3] Fan fiction is indeed a way of responding to a text in an emotionally engaged way, often with particularly gendered components. Yet it is not clumsy, amateurish, or just for fun (although even if it were, it wouldn't matter). Fan fiction engages and critiques source texts in light of important cultural shifts. We, as historians of the ancient, see tremendous potential for using fan fiction and ancient texts to investigate topics such as the development of religious movements and cultural identity negotiation in the ancient world.

[5.4] When organizing conference sessions on the topic of fan fiction and ancient scribal cultures, specifically in the context of academic biblical studies, we encountered one particularly strong reaction against our research group at the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS). Surely, we were told, it was a fallacy to draw an analogy between fan fiction and ancient religious texts because the latter were not written just for fun.

[5.5] As we learned more about fan fiction and its producers, we began to realize that calling fan fiction "just for fun," thereby dismissing its significance, is a prejudice against the practice and the art form. It undermines its heuristic potential. We point to Wilson (2016), for

whom critical (as taught and endorsed at universities) and affective (as often hidden, practiced only secretly) readings are juxtaposed. Wilson writes, "The affective quality of fan fiction—and its implications—could potentially be overlooked or erased through scholarship that identifies it too readily with classical literature, which has—correctly or not—so long been associated with western high culture and the literary canon of Great Books on which the university rests" (§ 2.10). In our case, the situation might be different because we are comparing fan fiction to responses to religious texts, which are perceived by some to be sacred. It is possible that the affective approach of fan fiction is actually similar to the affective approach of religious, sacred, and metaphysical texts. Although we might not have to fight a dismissal of affective reading, we still encounter the accusation that fan fiction is just for fun, whereas the interpretation of sacred texts is a serious business.

[5.6] If one listens to even one episode of the podcast, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* (<http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/>), discussed in Cheshire's contribution to this issue, one immediately realizes that the contemporary practice of reacting to a modern canon with one's chosen textual community is a deeply committed, serious process ([note 6](#)).

[5.7] Perusing comments on AO3, one finds incredibly supportive statements, sometimes thanking authors for helping a reader through a difficult time. Serious commitment, a firm rooting in contemporary life, and passionate discussion do not preclude fun and playfulness. Indeed, a deep emotional commitment to canon is actually another trait shared by ancient and modern practices. Let us state it plainly: although fan fiction is at times playful, it demonstrates an affective and critical involvement in contemporary society. Responses to ancient sacred/religious literature—possibly not yet affected by the affective-versus-critical dichotomy at the time of its creation—can do the same.

[5.8] Seriousness and playfulness are not mutually exclusive; likewise, a text can be approached with both attitudes, even simultaneously. Fan fiction can teach us to accept another interesting apparent dichotomy: both positive and negative feelings toward the canon generate the writing of fan fiction. An intriguing psychological question is this: what kind of unwavering commitment is it that enables readers to push back, to critique something that does not sit comfortably with them, even while committing enough time to the canon to become an expert on it? Fans are and stay committed to a text or fandom, even if they do not agree with decisions made by an author, showrunner, or ancient writer. In an interview we prepared for our first Fan Fiction and Ancient Scribal Cultures workshop in Córdoba in 2015, fan fiction writer Solveig Grebe compared the canon to a mother: "But still—it is the canon. It's like when you are angry with your mum—but you know still she's your mum, and you wouldn't say: You're not my mum anymore because you've done something I didn't like." Even though Grebe might dislike certain features of the canonical material, just like she might get angry at her mother (or fight with her, or rebel against her), she would stick to her canon and keep writing fan fiction.

[5.9] Moments in a source text where one might perceive a flaw or a gap are precisely the ones that spark especially intense affective engagement. Wilson calls this engagement with the gaps in a text erotic: "Silences and absences in the source text act as barriers to intimacy, and fan fiction writers fill these silences with their imaginative activity, enabling their own

deeper understanding of the world and characters of the source text" (2016, ¶ 1.4) Similarly, it has often been noted that the discrepancies in the biblical text inspired intense engagement from Jewish commentators in particular. The reasoning behind this may have to do with the early Jewish understanding of the source text as written by a single divinely inspired author. Barenblat writes: "Although contemporary scholarly reading of the Jewish scriptural canon presumes that Torah is an anthology of texts written by different authors at different times and stitched together by an editor with human biases and blind spots, early rabbinic Judaism presumed a text with a single Author, which meant that for the sages of the classical rabbinic period, every apparent 'flaw' in the text could (arguably must) be a locus of meaning" (¶ 5). For this specific group of commentators, the text's inconsistencies—its difficulties, its edges that inspired commentary—inspire, via gaps, disagreeableness, and discrepancies, fan writers today.

[5.10] Fan fiction may be read as a critique of contemporary canons, and ancient rewritings/reworkings are responses to ancient canons. Both can be combined. Ancient canons or dogma can be critiqued in an interplay of dogma, contemporary work, and fan fiction about this contemporary work. We have already discussed the ideas of a sacred text, canon, and bible as well as their roles as tools to shape discourse about contemporaneous issues. Textual authority does not mean that the text has to be transmitted without any change or creative extensions. In the present context, when discussing the difficulties and clashes caused by a sacred base text, we may refer to Griffin's contribution, which discusses attitudes toward queerness and the Catholic church as "storified" in *Daredevil* (2015–18) fan fiction: "Fan works are also a site for thinking through issues of religion and sexuality, and people use *Daredevil* fan works as a way to interrogate the intersections of queerness and Catholicism in particular" (¶ 3). Through the base texts—*Daredevil*, the teachings of the Catholic church—a high-stakes issue is explored through storytelling, particularly by locating and engaging with an intersectional moment of tension.

[5.11] These examples show that both fan fiction and ancient rewritings demonstrate their producers' commitment and grit, especially when faced with discomfort or opposition. Both have enormous subversive and empowering potential, and neither precludes the possibility to be playful or fun even while being deeply affected and committed.

## 6. Outlook

[6.1] Using fan fiction as a heuristic lens for analyzing ancient religious texts has been a fascinating and fruitful research perspective for us as biblical scholars. We hope fan fiction scholars will also find, from their perspective, inspiring elements in this cross-disciplinary conversation. Cheshire shows how ancient religious traditions and their techniques of transformation can enrich fannish works and scholarship: her case study, the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* (2016–), is one example of how even a commercially successful canon can carry deep meaning and inspire ethically sound choices in everyday life.

[6.2] The authors of this themed issue put phenomena observed in fan fiction in a broad historical perspective. From this vantage point, the transformative practice of fan fiction may seem neither new nor surprising because it "does what literature has always done: it adapts,

rewrites, and transforms older stories, characters, and plots" (Rosland, ¶ 1.3). And, as Rachel Barenblat writes, "Fans who grapple with inconsistent or contradictory canon can take comfort in the knowledge that those engaged with Jewish textual tradition have participated in that same struggle for millennia" (¶ 1).

[6.3] We would be happy if this special issue stimulates further exchange and keeps this fruitful conversation between scholars of fan fiction and of ancient religious texts going.

## **7. Acknowledgments**

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## **8. Notes**

[1.](#) We cut the quotation to keep the elements shared by ancient religious texts and contemporary fan fiction; the full definition of fan fiction points toward possible differences related to amateur versus professional writing: "Derivative amateur writing—that is, texts written based on another text, and not for professional publication" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 5).

[2.](#) The first official decree fixing the canon of Scriptures in the Roman Catholic Church was established at the Tridentine Council in 1546 in reaction to the challenge of the Reformation movements.

3. Compare for a definition from a more fannish perspective Hellekson and Busse (2006, 9) who define "fanon" as "the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext," adding that "fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it—or, at times, outright contradicts it."
4. Another example would be the heading of the Greek translation of the book of Lamentations, in which the book is attributed to the prophet Jeremiah.
5. This is also illustrated, for instance, by the text Kristine Rosland's contribution deals with, which has been (re)discovered only in the nineteenth century.
6. For a moving example, see the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* episode "Being a Stranger: Diagon Alley" (book 1, chapter 5; <https://soundcloud.com/hpsacredtext/being-a-stranger>), in which the hosts react to the Orlando nightclub shooting.

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# Praxis

## The Queen of Sheba as a transformative work protagonist

**Barbara Oudová Holcátová**

[0.1] *Abstract*—The story of the queen of Sheba has often puzzled commentators with its numerous late transformations, which are both colorful and sexual. The transformations of the queen of Sheba's story invoke many of the patterns familiar from fan fiction. Such transformations of ancient tales also provide preliminary explanations of why the themes in the various versions of her story appear again and again. This too shows parallels with fan fiction.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Bible; Edmund Leach; Quran; Shipping

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] The idea for this paper first came to me when I was studying materials on the subject of the Queen of Sheba and came, again and again, across commentators and other academics (e.g., Tidswell 2007) trying to somehow explain why her perfectly respectable political visit to another monarch—which is what happens in her story as presented in the Hebrew Bible—turned into a sexual encounter in most of the later literature related to her. These attempts to explain the transformation of the story resolves itself into two questions: Why the persistent sexual nature of the encounter, and why the repeated focus on Solomon's sexual relations with her when we know from the Bible that he had hundreds of wives? These are questions similar to those many people ask when they first encounter fan fiction. Given the generally acknowledged similarities between modern transformative works and traditional creative expansions on canonical material, this comparison, I believe, bears further exploration, both for the sake of understanding the Queen of Sheba's story and because the comparison may have wider implications when it comes to studying texts that build on what is considered canonical.

[1.2] The chief advantage of this comparison lies in the amount of material fan fiction affords us. Ancient writings of this nature are frequently based on a flourishing tradition that is no longer available to us, requiring us to study the different texts in relative isolation. It is certainly the case with at least some stories about the Queen of Sheba, which we know to be based on an oral tradition lost to time. The internet, on the other hand, preserves many contemporary texts in archives. As regards fan fiction, this preservation makes it possible for

us to see the breadth of transformation, allows us to observe developing and past trends. While the transformative cultures surrounding fan fiction and those surrounding ancient texts are not directly comparable—there are marked differences between fan fiction and ancient writing (Keen 2016)—there are nonetheless enough similarities for this comparison to be useful.

[1.3] In this article, I hope to use these similarities to point out some patterns in the development of sacred texts. To analyze how this can compare to modern fan fiction, I will turn chiefly to Harrington and Bielby's (1995) psychoanalytical analysis of soap fans' pleasure, Jones's (2014) exploration of the transgressive aspects of shipping, and Leach's (2000b) analysis of power in all its interconnected forms.

## **2. Versions of the Queen of Sheba's story**

[2.1] First, allow me to retell, in brief, the different versions of the Queen of Sheba's story that are currently at our disposal and that can be considered part of living religious traditions. Deciding what can be seen as part of a living religious tradition is not always easy and could include popular books as well as film and television adaptations of the Queen of Sheba's character, many of which could be taken into account here. But for the purposes of this paper, I will mostly leave such recent adaptations aside and instead provide a historical survey ending in the nineteenth century.

[2.2] The oldest version we know of the Queen of Sheba's story is from the Hebrew Bible (1 Kgs 10:1–13; 2 Chr 9:1–12), in which the Queen of Sheba makes a political visit to Solomon and tests him with riddles. He answers to her satisfaction, and after seeing his power and riches, she praises his God. After receiving gifts from him—a passage sometimes translated as "he gave her her heart's desire"—she departs from Jerusalem. In this context, she is also mentioned (as Queen of the South) in the New Testament.

[2.3] There is some argument about which version comes next (Silberman 1974), but if we refer only to canonical material and holy books for now, the Quranic version of the story (27:20–44) can be considered to follow the Hebrew Biblical version. This version tells of Solomon's summoning the Queen of Sheba to him after he was told of her existence and her sun worship. She discusses his letter with her advisors, worried about a possible invasion, as "kings tend" to invade other kingdoms. As a consequence of their advice, she first tries to placate him with gifts and then, when they are rejected, goes to him as ordered. While she is on her way, Solomon steals her throne and masks it, preparing a test. When presented with it, however, she recognizes that it is "like hers." She has worse luck with the second test, where Solomon meets her in a palace with a floor of glass. She believes it to be water and hikes up her skirts, caught by his trick. Immediately afterwards, she converts to God worship, stating that she bows "alongside Solomon to God, Lord of the Worlds."

[2.4] Perhaps from a similar time period—dating is difficult in this context (Lassner 1994)—comes the story from Targum Sheni (an Aramaic translation of the original Hebrew Bible text). Here, too, Solomon summons the Queen of Sheba, this time outright threatening war. She hurries to comply—no great wonder, perhaps, when we consider that in this version, her

country is supposed to be in a golden age without wars and rich in happiness and capital. She does not have any way to fight him. When she arrives, she first embarrasses herself by mistaking a servant for Solomon, and she is then tricked by a glass floor, much like in the Quranic version of the story. This time, though, when she reveals her legs, Solomon also notes that they are hairy, which disgusts him. He declares hairy legs would be fitting for a man but are terrible on a woman. The Queen of Sheba keeps her dignity by ignoring this remark and proceeds to test him with riddles, like in the Hebrew Bible. He answers to her satisfaction, and she praises him. Consequently, he takes her to his chambers, which she praises again for their richness. She then gives Solomon gifts, and he reciprocates by giving her all her heart's desire.

[2.5] Another Jewish version can be found in the text *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. It is quite short and simply states that when the Queen of Sheba came to Jerusalem, Solomon wanted to have sex with her, but her pubic hair (yes, in this case it is not hairy legs) put him off, and so he had her shaved and then "had his way with her." She reacts to this by singing Solomon's praises. The child born from their union is Nebuchadnezzar, who is later responsible for the fall of the first temple of Jerusalem.

[2.6] Later Muslim transformations of the story captured in various anthologies of the *Tales of the Prophets*, record, as is customary, multiple versions of the tale. The main storyline remains similar, however. The version provided in al-Tha'labī's (2002) text goes something like this: Bilqis, for that is the name given to the Queen of Sheba here, is a half jinn and daughter of the King of Sheba. When her father dies, the people of her country place a man on the throne rather than her. However, the man turns out to be a serial rapist. When Bilqis hears of this, she pretends to be willing to marry him and then kills him on their wedding night. Afterwards, she is declared Queen of Sheba. The story with Solomon follows after this and goes similarly to the version provided in the Quran. However, this version includes the hairy legs incident as well as some riddles, including one in which Bilqis dresses boy servants as girls and girl servants as boys and then asks Solomon to guess their actual gender. In some variants recorded by al-Tha'labī, Solomon wants to marry Bilqis but requires her body hair to be removed before he will do so.

[2.7] In the Ethiopian version of the tale, the queen, here called Makeda, comes to see Solomon for his wisdom, and after witnessing it converts to Judaism. She spends a long time learning from him, but when she finally decides it is time to go home, Solomon is reluctant to let her leave and decides he wants her to bear him a son. To that end, he invites her to dinner and feeds her large amounts of spicy food. He then offers to let her sleep on his couch. The queen agrees on the condition that he not rape her. He agrees on the condition she will steal nothing from him. They both swear to this and go to sleep. She wakes up in the middle of the night thirsty, and the only water available is by his bedside. As she drinks it, he wakes and accuses her of stealing. Since that breaks their agreement, he proceeds to have sex with her. She bears him a son, who later takes the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia.

[2.8] The last relevant narrative is the one by Saadya ben Joseph called *Tale of the Queen of Sheba*, in which the Queen of Sheba comes to Jerusalem because she is impressed when she

hears about Solomon's wisdom. She poses a number of riddles, all of which he answers successfully. He then wants to have sex with her, but he is aware that she is a jinn and therefore has hairy legs, so he uses the glass floor trick to expose those legs so that he has an excuse to ask her to shave. Afterwards, they have sex, and she sings his praises. Here, too, Nebuchadnezzar is born following the union.

[2.9] Finally, the Queen of Sheba plays a small role in the Christian *Legend of the True Cross*, where she shows her wisdom by recognizing the wood of the true cross (Watson 1974). The remaining, usually folkloric versions of the Queen of Sheba's tale known to us today tend to paint her in a rather more negative light. In the Kabbalistic tradition, she is frequently called a demon and identified with Lilith, and in Jewish folklore in nineteenth-century Germany, she is depicted as a child-murdering succubus (Silberman 1974). Both versions differ significantly from the Hebrew Bible's story of a wise queen.

### **3. Shipping and canon**

[3.1] Clearly, there are plenty of differences between the earliest version of the story presented above and the many later ones. Fan fiction readers and writers, though, would probably be able to recognize some patterns. As I have mentioned, in the academic study of the Queen of Sheba texts, there are frequent attempts to explain the development of the story, particularly the increasing inclusion of sex. Although there are only some small hints in the Hebrew Bible that could imply a sexual or romantic relationship—and much has been made, for example, of the phrase that Solomon gave the queen "all her heart's desire"—she and Solomon go on to copulate or marry in many later versions.

[3.2] While the explanations for this change provided by scholars never seemed particularly convincing to me, they did remind me of something I was familiar with from a very different context: the frequently mystifying combinations of characters in ships, that is, the romantic or sexual pairings in fan fiction. When one has been in fandom for some time, one gets used to the idea of ships and to the ships that at first seemed odd, but newcomers are often surprised when they glimpse the wide variety of sexual and romantic pairings on offer, thinking, "These two together? But they barely even interact in canon!" This is, precisely, the crux of the problem. It is the same mystery that Hebrew Bible commentators face when dealing with the Queen of Sheba's story and its transformation to include descriptions of her sexual exploits. Fan fiction provides us with a vaster amount of data and even with the ability to ask the actual authors and readers, both, what appeals about a given pairing, so perhaps fan fiction could shed some new light on why transformations of the Biblical tale include increasing and varying references to the Queen of Sheba's sexual union with Solomon.

[3.3] In the Harry Potter fandom, the three most popular ships (Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, and Harry Potter and Severus Snape) do not occur in canon, that is, they do not occur in the source texts written by J. K. Rowling. Moreover, out of the three, two relationships are depicted as antagonistic rather than romantic relationships in the commercially published texts. Only the fourth most popular ship appears as a relationship in the source material as well as in fans' transformative texts. Noncanonical

relationships further down the list of the top ten pairings in the fandom include Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape, Remus Lupin and Severus Snape, and Harry Potter and Voldemort. Aside from the interesting point that many of the same characters appear over and over again in this list, in different combinations (which is not, let me note, due to an overall lack of characters in the book series), we can see that a number of the romantic pairings preferred in the fandom are based on antagonistic relationships in the published novels.

[3.4] Such a pattern is less observable in other fandoms. If we look at statistical examinations of Archive of Our Own for the most popular fandoms (Destination: Toast! 2017), we see that, for example, in the Sherlock Holmes fandom, the pairing of close friends Sherlock Holmes and John Watson is popular. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom, Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes would be another case of canonical close friendship read as romance. Pairings are also made between characters who have not met in canon: in the Sherlock Holmes fandom, for example, Mycroft Holmes and Greg Lestrade were often paired even before they met on screen, and in the Marvel fandom, Clint Barton and Phil Coulson are in a similar position. It is clear, then, that the degree to which a ship is represented in canon has little to no bearing on its popularity in fandom. Sometimes there are additional factors—for example, some academics posit that the attractiveness of the actors plays a part in the decision to follow or write fan fiction within a ship (Thomas 2013; Williams 2011)—but that is hardly the only reason.

[3.5] In other words, the oddity of pairings like the Queen of Sheba with Solomon are not a problem particular to the transformations of her story. There appears to be a general tendency to imagine romantic or sexual relationships where there were none in the source material. Academic literature on fandom has a number of answers to the question why. Jones (2014) shows how romantic pairings can tie into central themes of speculative fiction, becoming an additional transgressive factor alongside the supernatural phenomena that appear in the canon. She speaks, in particular, of slash fiction, or same-sex couples in fan fiction, but certainly other kinds of pairings can be transgressive as well, as is perhaps best demonstrated by popular hero/villain pairings. Of the aforementioned noncanonical Harry Potter pairings, all but one would fall under this category. The exception, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, could certainly be considered transgressive enough simply on the merit of Remus Lupin's lycanthropy (more on that later) and Sirius Black's status as an escaped, if wrongly imprisoned, convict.

[3.6] A completely different approach was presented by Harrington and Bielby (1995), who explained the problem of shipping using psychoanalysis. According to object-relations theory, building relationships to the external world and with the people who inhabit it is an essential part of human development. To bridge the gap between ourselves and the outside, we practice using transitional phenomena, which are things that simultaneously are and are not real. Popular media creates, for fans, a middle zone between the internal and external world, which allows them to mediate seemingly unbridgeable gaps. Popular media are not alone in fulfilling this function—sports, religion, or art of any kind can play this role—but according to Harrington and Bielby, what is so crucial about fictional relationships serving this function is that romantic and sexual relationships also create a bridge between external

and internal. Fans, by avidly following a romantic story, are falling in love not chiefly with the characters but with the relationship depicted. Williams (2011) further develops this by examining the rewards shipping can provide to its practitioners and the creative interaction with the source materials it requires.

[3.7] This, again, is best illustrated by the shipping of antagonists, where the initial distance between the two characters is greater—and the act of bridging more complicated—than it is between two friends or two people who are already depicted as romantically involved. Fan fiction also focuses on getting behind the mask of the antagonistic partner to understand the character's motivations and point of view. In the Harry Potter fandom, this often takes a very literal form, especially in pairings including Severus Snape, where mind-reading is practiced by the couple and leads to the breaking down of barriers between them (e.g., MillieJoan 2016; Loten 2012). The theme of bridging the gap between internal and external could not be clearer.

[3.8] Both Jones's (2014) and Harrington and Bielby's (1995) theories fit the transformations of the Queen of Sheba's story as well as they do fan fiction. The pairing between her and Solomon is certainly transgressive, especially given the emphasis on her otherness in the later versions of her tale, in which she becomes a jinn. And while her story does not precisely focus on the more romantic aspects of what Harrington and Bielby describe as the "transitional dimension" of relationships—where one partner discovers to what degree their mental idea of their potential partner matches their lived identity—the basic point still stands; it is merely manifested differently. Solomon does not wonder whether the Queen of Sheba truly loves him as he dreamed she would, but in the later Muslim versions of the story, he does wonder, before he meets her, whether she truly had hairy/demonic legs, as he was afraid she would, or whether she is clever enough to answer his riddles. The mystery of the other person is revealed and culminates in a sexual encounter. Solomon's increasing antagonism toward the Queen of Sheba in many of the later versions also makes good sense in this context. As Harrington and Bielby say, readers are in love with the idea of the bridging of a gap between two characters. This is why transformative versions of the Queen of Sheba's tale introduce a gap between her and Solomon that can then be overcome.

[3.9] This only answers the first half of my original question: Why sex? The question of why sex must occur between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in particular remains. It has been shown in my listing of popular ships in popular fandoms that certain characters appear repeatedly in pairings, while others hardly appear at all. It has also been shown that, most commonly, the pairings that appear repeatedly include an antagonistic relationship or a transgressive aspect to the relationship. So to answer the question of why the Queen of Sheba is so prominent in these sexual transformative versions of the tale, I would give the psychoanalytic explanation above a small twist. The Queen of Sheba, in the Hebrew Bible, represents the foreign and distant, and so the external, better than another love interest would. Sex with her is, in Jones's (2014) terminology, more transgressive. As such, the desire to make her and Solomon a couple and thus to bridge the gap is natural, to some degree. The queen is a fascinating character, and readers and authors do not want her to simply disappear back to the distant Sheba; a relationship with Solomon is a way to tie her to him. The bridging of gaps is what draws readers to reimagine characters' relationships as

romantic and/or sexual, and in turn, these stories often lose their attraction after the protagonists get together (Jones). The bigger the gap, the bigger the desire to mend it.

[3.10] Not all that we learn in fan fiction works equally well for ancient texts ([note 1](#)). What holds true for both, however, is that authors of transformative works do not have to rely on relationships actualized inside the source material to find inspiration for a romantic story. Their own imagination plays a much more crucial part—be it imagining how the intellect of Hermione Granger could match that of Severus Snape and inspire an intimate relationship or imagining how the Queen of Sheba's intelligence would hold up against Solomon's tests. More, fascination with intimate relationships, be they sexual or romantic, grows most often where there is a transgressive aspect to them—a wider gap to be bridged. This is true in fandom as well as in transformative versions of ancient texts, like the Queen of Sheba's tale.

#### **4. Beyond sex and romance**

[4.1] It is worth mentioning, however, that the sexual encounter between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is not the only repeated pattern that we can find in the later versions of that story. There are other patterns which come up time and again, though they appear nowhere in the first known version of the tale, in the Hebrew Bible. For example, there is the matter of the queen's supposedly hairy legs, which irritate Solomon. It does not appear in the Hebrew Bible's version of the tale, and yet it appears with higher frequency than other elements which do, in fact, appear there (like the queen's visit to Solomon being her own initiative, which almost never appears outside of the Bible). Similarities to this can also be found in fan fiction. One example is the motif of Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy sharing a living space during their last year at school because of the student leadership positions they hold, as Head Boy and Head Girl. On the surface, their sharing a living space makes no sense—no school would ever permit two students of the opposite sex to share a single living space—yet this motif has become immensely popular in the fandom. As we have seen with sex, the seeds for a particular development popular among readers do not always have to be present in the official or first known literary version of a text. As with particular ships, the question is: How is it possible that certain elements of the story have become so widespread? And as with ships, the question is twofold: Why the repetitive motifs in general, and why these repetitive motifs in particular?

[4.2] These elements have the quality of a meme, in the original sense—a cultural unit that is replicated by the people using it, again and again, because it in some ways fits their needs (Dawkins 1976). As with the characters' romantic pairings, there must be something about the repeated meme that compels readers to (re)use it on a collective level. The answer to "Why do repetitive patterns appear in transformative texts?" may simply be "Because repetitive patterns appear everywhere." The memetic nature of culture is one of its central characteristics, be it on the level of very large ideas (Dawkins talks of the idea of God as a meme) or very small ones (such as the idea that the Queen of Sheba has hairy legs).

[4.3] From here, we move to the question of why particular motifs are repeated more often. I will focus here on the Queen of Sheba's leg hair, and here, too, a parallel with fan fiction can help. In particular, to understand the queen's body hair, and her jinni ancestry, better, we can



focus on another frequent phenomenon in fandom: demonization, or reimagining characters as nonhuman creatures. In the case of the Queen of Sheba, gradual demonization, both in the literal sense (her transformation into a nonhuman creature) and in the metaphorical sense (her transformation from a respectable monarch into a dangerous succubus who kills children), occurred over time (Lassner 1994). In the fan fiction context, demonization as a term is most commonly used in the second sense: characters who may have been depicted positively in the canon are depicted, in transformative works, in a negative light. For example, Ron Weasley is often demonized in the Harry Potter fandom, particularly in the stories that pair Hermione Granger with someone other than him. His actions are assumed to be taken in bad faith, and behavioral patterns with a negative connotation for most readers frequently appear. For example, Ron often cheats on Hermione in stories in which he is demonized. Presumably, in case of the Queen of Sheba, demonization would be carried out by those—whole communities rather than individuals—who disliked her and considered her connection to King Solomon a negative, perhaps in the context of his foreign wives who turned him from the Lord (1 Kgs 11:1–3). We see cases of this in German Jewish folklore or the Kabbalistic tradition.

[4.4] Demonization in a literal sense—that is, the Queen of Sheba's becoming nonhuman and even gaining some literally monstrous aspects—appeared in stories long before her metaphorical demonization. A better explanation for this can be found in a different aspect of fan fiction. I have briefly already mentioned the transgressive potential of writing a sexual encounter or a romantic relationship with a nonhuman character above—Remus Lupin's lycanthropy and the popularity of his being paired with Sirius Black is a clear example of the popularity of human-nonhuman pairings. A tradition also exists of making protagonists who are fully human in canon into supernatural creatures who then enter into relationships. For example, there are plenty of demon AUs—or alternate universe stories—on Archive of Our Own. In this genre of fan fiction, one or more of the characters in the story becomes a supernatural creature, usually a demon, while preserving most character traits of the original. For example, in "Chrysalism" by badassontheblock (2019), Harry Potter accidentally summons a demon who turns out to be Draco Malfoy. There seems to be something particularly attractive about a relationship with a supernatural being. As with the sexual and romantic interpersonal relationships depicted in fan fiction, characters' superhuman nature is rarely included because there are any hints of it in the canon. Transforming a character from a human into a supernatural being is a completely independent choice fans make because they find the supernatural compelling, perhaps because of its transgressive aspects and the way it increases the distance between characters, making the bridging of the gap more satisfying, as argued above. We could speculate about whether different characters are more suited to different kinds of AUs, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. What is important here is that in some ways, the answer to the question of why Muslim authors of the *Tales of the Prophets* think to make Bilqis a jinn might simply be because they were writing a jinn AU.

[4.5] The case is a little different in the above-mentioned folklore and Kabbalistic versions of the queen's character, where the two kinds of demonization combine. Here, the Queen of Sheba is both inhuman and evil. That does not normally happen in fan fiction, where the demonic characters are depicted in a positive light, often a more positive light than in canon,

as in the case of the above-cited "Chrysalism" (badassontheblock 2019). In the case of the queen, different factors like gender and her position as an outsider intersect to create a uniquely powerful image of her otherness, which has developed into more interwoven forms of demonization over the very long period of time her character has existed. Still, it is important to note that she was inhuman in many stories without being evil, so the two kinds of demonization can be considered separately.

[4.6] It is unlikely to be accidental that most creatures chosen for this kind of AU are powerful. Someone simply supernatural is not interesting as a character in a romantic or sexual relationship: they must be both supernatural and powerful. And if that is an important enough factor here, it might just help with the question of why body hair, of all things, is such a repeated motif in the stories about the Queen of Sheba: the hair represents wilderness and wildness. It makes the queen less civilized and therefore less human, closer to animals and other beings existing beyond the borders of culture. Wilderness and otherness are deeply connected (Hailwood 2000), and, as Leach shows, both are related to power (Leach 2000b), just as hair itself is related to power (Leach 2000a). If demon AUs show, among other things, that power tied to otherness is an attractive topic to readers and writers both, it is not surprising that the queen's inhumanity and, more frequently, her body hair, as markers of both her power and otherness, would become widespread motifs.

[4.7] In fact, Leach's (2000a, 2000b) arguments may be helpful in tying this to the answer to the question of "why sex" from the previous section. Power, Leach argues, is always in-between, that is, it is always found in relations; liminality and transgression are, according to him, the very source and nature of power. If this is true, then the fascination with the queen's body hair and jinni ancestry, as with fans' fascination with demon AUs, are one more way in which fans express fascination with sexual and romantic relationships. Leach (2000b) makes this comparison explicit in "The Nature of War," though he only explicitly discusses sex, not romance (for more on their interconnectedness, see Driscoll 2006). Power, sex, and romance are all related to transgressing boundaries between oneself and the other, about bridging the gap. Fascination with liminality remains the crux. While I could continue to discuss the way sex and power are directly interconnected both in fan fiction and in the stories about the Queen of Sheba, such an exploration is beyond the scope of this article.

## 5. Conclusions

[5.1] I argue that an explicit comparison of fan fiction to the Queen of Sheba's story—and the transformations of texts more broadly—helps us to better understand the different versions of her story. One rather obvious benefit is that considering the various versions of the tale as transformative fan works frees us from having to find kernels of her attraction to Solomon in the Biblical version of the tale. There are other benefits, however. Speaking in fan fiction terms, the *Tales of the Prophet* tell a jinni AU version of the Queen of Sheba's tale, while *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* can be considered to be porn without plot (PWP), as the focus is entirely on the sexual encounter, with canonical phrases being used as double-entendres. Using terms used to categorize fans' transformative works makes it clear how similar the mechanisms at work in ancient scribal cultures are to the ones we can observe at work in online fandom today.

[5.2] I mentioned at the beginning of this article that we sometimes only have an incomplete ancient story because traditions, such as the oral transference of tales, are not preserved. Even literary versions of the tale—that is, versions that were written down—have been lost to time. There was a widespread oral tradition behind the Queen of Sheba's story—the *Tales of the Prophets* are known to be stories written down from oral narratives (Lybarger 2008). Stinchcomb (2017) recently postulated that we should assume a common oral origin for both the Quranic and the Targum Sheni versions of the story, to avoid endless discussions about which came first. The Quran, to the best of our knowledge, originated in the Arabian peninsula, whereas the Levant is the most likely origin of the Targum Sheni version of the tale. If we hold to the theory of a shared oral tradition, it implies the story was told both in the cosmopolitan areas around Damascus and Jerusalem and in the relatively remote and isolated Hijaz, the birthplace of Islam. This demonstrates an impressive degree of interconnectedness comparable, to a limited degree, to the connectedness of digital fandom.

[5.3] Fan fiction is necessarily created in a dialogue—not only the dialogue between a fan and the canonical material but also that between a fan and the wider fandom. The same holds true for literature that builds and expands on religious texts, only in the case of such literature, larger parts of this dialogue are unavailable to us. As such, it is somewhat pointless to look for motivations for the transformation of particular scenes as if these transformations were isolated cases. The reasons why certain motifs become prevalent and repeated may be understood through the lens of psychoanalysis, but at least in part, they lie in the living dialogue of the community in which the stories were shared and transformed. The process of transformation is an involved and complicated one. In case of the Queen of Sheba, we see fragments of the tale transformed throughout a time period spanning centuries. In fan fiction, we can watch it live, though it can be difficult to map the exact transformative processes taking place ([note 2](#)).

[5.4] It is not my intention to provide definitive answers regarding why readers very often transform the works they read to depict certain romantic or sexual pairings, why particular characters are popular, and why particular patterns develop and are repeated. I wish to suggest some possible answers to these questions in this paper, following the theories of Leach (2000a, 2000b), Jones (2014), and Harrington and Bielby (1995). However, my chief goal has been to show the many ways in which the story of the Queen of Sheba behaves exactly like fan fiction stories do, and thus to illustrate that her case is not special—in fact, the transformations to which her tale has been subject may instead reflect a more general human attitude towards texts, one that remains essentially unchanged.

## 6. Notes

[1.](#) As an aside, it should also be said that the case of the Queen of Sheba shows that, contrary to many gendered assumptions, shipping is not only a pastime for women, since the scribes through whom her tale passed to us were, generally speaking, men. However, I do not wish to diminish the role of women keeping the tradition of the story of the Queen of Sheba alive. It would be fascinating to know if and how women readers identified with the queen. Williams (2011) describes identification with characters as common among the fans she studies.

2. One example of the mapping of a motif's evolution—in this case, a ship—can be found in Catherine Coker's (2013) article "Earth 616, Earth 1610, Earth 3490—Wait, what universe is this again?"

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# Praxis

## Reading the *Apocryphon of John* as Genesis fan fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—This reading of the late antique Coptic apocryphal work the *Apocryphon of John* (*Ap. John*) as Bible fan fiction finds that *Ap. John* uses the same transformative techniques as fan fiction, but that the manner in which these transformations are legitimized depends on the Christian tradition *Ap. John* is part of. Several strategies for transforming canon are operative in *Ap. John*. Even when Genesis is subverted in *Ap. John*, the rewriting of canonical material is legitimized through strategies already established in other biblical texts. In this manner, *Ap. John* uses canon to subvert canon.

[0.2] Keywords—Christian apocrypha; Coptic; Nag Hammadi

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] Monotheism and the belief that the one God is the creator of the universe are central tenets of Christianity. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, central in defining Christian orthodoxy, states in its opening line, "We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible" ([note 1](#)). The story of creation from the book of Genesis constitutes the central scriptural foundation for this belief. However, other takes on the story of creation existed in late antiquity. The same canonical material that was used to support the creed also served as the source text for alternative creation narratives. The following text, from the *Apocryphon of John* (*Ap. John*, also known as *The Secret Book of John*)—a late antique work preserved in Coptic—challenges the understanding that the supreme God and the creator are identical:

[1.2] He saw the creation beneath him and the multitude of angels beneath him, these who had come forth from him. He said to them, "I am a jealous god. Without me there is no one," already indicating to the angels beneath him that there is another god. For if there were not another, of whom would he be jealous? ([note 2](#))

[1.3] This description of the creator indicates that he is not in fact the only god. The Genesis

narrative, from the creation to the flood, is significantly changed in *Ap. John*, with new details, new interpretations, and a reversal of the roles of heroes and villains. In this transformative practice, *Ap. John* resembles fan fiction, which does what literature has always done: it adapts, rewrites, and transforms older stories, characters, and plots. Reading *Ap. John* as fan fiction opens up new analytic categories, and it provides opportunities to compare the transformative writing of an early Christian apocryphon with the transformative writing of today's fan fiction.

## 2. Canon and apocrypha

[2.1] Sherlock Holmes fans adopted the word *canon* after the Catholic priest Monsignor Ronald Knox (2011) presented a satirical lecture where he discussed chronology, internal conflicts, and authorship of the Holmes stories with methods known from biblical studies (Busse 2017). Fandom in general has played with the religious connotations of the term ever since. The terms "Word of God" for statements from an author or director or "The Powers That Be" for those in control of a media product are other examples of such adaption of religious terms in fan speak (<https://fanlore.org/>). Definitions of canon in fan fiction studies, such as Sheenagh Pugh's "the source material accepted as authentic...within the fandom, known by all readers in the same way that myth and folk tale were once commonly known" (2006, 26) and Kristina Busse's "collection of texts considered to be the authoritative source for fan creations" (2017, 101), show that even in this new context, the term retains meaning it developed in early Christianity.

[2.2] The word *canon* is derived from the Greek word for "measuring rod." In early Christianity, it could mean both "rule" and "list." Its earliest use was primarily in the first sense, as a standard something was measured against, "the normative quality, or the authoritativeness, of certain books" (Thomassen 2010, 9). From the middle of the fourth century CE, the term gradually came to signify a (closed) collection of texts, which eventually became the list of biblical books deemed to be authoritative by the church hierarchy (McDonald 2007). The act of making lists of canonical books therefore did not simply document which books were considered authoritative. It was also an act of excluding books that should not be given such status. Many canon lists included warnings against reading apocrypha (Gallagher and Meade 2017).

[2.3] The word *apocryphon* is from Greek and means "hidden" or "secret." *Ap. John* is a self-designated apocryphon; indeed, the term occurs in the title of the book in all the extant manuscripts. *Ap. John* is therefore *The Secret Book of John*, a book with a message not meant for all but rather reserved for a select few. This meaning corresponds well with the contents of the book. However, in early Christian discourse, the meaning of the term shifted from the pre-Christian positive understanding of a book of esoteric wisdom and came to signal noncanonical, fraudulent, or heretical works (Shoemaker 2008). This shift is linked to how the emerging Christian orthodoxy gained control of canon by linking it to the church hierarchy (Pagels 1989; Brakke 1994). According to orthodox understanding, there could be no new or secret revelations. Christ had appointed apostles to bring his message to the world. The apostles had handed down the responsibility and authority to interpret the message to their successors, the bishops of the church. Therefore, only writings recognized by the



church hierarchy as deriving from the apostles or their closest associates could be deemed authentic.

[2.4] For centuries, stories similar to the rewritten creation narrative in *Ap. John* were only known through their opponents (Christian heresiologists like Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Tertullian), who referred to them when arguing against their teachings and authenticity (Pagels 1989; Williams 1996; King 2003). As a result of this process, *Ap. John*, along with other such subversive narratives, disappeared from the Christian tradition until manuscripts containing mostly unknown Christian apocrypha were discovered in Egypt in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

### 3. Fan fiction as a heuristic lens

[3.1] Despite many parallels, I do not suggest that *Ap. John* is fan fiction, though definitions such as Pugh's "fiction based on a situation or characters originally created by someone else" (2006, 9) would allow it to be characterized as such. Instead, I see fan fiction as providing a set of tools that may be used to better understand early Christian transformative writing. The special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work," successfully uses "fandom, its practices, and its vocabularies...as a heuristic lens to open up new approaches to classical, medieval, and early modern texts" (Willis 2016, ¶ 1.6). This issue demonstrates that although not all transformative work should be considered fan fiction, the discussion of fan fiction in relation to the classical canon can lead to new insights into both. It is through this same heuristic lens that I explore *Ap. John*.

[3.2] Shannon K. Farley (2016) offers a theoretical framework for comparing fan fiction and other transformative works. From the vantage point of translation studies, she extends André Lefevere's (1992) notion of rewriting by adding fan fiction to the forms of rewriting. Farley treats all these forms as transformative. Like Lefevere, she applies systems theory, in which systems consist of texts, readers and writers, cultural expectations, and norms.

[3.3] According to Farley, a literary system places a "a series of normative constraints" (2016, ¶ 2.1) on writers: "When a text is rewritten, it is rewritten to satisfy the requirements of a particular system, in form or in ideology" (¶ 2.1). Farley shows how different translations of Homer are transformative works, rewritten to fit the systems of their time and place. Transformative works "make the same transformative moves" (¶ 1.3) as fan fiction does, "informed by the system in which the rewriter is writing" (¶ 1.3). While Farley focuses on how the rewriting is governed by the constraints of the system, Lefevere additionally allows for rewriting that

[3.4] choose[s] to oppose the system, to try to operate outside of its constraints; for instance by reading works of literature in other than received ways, by writing works of literature in ways that differ from those prescribed or deemed acceptable at a particular time in a particular place, or by rewriting works of literature in such a manner that they do not fit in with the dominant poetics or ideology of a given time and place. (1992, 10)



[3.5] Still, it is the system that supplies the constraints the writer is conforming to or writing against. The time, place, and social group of the texts inform which transformations need to be done, and how they can be done. Fan fiction and other forms of rewriting thus have transformative elements in common, although the context in which the rewriting is done differs.

[3.6] Fan fiction transforms its source material in numerous ways. Henry Jenkins lists ten possible ways to rewrite a TV show, highlighting different strategies that fan fiction authors use to "rewrite and rework [a primary text], repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored" (2012, 162). Jenkins's strategies are recontextualization, expanding the series time line, refocalization, moral realignment, genre shifting, crossovers, character dislocation, personalization, emotional intensification, and eroticization. Jenkins does not present his list as exhaustive; nor does he suggest that one piece of fan fiction would use all strategies. He simply lists some strategies that fan writers use. Following Farley, I will show how some of the "same transformative moves" (2016, ¶ 1.3) described by Jenkins can also be found in *Ap. John*. I will investigate how contextual expectations and norms influence the use of these strategies. To be able to investigate how the rewriting in *Ap. John* is adapted to system requirements, we need to know something about the context of the work.

#### **4. The where and when of *Ap. John***

[4.1] After being lost for centuries, *Ap. John* resurfaced when the manuscript Codex Papyrus Berolinensis 8502 (BG) was offered for sale on the antiquities market in Cairo in 1896. A series of unfortunate events delayed publication of the three so-called Gnostic apocrypha it contained until 1955 (Till 1955) ([note 3](#)). By then, three other manuscripts containing *Ap. John* had been found—Nag Hammadi Codex (NHC) II, III, and IV—in a discovery of twelve books containing mostly until then unknown apocrypha (Waldstein and Wisse 1995).

[4.2] *Ap. John* is often considered a second-century work. The Christian bishop Irenaeus of Lyons paraphrased a part of what now is the opening of the revelation in of *Ap. John* around the year 180 CE. The manuscripts containing *Ap. John* are, however, from the fourth or possibly fifth century CE; indeed, BG may even be from the sixth century (Kruttsch and Poethke 1984; Waldstein and Wisse 1995). There are different theories concerning the origin of the work, and a major debate has been whether the work originated in Christian circles (Pétrément 1990; Logan 1996) or whether there was a Jewish stage (Dahl 1978; Pearson 1976, 2004) of the work before the one we currently know (Creech 2017). However, *Ap. John* in its current form is Christian.

[4.3] Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott (2015) persuasively argue that the NHC, as well as the codex BG 8502, came from a monastic setting. The NHC's probable fourth-century date situates the texts in the foundational period of Egyptian monasticism, during a time of rapid Christian growth. It is during this century that Christianity went from being a minority to the majority religion of the Roman empire (Stark 1997; Depauw and Clarysse 2013). It is a time, too, of controversy over the understanding of Christ and of efforts to regulate canon. The first monastic leaders were not under a bishop's jurisdiction, and for a while their authority

was independent of the church (Goehring 1986, 1997). This is the context in which we find *Ap. John* and its "interpretation, appropriation, and reconstruction" (Jenkins 2012, 165) of Genesis.

[4.4] The late antique readers of the extant versions of *Ap. John* were thus situated in a monastic community, and it is therefore this community that is the closest analogy to a fandom. It is difficult to overstate the importance of a fan community to fan fiction: "Fanfiction is not just any continuation or interpretation of a story, but one that happens within, because of, and for a particular community" (Coppa 2017, 9). To Rachel Barenblat (2011), it is the community affiliation that makes a work transformative rather than just derivative.

[4.5] A fan fiction writer can presuppose canon literacy from the readers of fan fiction. In fact, the successful rewriting of canon depends on this. Reanalyzing the source material (rereading, rewatching) may be ritualized; fans' rereading of, commenting on, and exploration of canon is part of what makes a fandom a community. These practices immerse the fan in canon (Jenkins 2012). Kasper Bro Larsen (2019) holds that the hypertextual and social practices of fan fiction also describe the development of Christian apocrypha. In a monastic setting, the biblical texts rewritten and referred to in *Ap. John* would have been used in ritualized communal settings, such as liturgy. Lillian I. Larsen (2017, 2018) demonstrates how Bible texts were the basic pedagogical texts in monastic education. In reading *Ap. John* using the strategies of reading fan fiction, we can therefore presuppose a canon literacy in the readers of *Ap. John* similar to that of today's readers of fan fiction.

## **5. The story told in *Ap. John***

[5.1] *Ap. John*'s story opens as the Apostle John comes to the temple in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Christ. There he has a run-in with a Pharisee, who claims that John has been misled. Upset by this, John leaves the temple for the wilderness. Christ appears to him and introduces him to secret teachings: the true account of the creation of the world (BG 19:6–22:17).

[5.2] The revelation that follows can be divided into two main parts: a description of the divine realms and a rewritten account of the creation and flood narratives from Genesis. *Ap. John* is a complicated read; the first part is particularly challenging and seems to have confused even the scribes copying it. The description of the divine world starts with the supreme God, called the Invisible Spirit, and it details how multiplicity could come into being from unity (BG 22:17–36:15). The original unity—the Spirit—reflected on itself. Its thought took on existence as an independent feminine divine entity, Barbelo. Numerous divine aspects, aeons, came into being at the request of Barbelo. During this process of divine emanations, Christ was born from Barbelo and the Spirit. These constitute *Ap. John*'s version of the trinity—the Father (the Invisible Spirit), the Mother (Barbelo), and the Son (Christ) (BG 21:19–21, 29:18–32:19).

[5.3] Plato's *Timaeus* is an important intertext (King 2006; Pleše 2006). *Ap. John* presupposes a reality where everything below has a model above. The true world is the

spiritual world, and the material world is a lesser imitation (BG 44:5–9). Because the world below is simply a (much) lesser copy of the world above, the creation narrative from Genesis is not only rewritten in the description of the creation of the material world but also informs the description of the world above (King 2006).

[5.4] In contrast to the creation narrative in Genesis, *Ap. John* holds that the supreme God and the creator of the world are not identical. Instead, the creation resulted from a "fall" in the divine world. The last aeon to emerge, Wisdom, wanted to imitate the Spirit's action—to produce something of her own. But younger, female aspects of the divine cannot do what the supreme God can do. Her wish takes on existence, but it is an inferior being. This inferior being, called Yaldabaoth, is thrown out of the divine realm. He then creates the heavens and the earth (BG 36:16–45:5).

[5.5] Even if Yaldabaoth is less than perfect, he does have divine power from his mother. This is a loss to the divine world. To retrieve this power, heavenly emissaries, in disguise as Yaldabaoth's own angels, fool him into creating man and to breathing the divine power into Adam. Human beings therefore have a spiritual element that belongs in the divine world. Jealous of Adam for having the power that used to be his, Yaldabaoth throws the man into matter, and the body, the emotions, and the sensations that having a body results in keep human beings ignorant (BG 45:6–55:13).

[5.6] To rectify this, Christ, as well as other divine figures, are sent to teach the human beings about their divine origin and how to ascend from and transcend the material world. The creation of woman is written as a salvific event, and eating of the Tree of Knowledge is interpreted as a moment when humanity learns the truth about its divine origin. However, Yaldabaoth and his servants strive to keep humans ignorant. They introduce sexuality and procreation, and they create a counterfeit spirit that can enter human beings. Humanity is therefore divided. Some humans have a divine spirit residing in them that strengthens their soul to make it able to resist temptation and ignorance; others have the counterfeit spirit, which leads them astray. However, toward the end of the revelation, Christ promises John that there will eventually be salvation for all, except for those who have learned the truth but abandoned it (BG 55:14–75:15).

[5.7] *Ap. John* ends with Christ telling John to write down the message he has been given and to share it with his "fellow spirits" (BG 75:15–77:5). How, then, is this a transformation of Genesis, and in which manner do Jenkins's strategies apply to the rewritten Genesis of *Ap. John*?

## **6. The opening scene: Recontextualization and genre shifting**

[6.1] The book of Genesis opens with the words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The story goes on to tell how God, over the course of six days, does just that: creates heaven and earth and all living creatures. As his last act of creation, he creates humanity in his image. Although *Ap. John* offers a rewritten Genesis account, the opening scene is not from the very beginning of time but from the early first century CE. The scene is set somewhere in the time line of the New Testament Gospels or Acts. The setting

(Jerusalem) and cast (a Pharisee, John, and Christ) are familiar, but this particular scene is not described in the New Testament. The New Testament gives little information about what Christ did between his resurrection and ascension, and even less about him after ascension.

[6.2] One mode of fan fiction describes events that happen in between canonical scenes. Jenkins (2012) calls this recontextualization, or missing scenes. These missing scenes can narrate situations only hinted at in canon; can function as explanations of unexpected developments evident in canon; or, not infrequently, can detail what happens between the fade to black and the morning thereafter. The opening narrative of *Ap. John* can be labeled a missing scene. Missing scenes give writers the option of being compliant to canon without "being totally restricted by the canon" (Pugh 2006, 36). This concurrent freedom from and dependence on canon offers an option to add canonical legitimacy to venturing outside of canon in the revelation that follows the frame narrative. By giving Christ the role of revealer and by shifting the genre of the story of creation, the missing scene opens up possibilities for the rewriting of canonical material.

[6.3] Fan fiction is not limited by mode of presentation: a scene from a TV show may be transformed into a poem; a dramatic battle on screen may be described in detail in a letter. However, what Jenkins (2012) refers to when he discusses genre shifting is a shift from emphasis on plot to a focus on character relationships. Fan fiction does not have to be romantic, but it often is. The genre shifting in *Ap. John* does not turn the narrative into a love story. Instead, it is an attempt to strengthen the credibility of the rewriting of canon. By making this story a revelatory dialogue, *Ap. John* uses a strategy popular in early Christian writings for disclosing hidden meaning (Perkins 1980; Hartenstein 2000). This genre depends on passages in the Gospels that indicate that there were truths not told to all during Jesus's public preaching, but that Jesus, after his resurrection, chose to divulge to some. Among these passages is the Johannine Farewell Discourse (John 13:31–17:1). The Gospels and Acts also describe Jesus coming to his disciples to speak to them after his resurrection. In these, Jesus reveals the true meaning of the scriptures to some of his followers. Parkhouse (2019) draws attention to Luke 24, in which the risen Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27) ([note 4](#)). He later appears in Jerusalem, where "he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Therefore, when *Ap. John* uses the revelation dialogue genre, it is to utilize possibilities found in canon that authorize a reinterpretation of canon.

## **7. The conflict over authority**

[7.1] Christian and Jewish tradition consider Moses to be the author of Genesis as well as the other books of the Torah. *Ap. John* does not question this, but it does challenge Moses's authority. In fact, Christ explicitly "corrects" the Genesis text with the phrase "(it is) not as Moses said" (or similar) four times in *Ap. John* ([note 5](#)). Though *Ap. John* goes much further in correcting Moses than the New Testament Gospels do, the idea that Christ has an authority above Moses is found there as well. The quote from Luke 24 is one example, but there are also other examples in the Gospels of Jesus correcting or expanding on scriptural traditions (Matthew 5–7; Mark 10:6–9). It is this canonically established idea of Christ's authority

surpassing that of Moses that *Ap. John* relies on when Christ reinterprets Genesis for John:

[7.2] I said: Lord, what is "the trance"?

He laughed and said, "Do you think it is as Moses said it, 'He made him sleep?'"

No, it was his perception he veiled with a lack of perception. For indeed, he said through the prophet, "I will make the ears of their hearts heavy so [that] they will not understand and will not see." (NHC III 29:2–11)

[7.3] The corrections challenge the Genesis narrative as well as the doctrines of the emerging Christian orthodoxy, but the canonicity of Genesis is not challenged. Although the creation narrative on the literal level does not convey the full truth, Christ introduces a spiritual or higher meaning hidden in the words of Moses that are not immediately accessible to readers without the help of his revelation. In the corrections, John asks for an explanation of a word or a phrase, and Christ gives him an allegorical interpretation (Dunderberg 2011; Rosland, forthcoming).

## 8. Out of character?

[8.1] Despite not challenging the canonicity of Genesis, the interpretation of Genesis in *Ap. John* opposes the belief that God created heaven and earth. *Ap. John* describes one supreme God who is not the creator and a creator who is not God. Fan fiction fails when readers do not accept canon characters as being in character. What is done in *Ap. John* to keep God in character?

[8.2] One way God is kept in character is by *Ap. John's* doing what Jenkins (2012) calls expanding the time line. Such expansion can involve writing a story that takes place before the opening of the series to give background to characters or events, or it can be a continuation of the canon, set between TV seasons or when the TV show has come to an end. Genesis starts at creation. *Ap. John* starts before creation, with a description of the emanation of different aspects of God. There is a trinity of sorts, but this trinity is Father, Mother, and Son. There are several female aspects of God. The emergence of Christ is described differently in the different versions of *Ap. John*. This variation perhaps indicates that its contemporaneous readers had problems with aligning the image of Christ in *Ap. John* with the one they knew from other Christian writings.

[8.3] A solution to this problem may be found in *Ap. John's* opening scene. When Christ appears, it is as a likeness with many forms, saying, "John, John why [do you] wonder and why [do you] fear? [You] are not a stranger to this likeness. Do not be faint hearted—I am the one who [is with you] always. I am [the Father. I am] the Mother. I am the So[n]" (BG 21:14–21). The declaration "I am the one who is with you always" alludes to Matthew 28 and the trinitarian baptism formula found there. By this, Christ reveals that John does in fact know him, even if he may appear in unrecognizable forms. Again, the opening scene of *Ap. John* gives the reader interpretive keys. The expansion of the time line offers a different understanding of God than the one known from both Genesis and the Gospels. However, the

allusion offers the reader the option of seeing this not as a competing understanding of God but rather as a complementary or higher understanding.

## 9. Moral realignment

[9.1] It is not only the description of the supreme God that may be read as out of character. In *Ap. John*'s version of the story, the creator is the villain. Applying Jenkins's (2012) vocabulary, this can be described as moral realignment. This is typically done by narrating the rewritten story from the point of view of the villain of the source text to "invert or question the moral universe of the primary text" (168). In *Ap. John*, the creator is recast as the villain.

[9.2] The creator (Yaldabaoth in *Ap. John*) is given a backstory not known from the Bible. In it, he is a faulty character since his conception. His mother, Wisdom, wanted to produce something from herself, like the Invisible Spirit did when his Thought (Barbelo) emerged and became a new entity. However, this was without the contribution of her partner and not according to God's plan (BG 36:16–38:6). The description of the conception and birth of Yaldabaoth follows the medical understanding of its time. A child born without a father would lack form and perfection (Smith 2000). Wisdom's son is an evil and arrogant son, but he still has divine power. The rest of *Ap. John* details how humanity is created in an effort to retrieve that power, and how Yaldabaoth and his minions fight to keep humanity trapped in ignorance while Christ and other divine emissaries come to the aid of the human beings.

[9.3] As moral alignments go, *Ap. John* went for what was perhaps the boldest option: making the god of Genesis evil. How is he, then, kept in character? Yaldabaoth is kept in character by speaking words recognizable to readers familiar with Jewish scripture as the creator god's words. When Yaldabaoth watches his creation, he proclaims, "I am a jealous god. Without me there is no one" (BG 44:14–15). This statement sounds like a biblical quotation, although this exact sentence is not found in the Bible. It is, however, a paraphrase of related ideas, a blend of several passages in which the creator demands exclusive worship and claims to be the only god.

[9.4] In Isaiah, creation and the demand of exclusivity are found together. One example occurs in Isaiah 45:18: "For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the LORD, and there is no other."

[9.5] When Yaldabaoth utters his assertion of being the only god as he looks out over all his creation, it is precisely because creation and exclusivity are connected in the Jewish scriptures. In the proclamation in *Ap. John*, the claim of exclusivity is paired with a statement of being a jealous god. Statements of jealousy are found in several places in the Hebrew Bible, including Exodus 20:5 and 34:14 and Deuteronomy 4:24, 5:9, and 6:15. In the Ten Commandments, the statement is accompanied by the idea of God punishing children for the transgressions of their fathers:

[9.6] For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the

iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:5–6)

[9.7] Not all would find a jealous god good, and certainly not one who threatens to punish the children for the sins of the fathers. By letting Yaldabaoth speak in words taken from canon, he is still recognizable, despite the moral realignment. By alluding to canonical passages where the creator god claims to be jealous, the reader is encouraged to find him evil. In *Ap. John*, Yaldabaoth is repeatedly shown to be vengeful toward human beings when they do not do as he pleases. In this manner, canon is actively used to subvert the Genesis narrative to support the rewriting of Yaldabaoth as the antagonist of the story.

## 10. Conclusion

[10.1] By using the list of strategies outlined in Jenkins (2012) as an analytical tool, it is evident that *Ap. John* uses some of the same techniques that today's fan fiction does. Recontextualization, genre shifting, expanding the time line, and moral realignment are all used as transformative strategies contributing to the rewriting of the first chapters of Genesis. In Farley's words, *Ap. John* "makes the same transformative moves" modern fan fiction does (2016, ¶ 1.3). The analysis also shows that the ways these transformations are legitimized are determined by *Ap. John*'s historical context.

[10.2] *Ap. John* must, in contrast to fan fiction, establish its right to be transformative. Two of the strategies, recontextualization and genre shifting, facilitate the rewriting by appealing to the highest authority for scriptural interpretation in Christianity established in canon: Christ. Extension of the time line and moral realignment introduce understandings of the main characters, Christ and the creator, that challenge and contradict canon. To support this rewriting, *Ap. John* appeals to canon by allusions and quotes. While subverting canon through strategies also used in fan fiction, *Ap. John* repeatedly utilizes its authoritative texts. As much as it rewrites canon, it simultaneously reaffirms canon's authoritative status.

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## 12. Notes

1. The English translation by J. N. D. Kelly (2006, 297) is based on Guiseppe Luigi Dosetti's *Il simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli* (1967).

2. This quote is from the manuscript Codex Berolinensis 8502,2 44:9–19 (BG). For consistency, references to *Ap. John* will be from this manuscript, unless I compare different versions of the work or the text in BG is missing or too fragmented to use. The references to *Ap. John* indicate codex, page number, and line number. Holes in the manuscripts are indicated by square brackets. Letters or words inside such brackets are reconstructions. All translations from Coptic are my own.

3. Till published the Acts of Peter found in the manuscript in 1903. The publication of *Ap. John*, The Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of Mary were, however, hindered by two world wars and a flooding of the publication house. By Till's own classifications, these are Gnostic works. I avoid the term *Gnostic Gnosticism* even though *Ap. John* very often has been labeled as such, even called "the Gnostic Bible *par excellence*" (Tardieu 1984, 26). Williams (1996) demonstrates that Gnosticism is a modern construct. The term neither corresponds to the self-definitions of the groups often labeled Gnostic nor works well as a typological construct. King (2003) shows how the term has functioned as a rhetorical device, supplying the heretical other against which orthodoxy can be defined. Gnosticism is therefore not only ill suited as a definition but also tainted with connotations that impede textual understanding.

4. The English translations of Bible texts are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (<https://www.bible.com/>), with the exception of Genesis 1:1. NRSV reads, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." The (common) translation I have used is, however, suggested as an alternative.

5. "Are you thinking it is as Moses said it 'above the waters'? No" (BG 45:8–10). "It is not as Moses said it: 'He put him to sleep'" (BG 56:16–18), "not as Moses said 'his rib'" (BG 59:17–19). It is not as Moses said, "They hid themselves in an ark" (BG 73:4–6).

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# Praxis

## Nostalgia, novelty, and the subversion of authority in *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*

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[0.1] Abstract—The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, by negotiating the authorship and authority of its derivative readings, discusses the place of Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity through near-fannish retellings of the lives of the patriarchs of Israel. The text thereby walks a line between nostalgic and novel readings of foundational narratives, in some places perpetuating canonical authority and in others subverting it. The outcome of this interplay is the displacement of the Jewish author and the Christianization of Jewish history and religion. Contemporary fan fiction studies discourse provides useful tools for analyzing this negotiation of textual authority.

[0.2] Keywords—Early Christianity; Fan fiction; Judaism; Parting of the ways

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a collection of texts read and produced by followers of Christ in the second century CE. In the first and second centuries, Christian reflections often focused on the Jewish religion, its role in salvation, and its rejection of the Christian Messiah (Hollander 1995). Most Christian reflections took place in philosophical treatises or debates: Paul's letter to the Romans, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* and *Apologies*, and Tertullian's *Against the Jews* all discuss Judaism. However, *Testaments* is a fundamentally different type of writing reflecting on the place and role of Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity (de Jonge 1985, 1986; Hollander 1995; Hollander and de Jonge 1985; Nicklas 2014). The text claims to be twelve separate documents that contain the final words of the ancient progenitors—the patriarchs—of the twelve tribes of the Jewish people. This means that the persons to whom the words are explicitly attributed are not the actual writers ([note 1](#)) of these texts. Based on earlier traditions, each writer has woven an intricate narrative around each of these patriarchs of Judaism. This ancient work bears many similarities to contemporary fan fiction, and in this article, I will explore how fan studies can therefore help elucidate this ancient text—specifically how it negotiates its authority in relation to the

biblical canon common to both Judaism and Christianity.

[1.2] Like fan fiction authors, the Christian writer of *Testaments* to some degree assumes the voice of and authority over Jewish characters and narratives. At stake here is the legitimization of Christianity's adoption of Jewish scripture, heritage, and history. This process should primarily be seen not as a religious effort but more as one of identity, nationality, and culture. Admittedly, in the second century and possibly for much longer, the distinction between Christian/Christianity and Jewish/Judaism is a complex and contested issue (Becker and Reed [2003] 2007; Nicklas 2014). While there was, in all probability, a lack of "actual social, theological, and liturgical boundaries" between Jews and Christians at this time (Otto 2018, 9), there were nonetheless several writers following Christ who argued for at least some theological difference and/or separation between Christianity and Judaism (e.g., Ignatius, Marcion, Justin; see Fredriksen [2003] 2007). Tobias Nicklas (2014) problematizes the issue from the point of view of Ignatius's late first/early second-century writings, arguing that perhaps contrary to the church more generally, "Ignatius' letter [to the Magnesians]...shows us that at least for him something had happened which we could call a 'Parting of the Ways': for him Jews and Christians had begun to be two different groups going separate ways" (10). Thus, though many communities may well have consisted of both Jewish followers of Christ and Jews who did not follow Christ, for some authors, a distinction was beginning to be made. Some writers in these communities were beginning to argue that, to use Ignatius's terms, there may be or should be a difference between Christianity (*Christianismos*) and Judaism (*Ioudaismos*) (Nicklas 2014).

[1.3] Fundamentally, any discussion of Christianity in this period must bear in mind that Christianity and Judaism are fluid identities, that the terms "Christian" and "Jewish" fall woefully short of nuanced reality, and that these texts are not indicative of a general reality but rather indicate only the writer's theological agenda or local situation. Yet simultaneously, there are many texts that do assume or argue for a difference between what I will call for simplicity's sake Christianity and Judaism. *Testaments* is one of these texts as it differentiates between Jews and Christians (Hollander and de Jonge 1985). *Testaments* portrays Christianity not as a continuation or a branch of Judaism but as what Judaism has always been. Thus, *Testaments* deals with the theological issue of Judaism by subverting the narratives of Jewish scriptures. In *Testaments*, canonical narratives are expanded and adapted. This act of (re)writing the narratives of characters foundational to the Jewish nation and religion is thus also a Christian claiming of authority for a Christian revision of these narratives and characters. This claiming legitimizes the Christian context as the true locus of God's communication with and relationship to humanity while concomitantly delegitimizing non-Christocentric readings of Jewish scripture.

[1.4] From a contemporary perspective, we could argue that *Testaments* is a work of fan fiction. Although fan fiction is difficult to define (Klink 2017), Fanlore, a semiauthoritative, multiauthored fan site, defines fan fiction as "a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure" ("Fanfiction" 2017). Insofar as we can refer to Christians as fans of the Bible, this definition easily applies to *Testaments*. Furthermore, *Testaments* "frequently build[s] upon ideas and narratives present in" the canon, that is, Jewish scripture (Charlesworth 1983, xxv). While it would be anachronistic to

term such writings fan fiction, the similarities between a contemporary corpus of "derivative...writing—that is, texts written based on another text" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 5)—and this ancient work are not inconsequential. Naturally, there is a significant difference between fan fiction, which is overtly framed as secondary to a source text or famous person, and *Testaments*, which claims to be primary; more, as will be discussed below, differences in the understanding of authorship need to be taken into account. Yet much of what Paul Booth (2015) calls "fan play" (1) is also present in this ancient work. In this article, I will demonstrate how the Christian writer of *Testaments* "play[s] with the borders and frames of narratives through [their] own imagination" (1), for example, by recreating the Jewish patriarchs as followers of Christ predating Christ himself.

[1.5] A number of forces are at work in the creation of fan fiction. The most immediate may be the fan's attraction to a narrative, curiosity about the world or characters depicted, or disappointment that a beloved narrative has ended. Pugh (2005, 47) writes,

[1.6] Whenever a canon closes, someone somewhere will mourn it enough to reopen it. The wish to find out "what happened next"—or invent it if it didn't—is familiar to most of us...If we liked the story we may still not be ready for it to end, for the characters and milieu that have become real to us to be folded up and put back in the puppeteer's box.

[1.7] This leads to what Booth (2015) calls a continuum "between nostalgia and novelty" (6). On the one side there is "a desire for fresh material, new takes on old genres, and changing paradigms of meaning"; on the other, "an inherently nostalgic practice" (6). This interplay between nostalgia and novelty undergirds the fannish production of texts. Nostalgia hearkens back to the canonical texts and thus implicitly carries the original text's authority with it. Novelty, on the other hand, by definition creates something new, which does not share nostalgia's implicit authority. As we examine these two forces in *Testaments*, we will see how they both come into play and are used equally to subvert canonical readings and to authorize a Christianizing both of the Jewish patriarchs and forefathers and of salvation.

[1.8] In this paper, I will be looking at three parts of *Testaments* that are indicative of the whole. These three parts are all related to the issue of authorship and authority, and the ways in which *Testaments* alternatively perpetuates and subverts the authority of the canonical material. First, I will examine the so-called paratext and the narrative frames of each testament. There, the text engages in a dialectic on authority with the readers. Next, building on the nostalgia/novelty continuum expressed by Booth (2015), I will examine the *Testament of Levi* 5–6, a nostalgic reading in *Testaments*, and the *Testament of Simeon* 6.2–7, a novel reading. I will demonstrate how *Testament's* nostalgic retelling "fixes" perceived issues in the canonical material. I will then demonstrate how the novel reading subverts Jewish scripture. In this reading, the patriarchs—characters who were originally Jewish icons—are distanced from their Jewish heritage and claimed as part of Christianity.

## **2. Author's notes: Paratextual engagement in authority**

[2.1] Fan fiction by necessity engages in a dialectic of authority. Fans, as they create

derivative works, need to establish their agency, authorial voice, and claim to authority (Herzog 2012, ¶ 1.3). Like all texts, fan texts are accompanied by paratext, defined by Genette as "a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations," which accompany the main text (1997, 1) ([note 2](#)). These paratexts are the locus of "a discursive negotiation of the concepts of authorship and ownership" (Fathallah 2016, 86). Perhaps the most obvious paratext to accompany fan fiction is the author's notes (A/N), where a "fannish negotiation of ownership and agency" ultimately about "authority" often takes place (Herzog ¶ 1.5). A good example of this is given by Alexandra Herzog. She begins her article on A/Ns and authority with a quote from a fan named Caazie, who declares, "This is *my* story and this is how *I* wanted to write it" (¶ 1.1, emphasis mine). Here the fan claims their own agency by using first-person pronouns in relation to the narrative and their ownership of it. A/Ns are most important to my discussion as they provide a place for authors to enter a negotiation of meaning with their readers, where they appropriate the authority found in the original text and repackage it for the readers (¶ 3.1). By doing this, fan authors attempt to enforce authorial control on meaning, "trying to dictate to the readers how *'the text is read properly'*" (¶ 2.4, original emphasis).

[2.2] *Testaments*, like all texts, is accompanied by paratexts. Each individual testament has been given a title and a subtitle, which may or may not have been included in the first written versions of the texts; additionally, each testament begins with a narrative frame. The titles are all in the same vein: "Testament of Reuben," "Testament of Judah," "Testament of Benjamin," and so forth. As such they define the work as a testament, the authoritative last words of a famous patriarch of the Jewish nation. The subtitles also share a structure: they consist of the preposition "concerning" followed by one or more substantives, such as "Envy," "Compassion and Mercy," or "Natural Goodness." In many cases, the subtitle self-evidently follows from the contents of the testament. In some cases, the link is harder to make (*Test. Reu.*; *Test. Jud.*). These subtitles guide readers in their reading of the text. Thus, the subtitles function in a manner similar to that of A/Ns; the readers are shown how to read the text properly. Admittedly, the subtitles are most likely later additions (de Bruin 2015). They therefore functioned as guides for the reader only at a later stage in their history. The second part of the paratext—the narrative frame—however, is not a later addition ([note 3](#)).

[2.3] The narrative frame functions to give the text itself authority. Without fail, each testament begins with the phrase "a copy of the words of [a patriarch]." By portraying each of these works as the authentic last words of the twelve patriarchs, the texts are given great authority. Indeed, because the patriarchs themselves appear to be given agency over their own biographies, the narratives presented could be seen to supersede the third-person narratives of the canon. In other words, readers are invited to see this text as the last words of the patriarchs rather than as what someone else wrote about the patriarchs. Fan fiction similarly interacts with a canon, which almost becomes "a reference work that one *might* consult for character names and general ideas instead of being considered a bible that needs to be treated with reverence and awe and would conventionally represent the only valid text" (Herzog 2012, ¶ 3.2, emphasis mine).

[2.4] An interesting dichotomy is thus created in fan studies, which does not hold for early Christianity. Fan fiction interacts with a canon, but this canon is not entirely authoritative,



not definitive, and not sacred. However, while Herzog (2012) highlights the differences between how fan fiction depicts its canons and how contemporary culture views the relationship between religious groups and their canon(s), it does not appear that this contemporary difference is true for many first- and second-century Jews and Christians. Lee McDonald (2017), using an example of how the first-century Jewish Qumran community "did not hesitate to change the text," argues that, for Christians, only "in later centuries, would [textual transformation] have been most unusual and almost unthinkable, given the perceived holiness of the text" (316). Many Jews and Christians from the first centuries, then, had a very similar view of the canon to contemporary fan fiction authors. Canon is thus not a definitive text "to be treated with reverence and awe," but something with which one can take "many liberties" (331); only much later did the canon become sacrosanct. Therefore, while *Testaments* is part of a corpus of works derivative of Jewish scripture and, in the eyes of contemporary readers, seen as less authoritative than canonical works, this is unlikely to have been the case for ancient readers (Borchardt 2015, 196).

[2.5] *Testaments* assumes a large amount of authority regarding the canon. Though the canon is viewed as authoritative, this does not preclude an extracanonical book's having authority. While this may seem strange to contemporary sensibilities, ancient and current ideas of authorship do not fully overlap, especially in the realm of ancient Jewish and Christian texts. One could argue that in the context of contemporary authorship, "the purpose of literature is seen as being to express the self, and to that extent literature is seen to embody the self" (Middleton 2016, ¶ 2.9). Texts are strongly related to authors' sense of self (Fathallah 2016). For ancient religious texts, there is a different relationship. Ancient Jewish texts "appeal to [their authors], not as authors with authority rooted in their own wisdom or virtue, but primarily as conduits for the transmission of divine knowledge to humankind...[The] writer is not so much creator or author as tradent and guarantor" (Reed 2008, 477). Thus, in ancient Judaism, authorship and authority are less related to the writer's self and are instead much more related to the writer's access to divine revelation. Later, Greco-Roman influences led to a renewed interest in writers themselves and to a "reinterpretation of biblical history as a series of ancient heroes" (Reed 2008, 478). *Testaments* shows both sides of this sensibility, emphasizing both the heroic nature of the twelve sons of Jacob (e.g., Philonenko 1970) and their unfettered access to additional divine revelation (e.g., Hollander and de Jonge 1985; Kugler 2001). There is a large difference between how authority and derivative works are understood and interpreted in ancient Jewish-Christian circles and contemporary fan communities. Because for ancient readers the canon was seen as less sacred and the actual writer of the text was less important than the implied author/narrator, the authority of *Testaments* could readily supersede that of the canonical narratives.

[2.6] In its paratexts, then, *Testaments* attempts to assume authority over the canon. As we consider the text itself, we see marked differences between the canon and *Testaments*. The biographical sections repeat and consolidate common canonical material, but they also adapt, extend, and change this material. In this way, they replace third-person, canonical Jewish readings with new, authoritative, first-person readings. In the next section I will analyze an example of how the canonical details of biblical characters' lives are altered in *Testaments*. In creating a fannish reading of the canonical framework and other associated traditions, the characters, ethics, and beliefs of the patriarchs are adapted to meet the needs of the religious

community as perceived by the writer. However, this reading remains on the nostalgic side of Booth's (2015) continuum; there is little impulse to create completely novel readings.

### **3. Fix-it fic: Changing the narrative to fit the universe**

[3.1] Ancient noncanonical Jewish and Christian writings currently tend to be examined as witnesses to thoughts that are not represented in the canon. This is, from the outset, a somewhat anachronistic endeavor, as there is little reason to assume that Jewish and Christian communities at the time were concerned with the idea of a canon; they were "not canon conscious" (McDonald 2006, 191). Yet at the same time, most communities would have seen some books as "core" and others as "fringe" (190–92). Allow me to introduce a couple of examples before giving some more critical notes.

[3.2] In his introduction to noncanonical writings, David deSilva (2010) explains that these texts "are of immense value as windows into the development of *biblical interpretation*, theology, ethics, and liturgy in Early Judaism and Christianity, as well as into the sociocultural and historical contexts within which these developments occurred" (emphasis mine). Most applicable to this discussion is specifically how these writings function as witnesses to ancient interpretative practices. As such, they give us insight into how ancient people, or ancient fans, engaged with their canonical narratives and figures. A major theme we can note in ancient interpretation is the solving of perceived flaws in the narrative. As James Kugel (2007, 12) explains,

[3.3] Ancient interpreters...set out to give the text the most favorable reading they could and, in some cases, to try to get it to say what they thought it really meant to say, or at least ought to say. They did this by combining an extremely meticulous examination of its words with an interpretative freedom that sometimes bordered on the wildly inventive.

[3.4] This inventive freedom led to the creation of derivative works with widely diverging narratives. Kugel's (2007) and deSilva's (2010, 2013) work is indicative of a major theme in the way that canonical and noncanonical texts are often studied. Terming these texts "rewritten Bible" implicitly places them as secondary to a canon, although that canon most likely did not exist at the time these texts were written. Mroczek (2016) has critiqued these assumptions because a canonical focus obscures important facets of ancient literary practices. She argues for fostering an appreciation of the way writers react to already existing traditions and texts without invoking a hierarchy of texts. By their very natures, these texts react to and interact with (earlier) versions of the same narratives that have come to be preserved in the canon.

[3.5] The creation of these works seems similar to the genre of fan fic called fix-it fic. This genre stems from fans' dissatisfaction or anger with aspects of the canon (Goodman 2015, 663). Henry Jenkins (2000) writes, "Fans relate to favorite texts with a mixture of fascination and frustration, attracted to them because they offer the best resources for exploring certain issues, frustrated because these fictions never fully conform to audience desires" (175). Frustrated yet fascinated, readers set out to solve this divide between their expectations and

the text by creating narratives that solve or address these tensions. Fans are nostalgic for how the text originally affected them and attempt to keep the whole of the text in line with an "imagined ideal text" (Booth 2015, 19). Novelty does not play a large role here.

[3.6] A prime example of this practice can be seen in the *Testament of Levi* 5–6. In this passage, the writer retells a narrative often called the "rape of Dinah." In the second-century context of *Testaments*, it is more than likely that the account of this narrative in Genesis 34:1–31 would have been considered canonical or at least authoritative. The Genesis narrative is as follows: Dinah, the sister of the twelve patriarchs, is sexually assaulted by a prince named Shechem. He then falls in love with her and wishes to marry her. Her twelve brothers (the patriarchs), hearing of this assault, are outraged. But Shechem's father intercedes and begs for marriage. He promises anything they desire. The brothers deceive him and ask that they and all the men in their city be circumcised. While the men are recovering from this surgery, Simeon and Levi, two of the twelve brothers, enter the city and kill them. The other ten brothers plunder everything: flocks, wealth, children, women. Their father is upset by this as he fears retaliation.

[3.7] For many ancient and contemporary readers (e.g., Bader 2008), the ethics of the patriarchs in this narrative are highly ambiguous: Simeon and Levi deceive and kill all the men; their brothers take all the women, children, and livestock as their own; and their father, Jacob, upon hearing this, is worried about his "reputation and security," not about the terrible deeds of his sons (Fisk 2000, 233). Accordingly, the *Testament of Levi* tells a different and unique story (Bader 2008). Levi receives a vision in which he is ordained as a priest (5.1–3). An angel gives him a sword and a shield, saying, "Retaliate against Shechem on account of Dinah, I will be with you because the Lord has sent me" (5.3) ([note 4](#)). Levi is furious about the rape of his sister and urges his father and elder brother to tell the Shechemites to become circumcised (6.3). Levi kills Shechem, and Simeon kills Shechem's father, Hamor (6.4). The other brothers then kill the rest of the town (6.5). Upon hearing this, Jacob is angry and irritated, but not because of his reputation and security. He is upset because "they had been circumcised and after this had been killed... We [the brothers] had sinned by doing this against his judgement" (6.6–7). But Levi is of another mind; he understood that the sexual assault of Dinah was simply the latest of a long series of violent acts against Jewish women (6.8) ([note 5](#)). This fictional narrative saves Levi and Jacob from many ethical accusations. Levi is no longer an angry brother out for revenge; he is a warrior of the Lord sent to bring righteous judgment, and he is even accompanied by an angel. In the same vein, Jacob's worries are now about having killed fresh converts to Judaism rather than the selfish exclamations of the account in Genesis.

[3.8] In the context of contemporary fan fiction, such fixing of texts is also a common occurrence. Lesley Goodman (2015) quotes a fan who writes, "Fan fiction is 60 percent fun, 30 percent porn and 120,000,000 percent fixing canon because canon is WRONG and needs to go sit in the corner and think about what it's done" (664). The fiction in the *Testament of Levi* may not contain the 30 percent porn of fan fiction (for that, we should probably turn to the *Testament of Reuben*), but it does fix canon. A useful way to understand the tensions between writer, canon, and collected fan writings is to make distinctions between three authoritative objects or discourses. Goodman defines these as (1) the universe, (2) the canon,

and (3) fandom. In the original work, the author creates a universe, which we could call fictional or constructed. At this point, that single work is both the entire canon and the fictional universe. Subsequent works by the author add to the canon and are situated in that same universe and expand it. With the introduction of a second canonical text, "there is now room for contradiction and inaccuracy, room for other differences between one of the texts and the fictional universe" (665). In fact, even inside one text, there is room for these inaccuracies and differences. Thus, fans see the need to fix canon to match their perception of the fictional universe.

[3.9] In the case of the *Testament of Levi*, the process could be comparable. Ancient readers would have imagined that the more common, canonical narrative portrayed the real world, not a fictional universe ([note 6](#)). Yet they could easily have seen a contradiction between the way the characters, or actual people, would or should have acted and the way canon portrays them. Here is the same "contradiction and inaccuracy" between the expectation of the patriarchs' behavior and the canon that Goodman (2015) discusses. This entails the same perceived need and right to fix canon based on nostalgia for a certain perception of the universe. Booth (2015) writes that "fan nostalgia, however, is not just about a historic memory but also about the affective connection between an imagined ideal fan text and the initial experiences of the fan" (19). Thus the fan becomes nostalgic for an ideal text and frustrated with the canonical text. In other words, there is a tension between the narrative and the reader's (ethical) expectations: the patriarchs, who should be the epitome of ethical perfection, act dishonorably, selfishly, and violently. This combination of nostalgia for the patriarchs' (imagined) noble characters and frustration at the canon's portrayal of them serves as the impetus for creating these derivative works.

[3.10] However, there are also marked differences between contemporary fix-it fiction and ancient derivative works when it comes to nostalgia. Fan fiction in general, and fix-it fic in particular, is apologetic and seemingly accepts its secondary status. Judith Fathallah (2017), examining *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) fan fiction, notes the verb choices of the authors, noting that they often use verbs portraying nonauthoritative readings. Fathallah concludes that "though fix-it fic is appreciated, it is not author-ized at the level of canon" (148). At the same time, the authority of the canon "is obviously deconstructed via fanfic," and Fathallah points to other fandoms that are decidedly less apologetic (155).

[3.11] The *Testament of Levi*, on the other hand, does all that it can to raise its authority to that of the level of canon. Besides the steps taken in its paratexts, the work attributes its unique knowledge to many authoritative, revelatory sources: "a spirit of knowledge from the Lord" (2.3); a meeting with the Lord (5.1); the writings of Enoch, who was famous for having an exceptionally close relationship to God (14.1); heavenly tablets (5.4); and Levi's forefathers (10). The narrator is presented as a conduit of divine knowledge, the basis of ancient Christian and Jewish authority (Reed 2008). Additionally, by putting historical events into the mouth of an ancient person in the form of prophecies—that is, by letting Levi prophesy about events that are sure to happen, because they have already happened and the author is writing retrospectively—the trustworthiness of the revelations of Levi is further strengthened. The writer does everything possible to make this text authoritative. *Testaments* is not meant to be seen as secondary at all—in fact, the writer attempts to portray this writing

as superior to canon itself. This authoritative step is easier to make in the ancient world, where canon is not so strictly and unequivocally defined, nor seen as the sole authoritative text.

[3.12] In this section, I focused on how the writer of *Testaments* could be seen to be writing fix-it fan fiction. There are many similarities between fix-it fic and the way the *Testament of Levi* retells the narrative of the rape of Dinah. Both fix-it fic and the *Testament of Levi* function as though they are attempting to reconcile differences between the universe and the texts of the canon. As the *Testament of Levi* reconciles these differences and attempts to make its reading of Jewish scripture authoritative, it both perpetuates and subverts the canonical material. On the one hand, in retelling the narrative in a way that removes certain difficulties, it reinforces the normativity of the canon. Any critique of or questions about the canon that a reader might have had are resolved. While the fan's nostalgia for the canonical narratives leads to the production of fiction, it is the authority claimed by the derivative work (through, e.g., the genre, the spirit of the Lord, a meeting with the Lord, the writings of Enoch) that perpetuates the canonical material. The text presumes the inherent authority of the narrator as a recipient of divine revelation, and thus the canonical material is perpetuated by the derivative work. On the other hand, as the text adjusts fundamental parts of the canonical narrative, it subverts the canon as well. The act of fixing the narrative to fit the writer's conceptions of the patriarchs shows that there is a cognitive dissonance between those conceptions and the canon. The canonical narrative must thus be seen as in some way erroneous, and the writer subverts canonical authority, creating an additional authoritative reading.

#### **4. Novel fan fic: Stealing Israel**

[4.1] The example from the *Testament of Levi* leans toward the nostalgic side of Booth's (2015) nostalgia-novelty continuum. It attempts to adapt, solve, and fix difficulties that the writer sees in a canonical narrative. Little about the canonical narrative is revised in the above example, but elsewhere in *Testaments*, we find much more novel revisions. In the passages about the future, we can often find particularly good examples of what Booth calls "a desire for fresh material" (6). These passages are generally either prophecies about Jewish history and the life of Jesus Christ or predictions about the end of times (de Bruin 2015, 44). Predictions of the future have a number of roles in the text: they demonstrate the future consequences of the descendants' behavior and they function to establish the authority of the patriarch in question (74–80). I have discussed authority above; however, two methods *Testaments* employs to augment its authority through prophecy need further exploration. First, the patriarchs claim access to hidden knowledge. As "the patriarchs themselves can have no knowledge of events that occur...at a later date" (73), they need sources that "provide them with the information" (Kugler 2001, 14), often referring to esoteric teachings received from their forefathers or heavenly documents. The patriarchs therefore have access to secret sources of authoritative information unavailable to readers. This strengthens the words of the patriarchs in the minds of the readers. Second, the writer "could...put events that he knew would occur into the mouths of the patriarchs as predictions. These...function to establish prophetic authority" (De Bruin 2015, 75). Because the narratives *Testaments* were written retroactively, the patriarchs are able to predict future events, showing that they

must have supernatural knowledge.

[4.2] As one might expect, in these sections, which are more novel than nostalgic, the more subversive aspects of *Testaments* come into focus. The *Testament of Simeon* contains an excellent example, when it gives a prophecy in "hymnic form" (Hollander and de Jonge 1985, 121; see also Kugler 2001, 46). It states (*T. Sim.* 6.2–7),

[4.3] If you remove all jealousy and stubbornness from yourselves,  
my bones will blossom like a rose in Israel,  
and my flesh will blossom like a lily,  
and my fragrance will be like the fragrance of frankincense,  
and holy people will be multiplied from me like cedars forever,  
and their branches will stretch far.

[4.4] Then, the seed of Canaan will perish,  
and nothing will remain for Amalek,  
and all the Cappadocians will pass away,  
and all the Hittites will be utterly destroyed.

[4.5] Then, the land of Ham will fail,  
and all the people will perish.  
Then, all the earth will take a break from upheaval,  
and everything under the sky will rest from war.

[4.6] Then, Shem will be glorified,  
because the great God of Israel is Lord,  
he will appear on earth like a person,  
and will save Adam through him.

[4.7] Then, all the spirits of deceit will be trampled,  
and humans will rule over the evil spirits.

[4.8] Then, in joy I will arise,  
and I will praise the Most High on account of his marvelous deeds:  
because God has saved humanity,  
by taking on a body and eating with humans.

[4.9] This hymn contains a prediction that spans many centuries (though not necessarily in chronological order). The prediction references both the history of the Jewish people and the life of Christ. A poetic description of the "glory of all Simeonites" (Kugler 2001, 46) is quickly followed with a description of the fall of Israel's enemies. This is followed by end-time predictions that occur chronologically after the history contained in the Jewish scriptures: there will be peace on earth, and God will appear on earth as a human saving all humankind; this is a clear reference to Jesus Christ, the messiah for Christ followers (6.5). The forces of evil will be conquered, and then Simeon will rise from the dead (6.6–7). Simeon will praise God, because God became a human, ate with humans, and saved humanity, another clear reference to Christ (6.8). A number of these statements thus discuss

the place of Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism.

[4.10] According to the *Testament of Simeon*, Simeon—one of the foundational figures of Judaism—was actually a Christ follower all along. He believed in Jesus Christ and praised God for Christ's sacrifice to save humanity. These are core Christian beliefs that can be seen to significantly differentiate Judaism and Christianity. This rewriting must be seen as a hostile and exclusionary act, a common occurrence in early Christian writings (Nicklas 2014): non-Christ followers, who identify with these patriarchs, are excluded from a narrative that did not previously exclude them. This text implies that Simeon was already aware of the salvific nature of Jesus Christ and appreciated his ministry and sacrifice. It also suggests he was aware of the Christian theology that God has a plan to save humanity through Jesus Christ and his incarnation. Christian beliefs are thus recast back into the time of the patriarchs. The *Testament of Simeon* argues that Christianity is the true faith even according to the founding fathers of the Jewish nation. In this way, the text subverts these Jewish characters and narratives, rechristening them as Christian millennia after the fact.

[4.11] The *Testament of Simeon* is not the only testament to subvert Israelite history and Jewish heritage like this. The *Testament of Dan* explains that the Lord will depart from the Jews and move to the Gentiles, that is, the non-Jews (6.6), and if the Jews are righteous, "the Saviour of the Gentiles" may accept them (6.9). In the *Testament of Reuben*, Jesus Christ is called the fulfilment of time and is predicted to invalidate the Jewish priesthood (6.8). Thus, another foundational aspect of ancient Judaism has been disowned or removed. There is no doubt that Jewish believers can be saved if they follow Christ, but *Testaments* deals with their "final salvation as a more or less fixed item in a purely Christian discussion" (Hollander 1995, 101). Christianity has displaced Judaism, the patriarchs have become Christ followers, Jewish writings and characters have been Christianized, and Jews are not allowed to take part in the discussion of their own salvation. Additionally, the Torah, the collection of laws that are foundational to Judaism, has been replaced with the Christian double commandment to love God and love one's neighbor (103). This is significant, as this subversive strategy is fairly unique to *Testaments* in the Christian writings of the late second century. Helen Rhee (2005, 68) explains how late second-century theologians, defending Christianity against others, argued that "Christians are in possession of the history of the whole world. This claim to antiquity enables them to assert that whatever truth has been discovered and said among all people, including the Greeks and the Jews, belongs to Christians. This view of history legitimizes the 'Christian' interpretation and appropriation of the Jewish Scripture." The difference between this approach and that of *Testaments* is that there is no interpretation or appropriation of Jewish scripture but rather a reimagining of the Jewish Bible as Christian all along.

[4.12] *Testaments* therefore performs a fannish reading of Jewish heritage similar to what Jenkins (1992) describes as "resistive reading" (64):

[4.13] The reader is drawn not into the preconstituted world of the fiction but rather into a world she has created from the textual materials. Here, the reader's pre-established values are at least as important as those preferred by the narrative system...The raw materials of the original story play a crucial role in this process,

providing instructions for a preferred reading, but they do not necessarily overpower and subdue the reader...Some groups' pleasure comes not in celebrating the values of their chosen works but rather in "reading them against the grain," in expressing their opposition to rather than acceptance of textual ideology.

[4.14] Analogically, the Christian writer of *Testaments* is interested in the textual world of Jewish heritage but is more readily drawn to his own contextual Christian worldview, established based on the canonical narratives. The patriarchs and their lives suggest a Jewish reading, but the writer instead reads them as Christian. They "read against the grain," subverting the inherent Israelite ideology of the narratives. Therefore, this work also falls neatly into Nickolas Pappas's (1989) definition of subversive readings: "A subversive reading will release the reader from the power of the author...[which is experienced] as limitations upon the creation of meanings" (328). Though Pappas speaks of an author, contextualizing this for the ancient world, we may want to replace the word "author" with "text" or "context." The original context of the canonical narratives, and indeed the text itself, is not permitted to limit their meanings to Jewish ones. Instead, that authority is unseated by

[4.15] carrying on some activity the author has instigated, to a point at which it is no longer relevant to ask about the author's own desires...The authors' desires drop out of the picture—not because they cannot be known, but because the authors' desires or intentions do not determine the outcome of this sort of reading. These readers have gone over the authors' heads. (325, 328)

[4.16] The context of the Jewish writer of the canonical narratives has no authority over readings of the narratives of the progenitors of Judaism. The new Christian composer takes over what authority the Jewish texts had and creates a new, authoritative Christian reading.

[4.17] Subversive readings, or readings against the grain, seem to be a topic of debate in fan fiction. Slash fiction is a good example of a type of fan fiction that is most commonly seen as subversive (e.g., Jenkins 1992). Slash (generally) describes "erotic encounters between television characters...of the same sex" (Jones 2014, 116–17). It is seen as subversive because it deliberately goes against the characters' heterosexuality as implied, stated, or shown in the canon. Sarah Gwenllian Jones argues that this "paradigm rests upon an understanding of the text as an inviolable and discrete semiotic surface" (2014, 118). Jones explores whether slash fiction based on a cult television series can be seen not as resistant readings but rather as an "actualization of latent textual elements" (119). Arguing that maintaining the exotic and adventurous nature of the characters requires "exotic erotics," Jones concludes that it "is the cult television series itself which implicitly 'resists' the conventions of heterosexuality" (127–28). What the fans love about these texts requires the adventurous, antirealist eroticism of slash fiction. These texts are inherently queer, though not explicitly so. A similar argument might be made for how *Testaments* reads Jewish heritage. The Christian fans of Jewish narratives appreciate Jewish texts specifically because they speak to them about Christian truths. Their Christian expectations resist a Jewish reading, and thus they need to actualize what, following Jones, we might call latent Christian



elements, that is, elements that are particularly suited for a Christian reading or tie in with specifically Christian concerns. Thus, following Hellekson and Busse's (2014) argument that "slash fan fiction may indeed be more textual and bound to the possibilities presented in the canonical source, and far less subversive than slash theorists have wanted to claim" (79), we could conclude that this reading of the Jewish heritage is bound to the interstices available in the canon.

[4.18] All in all, using the authority of genre, first-person narration, "prophecies," and access to hidden writings, *Testaments* creates an authoritative, Christian reading of the patriarchs, displacing canonical, Jewish traditions. The writer of *Testaments* seems to be creating a subversive reading in which the canonical Jewish writer is unseated by a new Christian writer, who creates a new authoritative reading to take the place of the canonical narratives. The new writer actualizes latent elements in the text, foregrounding a Christian interpretation of these elements. This Christianizing of the patriarchs is thus no longer a simple fix-it fic necessitated by the unfavorable portrayal of beloved characters; it is a novel, perhaps subversive recasting of canon.

## 5. Conclusion

[5.1] Early Christ followers wished to understand the role and place of Judaism in salvation history, and the lot of non-Christ-following Jewish people. While many approached this topic from a rational, deductive point of view, the writer of *Testaments* deals with this (and other topics) through narratives. Creating a collection of what we may anachronistically call fan fiction, they adapt the canonical material (and associated traditions) from a position of authority. Displacing the writers of the Jewish scripture by appealing to hidden knowledge and authentic first-person narratives, the writer subverts the authority of the canon by presenting their own readings as authoritative.

[5.2] In some cases, *Testaments* retells narratives, fixing or correcting how the patriarchs are portrayed in the canon. Deriving from a nostalgia for the characters, the writer reinterprets events to fix perceived problems with the patriarchs' ethics. This makes clear the writer's frustration with the dissonance between the canon's portrayals and how the writer of *Testaments* feels the universe and characters should be depicted. New narratives are created that fix these errors in canon. In other cases, *Testaments* creates novel readings that subvert the Jewish scriptures. The Jewish nation and patriarchs are removed from their Jewish background and metaphorically baptized into a Christian one. The Jewish writer is displaced, and the history of Judaism is Christianized, with the patriarchs recast as always already Christian.

[5.3] Fan studies gives us a unified theoretical framework in which to discuss the hermeneutic strategies of nostalgia and novelty. Fan play gives us a model that allows the analysis of these—in the eyes of many—contradictory textual strategies, which traditionally have often been examined separately ([note 7](#)). This allows the introduction of a more nuanced reading of how *Testaments* engages with its source material(s). For example, Robert Kugler (2001, 2012) and James Kugel (1990, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2007) have both discussed *Testaments* as a derivative work. Kugler (2012) has focused on the way that *Testaments* uses

new narratives of canonical characters to make "fresh theological arguments" (356), that is, novel readings. Kugel (2007) instead sees these narratives in the context of solving major problems in the text (10–14), that is, nostalgic readings. In some ways, these two readings overlap, yet they are based on wholly contradictory assumptions: Does *Testaments* provide fresh theological arguments that add to canon, or does it solve contradictions that are inherent to canon? The writer is either exploitative (Kugler 2012, 355) or a clever explainer (Kugel 2007, 14).

[5.4] Clearly, both nostalgia and novelty are present in *Testaments*, and Booth's (2015) continuum of fan play allows for both to exist side by side and build on one another. The writer now has a unified strategy for their derivative works. They are a fan, and "to engage a fan, a text needs to be both familiar and novel at once; it must both surprise and appease" (6). We can expect nothing else from a text copied for thousands of years by fans, and the writer's hermeneutics in both reading and rewriting canon is no longer divided between two poles but is instead unified on a single continuum of negotiation and dialogue with canon(s) and community. We can thus conclude that the fan writer, as a creator of a derivative work, is driven by the desire for new material within the context of the canon.

[5.5] A second way this analysis adds to previous scholarly readings of *Testaments* relates to its presentation of Judaism. Scholars have often ascribed a relatively positive view of Judaism to *Testaments*. For example, de Jonge (1986) has argued that this work was "clearly genuinely concerned with the salvation of the Jews" (211). Hollander (1995), writing nearly ten years later, nuanced this opinion slightly, showing how the Jewish law had been replaced by a Christian one. Steps, therefore, have been taken to read *Testaments* as subversive or hostile to Judaism. Yet Hollander nonetheless argues, based on the way the patriarchs discuss the future (i.e., the same passages discussed above), that God's plan of salvation "includes the people of Israel" (99). The analysis above instead suggests that this is not the case: *Testaments* usurps a Jewish reading of Jewish scripture and requires the following of Christ. God will save Christ followers only, which includes people, like the patriarchs, who may have appeared to be Jewish but are in actual fact Christ followers; however, it does not include Jews.

[5.6] All in all, *Testaments* plays a nuanced, fannish game of simultaneously perpetuating and subverting canonical authority. Picking and choosing topics, themes, and narratives, the writers, editors, readers, and transmitters enter into a negotiation of power, changing, adapting, and enforcing readings that suit the personal and communal needs of their religious and sociocultural context.

## 6. Notes

1. I will use the word "writer" throughout to refer to the person(s) who produced this text. This is to avoid importing contemporary ideas of authorship into the discussion. It is not entirely clear if we should talk of a writer or of a writer/editor when it comes to this work. However, I will nonetheless use the term "writer," bearing in mind that the writer made use of sources and traditions. As will be discussed below, authorship in ancient Judaism and early Christianity was viewed significantly differently to how it is seen today.

2. Genette (1997) focused only on the text as manifested in printed media. Georg Stanitzek (2005) extended the theory to other media, including film and television.
3. For more on the form of *The Testaments*, see the discussion and notes in de Bruin (2015, 42–47).
4. All translations are my own, based on the Greek text of de Jonge et al. (1978). English translations can be found in Hollander and de Jonge (1985), de Jonge (1984), and Kee (1983).
5. This reading is not immediately obvious from the text, which seems to imply the sexual assault of the long-dead Sarah, great-grandmother of the twelve brothers. Fisk (2000) has discussed how the author links this narrative from Genesis 34 with an earlier narrative in Genesis 20. There the married Sarah, the mother of Judaism, is inducted into the foreign king Abimelech's harem. This sexual assault thus becomes indicative of the overall treatment of Jewish women (234–35).
6. The distinction between the real world and fictional universes is admittedly hard to define in religious studies, where fiction and reality easily mix; see, for example, Davidsen (2013).
7. As regards *Testaments*, numerous works discuss the nostalgic elements in, for example, the retelling of the Dinah episode (Baarda 1992; Bader 2008; Fisk 2000; Kee 1978; Kugel 1992, 1998; Slingerland 1986), though these generally focus on how these readings are novel, not nostalgic. There are, similarly, several analyses of the rereadings of Jewish history (de Jonge 1985, 1986; Hollander 1995; Stone 1987). Very little can be found that incorporates both sides of the coin in a single framework.

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# Praxis

## The making of Ḥanina ben Dosa: Fan fiction in the Babylonian Talmud

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[0.1] Abstract—The Babylonian Talmud provides a series of stories about a certain Ḥanina ben Dosa, the last of the so-called men of deed according to the Mishna. This Ḥanina ben Dosa appears only sparsely in the earlier Palestinian rabbinic works, so the later, more elaborate, and more numerous stories about this character in the Babylonian Talmud seem to represent a case of fan fiction. Using the distinction between canon and fanon, as is common in fan fiction communities, I reconstruct the conventions applied by the canon (Mishna and Tosefta) to the character Ḥanina ben Dosa, as well as the expanded conventions accepted by the fannish community (or interpretive community) represented by the Babylonian Talmud. The fanon used in a story cycle will be tested against an isolated Ḥanina ben Dosa story in a different Talmudic tractate as well as against an extra-Talmudic story. The applied conventions with regard to Ḥanina ben Dosa as adopted in a *historiola* of an incantation on an Aramaic amulet bowl from Mesopotamia appear to be the same as those of the Talmud.

[0.2] Keyword—Babylonian incantation bowls

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### 1. A brief note on comparison

[1.1] Ralph Weber (2014a, 2014b) recently emphasized the importance of a "philosophy of comparison"—that is, an awareness of what we are doing as we are comparing. This awareness should not amount to a justification of the reasons that led to a comparison, which often result in a listing of (assumed) commonalities. Rather, Weber emphasizes, commonalities are not a requirement of a fruitful comparison, which can simply be justified in that two things sparked the comparer's interest (2014a, 166). Of importance, however, is the specification of the *tertium comparationis* (i.e., the "third of comparison," the respect in which something is compared to something else) and, especially, the "pre-comparative *tertium*," which is in play in the selection of the *comparanda* (the things to be compared), apart from mere interest.



[1.2] It may, of course, not always be necessary to lay out one's precomparative *tertium* or *tertium comparationis*. Yet authors themselves must be aware of the existence of the latter because only in this case "some initially asserted commonality may become unwarranted in the process of comparison; whereupon some continued interest steps in as the guiding *tertium* of the comparison until some new commonality is asserted, and so on" (Weber 2014a, 166). Only such a cognitive process allows for the *comparanda* to undergo an equal transformation into *comparata* (the things that were compared). "The resulting *comparata* are still in some important sense the same as the initial *comparanda*. In some sense, but not in another; for they are the same and they are different. Would they not be the same in any sense, but just be different, then the comparison would not have been about what it was supposed (and perhaps announced) to be about. Would they be just the same and no different, then no inquiry and no comparison would have taken place" (2014b, 928).

[1.3] This article sets out to compare fan fiction with late antique writing culture. Both *comparanda* and especially the *tertium* changed considerably within this comparison, and it may be fruitful to describe the process in more detail than usual.

## **2. A fallacious precomparative *tertium*: Oral cultures**

[2.1] Fiction written by fans depends in one way or another on a story owned by someone, but fan fiction is itself ownerless and open access. Fans write for others and with others. It seems that without a contention for copyright "the internet is giving us back something like an oral society in which people can retell the stories that are most important to them, and, in so doing, change them" (Walker 2004 quoted in Frizzoni 2010, 63). Others go even further with that argument and claim that in the present system "where storytelling has been industrialized to the point that our shared culture is owned by others ... fanfiction is what happened to folk culture: to the appropriation of fables and the retellings of local legends, to the elaborations of tall tales and drinking songs and ghost stories told round the campfire" (Coppa 2017, 7). Therefore, the phenomenon of fan fiction, as it manifests itself on the internet, seems to serve as a suitable foil of comparison to precopyright cultures in which exactly such a folk culture was still vital. This seems especially applicable to rabbinic literature, which is said to have developed orally by faithful memorization and continuous enrichment within a voluntary association, which might then be compared to the fan community.

[2.2] However, while I still think that a comparison with assumed commonalities between rabbinic scholars and fan communities may yield interesting and fertile results, an equation of oral culture with written texts seems misguided. Why? Because it seems that, both then and now, additions to and continuations of well-known stories were and are not something that happens spontaneously and before an accidental audience. An accidental audience would not understand and appreciate pastiches or changes and additions to a defined plot. If, on the other hand, the audience is made of like-minded experts, the presentation has to be prepared in advance and cautiously, and therefore in written form. The texts accepted in internet fan communities are like the late antique rabbinic texts; they do not reshape or continue other texts in a haphazard way, as may be expected from the retelling of a tall tale or an entertaining hyperbole of an adventure ([note 1](#)). Fan fiction and rabbinic literature are

consciously crafted texts—the late antique ones probably even more so than the contemporary, considering the fact that writing was more laborious.

[2.3] Thus, my precomparative *tertium* changed from comparing two quasi-oral cultures to comparing two distinctly and consciously writing cultures. The standards with which the texts are crafted within the two settings became the *tertium comparationis*, the respect against which fan fiction and rabbinic texts are compared.

### 3. Conventions within fan fiction

[3.1] Fans of a certain plot are, in some way or another, emotionally attached to it. This respective plot, generally official and under copyright, is often referred to as *canon*—a loaded and somewhat misleading term, as I explain in another contribution to this issue of the journal. Indeed, while the copyrighted mainstream work (calling it the original only leads to further misconceptions) may have triggered the fandom, it is the willingness of the fan community to elaborate further on the plot that dictates the rules. It is therefore the *fanon* that matters more than the canon, the former being described as "a fan-authored idea or interpretation that is so perfect, so convincing or fun that other fan-authors simply adopt it wholesale" (Coppa 2017, ix) ([note 2](#)). In fan communities, canon and fanon stand on a par, breaking down the boundaries between producers and consumers, creating prodsumers or produsers ([note 3](#)).

[3.2] While the fanon defines the interpretive conventions, other, formal conventions concern the fact that a story has to be assigned to one of the main genres of fan fiction: *gen* (general audience, not focused on romance), *het* (focusing on heterosexual erotica and romance), or *slash* (focusing on homosexual erotica and romance) (Kaplan 2006, 138) ([note 4](#)). Subgenres provide further orientation for the reader (or the archivist of the site) with regard to the content of the story. To give some classic examples:

*H/C* (hurt and comfort): A character is injured and comforted by another.

*Mpreg*: A man gets pregnant.

*Deathfic*: A major character dies.

*Curtainfic*: Domestic fic (main characters (often male slash pairing) shop for curtains, etc.).

*Episode fic*: Rewritten canonical episode with a (preferred) different outcome.

*Episode tag* or *missing scene*: Continuation of canonical scene providing additional information.

*AU* (alternate universe): Canonical characters facing a new setting (which may or may not be mentioned or created in the canon).

*Crossover*: Combines characters from two sources into a single story (which then results in an AU for one or both sides).

*Mary Sue* (if feminine)/*Marty Stu* or *Gary Stu* (if masculine): Inserting a new person (usually an avatar of the authors themselves) into the story, who becomes its new hero. ([note 5](#))

[3.3] The mere fact that such lists of possible topics exist points to a certain normativity and self-restriction in play: not everything goes ([note 6](#)). Such a restriction, however, can only be applied to written texts and helps to warn readers of content that might surprise them in an

unpleasant way.

[3.4] Thus, fan fiction is not just fiction, but stories written in and for a specific and competent audience, shaped against each other and building upon each other (Coppa 2017, 7–12). This fact is also expressed by the excessive use of abbreviations and terms that may seem cryptic to outsiders (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 12).

[3.5] Not by convention but rather by nature, fan fiction is "speculative fiction about character rather than about the world" (Coppa 2017, 12, referencing Mary Ellen Curtin). The writers of fan fiction focus on characters, their potential and potential transformations, and their social background and class identity (13). It may be that fan fiction focuses on character because it is essentially the characters that allow for identification, admiration, or hatred and thereby generate the emotional attachment to a plot—which, in turn, creates a fan. This explains also the sensitivity with which the stories are presented on the fannish platforms by means of the previously mentioned genres.

[3.6] In what follows, I will show to what extent a distinction between a character appearing in an earlier text known to the author (i.e., canon) and the character's fanon (agreed-upon extracanonial knowledge by the fan community resulting from their shared interpretations) can serve as a tool to denote whether or not certain texts stem from the same interpretive community (Kaplan 2006, 136) ([note 7](#)).

#### **4. Canon and fanon about Ḥanina ben Dosa**

[4.1] The earlier texts known to the authors who contributed to the Babylonian Talmud (approximately sixth century CE) were the Hebrew Bible (sixth–second century BCE), the Mishna (second century CE), and the Tosefta (second–fourth century CE). The Mishna and the Tosefta are collections of (mostly) case law; the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds take the form of commentaries on the Mishna to enhance the topics raised therein.

[4.2] The remainder of this discussion will be concerned with the reconstruction of the rabbinic fanon with regard to Ḥanina ben Dosa. Ḥanina ben Dosa is a character who appears in both the Mishna and the Tosefta. Because these traditions are older than those in the Babylonian Talmud, they can be considered as being canon in the sense of forming a basis for further elaborations of the character. The stories in the Mishna and the Tosefta shall therefore be analyzed first in order to deduce from them the canonical conventions concerning the character Ḥanina ben Dosa. Building upon this, we will then see how they have been adapted and enhanced in the Babylonian Talmud, and hence what the latter fanon looks like.

[4.3] This is particularly interesting because the character of Ḥanina ben Dosa appears also in an anonymous non-Talmudic text from roughly the same time and region. By comparing the features of this story to the canonical and the fannish conventions regarding Ḥanina ben Dosa, we can discuss whether it is likely that the non-Talmudic text was produced within the same interpretive community as the Talmudic stories.

## 5. Conventions in the canon about Ḥanina ben Dosa

[5.1] The Mishna tractate Avot 3:9/10 quotes Ḥanina ben Dosa as saying that deeds have priority over wisdom. In accordance with this statement, Ḥanina is never cited throughout rabbinic literature in connection with a halakhic issue (i.e., concerning the traditional law) but as someone who does things in a particular and effective way. In the same vein, the Mishna tractate Soṭa 9:15 (par Tosefta Soṭa 16:5) reports that with the death of Ḥanina the "men of deed" (מעשה אנשי) ceased to be. Hence, already for the canon Ḥanina is history.

[5.2] Accordingly, Mishna tractate Berakhot 5:5 relates to Ḥanina in a hearsay manner (translations mine unless otherwise indicated):

[5.3] (Hebrew) They say about him, about rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, that when he prayed for the sick he would say, "This one will live, and this one will die." They said to him, "Whence do you know this?" He told them, "If the prayer in my mouth feels stimulating then I know that it has been accepted (by God); if not, I know that it was rejected."

[5.4] This story is also present in the Tosefta, but there it refers to an anonymous man (Tosefta tractate Berakhot 3:3).

[5.5] Alternatively, an anecdote referring to Ḥanina in the Tosefta is recounted anonymously in the Mishna (Tosefta Berakhot 3:20/Mishna Berakhot 5:1; the story is also reported in the later Midrash Shemot Rabba 3:12). The incident is told in the same hearsay manner:

[5.6] (Hebrew) They say about him, about rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, that he was standing and praying. An 'Arod [unknown term, most likely a snake or a lizard; Jastrow 1903, 1114] bit him, but he did not stop (praying). His students went and found it (the 'Arod) dead in the opening of its hole. They said, "Woe to the man who is bitten by an 'Arod! (But) Woe to the 'Arod who did bite Ḥanina ben Dosa!"

[5.7] The canon therefore characterizes Ḥanina in these incidents as steadfast in prayer and experienced in praying for the sick.

[5.8] This is very little information compared with the eleven different traditions mentioning Ḥanina in the Babylonian Talmud, some of which have multiple mentions ([note 8](#)). The character "Ḥanina ben Dosa" seemingly expanded greatly between the basic information in the Mishna and the Tosefta. This is most probably due to the fact that to tag a man an *ish ha ma'aseh* (man of deed) bears a lot of potential for imagining those very deeds. The canonical conventions about Ḥanina therefore imply that he was a man of deed, and that this deed came about by prayer.

## 6. The Babylonian fanon about Ḥanina ben Dosa

[6.1] Although the canonical traditions let the outcome of Ḥanina's prayer be dependent on

God, Ḥanina fan fiction lets his prayers always be answered positively. Thus, the stories in the Talmud depict Ḥanina praying for rain to stop and start again (bTan 24b/bYom 53b); Ḥanina praying for an ill child, who promptly recovers (bBer 34b, 2x); and Ḥanina helping a child who fell into a cistern to float by means of prayer (bYev 121b/BK50a) ([note 9](#)). Even so, it seems that the fanon does not regard prayer to be mandatory to a Ḥanina story; rather, what all the stories have in common is a miracle—an unexpected, supernatural event.

[6.2] The fanon also holds that Ḥanina is an early figure from Palestine because he is reported in the Palestinian works Mishna and Tosefta. He is therefore always somehow brought into connection with tannaitic traditions (i.e., early rabbinic traditions from Palestine in Hebrew). The Ḥanina traditions thus often take the form of a *baraita* (i.e., tannaitic material not included in the Mishna), as in bBer 34b, bBK 50a par bYev 121b and bBer 33a, or seemingly explain a *baraita* (bTan 24b-25a).

[6.3] Several stories are tagged as being a *ma'aseh*, a "deed" or "incident" (bBK 50a4/ bYev 121b2, bBer 33a2, bTan 25a). David Stern characterized the *ma'aseh* as a story with a blunt didactic purpose. Because righteous people are depicted as being protected in their everyday lives and their prayers are shown to be answered, the stories encourage their audience to live and act in a similar way (Stern 1991, 13–18).

## 7. The Ḥanina story cycle in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Ta'anit 24b-25a

[7.1] Most interesting for the analysis here is a story cycle consisting of seven stories in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Ta'anit and a single story in the tractate Pesahin. They will serve to show how these fannish conventions were applied and were examined for soundness (or, as it was called in Latin textbooks, *verisimilitas*) by others ([note 10](#)).

[7.2] The story cycle in bTan 24b-25a is part of a larger collection of stories depicting rabbis experiencing a miracle and their own or God's reaction to it. The miracles are shown to be a threat to the peace of society, the order of creation, and the integrity of the creator ([note 11](#)). The seven stories that involve Ḥanina ben Dosa are interrupted twice by comments from the compiler of the Talmud, but never by a story starring another rabbi.

[7.3] In the first story, rain distresses the strolling Ḥanina. He prays and the rain stops until he is back home again. Although this is an entertaining story, it was found to be unsound. In internet fan fiction, it is the "so-called *beta readers* who critique, read, and help revise on various levels, including spelling and grammar, style and structure, and canonicity and remaining in character" (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 6). In the Talmud, it is the compiler who takes care of inserting objections; he sometimes pulls these as excerpts from other contexts, but sometimes they are simply his own remarks, which he attributes to a fitting rabbi. In the case of this Ḥanina story, a comment attributed to Rav Yosef objects that the story is not aligned with the fact that the high priest used to pray on the feast of Yom Kippur that the prayers of travelers should not be heard ([note 12](#)). On that basis, the story's soundness is restored with the explanation that Ḥanina must be more important in God's eyes than is the high priest. Apart from this necessary rectification of the story, the positing of the high priest as a contemporary to Ḥanina archaizes the story in Aramaic, which otherwise lacks any sign

of being of tannaitic origin.

[7.4] A statement attributed to Rav Yehuda (in the name of Rav) then reinforces the claim of Ḥanina's importance before God by adding that the whole world is sustained for the sake of Ḥanina, whom God calls here "my son." Despite his importance in God's eyes, however, a *qav* of carobs is said to be enough for Ḥanina from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve ([note 13](#)). Thus, it is his intimate relationship with God ("my son") that gives Ḥanina priority over the high priest.

[7.5] As the story cycle progresses, it is this intimacy that lets Ḥanina experience miracles whether he is praying or not. The miracles apparently happen to him because he is Ḥanina ben Dosa—someone who enjoys a special favoritism by God because of his previous history of pious deeds, which need not be repeated every time. This fannish convention will be confirmed by the stories that follow. The fact that Ḥanina's pious deeds lie in the past enables the storytellers to let his behavior appear less pious now, as in the story with the rain miracle where Ḥanina stopped the necessary rain.

[7.6] The next six stories would probably be labeled curtainfic (see the earlier definition) in contemporary popular fan fiction forums. They show the family of Ḥanina involved in daily activities. By so doing, they fulfill the curiosity of fans who already may have wondered what it must be like to be married to someone like Ḥanina or to have a father like him. Thus, the next story introduces a completely new figure into the plot, namely Ḥanina's wife. However, as Kristina Busse (2017, 116) has pointed out, it depends greatly on the interpretive community whether "out-of-character" or the insertion of avatars is approved of and to what extent ([note 14](#)). Within the interpretive community in and for which the subsequent Ḥanina stories were written, it would seem the insertion of avatars was only allowed in a very restricted way.

[7.7] Thus, Ḥanina's wife remains nameless; she is introduced casually as "she from his house," and even her neighbor calls her "Madam so-and-so" ([note 15](#)). This second story in the cycle is not introduced as a *baraita* but ends with a commentary formulated like a *baraita* and attributed to a Tanna (a Palestinian teacher of the first rabbinic generations). The purpose of this *baraita* is to justify the addition of Ḥanina's wife as a new character by demonstrating that she already had been part of the storyline in tannaitic times.

[7.8] (Aramaic) She from his house used to heat the oven every Shabbat eve in order to produce much smoke because of the shame. She had a neighbor woman [who] said, Since I know that they have nothing [I will go and see] what is all this [smoke]. She went and knocked on the door, and she [Ḥanina's wife] was ashamed and entered the inner room. A miracle was performed for her, and she saw the oven full of bread and the trough full of dough. She [the neighbor] said to her [Ḥanina's wife], Madam So-and-so, Madam So-and-so, bring the ladle as your bread is going to get burnt. She said to her, That is why I entered.

[7.9] (Hebrew) A Tannaitic tradition [says]: She even went to bring the ladle because she was used to miracles (bTan 25a). (trans. follows Hasan-Rokem



[2009, 42] with modifications)

[7.10] In the same manner—by adding a seemingly older tannaitic tradition at the end that apparently refers to the narrated incident—the next (third) story in this cycle, which involves again Ḥanina's wife, is authorized, as is the fourth narrative which introduces Ḥanina's daughter. The fifth story, on the other hand, only features Ḥanina, so there is no need for such an authorization. Consequently, this is also the case in the Talmud. The story depicts Ḥanina in a conflict with someone (only referred to by using a passive voice construction: Ḥanina was told), which represents another daily experience shared by the members of the interpretive community. The neighbor complained that Ḥanina's goats would damage his fields. In reply to this, Ḥanina says that if that were so, his goats should be eaten by bears; if not, they should each carry a bear in their horns when they came back in the evening. And this is what happened: "In the evening, they each carried a bear in their horns."

[7.11] The sixth story is about Ḥanina meeting a woman who wants to build a house, but her beams are too short. When she comes before him, he asks her about her name. In the context of his wife and daughter having gone unnamed in the previous stories, this is a rather remarkable feature. By asking this question, the story crosses the border into the fan fiction subgenre of real person fiction (RPF), a popular fan fiction subgenre highly disputed by the community for moral and legal reasons. It seems that this move toward RPF (by revealing a character's true name) also called for special measures in the Talmud: in addition to a *baraita*—which, again, is used to conclude a story introducing new characters—the eyewitness testimony of Pelimo, a tannaitic rabbi, is added.

[7.12] (Aramaic) He had this woman neighbor who built her house, and the beams were not long enough. She came before him and told him, "I built a house, and the beams were not long enough." He asked her, "What is your name?" She answered, "Aiku." He said, "Aiku, may your beams be long enough!"

[7.13] (Hebrew) A tannaitic tradition: They were so long that they extended an *ama*-measure of length from here and an *ama*-measure from there. And some say, He made them branches.

[7.14] (Hebrew) They told [in a *baraita*]: Pelimo says, I saw that house and its beams were protruding an *ama*-measure here and an *ama*-measure there. And they told me, That is the house which Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa covered with his prayer. ([note 16](#))

[7.15] This extra claim of truth frees the story from the reproach of being slanderous. The woman really was too poor to afford beams that were long enough, and after Ḥanina performed a miracle, they really stood out on each side of the house.

[7.16] After this story the Talmud returns to Ḥanina's goats. A beta reader objects, "How could Ḥanina ben Dosa possess goats when he was poor?" And further the sages said, "They do not raise small cattle in the land of Israel" (bTan 25a). This objection refers to the convention stated previously in this story cycle: Ḥanina is poor. Moreover, according to the canon he is from Palestine, so the character of Ḥanina ben Dosa needs to be subjected to the

rules that apply to Palestine. This objection again demonstrates the strict control with regard to the conventions, which the story about Ḥanina's goats failed to meet ([note 17](#)).

[7.17] Interestingly, the manuscripts stop the list of Ḥanina ben Dosa stories here. The later prints (Pessaro, Venezia, Vilna) add an additional story to rehabilitate the last story, which had failed to meet the approval of the members of the interpretive community:

[7.18] (Hebrew) Rabbi Pinḥas said: An incident (מעשה): A man passed the door of his [Rabbi Ḥanina's] house and left there some chicken, and Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa's wife (אשתו) found them, and he told her, Do not eat from their eggs. And the eggs multiplied and the chicken bothered them so they sold them and bought goats with that money. Once that same man who had lost the chicken passed by and told his companion, "Here I left my chicken." Rabbi Ḥanina heard him, and told him, "Can you point out a distinguishing sign for them?" He said, "Yes." He gave him the sign and he took the goats. Those were the very goats that brought back bears on their horns. (trans. Hasan-Rokem [2009, 51], with modifications)

[7.19] This story stands out from the other six in that it is in Hebrew, attributed to the mouth of a certain (Palestinian) rabbi (Rabbi Pinḥas), and introduced as a *ma'aśeh*. Intentionally the author stresses the story's relationship with the canon. Even more than that, the story becomes indistinguishable from canonical material. Yet apart from the fact that the story is not present in any of the existing manuscripts, it also betrays its young age by referring back to the story with the goats, which is definitely a work of the postcanonical interpretive community and not to a *baraita*.

[7.20] This story cycle gives a live impression of how conventions were proposed and critically reviewed by others. It also shows that special attention was paid to the introduction of new characters into the canonical storyline and to the naming of real people.

[7.21] In summation, the Babylonian fanon states the following:

- Stories about Ḥanina must take place in a tannaitic setting.
- Ḥanina is from Palestine.
- The stories do not have to have the shape of a *ma'aseh* (an exemplary tale of a righteous person), but a supernatural interference is expected.
- His prayers are always answered, but they are not mandatory to the plot.
- He has an intimate relationship with God ("son"), and miracles result from this heavenly favoritism (rather than from prayer).
- Ḥanina is poor.

[7.22] Also, in the creation of the stories, special attention is paid to the introduction of new people to the plot, which is generally limited to the denotation of their role (e.g., wife, daughter). In one case, where a coprotagonist is introduced with her proper name (thereby turning it into a form of real person fiction), an eyewitness testimony is added.

## 8. Application of the fanon to other Ḥanina stories



[8.1] It may be interesting to compare the fanon established along the story cycle in the Babylonian Talmud's tractate Ta'anit 25a to other Ḥanina ben Dosa stories in the Talmud to see whether they adhere to the same fanon and may therefore be considered to be the product of the same interpretive community. A story from tractate Pesahim 112b serves here as a further test case. This story has, as a somewhat extraordinary matter of fact, an extra-Talmudic parallel in an amuletic bowl. The latter offers yet another possibility for testing the fanon, as we will discuss.

[8.2] The Ḥanina story in bPes 112b is embedded in a long list of exemplified situations and conditions to beware of in order to avoid the harmful attack of demons. Contrary to the Ḥanina stories discussed earlier, the story in tractate Pesahim is not concluded with a *baraita* (a Hebrew and therefore apparently early rabbinic tannaitic tradition) but is prefaced with one.

[8.3] (Hebrew) For it was taught (דתניא): A single person should not go out at night, not in the night of the fourth day or the night of the Sabbath. Because Agrat bat Maḥlat and eighteen myriads of angels of destruction (חבלה מלאכי) go out (in these nights) and each and every one has a permission to destroy in his own right (עצמו בפני). (bPes 112b)

[8.4] This tradition triggers the question, Why do the demoness Agrat bat Maḥlat and her destructive entourage only swarm out on two nights of the week? The answer follows subsequently in the shape of a story, which locates this fact in the demoness's encounter with Ḥanina ben Dosa.

[8.5] (Aramaic) Originally it was common for them (to swarm out) daily. One time she (Agrat bat Maḥlat) met Ḥanina ben Dosa and said to him, "If it had not been publicly announced in heaven: 'Beware of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, my son!'—your blood would be valued in my place (only) in small coins." He said to her, "If I am so important in heaven, I decree upon you that you shall never cross the world again." She said to him, "Leave a little room for me!" He left for her Wednesday night and Friday night. (trans. per New York Columbia [X 893 T14a] dating to 1546–1548)

[8.6] It seems that the previously derived fannish conventions have been applied and met in this story. Because the story explains a (seemingly) tannaitic tradition, Ḥanina is again removed to a distant past in Palestine. The story is not tagged as an incident (*ma'aseh*), but meeting a demoness was also considered a supernatural event in late antiquity, especially if the encounter did not result in a mere attack from the demon but in a dialogue. Because the prayer was no longer considered mandatory by the fanon (contrary to the canon), it is also absent from this story. Instead, the special relationship that Ḥanina entertains with God is again placed at the fore, as required by the fanon. And again, it is this apparent position of (previously earned) preference that enables Ḥanina to ban the demoness, not a righteous deed performed or a prayer uttered on the spot.

[8.7] If there are no parallels anywhere else in earlier rabbinic literature, the simple fact that

a *baraita* is introduced as such, and in Hebrew, cannot be taken as a proof of authenticity. Yet if this *baraita* is indeed taken as earlier material upon which someone created an explanatory story, it becomes more understandable why the choice of character fell on Ḥanina: he was the only early figure known to be from Palestine who enjoyed enough favor with God to stop a demoness from wandering the Earth.

[8.8] The story of the demoness seems to have originated within the same interpretive community as the others. Once again a new character is introduced, but without precision for her role, which is rather significant. But her personal name (Agrat bat Maḥlat) is provided. No special attempt is made to inform readers or listeners about who she is, or to protect her privacy, or to add an eyewitness testimony to protect the story from the suspicion of being a tall tale. In fact, how is it known that she is a demoness? This is for one part obvious from the context, which is concerned with different types of demons and their behavior. Still, from the nonchalant way in which Agrat bat Maḥlat is brought into the story, and from the fact that the *baraita* that reveals her name may stem from a different literary context, it seems that this story is a crossover featuring two already known characters, Agrat bat Maḥlat and Ḥanina ben Dosa.

[8.9] However, although pairing these characters in a story answers the question triggered by the *baraita*, it is apparently not fit to solve the problem for good: Ḥanina ben Dosa's character is too soft, and he leaves enough leeway for the demons to harm people on Wednesday and Friday nights. But there is another character who seems more fit to take care of the demoness for good: Abaye, a Babylonian teacher and a prominent figure in the Talmud:

[8.10] (Aramaic) And again on another day she met Abaye. She said to him [me], "If it were not publicly announced in heaven: 'Beware of Naḥmani and his Tora!' I would endanger you!" He said to her, "If I am so important in heaven, I decree upon you that you shall never cross the world again." ([note 18](#))

[8.11] This exchange between the Palestinian Ḥanina ben Dosa and the (local) Babylonian teacher Abaye brings to mind what is now called a Mary Sue/Marty Stu story in fan fiction. A Mary Sue—or masculine Marty Stu—character is introduced into the story to become its new hero. This is exactly what happened here: Abaye saved the day, and people can now safely stroll around at night whenever they want to. Quite often, this Mary Sue/Marty Stu character is an avatar of the author themselves (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 11). Although it seems unlikely Abaye wrote this story himself, the identification of students with their teachers (and their teachers' teachers) was very high, as the reference to Naḥmani shows: Abaye was a student of Rabbah bar Naḥmani (Stemberger 2011, 110). Similarly, the copyist of the Munich 95 manuscript seems to have self-identified so much with Abaye that he wrote "me" instead of "him." Yet there is one obvious aspect that differs greatly from a genuine Mary Sue/Marty Stu fan fiction plot: the canonical hero, Ḥanina ben Dosa, has been eliminated from the storyline. He was not saved by a new hero but replaced. It seems that when it comes to heroes from Palestine, the alliances of the Babylonian storywriters are clear.

[8.12] Yet not only the preference for a certain character seems to be at issue here but also the pedagogical and maybe even theological message of the Ḥanina stories. The additional story featuring Abaye teaches that to have the wits to conquer a demon for good does not require being a son of God; rather, it takes the right Tora—the right teaching ([note 19](#)).

## 9. Ḥanina ben Dosa in an Aramaic Bowl Incantation

[9.1] The Aramaic Bowl Incantations from Mesopotamia date from the fifth to the eighth centuries CE ([note 20](#)). They were used in the same way as amulets—to protect, heal, or curse—but they were hidden in a wall, under the threshold, or in a cemetery, and often placed upside down (Morony 2003, 95; Frankfurter 2015). The pottery used was of genuine everyday make (Hunter 1996, 222).

[9.2] The ten bowls from the Schøyen collection that contain the name of Ḥanina ben Dosa were apparently all written by the same hand for two related women (Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro 2013, 54). Thus, the sample does not attest to a whole Ḥanina interpretive community but rather to the interpretation of one scribe. The *historiola* is used like a template over the ten bowls with adaptations made only for the names (and nicknames) of the clients. The respective incantation runs as follows:

[9.3] (Aramaic) I adjure you, and I beswear you, you evil spirit, who met Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, and Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa said to her, to the evil spirit who met him in this very hour, the verse that is written: "You make darkness and it is night, wherein all the animals of the forest creep" [Psalm 104:20]. And again, I adjure and again I beswear you, you, evil spirit, that you should not go and not become to PN daughter of PN, who is called "Nickname," neither a companion of the night nor a companion of the day. ([note 21](#))

[9.4] Looking for the conventions established in the interpretive community represented by the Babylonian Talmud, we find that Ḥanina ben Dosa bears the title "rabbi" in the *historiola*, as sages from Palestine do (rather than "rav," which is the Babylonian/Aramaic version of this title). Furthermore, here Ḥanina cites a biblical verse and is thereby speaking Hebrew, not Aramaic. Neither the incident described here nor the one in the Talmud are classified as *ma'aseh*; rather, they both refer to a specific time (Talmud: *one time*; the bowls: *in this very hour*).

[9.5] The demoness Agrat bat Maḥlat, who is seemingly also from Palestine, judging from the way she is introduced in the Babylonian Talmud (namely, in a *baraita*), is not mentioned by name—just as she is not mentioned in the Talmudic story, in fact. The reference here is simply to an evil spirit.

[9.6] There is a further parallel to the Talmudic story: Ḥanina fails again in his attempt to ban the evil spirit for good. Citing Psalm 104:20, he confines the harmful work of the spirit to the night. This is, of course, not the holistic healing that the suffering patient wishes for. Here, the decisive "I" of the bowl's writer chimes in and adjusts this mishap by commanding that the spirit should not accompany the patient by night or by day. The conjurer does here what

Abaye did in the Talmudic story: he bans the demon for good, not only partially.

[9.7] The writer of the bowl observes so many of the conventions of the fanon of the Talmudic interpretive community that it is almost impossible to assume that they had no connection with each other. The character "Ḥanina ben Dosa" is used in both versions for the same purpose: to start a good deed, which someone from Babylonia had to finish.

## 10. Conclusion

[10.1] This discussion has concerned itself with an investigation of the stories about Ḥanina ben Dosa in the Babylonian Talmud under the premise that they are to a certain extent comparable to internet fan fiction. The merit of this sort of examination lies mostly in the distinction between canon and fanon. The canon, as referring to an inspiring earlier source, can in the case of the Talmud be established in the Mishna, which it addresses in the form of a commentary. The reconstruction of the fannish conventions (fanon) with regard to the character requires, of course, a representative database. The eight stories analyzed here point to careful beta reading by members of the interpretive community.

[10.2] A comparison with a Ḥanina ben Dosa character found in an extra-Talmudic story has shown that most of the fanon has been maintained. Thus, the sifting out of the fanon (or simply the conventions of an interpretive community with regard to a certain character) can help to decide whether certain stories stem from the same community. Moreover, they may point to possible beta readers or even later additions.

## 11. Notes

1. Not even in the time before the transition of fandom to the internet in the early 1990s, when fandom was still a "face-to-face proposition" (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 13) does it seem that fan stories were an oral matter: "Fan clubs formed, and fans *wrote* newsletters, zines and APAs ("amateur press association": add-on circuit newsletters) and got together at conventions" (emphasis mine).

2. A fan's personal, idiosyncratic interpretation, on the other hand, is called the *headcanon* (<https://fanlore.org/wiki/Headcanon>).

3. Jenkins adds, "Through fanfiction writing, and, specifically, the advent of the fanon, the aura of a canon author such as Austen is usurped and the shadow from which the fanfic writer rises out of is subsequently cast over the original author and text" (2015, 371).

4. These three genres function as organizing principles of fan fiction websites. However, slash is often housed in separate archives (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 10).

5. For more examples, see Busse and Hellekson (2006, 10–11). However, as they specify, there exist also "many fandom-specific categories." For the hurt and comfort genre, a writer of fan fiction confesses, "A word about Hurt/Comfort. I love it. I love it for all the wrong reasons. I don't only use it to make the stoic types more vulnerable; I adore taking the most

open character (who is usually my favorite) and trashing him until he is a devastated, whimpering wreck. I can get into trashing the stoic one, too, but he's usually my second helping" (Renae 2000).

6. Indeed, some writers exhibit rather conservative and clear ideas about the guidelines that should be followed within a specific subgenre. Thus, Lucy Gillam (2001) posted the "ten commandments of crossovers" as "1. Thou shalt not cross sources just because it would be 'neat'; 2. Thou shalt know and represent both thy sources equally; 3. Thou shalt avoid the reciting of mighty deeds; 4. Thou shalt not egregiously mix thy genres [talking of the genres of the sources]; 5. Thou shalt not mix contradicting universes; 6. Thou shalt not randomly mix and match pairs; 7. Thou shalt not assume everyone is gay; 8. Thou shalt not base thy crossover on trivial coincidences; 9. Thou shalt mingle thy mythologies sparingly; 10. Thou shalt leave long-lost relatives lost."

7. For the negotiation processes over community conventions, see Busse (2017, 113–17).

8. See bBM 101a; bBQ 50a; bBer 33a.61b; bHag 14a; bYev 121b; bYom 53b; bSoṭ 49a; bPes 112b; bShab 112b; bTaan 24b. For charts of all of the Ḥanina mentions throughout rabbinic literature, see Becker (2002, 343–44).

9. A thirteenth-century manuscript (Ms. Vatican ebr. 216ff. 4–6cf., <https://digi.vatlib.it/mss/detail/Vat.ebr.216>) renders Ḥanina's prayer effective, which is otherwise not stated in the Talmud (cf. the edition and Italian edition of this *Piṣṣ'a de R. Ḥanina ben Dos'a*; Tocci [1986]).

10. For the preeminence of verisimilitude over truth in late antique stories and speeches, see Webb (2009, 117–18). On avoiding writing OOC (out of character) fiction, see hlwar (2015).

11. Thus, Julia Watts Belser has recently approached these stories—and this story cycle in particular—"ecocritically," a literary method that takes the physical environment of the texts into consideration (2015, 188–95).

12. This whole passage has a parallel in Yom 53b.

13. This statement is also present in bBer 17b and bHul 86a.

14. Compare with Busse (2017, 116–17). Those who succeed in their communities in such a way are characterized by Busse (116) as the "most ingenuous readers—the most aggressively discontent ones."

15. פלניתא פלניתא!

16. Regarding the name "Aiku," Hasan-Rokem (2009) draws attention to its phonological closeness to the Greek οἶκος, "house" (50n99). More interesting seems the variant reading *Aibu*, as it appears in some manuscripts, which refers to an owl bird (50). In light of the people who had seen additional "branches"—which would better fit a nest than a house—and the story with the goats, the story with Ḥanina's obedient donkey (bShab 112b and ARN.A,

chapter 8), and the hagiographical nature of this story cycle (Hasan-Rokem 2009, 52), it would just seem appropriate to let him understand the speech of a bird.

17. What I call here "fannish conventions" or "fanon" with an eye to fan fiction, Galit Hasan-Rokem (2009) calls "meta-folkloric awareness" with regard to folklore.

18. Translation according to Ms Munich 95, dating from 1342, with the noted changes. Every Mss except for Munich 95 writes "him"; Munich 95, on the other hand, writes, "she said to *me*," which may simply be an omission of the final *he*. If the first person singular were chosen on purpose, then it should later also read "*I* said to her." This cannot be verified because Munich 95 tends to abbreviate the personal endings of the verbs, as was the case here. Also, regarding "Beware of Nahmani and his Tora!," Nahmani was Abaye's teacher. The translation at this point follows Ms Vatican 109. The reasons for why Abaye should be spared vary in the Mss, from no reason given (Munich 6) to "my son" (Munich 95; Vatican 125) or "Nahmani my son" (NY JTS 1608 [ENA 850]).

19. Many other stories, particularly in the Babylonian Talmud, stress the importance of study (Rubenstein 2003, 16–79).

20. Morony (2003, 83) notes about the practice that it "seems to have begun and ended rather abruptly."

21. Translation follows Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro (2013). The *historiola* is present in bowls JBA 1–JBA 10 (Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro 2013, 56–85). For the Talmudic interpretation of Ps 104,20 with a rather similar story, see bBM 83b/84a. Note that "in this very hour" (שעתא בזההיא) was translated as "at that time."

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# Praxis

## Martyrs, athletes, and transmedia storytelling in late antiquity

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[0.1] Abstract—Fan fiction in antiquity suffers from a lack of certainty regarding what is canon. Is what is now considered fan fiction really fan fiction, or is it another contemporary version of the canon? The concept of fan fiction thus ought to be combined with the idea of transmedia storytelling, building on snowball-effect stories. This approach is used in an analysis of how saints became a characteristic of late antiquity Christianity. This era used fan fiction-like texts to describe the saints' life stories. The shrines and dedicated basilicas allowed distinct communities to gather and celebrate, and pilgrimages combined adventure and biographical identification with pictures, relics, and pilgrim tokens for the beloved saint. The Christian world in late antiquity has characteristics reminiscent of the universes created by transmedia storytelling, the aim of which is complete immersion in content.

[0.2] Keywords—Athletes of Christ; Cult of the saints; Fan fiction; Patronage; Pilgrimage

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### 1. Were there canons in late antiquity?

[1.1] One particular word, *canon*, links fan fiction with the Bible and suggests grounds for comparison. However, interestingly, the use of the term troubles both biblical studies and adjacent fields and scholarship on fan fiction. Before I address these analytical issues, I would like to briefly contrast the usage of the term and its implications in fan fiction communities as well as late antiquity.

[1.2] In fan fiction communities, the term *canon* relates to the original source to which a fan story relates by using its characters, universes, plot, specific language, and so on. This notion of canon as an authoritative predecessor of a work that—either officially or unofficially—relies on it is a rather recent one. The notion requires stable forms of a medium that can be protected and owned by individuals (copyrighted). By contrast, in late antiquity books were expensive, and people often copied only relevant passages onto cheaper and less bulky tablets. Moreover, the process of copying, whether it concerned the whole book or only parts

of it, further affected the original content. Late antique authors cared to attach their name to their literary productions as well, yet there were no laws that would have supported their ownership claims.

[1.3] The late antique usage of the term canon, then, had nothing to do with originality or ownership. Rather, the canon was a list of ecclesiastically authenticated books. Works could qualify as "canonizable" if they were true in style and theology to other works already considered to be canonical (Pentiuć 2014, 101–105). Mimicking an authorized author's reasoning and literary style was, in fact, the aim of many late antique authors and makes it very difficult to distinguish between canon and fan fiction in the sense these terms are used in the fan fiction vocabulary.

[1.4] However, the concept of canon as it is used in fan fiction can also be found in biblical studies, from where it seems to have entered colloquial usage and, eventually, fan fiction jargon (Busse 2017, 101). In biblical studies this concept of canon has been criticized considerably lately for its anachronistic nature (Mroczek 2016). The critiques have foregrounded the problem that, by etically designating certain works as canonical in the sense of their being authoritative, binding, and original, other works are relegated to being merely pseudepigraphies or rewritten Bibles.

[1.5] Not surprisingly, then, the use of the same term *canon* as referring to authoritative, binding, and especially original imposes the same dichotomies and hierarchies between copyrighted stories and fan fiction. Thus, a similar "narrow view of a binary set of the 'good' (official and original) text and the 'bad' (amateurish and derivative) one" as found in biblical studies can be observed in fan fiction communities (Stasi 2006, 120). Yet, like the texts relating to or based upon an ancient text, fan fiction also entertains a very complex relationship to its copyrighted base text, a relationship that cannot be described merely in terms of hierarchy between texts.

[1.6] The modern concept of canon obviously generates biased assumptions regarding the relationship between texts as well as of their quality. In order to produce a fair and symmetric analysis of texts, a less biased term such as *base text* may be more helpful—if, indeed, a direct link between two texts can be established.

[1.7] Yet even if we abandon the concept of canon altogether, does fan fiction still have a lot to offer to scholars of ancient texts as a template of comparison? As I will discuss, fan fiction can also be produced without a distinct base text. Such fan fiction—and especially the reasons that lead to its creation—may serve as a helpful template for assessing the processes in what will be associated here heuristically with fan communities—namely, voluntary communities of joint interest—who produce artifacts and texts without a distinct base text. The remainder of this article will thus focus on fan fiction triggered by analogy and metaphor and fueled by curiosity, fascination, suspense, relevance to one's personal life, and entertainment. Transmedia storytelling will serve as a template to explore the mechanisms in play.

## **2. The concept of transmedia storytelling**

[2.1] The conscious and commercial application of mechanisms to trigger fandom as well as new media platforms for its display is called *transmedia storytelling*. Henry Jenkins describes the approach as follows: "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (2007). The franchising of *The Matrix* (1999), for example, resulted in three films, several animated shorts, comic books, and video games. Fan fiction relating to The Matrix series can therefore not be traced back to a specific canon: "There is no one single source or *ur-text* where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *Matrix* universe" (Jenkins 2007). Therefore, it seems that the concept of transmedia storytelling may yield some answers to the question of how to access fannish text production and fan materiality without the need of an explicit base text.

[2.2] Books about transmedia storytelling offer advice on how to sell a story to the largest possible audience by involving and creating as many media platforms as possible. These platforms are tools that enable the fans to be in constant engagement with the plot throughout their everyday lives. Or, as Nuno Bernardo, the author of the *Producer's Guide to Transmedia*, puts it, "Transmedia storytelling involves creating content that engages the audience using various techniques to permeate their daily lives" (2011, 3). Transmedia storytelling aims to create a product suitable to generate an emotional and interactive fandom. In multimedia storytelling the fan, not the plot, is the main concern.

[2.3] There are different ways to achieve such an audience engagement. For Andrea Phillips, the author of *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling* (2012), the most engaging story takes the form of a game, forcing the consumer to collect the content of the story across multiple platforms. This game engages the audience actively to press the plot ahead by means of puzzles, which have to be solved with the effort and the collective intelligence of fellow gamers. The gamers can influence and determine the plot via decision-choice possibilities. Borders to reality are crossed when players are called on their cell phones, when the characters reply by e-mail, or when clues are sent by postal mail. A multilayered story is fashioned that is, as the title of Phillips's book suggests, truly created by the author(s) for the consumers—who, despite their engagement, remain confined to the predetermined plot.

[2.4] Nuno Bernardo has a different approach to transmedia storytelling. He sees himself as the initiator of a story, not as its creator. After having initiated the story, he limits his role to being its producer. He proceeds by first identifying a potential group of consumers. This target group is subsequently teased through their favorite medium with text pieces out of context that seem to allude to a story. Knowing that fannish participation in terms of rewriting, advancing, and commenting on the plot cannot be avoided, Bernardo lets the fans do the rest. Since he found teenage girls to identify mostly with their peers, he created a character named Sophia, a teenage girl writing her diary.

[2.5] Sophia's daily entries could be read each night on a blog. Additionally, fans could also subscribe to receive messages from Sophia on their cell phones. These messages, which were apparently sent by Sophia to friends and relatives throughout her day, alluded to events

happening to her in real time. On receiving these texts, the fans would rush to the chat room of the fan website and speculate about what had happened and about what was going to happen to Sophia. What remained to be done by Bernardo, as the producer, was to choose which idea to follow on what platform in order to meet fannish suggestion and demand. As Bernardo notes, "The cross-platform activity grows organically from inside the story. As the product grows, the cross-platform activities are not add-ons or gimmicks, instead, they are generated by the storyline itself" (2011, 5). "Sophia's Diary" ended as several books, a magazine, a TV series, and a blog. Still, the series did not render the content of the book, nor did the magazine: each medium provided new content (see also Jenkins 2007).

[2.6] Phillips's and Bernardo's approaches differ significantly in their consideration of fannish contribution to the story. While Phillips limits fannish impact to decision-choice making, Bernardo lets the fans write the plot. Although both models do not involve a canon, Bernardo's model is the most suitable for investigating fan activity without determining a base text because it really puts the fans and their activity into the center. Still, Phillips's model is useful as a reminder of the stimulating effect of dispersed content on different platforms, which seemingly creates a "hunt for content."

[2.7] There is, however, one important aspect that seemingly went unnoticed by Bernardo: the reason for the creativity that his character stimulated in the fans. Identification, I would argue, does not account for this outburst of innovation. Rather, Bernardo's teasers constantly forced the fans to draw analogies, by means of which they were able to imagine things outside the realm of their own experiences, even outside their previous parameters of thinking. The contextless pieces of information that the fans received throughout the day constantly forced them to ask, What does this remind me of? Analogy drawing and metaphorical thinking are essential factors in reaching solutions for problems and, consequently, innovation (Knorr-Cetina 1981, 49–67). It is mostly via analogy that humans can come up with new solutions and, hence, innovate.

[2.8] If transmedia storytelling is viewed as the result of a business plan and as the usage of contemporary technical possibilities for telling a captivating story, it is certainly right to claim that "we're beginning to see the emergence of new forms of storytelling inconceivable before the internet" (Rosenthal quoted in Bernardo 2011, xiii.). If, however, transmedia storytelling is conceived of as a self-developing story through fannish activity, there is reason to assume that this could happen everywhere and anytime. What is new is simply the merchandising of the respective mechanisms as a distinct concept. Such a snowball-effect story, as triggered by Bernardo, may as well take off without a cleverly designed story for a specific target group. An incident may coincidentally stimulate a conclusive analogy that wins an audience, which perpetuates the subject further. Indeed, the perfect fannish plot stimulates analogies to other characters and stories. The story can turn from a simple plot into a universe of plots embracing multiple plots and platforms of fan activity.

### **3. Two separate stories: Jesus and athletics**

[3.1] I would like to consider the story about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in ancient Palestine as being, at the same time, the cause and effect of such a

snowball story. Many factors contributed to the persistent importance of this narrative in Western history, and this is certainly not the place to deal with all of them. Rather, I will focus on one important factor responsible for the breakthrough of the story in late antiquity, turning it from a simple story among many similar stories into a story-universe. I will show how a powerful analogy enabled the association of many other plots and activities with the story about Jesus and fostered the participation of prior unseen masses of fans in the development of this new universe.

[3.2] In fact, the death and resurrection of Jesus—a central component of Paul's letters, the earliest textual witness in our possession—was nothing special in its time. Many of the ancient Greek heroes who died on the battlefields, sacrificing themselves for the greater good, were said to be still alive, appearing to and even sharing meals with the living (Betz 2004). Even the Gospel's attribution of wise teaching and miracles to Jesus was not something new; it was rivaled in its time by the lives of philosophers and heroes, as the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus shows. The fact that Jesus was a Judean hero may have made him popular among Romans with a certain affinity for Judean mythology (so-called God fearers) yet not particularly among the Judeans themselves and even less so among the decisive mass of the Roman population. No, the story of Jesus as promoted by Paul and portrayed in the Gospels did not have the potential to become what it became of its own accord.

[3.3] The story of Jesus coincided with a time in which different forms of athletics boomed. The elite Roman youth trained in gymnasia, and athletes traveled across the Roman Empire to compete in prestigious, sacred games. Winners "enjoyed a range of privileges and achieved a high social status in their local communities" (Remijsen 2015, 30). The winner of an *eiselastic* game, for example, was not only entitled to a crown and a pension, but to a festive entrance into his hometown for which a part of the city wall was torn down. Privileges for victors included further "receiving privileges such as financial allowances and extra portions of sacrificial animals. They also walked as a separate group in festive parades in the city, as did other privileged groups" (Remijsen 2011, 99).

[3.4] Ancient athletics also consisted of games that bust the modern notion or categories of "sport" (König 2005, 32–35). Gladiatorial combats, the "most successful innovation in the repertory of Roman spectacular entertainment," quickly spread around the Mediterranean (Köhne 2000, 11; Weiss 2014). Their attraction was based not only on the tension of the game, but also on the involvement of the spectators, who could decide the final fate of the loser by respective cheering. For one moment, the circus turned social realities upside down and let everybody judge life and death (Ewigleben 2000). Beast hunts (*venationes*) and chariot racing were also popular forms of athleticism. Indeed, from the first through the end of the third century CE athletic games saw a renaissance. The Olympic games were held periodically in Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor. Local games also saw an exponential increase in the first two centuries CE, reaching their peak under the emperor Hadrian, 117–138 CE (Remijsen 2011; 2015). Epitaphs from the period demonstrate that such activities continued up to the sixth century.

[3.5] Athleticism was very popular at that time and was enjoyed by the masses, but it was an

exertion of the elite. Indeed, only the wealthy could afford the training, and participation in the contests required a stable pedigree. Athletic competition was primarily a means for the elite to compete with each other publicly and to win both the prestige and the prizes for their family and city. Successful athletes could also accumulate multiple honorable citizenships (König 2005, 13). Successful slaves or sponsored talent were exceptions of the rule—local games were held by and for the elites (van Nijf 2001).

[3.6] Although agonistic festivals were not the only promising expositions for athletes, the patrons (*agonothete*) and other sponsors of agonistic festivals did receive honorable mentions with their contestants. Winners and their benefactors were openly celebrated, and some cities seem to have been plastered with epitaphs and statues of their local victors (van Nijf 2001). These expositions seem to have been very persistent, as attested by 150 *ostraca* (pottery sherds with writing) that were used as tokens for wine. These tokens, which were meant to be redeemed by specific athletes, date from the fourth century CE (Oxyrhynchus, Egypt), and they were all issued in the name of the same benefactor (Lougovaya 2018, 54–55).

[3.7] As Alan Cameron (1973) and Jason König (2005) remind us, although we now believe that many authors of the time were among the foremost leaders, the fame and influence of athletes actually may have far surpassed theirs. The reason for our misperception is that the statues of victorious athletes and their reputed sponsors have perished, and the lists of victors as well as their epitaphs have weathered and become illegible. By contrast, many texts of orators, physicians, and diverse philosophers have survived and been passed on, and they constitute the starting point of many disciplines of the contemporary academic curriculum. In spite of this, it should not be forgotten that texts and words, treatises and sermons take much longer to become entrenched in the public consciousness than a stadium victory celebrated by lavish processions and concise, uncomplicated notes of admiration posted everywhere. The fame of victorious athletes was much more immediate than that of the treatises and sermons condemning them.

[3.8] In their own rhetorical context, the denigrating remarks of the period's writers may seem reasonable and appropriate: the physician Galen, who claimed that athletics was not an art; Augustine, who condemned the games as worthless; and the orators, who claimed they fought verbally as hard if not more bravely than a gladiator. Yet most if not all of these claims must be seen in light of the competition over patronage. A city had only a limited number of wealthy citizens; if they chose to sponsor the games, the funds to promote a physician and his theories, a bishop and his church, or an orator and his school would become scarce (Lehoux 2012, 4–8; König 2005, 2–7; Brown 1981, 23–39).

[3.9] So it seems those who wanted to promote themselves or their story had to engage, one way or another, with athletics—yet the Gospels do not. In fact, they seem to avoid using the term *hero* or any athletic terminology that could have associated Jesus with Greek myths and the Olympic games (Betz 2004). Instead, the Gospels distinctly link Jesus to Judean myths and the predictions of Judean prophets. So why was it that by the time the pilgrim Egeria visited Jerusalem in the late fourth century, she witnessed processions and displays of Jesus's relics on his commemoration days that followed the customs for heroes? Why was it that she

witnessed similar veneration at the shrines of martyrs in many other locales as well? As I will argue in the next section, the transformation of Jesus into a form of local hero was due to an analogy with athletes.

#### **4. The power of analogy: Jesus, the martyrs, and athletics**

[4.1] Although in two instances Paul makes use of athletic vocabulary in his letters, he never uses it with regard to Jesus. Rather, he evokes the behavior of the athlete, familiar to everybody, as being exemplary for self-discipline and endurance—while at the same time both vain and transitory.

[4.2] Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games restricts himself beforehand. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. (1 Corinthians 9:24–26 NIV, slightly adapted)

[4.3] Paul draws an analogy here from the athlete to the follower of Christ. Without making a distinction between rich and poor, with or without pedigree, the followers of Christ have a chance to compete and to win a prize. This is, however, a marginal figure of speech, and we should not overrate it. A more pointedly formulated invitation to imitate an athlete is found in the (pseudo) Pauline letter 1 Timothy 6:12 (NIV, slightly adapted):

[4.4] Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you have been called and for which you confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses [*martyrōn*].

[4.5] This is certainly more of a catchphrase, and it may have circulated independently before and after it was used in this letter. Still, it does not account for the fact that Jesus came to be associated with athletic heroes. Rather, it seems that we must follow a different path of analogy, but one of these passages may have been indicating.

[4.6] Indeed, another set of narratives became very popular in late antiquity and contributed locally to the fortification of bishops: the cult of the martyrs or, as it is also called, the cult of the saints. Similar to the Jesus story, scholars have struggled to explain how the stories of various killed Christians became as popular and influential as they did.

[4.7] Throughout history people have died heroic deaths, sacrificing their lives in war or to appease the gods (Moss 2013; Boyarin 1999). Funeral orations also were part of the Greek and Roman traditions, and with them the attempt to make sense of a person's death (see, for example, Dio Chrysostom's oration for the boxer Melankomas). Even the anticipation of "posthumous recognition" is not unheard of (Boyarin, 95). Thus, graphic depictions of cruel deaths were available at the time, but they did not stir the same passion as the martyr stories (Moss). What was different about the Christians who died in the arena as witnesses (martyrs in Greek) for their faith was that they became associated with athletes.

[4.8] From the third century onward the martyrs were called *athletes of Christi* or *athletes of faith* (Heid 2007; Kitzler 2015). Obviously, an analogy had been drawn between the martyr who won the eternal crown by dying in the arena and the athlete who won the game. This analogy enabled the invention of a completely new hero—the man or woman who died victoriously for God in the arena. This was a new character, who united the qualities of a mythological hero with the fame and prestige of a contemporary athlete.

[4.9] A hero was said to "stand between the gods and human beings. They know less than the gods, but more than human beings...Toward human beings these heroes appear helpful and kind, but if they are insulted and neglected by a lack of faith, their anger must be reckoned with" (Betz 2004, 36–37). Heroes not only knew remedies against physical pain and to assist love affairs, but they were active beyond their deaths. The same was true for the saints, as the accounts of their miracles and lives show. However, compared with the athlete-hero, the saint became more prestigious—especially as the analogy with athletes brought patronage by the wealthy.

[4.10] Just like with real athletes, the athletes of Christ affected the decoration of cities. Emperor Constantine (third to fourth centuries), for example, made use of the athletes of Christ in several ways, but particularly to distinguish himself from his predecessor Maximus. Maximus was considered responsible for the tragic deaths of Christians in the arena, and Constantine held himself out as different. He renovated and enhanced the Circus Maximus, and he established "halls of victory for the martyrs" on the Via Appia that led to and from the circus. Attending the games in the circus thereby became a commemoration of the victory of the martyrs (Heid 2007, 417).

[4.11] Constantine's new direction was, of course, no different than what the cities did for their athletes; statues of the athletes were "set up along the public roads of the city" (van Nijf 2001, 325). Starting with Rome, Christian martyrs became the new poster children for cities, standing for bravery and victory. In the same vein, martyr basilicas were built in the shape of the circus (see Heid 2007, 419–21 for illustrations). The newly established festive calendar under Constantine encouraged a similar back and forth between the commemoration of the athletes of Christ and agonistic games: in this calendar, the commemoration days for the martyrs alternated with 177 days for games.

[4.12] These new athletes forced other cities to acquire one or several martyrs for themselves, which they then could promote for the glory of the city with shrines dedicated to these saints at the sites of their death. And the story that started as a mere image—a Christian dying for his faith in the arena—was capable of generating multiple analogies. As the elites of the cities thought about what this picture reminded them of, they could create individual plots. Saint Sergius, for example, became the saint of a frontier region and was always depicted as an armed rider, a "soldier-saint" (Fowden 1999). Local patrons made sure that they had their say in the fashioning of the saint (Brown 1981, 50–68).

[4.13] Bishops were very interested in having a popular shrine in their diocese because this supported an increase in authority both locally and with regard to other bishops. One of Augustine's sermons (fourth/fifth century), for example, tells the story of a brother and sister,



Paul and Palladia, who had been cursed by their mother. Although the siblings wandered from one martyr shrine to another in hopes of healing, it was only at the martyr shrine of Stephen in Ancona (Italy) that Paul had a vision. He was told that three months later he would be cured in Hippo—Augustine's own diocese. Augustine reported that the healing had indeed occurred—and that just one moment after the healing of the brother, even as Augustine was delivering the Easter sermon, Palladia was healed as well. This was quite a persuasive promotion for the shrine in Hippo (Morehouse 2016). Simultaneously, this example shows to what extent the association of a new plot was enabled by this "athletes of Christ" metaphor. These associations, in turn, generated a set of loosely connected story lines that were unrestricted by a base text.

[4.14] The place of Jesus in all this is not quite clear. As the itineraries of the Pilgrim of Bordeaux and the female pilgrim Egeria (both fourth century) attest, their affections do not seem to have distinguished much between the shrines of Jesus in Jerusalem and the shrines of saints. To many, it seems, Jesus was just one saint among many. Indeed, the church fathers struggled in several respects with the overwhelming success of this developing story universe for, along with the athletes, they also had acquired the fans: some passionate, some fanatic, and some tagalongs who could be bent in either direction.

[4.15] Indeed, the descriptions of late antique fans of athletics do not differ much from those of our own time. The fourth century orator Libanius, for example, complained that his students would rather talk about charioteers, mimes, and battles than listen to him (Lib. Or. 3.12). Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea (both fourth century CE) reported how fans of chariot racing would not even let go of their passion in their sleep (Puk 2014, 206). Violent passion was expressed in the many curse tablets that have been found buried in the field of the circus (Gager 1990). Regularly, games or actors (mimes) had to be banned temporarily from cities because their fans caused riots (Cameron 1973). For example,

[4.16] In November 561 CE the fans gathered at the chariot races in the hippodrome of Constantinople created a serious disturbance. The fans of the Green racing team attacked the fans of the Blue team. When the emperor Justinian heard about the riot, he ordered the commander of his guards to separate the two sides. The guards, however, proved unable to stop or even slow the fight, and it continued with the Blue fans invading the seats of the Green fans, chanting "Burn here, burn there! Not a Green anywhere." In response, the Greens spilled out of the hippodrome and proceeded to riot in the streets, stoning the people they encountered, stealing property, and chanting "Set alight, set alight! Not a Blue in sight." The riot lasted all night and into the next morning. (Parnell 2014, 633, referring to Theophanes' *Chronographia* 235.6).

[4.17] It does not come as much of a surprise that the bishops had to struggle with their communities for what they considered to be the right attitude toward the athletes of Christ, especially when it came to the commemorating festivals. Many wanted to celebrate the victorious saints the same way they celebrated regular athletes, with a lot of wine, excess, an imitation of the martyr's fight, or just by fighting in his or her honor (Brown 2000; Heid 2007). Against this "mere celebration" of the martyr, the church fathers—and foremost

Augustine—held that mimesis, the imitation of the saint, should be the attitude of the believer toward the saint. And imitation of the saint was then increasingly associated not with death but with an ascetic lifestyle (Cobb 2017, 112–13).

## 5. Creating new platforms

[5.1] We have seen so far how by analogy the martyrs came to be associated with victorious athletes and how this spurred the creation of stories about these martyrs, their fights, and their lives. Because these martyrs became associated with athletes, every prestigious city had to have a victorious martyr. Thus, local martyr legends and shrines were established. These sites can be seen as platforms of content as they are used in multimedia storytelling. Each one provided a story about a saint, usually their life, death, and miracles. To visit different sites would provide the pilgrim with new content, which was related to the content of other stories about martyrs while remaining sufficient unto itself.

[5.2] Most people only visited their local shrines. Those who had the means and the willingness visited more remote ones. Indeed, there is much that connects the passion of these early pilgrims for the saints to contemporary fans who travel to locations of importance to their favorite media's plot or character—a form of practical exegesis (Larsen 2019). Pilgrims met en route or on site (Bangert 2010); as the pilgrim Egeria writes in her itinerary, she even met someone twice during her journey (Gingras 1970). We may therefore reckon that a great deal of exchange occurred among the pilgrims, especially with regard to their knowledge about the saints and the shrines. A longer pilgrimage was an occasion to learn about the customs at shrines in other dioceses and to compare and to exchange stories (Morehouse 2016). This temporary community of shared interest, bringing together people from different social and cultural backgrounds, was in many ways similar to the internet communities of today, except for the fact that pilgrims were not completely anonymous.

[5.3] Pilgrims also directed their collective intelligence to learn more about their favorite athlete of Christ or to complete their pictures of the athletes of Christ. The growth of the accounts of the lives and acts of the different saints parallels the increasingly shared lexicon and story plot (Fowden 1999; Morehouse 2016). The fans shaped their stories and enlarged them: every trip to a nearby or far off shrine and every encounter with another pilgrim would provide new information about their favorite character or another subplot of the story. It was a sort of a "hunt for plot," as described in Phillips's model of transmedia storytelling.

[5.4] In fact, it seems that the only binding aspect in the creation of a martyr was his or her cruel death. Indeed, a cruel death, graphically depicted, became a sign of the truthfulness of a martyr story (Brown 2000). Instead of a canon, we find a binding motif. With regard to the saints' lives before their deaths and their appearances and acts afterward, the characters were very open. Thus, it is not surprising that the different treatises called "Acts of," "Life of," or "Miracles of" Saint X, Y, or Z increasingly aligned because people do not tend to come up with farfetched analogies once the story has taken off. These processes of character alignment have been observed by Brett Jenkins in contemporary fan fiction as well: "There is a sense that open-ended characters can be 'colonized' or 'homogenized' by the fanfic writer, even those characters which can be said to defy colonization as in some postmodern fictions.

... After an initial proliferation of possibilities, comes a kind of homogenization of character and a delimitation of possibilities, contradicting the openness desired by fan fiction writers" (2015, 371). Thus, as Jenkins concludes, from a narratological perspective fans love their characters to meaninglessness.

[5.5] However, the pilgrims, just like fans today, did not mind. The pilgrim Melania the Younger (early fifth century) is said to have prepared herself for her pilgrimage to Egypt by going "through the Lives of the fathers as if she were eating dessert" (Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, quoted in Frank 1998, 484). When pilgrims read these stories together, they felt the presence of the saint like a sweet fragrance (Brown 1981, 78–79). Egeria read the *Acts of Thecla* together with other pilgrims (Egeria's itinerary 23.5–6) and noted that the reading moved her to give thanks. "She notes that 'I gave infinite thanks to Christ our God who deemed me worthy to fulfill my desires in all respects'" (quoted in Davis 2001, 145n113). However, even this incident was not singular, a fact that stresses the repetitive nature of the pilgrimage and its experiences. Stephen Davis observed that Egeria's "reading of the ATh [Acts of Thecla] at Seleucia parallels her reading of Scripture during her stops at pilgrim sites in the Holy Land" (2001, 145n113). It may seem from these examples that pilgrimage and veneration of the saints were very much a female activity. Similarly, many fans of athletes and games were women (Ewigleben 2000; Miller 2004; McCullough 2008). Although men were often the authors of these stories, they sometimes assumed female authorship (Burrus 2017).

[5.6] New stories emerged as pilgrims had dreams and visions, or simply confused one saint with another, or drew analogies to other stories about saints. Every now and then, someone would be tasked with collecting the miracles that happened at the local shrine in order to consolidate the tradition and legitimize it (Fowden 1999). Some stories seem to be veritable advertisements for the products sold there, as we see in miracle 42 in the *Miracles of Thecla* (Dagron 1978), which tells the story of the woman Kallista, who had a husband who betrayed her. Another woman had given Kallista a drink that made her so ugly that her husband cast her out of the house, whereupon he took up with the other woman. Kallista, in her despair went to see Thecla, who gave her the following advice:

[5.7] "Go and take of the soap that they sell in front of my temple and wash your face with it!" Kallista did this—and came out even more beautiful than before!

[5.8] It seems, however, that it was not an easy task to turn mostly oral fan fiction into writing. The clergyman from Seleucia, for example, who collected and composed the *Miracles of Thecla* in the fifth century, admitted that he added some of the discourses (Dagron 1978). It further seems that the composers usually furnished these stories with literary motifs common to popular Hellenistic novels as well (Barrier 2009). Moreover, it appears that composers found it difficult to impose a chronological order on the material. Consequently, historical facts are never an issue in these fan stories. Names of Caesars or Augusts are usually only general, and the names of places other than the shrine that is the focus of the account are usually omitted (Fowden 1999).

[5.9] As the models discussed for transmedia storytelling show, fandom can be exploited

profitably, and so we also find in late antiquity that smart businessmen and women quickly understood how to make money from people's affection and passion for the saints. Indeed, we find even a sort of a franchising going on as craftsmen incorporated the motifs of the saint on their products. Shrines sold different products to the pilgrims, much like the fan articles that were sold next to the Roman circus (figures 1 and 2). Flasks, probably containing oil or dust, did not come bare but rather carried a picture of the saint. Less related to the shrine and more to the daily life of the pilgrim were the combs similarly decorated with saints and their symbols (figure 3). Thus, the she-bear and the lioness—which instead of eating Thecla in the arena protected her—are always depicted together with the saint (figure 4). Many other, less durable objects, such as the soaps mentioned in the accounts, may not have survived the ravages of time.



Figure 1. Oil lamp depicting gladiator, first century CE (Rome).



Figure 2. Oil lamp depicting a gladiator of the *mirmillo*-type beating a *thraex* gladiator, second century CE.



Figure 3. Pilgrim's flask depicting St. Menas with the two camels who knew where his martyred body should be buried, sixth–seventh century CE (Alexandria/Egypt).



Figure 4. St. Thecla with the she-bear and the lioness that spared her life in the arena, sixth century CE (unknown origin; verso depicting St. Menas).

[5.10] Some of the artifacts depicting athletes of Christ can be related to a continuous history of a local type of iconography that had served other decorative purposes before being used on shrine souvenirs. An example of a combination of local art and a saint is found with North African red slip pottery. The workshops there had specialized for centuries in the application of wild animal designs. With the rise of the Roman circus, these techniques were used to show scenes of wild beasts attacking men. After the athletes of Christ had begun to compete for fame with the real athletes, the available motifs were enhanced with martyr scenes—specifically scenes involving wild beasts, with lions the most favored. The ancient craft adapted easily to the new demand. With the rising interest in female martyrs, the workshops expanded to add female figurines to their set stock. One motif represents, for example, a woman among lions with the caption: "Domina Victoria" (Victorious Lady). This somewhat nonspecific inscription, which could apply to any heroine, made the plate appealing to a wider clientele because it could be applied to the martyr of one's choice, be it Victoria, Perpetua, or Thecla (van den Hoek and Herrmann 2013).

[5.11] Indeed, the shrines were lucrative sites and were protected by the state (Fowden 1999). The expectations of pilgrims were met not only in the form of souvenirs but also by



means of architecture. In Abû Mînâ, for example, located approximately 45 km southwest of Alexandria in Egypt, the pilgrim's anticipation was consciously built up by a path that became gradually narrower as they approached the shrine (Grossmann 1998). Pilgrimage took place amid a mix of consciously steered passion by businesses, by a choice of different platforms, and by the space for the development of the self as well as one's favorite characters—exactly what multimedia storytelling aims for. Pilgrimage even seems to have surpassed contemporary media platforms because the borders to reality were not merely punctually crossed; pilgrimage provided a complete physical immersion in content.

[5.12] In many ways the development of the "cult of the saints" is similar to media convergence as described by Henry Jenkins (2006, 3): "I will argue here against the idea that convergence should be understood primarily as a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices. Instead, convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content." In that the saints came to unite both the veneration formerly accorded to heroes and the popularity and frenzy caused by athletes, they also occupied more and more diverse platforms than any other celebrity before. Moreover, even though each saint had his or her own story, they could be linked: they died for the same purpose. They were all equal winners, and the fan did not have to choose between them. That it was not an exclusive fandom enabled the pilgrim trails. It was a cultural shift that had started with a metaphor.

## **6. Conclusion**

[6.1] I have attempted to show how concepts of transmedia storytelling can be used as templates for the assessment of fan activity and fan fiction in late antiquity. The problem of focusing too narrowly on fan fiction as based on a distinct canon may pose problems because it is often impossible to designate a base text. Transmedia storytelling, on the other hand, can be conceptualized as a story evolving on its own by enabling a certain public to become innovative when forced to draw analogies to other stories. When the audience is only teased with contextless bits of what is apparently a whole story, they are constantly forced to furnish context, asking themselves what this particular bit reminds them of.

[6.2] This process also ultimately involves the association of the story or subplots with new platforms through which new and self-contingent content can be presented. This range of platforms may engage fans in a sort of a hunt for content. My claim is therefore that while producers of transmedia stories create these platforms consciously and plan the game to a certain extent in advance, this process may also happen naturally. Even in this case, monetarily exploitation and power will be involved because to control a story means to control the fans.

[6.3] As a case example I showed, very concisely, how by analogy the Christians dying in the arena came to be called the "athletes of Christ." This analogy enabled the characters of the martyrs to expand and to incorporate the *ur*-athlete, the hero, as well as the contemporary athlete. This enabled the mixture of veneration, as it was formerly accorded to the wonder-working hero, and frenzy of the fans in the stadium. These were strong markers of the saint

cult developing in late antiquity.

[6.4] Because athletes were the poster children of cities, the association of martyrs with athletes generated the need for local martyrs. As with the athletes, the martyrs—that is, their shrines and stories—were patronized by local elites. These sites, I argue, functioned like media platforms in multimedia storytelling, providing new content of the saint story while being in itself contingent. By traveling from one site to another, fans could add new subplots to their saint-stories universe as well as have a firsthand experience of the site where the saint was still active. As anticipated by multimedia storytellers, late antique pilgrimages provided a full and even physical immersion in content.

[6.5] Transmedia storytelling was used here to explain a chronologically ruffled example of a story universe triggered by a simple image, real or imagined: the Christian in the arena and its analogy to athletes. The template of transmedia storytelling or even convergence culture will prove even more useful in more detailed micro-analyses of the analogies that enabled innovative turns in stories and/or led to new platforms for content display. These platforms may be much less obvious than shrines or texts, and they may comprise pictures in public houses, statues, and even coins.

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# Symposium

## Gender, voice, and canon

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[0.1] Abstract—The Jewish tradition of midrash (exegetical/interpretive fiction) parallels the fannish tradition of creating fan works in more ways than one. In the twentieth century, both contexts saw the rise of women's voices, shifting or commenting on androcentric canon—and in both contexts today, that gender binarism is giving way to a more complicated and multifaceted tapestry of priorities and voices.

[0.2] Keywords—Feminism; Media fandom; Midrash

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[1] Fans who grapple with inconsistent or contradictory canon can take comfort in the knowledge that those engaged with Jewish textual tradition have participated in that same struggle for millennia. The Jewish scriptural canon features contradictory narratives right from the start.

[2] The book of Genesis (Hebrew, *Bereshit*) ([note 1](#)) presents two opposing narratives about the creation of the first human beings. In Genesis chapter 1, we read, "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'...God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." But in Genesis 2, the story changes:

[3] God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This one at last / Is bone of my bones / And flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, / For from man was she taken."

[4] Wait: Is the text saying that God created a man and a woman together, or that God created a male and then miraculously expanded (male) creation to include a female being? On its surface, Torah appears to offer two stories that cannot both be true, and each story potentially gives rise to a different set of attitudes and perspectives on gender and power.

[5] The classical Jewish response to idiosyncrasies or contradictions in scripture is the writing of *midrash*, exegetical stories that explore and explain. (There are two types of

midrash: *midrash halakha*, arising out of legal material, and *midrash aggadah*, arising out of narrative material. I'm speaking here of the latter.) Although contemporary scholarly reading of the Jewish scriptural canon presumes that Torah is an anthology of texts written by different authors at different times and stitched together by an editor with human biases and blind spots, early rabbinic Judaism presumed a text with a single author, which meant that for the sages of the classical rabbinic period, every apparent flaw in the text could (and arguably must) be a locus of meaning.

[6] The midrashic tradition doesn't presume a singular correct interpretation. The apparent inconsistency in Genesis cited above has sparked a variety of midrashic responses, none of which need to be treated as the one correct answer, and many of which are in conversation with each other. One of the midrashic tradition's responses is this text, from the classical compilation *Bereshit Rabbah* (written down between 300 and 500 CE):

[7] Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar said: When the Holy One created Adam, He created a bi-gendered being ([note 2](#)), as is said, "Male and female created He them...and called their name Adam." (Genesis 1:27...Genesis 5:2)

Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman said: When the Holy One created Adam, He made him with two fronts; then He sawed him in half and thus gave him two backs, a back for one part and a back for the other part.

Someone objected: But does not Scripture say, "And He took one of his ribs (*mi-tzalotav*)" (Genesis 2:21)?

Rabbi Samuel replied: *Mi-tzalotav* may also mean "his sides," as in the verse "And for the second side (*tzela*) of the mishkan..." (Exodus 26:20) ([https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit\\_Rabbah.8?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.8?lang=bi))

[8] The rabbis are saying that "male and female created He them" means that God created a man and a woman glued together at the back, like the two-faced Roman god Janus, and then had to saw them apart. As their proof-text for this, they draw on an alternative translation for the word usually translated as "rib."

[9] Another midrashic answer takes an entirely different tack. This is from the anonymous medieval text *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, written between 700 and 1000 CE:

[10] When God created the first man Adam, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone." [So] God created a woman for him, from the earth like him, and called her Lilith. They [Adam and Lilith] promptly began to argue with each other: She said, "I will not lie below," and he said, "I will not lie below, but above, since you are fit for being below and I for being above." She said to him, "The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth." And they would not listen to each other. Since Lilith saw [how it was], she uttered God's ineffable name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Maker and said, "Master of the Universe, the woman you gave me fled from me!" (<https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith>)

[11] I've always found this story hilarious—she refuses the missionary position, speaks God's ineffable Name and flies away! Take that, patriarchy! But its author continued in a darker, more misogynistic vein. In the continuation of that passage from *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Lilith is depicted as a homeless outcast demon who comes to the bedside of newborns with the intention of killing them unless they are protected by amulets inscribed with angels' names.

[12] The midrash of the classical tradition were almost entirely written by men because in earlier eras men were the ones who had literacy, knowledge of the canon, and the opportunity to contribute to the interpretive conversation. But in recent decades, that paradigm has shifted.

[13] One well-known feminist midrash was written in 1972 by feminist theologian Judith Plaskow. She takes the story that we heard in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* and tells it anew in her contemporary midrash "The Coming of Lilith" (<https://jwa.org/media/coming-of-lilith-by-judith-plaskow>). It begins more or less as *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* text does, but then posits that after a while, Eve became curious about Lilith, whom she had heard was outside the walls of paradise:

[14] One day, after many months of strange and disturbing thoughts, Eve, wandering around the edge of the garden, noticed a young apple tree she and Adam had planted, and saw that one of its branches stretched over the garden wall. Spontaneously, she tried to climb it, and struggling to the top, swung herself over the wall.

[15] She did not wander long on the other side before she met the one she had come to find, for Lilith was waiting. At first sight of her, Eve remembered the tales of Adam and was frightened, but Lilith understood and greeted her kindly. "Who are you?" they asked each other, "What is your story?" And they sat and spoke together of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them...

[16] Lilith and Eve meet and become friends. They are sisters. They have much in common. The midrash ends just before the two of them re-enter the Garden to start a new future—changed by their encounter and their togetherness. Plaskow's rewriting of the Ben Sira rewriting of Bereshit centers Eve and Lilith and offers a lens on friendship between women.

[17] I see the interpretive move made by the authors of classical midrash as a fundamentally fannish move. Faced with contradictions or disjunctions in the classical canon, normative (male) Jewish tradition responds with storytelling.

[18] Admittedly, classical midrash approaches narrative in a slantwise way, reflecting a narrative sparseness that mirrors the source texts of the canon. It tends to focus on word interpretation and creative textual hyperlinking, rather than emotional dynamics or character motivation as we find in the work of Plaskow, Rabbi Jill Hammer, and most (though not all)



female midrashists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, even narratively minimalist classical midrash expands on the scriptural canon. And like fan works writ large, midrash arises out of a community context and fuels further conversation within that community context.

[19] The reinterpretive move made by Plaskow is also a fundamentally fannish move—and a familiar one to me as a media fan. Plaskow's voice entering the tradition to reframe an androcentric source text (Torah) and a male-authored commentary on that source text (Ben Sira) mirrors the emergence of media-fannish and slash-fannish spaces created by women as an alternative to male-centered mainstream science fiction and fantasy fandom. It's not coincidental that media fandom and slash fandom ([https://fanlore.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Slash\\_Fandom](https://fanlore.org/wiki/History_of_Slash_Fandom)) arose around the same time as Plaskow's religious feminism. The move Plaskow makes is precisely the move that fans make when we center women's voices in our communities—the OTW's Founding Board of Directors was intentionally all-female ([https://fanlore.org/wiki/Organization\\_for\\_Transformative\\_Works/Board\\_of\\_Directors](https://fanlore.org/wiki/Organization_for_Transformative_Works/Board_of_Directors))—and female characters in our fan works.

[20] Those of us who came of age fannishly in late twentieth-century Western media fandom grew up fannishly in a paradigm wherein fandom as practiced by boys and men tends to mean consuming, collecting, and indexing, whereas fandom as practiced by girls and women tends to mean interpretive and transformative storytelling (fan fiction, fan vids, fan art, and so on). The classical (male-authored) midrashic tradition disrupts that gender binary somewhat, though midrashic texts written by women in the late twentieth century and beyond are even more firmly akin to late twentieth-century media fandom in their centering of (so-called) feminine concerns such as emotion, relationship, internal motivation, and connection.

[21] Jewish tradition's understanding of gender has shifted and evolved: from Torah (which evinces a gender binary), to Talmud (compiled and edited around 600 CE, reflecting an understanding of six possible genders) (<https://www.ufhillel.org/single-post/2018/06/20/The-6-Genders-of-Judaism>), to today's scholars and rabbis exploring tradition, practice, and *halakha* ("Jewish law" or "the Jewish path") through a gender-inclusive lens. Media fandom writ large also has an evolving sense of gender and how that spectrum interacts with fannish practice and privilege, as evidenced in a shift in how the OTW describes itself:

[22] The OTW represents a practice of transformative fanwork historically rooted in a primarily female culture. The OTW will preserve the record of that history as we pursue our mission while encouraging new and non-mainstream expressions of cultural identity within fandom. ("What We Believe," [http://www.transformativeworks.org/what\\_we\\_believe/](http://www.transformativeworks.org/what_we_believe/))

[23] The second sentence of that paragraph was not present on the About Us page during the early years of the OTW and reflects fandom's changing sensibilities about gender and inclusion.

[24] The gender binarism of the origin story that old school science fiction and fantasy

fandom was male-dominated whereas media fandom and slash fandom are spaces created by women may not resonate with fans today whose sense of gender possibility is broader than that of their fannish forebears. It falls to today's fans to create fan works out of that more expansive sense of gender possibility—just as it falls to today's Jews, rabbis, scholars, and interpreters to create midrash that moves beyond both the classical tradition's androcentrism and Plaskow's first-wave religious feminism.

## Notes

- [1.](#) The first word of Torah is variously translated as "In the beginning," or "In a beginning," or "With beginning," or "As God was beginning," or "In the beginning of God's creating..."
- [2.](#) The Hebrew here features a transliteration of the Greek word *androgynos*.



# Symposium

## Navigating Catholicism and queerness in *Daredevil* fan works

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[0.1] Abstract—In *Daredevil* (2015–18) fan works, fans confront the character of Daredevil, who is portrayed in the Netflix TV series of the same name as explicitly religious, namely Catholic. This means that fan works seeking to explore sexuality, especially same-sex sexuality, must confront Catholicism's prohibition on extramarital sex, including same-sex sexual relations. I examine how fan works use *Daredevil* as a site from which to debate Catholicism and queerness.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan fiction; Marvel Cinematic Universe; Religion

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[1] In 2015, Netflix released season 1 of *Daredevil*, an adaptation of the Marvel comics series of the same name. This was followed by two more seasons of the show (2015–18), as well as *The Defenders* (2017), a series tying Daredevil to other Marvel characters. The Netflix series and its spin-offs introduced a new audience to Matt Murdock, a blind man with an almost supernatural ability to sense his surroundings through the reflection of sound off surfaces. He takes on the persona of Daredevil to patrol the streets of Hell's Kitchen, New York City, as a justice-dispensing vigilante. During the day, Murdock practices as a lawyer to protect Hell's Kitchen in a different way with his friends Foggy Nelson and Karen Page.

[2] As in many other fandoms, people rushed to write fan fic, create fan art, and engage with the series in other ways. However, one aspect of *Daredevil* made it special compared to other television shows and other Marvel properties: Matt Murdock is explicitly portrayed as a Catholic, and a fairly observant one at that. He is depicted as regularly attending church services, maintaining a close relationship with his confessor, Father Lantom, and wrestling to reconcile his faith with his vigilantism. Many fans who were interested in writing slash fiction (fiction in which two male characters are portrayed as being in a romantic or sexual relationship) or creating other romantic or sexually oriented fan content were in the unusual position of having to confront a character's overt religiosity, which is generally not a factor in many other television fandoms or contemporary superhero franchises. Specifically, they

were forced to confront Catholicism, which preaches sexual abstinence outside of marriage and does not condone same-sex romantic or sexual relationships.

[3] Catholicism's official stance on these matters does not mean that there is not or has not been extensive discussion pushing back against such prohibitions. In particular, in looking at Catholic discussions of same-sex sexuality, numerous groups exist for queer Catholics and their family and friends. Most recently, James Martin, SJ, made waves with the publication of *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* (2018). But fan works are also a site for thinking through issues of religion and sexuality, and people use *Daredevil* fan works as a way to interrogate the intersections of queerness and Catholicism in particular. My examples come primarily from the "Daredevil (TV)" tag on the Archive of Our Own fan fiction archive (<https://archiveofourown.org/>). I am particularly interested in fan works tagged with "Catholicism," "Religion," or similar tags, or specific fan works tagged with the character of Father Lantom, a Catholic priest and Murdock's confessor.

[4] One story from the Archive of Our Own, Sanctuary\_for\_all's "Hymn" (2015), depicts Father Lantom, Murdock's confessor, endorsing Murdock's pursuit of a relationship with Foggy Nelson, drawing on Catholic social teaching and emphasizing a message of love. The story unfolds from Foggy Nelson's perspective, assigning him a background as a rather lax Unitarian who is perplexed by Matt Murdock's fierce religiosity but who attempts to understand it out of love for him. He volunteers to meet Father Lantom, Murdock's confessor and spiritual guide, in an attempt to better understand him. In a conversation with Foggy, Father Lantom is clearly presented as having a positive attitude toward Matt and Foggy's relationship, and thus Matt's religiosity is reconciled with his queerness. Father Lantom functions here, as in other stories, as a symbol of Catholicism more broadly; his approval signifies Matt's ability to stay connected to his Catholic faith while also pursuing a same-sex relationship.

[5] However, in another story, Eustace (Sibylline)'s "Caro, Carnis" (2015), Murdock pursues an ascetic style of Catholicism in an effort to distract himself from thoughts of same-sex intimacy. We are told that he learns as a child that "the flesh is weak. The body is an obstacle to be tamed." Carrying this ideology into college, Matt develops an eating disorder as he feels that hunger heightens his other senses—something he discovered through fasting for religious purposes. Matt feels Foggy's face to "see" what he looks like, and experiences deep shame after feeling desire for him.

[6] In these examples, we see very different interactions between religion and sexuality; they are opposites in terms of how they approach the intersection of Catholicism and queerness. In the first story, Catholicism is invoked as all-loving and embracing of Matt's queerness, with approval channeled through the figure of Father Lantom. In the second story, Matt's Catholicism gives him a language of deprivation and renunciation that he uses in an attempt to starve out his queerness. These fan works demonstrate the two predominant approaches to Catholicism and queer sexuality in *Daredevil* fan works: either the two can be reconciled and Matt Murdock can embrace both a Catholic identity and a queer identity, or one must supersede the other. In Eustace's "Caro, Carnis," Catholicism supersedes queerness. In other

fan works, queerness may supersede Catholicism. However, most writers seem bent on a reconciliation, and Father Lantom frequently functions in fan works as a mechanism through which Matt's Catholic and queer sides are reconciled.

[7] "Hallelujah Is Our Song" (2017) by moonyloonylupin is tagged with both "Inaccurate Catholicism" and "I haven't been to Easter mass or any mass since like 2005." Despite the author's protestations, the story is an interesting case study in how fan fiction authors navigate the intersections of Catholicism and queerness in the world of *Daredevil*. In "Hallelujah Is Our Song," Matt goes to Easter Mass after a night in bed with Foggy and is surprised when Foggy decides to come to Mass with him. Foggy becomes nervous waiting to meet Father Lantom after Mass, not knowing how Matt will refer to their relationship in front of Lantom. Matt introduces Foggy as his boyfriend, and Lantom is friendly, inviting them to stay and talk for a while. Matt's attendance at Mass is initially seen as a stress point for the relationship, as Foggy is uncertain how to behave with his lover in a religious space perceived as homophobic. Father Lantom is used as a vehicle through which Matt and Foggy's romantic relationship is defined. Moreover, Lantom functions as a representation for the Catholic church writ large; his approval of their relationship represents the reconciliation of Matt's Catholic identity and his sexual and romantic relationship with Foggy.

[8] Sometimes Father Lantom's interventions are more direct. In *NotQuiteHumanAnymore's* "By Omission" (2016), Matt repeatedly goes to confession in an attempt to reframe his attraction to Foggy as mere friendship. It fails, and he admits to Foggy that he discussed their relationship with Father Lantom, who helped him to realize that he was in love with Foggy. It is Father Lantom's interjection that allows Matt to recognize his affections for Foggy, and vice versa. Moreover, his tacit acceptance of their relationship once again reconciles Catholicism and queerness for Matt.

[9] In many stories, Lantom directly rejects Catholic teaching on same-sex relationships, allowing Matt to reconcile religion and sexuality. In one, Matt confesses his love for Foggy to Lantom, hoping for a rebuke, only to be told, "I don't serve a God that would give humanity such a profound capacity for love and then punish people for loving each other, no matter who they are. That's my personal stance on the matter" (Sir\_not\_appearing\_in\_this\_archive, "A Definitive Proof," 2015). Here, Lantom's rejection of the church's rejection of same-sex relationships allows Matt to embrace his feelings for Foggy.

[10] In some stories, Lantom's acceptance of homosexuality goes so far as his officiating a wedding for Matt and Foggy. Fan writers usually recognize that this would not be possible for Lantom to do in his function as a Roman Catholic priest, so they create circumstances in which it seems more plausible for him to do so. In "For Which the First Was Made" by spacenarwhal (2018), Lantom is positioned as having been retired for four years. Because most Catholic priests do not usually retire in the sense that they are no longer considered Catholic priests, it is not entirely clear what the author envisions this to mean. Lantom performs a non-Catholic ceremony for the pair, and Matt reflects that while it is not the traditional Catholic wedding he would have hoped for, he enjoys it nonetheless.

[11] But not all *Daredevil* stories are stories of reconciliation. Sometimes Catholicism and queerness cannot be balanced, and Catholicism is left behind in favor of an embrace of queer desires. In "Devout Catholic" by AcesofSpade (2017), Matt's Catholicism leads him to deny his attraction to men for years. When he finally accepts that he's gay, he expresses a series of worries, including a concern that he has disappointed God. Foggy reassures Matt that he hasn't disappointed God or his father, and Matt's Catholicism falls by the wayside as he and Foggy begin dating.

[12] In another story, Poisonivory, returnsandreturns, and Werelibrarian's "When Your Heart Beats (Next to Mine)" (2017), tagged with "Catholic guilt" (among other things), Matt tries to battle his attraction to Foggy through incessant praying and reminders of his vow as a Catholic to remain celibate until marriage. He finally gives in to temptation when Foggy confesses that he loves him and would willingly marry him: "I vowed to save myself for the person I wanted to be with forever,' Matt says, unable to keep his voice from shaking. 'I'd still be keeping that vow if you touched me.'" In this way, Matt's Catholicism is accommodated in an almost sideways fashion; though they haven't had an actual wedding, the intent is there, and that's enough to satisfy his requirements.

[13] Fan works are a site in which fans think about the relationship between religion and sexuality and draw conclusions regarding whether the two can be reconciled or whether one must inherently be lost for the other to prevail. This has real-world implications; the questions asked in these fan works about the relationship between religion and queerness, especially queer sexualities, are real-world questions. Fan works may provide a safe space for thinking about these issues, especially in a time where many religious denominations are grappling with their stances on homosexuality and related issues. Queer religious expressions and the queer navigation of religious questions are not limited to the walls of religious buildings or strictly demarcated theological inquiry; they expand beyond this into everyday spaces, including fandom and fan works.

# Symposium

## Queering the Anglo-Saxons through their psalms

Martine Mussies

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[0.1] Abstract—For fan fiction based on the TV serial drama *The Last Kingdom* (2014–), some authors use fragments of the translations of the Psalms by King Alfred of Wessex (849–899) to firmly ground their stories in the historical reimagination of the Anglo-Saxons. In the 2019 short story "Æthelflaed and Lagertha," fan author Bandi Crawford uses an Alfredian psalm to connect *The Last Kingdom* to another major TV series, *Vikings* (2013–). By developing bisexual and biromantic story lines along the lines of Alfredian Psalms, Crawford constructs a twenty-first-century neomedieval-based culture in which the Alfredian Psalms are reinterpreted or critically reexamined through a queer lens, thereby negotiating more diversity within a favorite show's story world.

[0.2] Keywords—Alfred the Great; Fan fiction; *The Last Kingdom*; Slash fiction; *Vikings*

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] Fan fiction based on the Netflix series *The Last Kingdom* (*TLK*; 2014–) reuses Alfredian (Anglo-Saxon/Old English) translations of the Psalms in new ways. Some of these fan fics reinterpret the text of the Psalms; others explicitly question the Psalms's authority. By examining two examples of slash fiction based on *TLK*, I hope to demonstrate how use of the Alfredian translation of the Psalms permits authors an "active rewriting" of the stories (Haraway [1992] 1999, 355) in order to queer female characters who appear to be solely heterosexual in *TLK*, thereby giving them lesbian desires and relationships.

### 2. Heteronormativity in *TLK*

[2.1] *TLK* is based on Bernard Cornwell's Saxon Stories series, an historical interpretation of England in the ninth and tenth centuries. It is centered around a fictional depiction of King Alfred of Wessex (c. 849–899; r. 886), the first king of the Anglo-Saxons, and in Cornwell's historical interpretation, the creator of England. There is much discussion about the series in the blogosphere, but the series has not yet attracted much academic attention. The blogs that

post about *TLK* tend to focus on the historical (in)correctness of the clothing, sets, and weapons. As such, there has been little discussion of the show's interpersonal relationships or the fan fiction *TLK* has generated. The main focus in the series is on the fictional character of Uhtred—born a Christian, raised a Dane—and his complicated relationships with the other main characters, including King Alfred himself and various fierce females, many of whom express sexual and romantic interest in Uhtred at some point. Other female characters—such as Alfred's wife, Queen Ælswith (historically spelled as Ealhswith or Ealswitha)—display sexual and romantic interest only in men. As of this writing, the series has depicted no lesbian, bisexual, or biromantic scenes.

[2.2] The lack of homosexuality in the *TLK* fits the image that modern audiences have of this period. The Anglo-Saxons were familiar with homosexuality, but they defined it entirely as an act of same-sex intercourse rather than as a personal identity or an orientation. As Christopher Monk (2014) explains, homosexuality is not referenced in any of the surviving Anglo-Saxon laws (c. 600–1025), which may be because it was considered far less disruptive to society than (heterosexual) adultery, which is frequently mentioned. The Anglo-Saxon church did forbid it, as can be seen by the frequent mentions and penalties found in surviving religious texts (Bailey 1995). Priests were one of the few groups who could read Latin, and works such as Augustine's *De Bono Coniugali* (On the good of marriage) were widespread and probably formed the basis for the surviving Anglo-Saxon penitentials (Frantzen 1995). One such example is the *Scriftboc*, a "tenth-century compilation, whose principal source is the Penitential of Theodore" (Hamilton 2005, 87). It offers a biblical manual for everyday life, including "what was considered a proper marriage and acceptable sexual relations" (Meyer 1990, 53). The full text of the *Scriftboc* is available online (<http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/index.php>) and has three classifications of homosexual behavior. First, if a young man is forced into sex by an older man, he should fast five nights, but if he agrees, then the fast should last fifteen nights. Second, a man who has sex with another man or with an animal must fast for ten winters. Finally, if a woman has sex with another woman, she has to fast for three winters. Thus, despite the heteronormativity depicted in *TLK*, homosexuality was indeed known to the Anglo-Saxons. Apparently homosexuality existed and was visible, but it was certainly not the norm. This might explain the heteronormativity in *TLK*, but it could also be that *TLK*, as a product of the current media environment, is just another example of the cultural assumptions that homosexuality is a modern invention rather than a product of historical research. Even if homosexuality was unknown to the Anglo-Saxons, the show's producers made a variety of choices in their narrative for a variety of reasons, many of which may not have been historically correct.

### 3. Slash fiction

[3.1] Following Abigail Derecho (2006), fan fiction texts may be described as archontic—that is, texts that are archives. As Peter G ldenpfennig explains, when viewing fan fiction, one can "see the text as an entry to an open archive with the original artefact as the basis for this same archive" (2011, 14). My focus here is on depictions of bisexuality in fan fiction about *TLK*. As of May 2019, the Archive of Our Own (AO3; <https://archiveofourown.org/>) listing for *TLK* has only three entries in the F/F category that could be labeled as bisexual and or biromantic. One is a fic entitled "For Me, There Is Only You" (2019) by

Immortalgothgirl. This short story depicts Alfred's servant girl, Kela, having sex with Queen Ælswith. The second, "Lessons" (2018) by ifinkufreaky, features Brida and Ragnar engaging in a ménage à trois with a girl called Cynwise. The third is "They Will Tell Tales of Us" (2019) by Artemis1000, in which a heated argument between Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd, and the Viking sorceress Skade ends with a passionate kiss. In these three examples, female characters who appear heterosexual in the show's canon have been rewritten as bisexual/biromantic.

#### 4. Fan works and the Psalms

[4.1] In my own (alter) ego-inserting fan fic, "The Cyborg Mermaid Meets King Alfred" (2019), I reference Alfred's translations of the Psalms:

[4.2] "When the Sun

Clearest shineth Serenest in the heaven,

quickly are obscured All over the earth Other stars."

[4.3] She shrugged, adding, "I've always wondered what it meant. Which other stars? Which sun? I know so few of them."

[4.4] Alfred was staring at her in a most curious way. Without taking his eyes off her face, he reached across the table and picked up a smaller book. Using an inkwell nearby, he copied the passage Tamar had recited into the book and then stashed it in the folds of his shirt.

[4.5] Although this text imagines an alternative origin for some of the Alfredian Psalms translations originally spoken in dialogue (Parker 2014), the authors of two other fan works go farther, changing the (implied) meanings of the Psalms and using them to confirm the bisexual relationships of their main characters.

[4.6] Here I focus on two works that queer the sexual and romantic orientations of two female *TLK* canon characters. The first, "Æthelflæd and Lagertha," by Bandi Crawford (2019), is a crossover between *TLK* and the television series *Vikings* (2013–). The second, "For Him It Is as for the Tree," by Cheyenne (2019), tells the story of a conversation between King Alfred of Wessex and Hild (both *TLK* canonical characters) regarding Hild's love for an original character named Emma. The two stories I have chosen as exemplars were selected for their reuse and reinterpretation of the Alfredian (Anglo-Saxon/Old English) translations of the Psalms in new ways, thereby subverting their presumed heteronormativity. In their rewriting of the Psalms, these two authors follow in the footsteps of King Alfred of Wessex, whose translations were informed by his personal experiences (Abels 2013).

#### 5. Crawford's "Æthelflæd and Lagertha"

[5.1] "Æthelflaed and Lagertha" connects two popular TV shows, *TLK* and *Vikings*, through the writings of the only historical figure common to both series: King Alfred. In this piece of fan fiction, *TLK* canon character Æthelflaed and *Vikings* character Lagertha discuss a translation of the Psalms while at the same time exploring their desire for each other. The same-sex desires explored in this fan fic are absent in both *TLK* and *Vikings* canon; in canon, Æthelflaed marries Lord Æthelred of Mercia (following Anglo-Saxon history) before falling into forbidden love with fictional protagonist Uhtred; and Lagertha is married to Ragnar Lothbrok, a character of dubious historicity. Æthelflaed gets stuck in her explanation of her father's translation, "And does not stand in the way of the sinful," which is the second part of the first line of the psalm in question. Notably, the translation used by Crawford faithfully captures Alfred's original: "Ne on þām wege ne stent synfulra."

[5.2] In "Æthelflaed and Lagertha," as the two women debate the concepts of "sinful" and "pestilential," a sensual power play arises:

[5.3] Æthelflaed's cheeks shaded as pink as a summer rose. "And does not sit in their pestilential seat," she continued. "Pestilential?"

[5.4] Lagertha repeated with a tilt of her head. When Æthelflaed pointed out the word, she lay her hand on top of hers. Both had smooth skin. Æthelflaed had been about to explain but found herself lost in the softness.

[5.5] The story has an open ending, with the Viking shield-maid expressing dry, perhaps even mocking, humor about the mix of power and purity expressed in the translation of the Psalms: "That is something I can understand. A balance. Like a goose and a blade." This is a wink to Æthelflaed's banner, a white goose holding a sword and a cross. With these new interpretations, Crawford provides her audience with an original twist to the challenge proposed by Norman F. Cantor in order for "a neo-medieval-based culture for the twenty-first century to be constructed" (1991, 412).

## **6. Cheyenne's "For Him It Is as for the Tree"**

[6.1] Cheyenne's story, "For Him It Is as for the Tree," refers to the third line from the first of the Psalms, referring to a biblical image also present in Ezekiel 47:12 and Jeremiah 17:8. Following the structure of the psalm, this story continues where Crawford's story ends. The historical King Alfred translates this line as "Him bið swā þām trēowe," thereby explaining the Latin "et erit tamquam lignum" (and he will be like the tree) in a grammar typical of Old English, with the dativus "he" provided without a preposition (Baker 2012). The text continues with an explanation that the tree "is planted near streams of water, that yields its fruits at the appropriate season, and its leaves and its blades neither yellow nor wither" (my translation).

[6.2] The first psalm is generally interpreted as teaching the reader how to stand firmly rooted and fruitful in life, to come to full bloom. This reading plays a crucial role in Cheyenne's story. But though for the historical Alfred this most likely meant a desire for his subjects more in line with Paul's prayer—that people take root in the love of Christ—this



story features a queer-friendly Alfred giving a rather different explanation for this psalm:

[6.3] What makes you think that it isn't the same for you? That your love isn't as firm as that tree by the water, that your love won't grow like the leaves in the branches, that your love isn't like the never-ending stream of a river? What makes you think that what you have isn't exactly the same as what a man and a woman have? Is there a part of you that thinks your love for that woman isn't as strong, isn't as powerful? That it doesn't bear the same fire a man has for his wife, or the other way around?

[6.4] The tree symbolizes strength, for a tree has roots burrowing deep and steady into the soil ("and you rooted and founded remains in love"; Ephesians 3:14–19). Moreover, the "leaves in the branches" reach high in the sky, which could be interpreted as a connection between earth and heaven. With the king himself giving this explanation to Hild, he conveys approval of her feelings for Emma.

## 7. Conclusion

[7.1] To firmly ground their stories in the historical reimagination of the Anglo-Saxons, some fan authors use fragments of translations of the Psalms by King Alfred. However, by using queered readings of these Alfredian Psalms in works focusing on female same-sex desire, these fan authors have constructed a twenty-first-century neomedieval-based culture in which the Alfredian Psalms are reinterpreted or critically reexamined through a queer lens. In "Æthelflaed and Lagertha," Crawford uses the second part of the first line of the first psalm to connect *TLK* to *Vikings*. The two characters are heterosexual in canon, but they express hidden biromantic desires in this fan fiction, in which their desires are expressed in a subtle way—yet what is clear is that these women doubt the text in the translation of the Psalms rather than their feelings for each other. The doubt considering these biromantic feelings is also expressed by the Hild in "For Him It Is as for the Tree," in which Cheyenne uses the arboreal analogy by the psalmist from the third line. Cheyenne lets King Alfred explain to Hild that she could be blossoming like a happy, healthy tree in her love for Emma. With these rewritings, fans negotiate biromantic diversity within their favorite show's story world and rebel against heteronormativity.

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# Symposium

## Meaning making, sacred reading, and political engagement in the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast

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[0.1] Abstract—The cohosts of the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast, Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, along with producer Ariana Nedelman, work chapter by chapter through the Harry Potter series, reading each chapter through the lens of randomly selected themes and applying sacred textual reading practices to find hidden layers of meaning within the text. This witch's brew of analysis invites listeners to move from fandom-focused media consumers to promoters of fandom-inspired political engagement.

[0.2] Keywords—Politics; Religion; Religious nones; Sacred texts; Spirituality

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[1] "What if we read the books we love as if they were sacred texts?" Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, cohosts and cocreators of the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast (<http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/>), first posed this question to one another while they were graduate students at Harvard Divinity School. Several years and five podcast seasons later, they have been posing this question to their thousands of subscribers each week. Zoltan and ter Kuile, along with producer Ariana Nedelman and associate producer Chelsea Ursin, work chapter by chapter through the Harry Potter series, reading each chapter through the lens of randomly selected themes and applying sacred textual reading practices to find hidden layers of meaning within the text. If it sounds boring and academic, be assured that this podcast is styled more after Professor Lupin than Professor Binns.

[2] *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* reacts to a major ethos of the Harry Potter fandom: that the Harry Potter series is a text that can help readers make meaning of the world around them. For this reason, the podcast has been a springboard for political discussion and engagement since its inception. Instead of using their platform to draw tired parallels between figures from the book and figures from modern American politics, Zoltan and ter Kuile do something much more difficult: through a combination of analysis, modeling, and invitation to their listenership, they offer their listeners the tools to analyze the text, allowing

them to make meaning both on their own and among the listener community.

[3] One might be forgiven for assuming that the only audience interested in *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* is the traditionally religious. The podcast's approach is a classic exegetical one familiar to scholars of biblical texts, but its diverse listenership points to a wider cultural moment: the rise of the religious nones. The designation "religious nones" refers to the population who profess no particular faith tradition; such adherents make up almost a quarter of the subjects in a 2014 Pew Research survey. Despite their absence from traditional faith communities, the religious nones—especially Millennial nones—seek a community-oriented and politically engaged spirituality. Sociologists and religious studies scholars have explored how the nones are forming communities in which they can explore meaning and purpose, two of the traditional functions of organized religion. The placement of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* in this milieu is neither accidental nor unexamined; ter Kuile is coauthor of "How We Gather," a cultural map and comprehensive report of "how Millennials are finding and building communities of meaning and belonging." He continues this work as a Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School. Zoltan is a Research Assistant at Harvard Divinity School and wrote her master's thesis on treating *Jane Eyre* as a sacred text. With backgrounds like these, it can come as no surprise that the podcast's media coverage includes references in articles from the *Atlantic*, *Huffington Post*, *Jewish Journal*, the *New York Times*, and others, as well as a session at the American Academy of Religion's annual conference in 2017. Guests on the podcast range from rabbis and ordained clergy to social activists and human rights lawyers. Zoltan and ter Kuile's podcast draws from their diverse personal and professional experience, meeting their religiously diverse listeners at the intersection where their ongoing quest to find meaning encounters a book series many of them have loved since childhood.

[4] The podcast's weekly themes—which are diverse, thought-provoking, and sometimes unexpected—have included "Instinct" (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Chapter 1, "The Riddle House"), "Justice" (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Chapter 20, "The Dementor's Kiss"), and "White Privilege" (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Chapter 12, "The Mirror of Erised"). After a thirty-second recap competition (with the winner decided by the podcast's listeners, who vote on the podcast's website) and discussion of that week's theme, Zoltan and ter Kuile apply a sacred reading practice from Jewish or Christian intellectual traditions to that week's text. One week might find the cohosts pulling from Roman Catholic Ignatian spirituality by imagining themselves as present in the text's plot. Other weeks, Zoltan and ter Kuile ask each other thought-provoking questions inspired by the text, according to the Jewish practice of Havruta. At the close of each episode, Zoltan and ter Kuile each offer a blessing to a character from that week's pages, but not before they play a voicemail sent in by a listener reflecting on a prior chapter. This witch's brew of analysis and invitation to their listeners moves *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* from fandom-focused media to a promoter of fandom-inspired political engagement.

[5] One tool that the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast offers to its listeners is the language of political theory. From the first episode, Zoltan and ter Kuile's discussions focused on political concepts like power structures in the Potterverse, the agency of different characters, and how identity contributes to marginalization in the text. Zoltan made clear in

the first episode that she would only ever bless female characters, a decision that has offered many opportunities to reflect on the portrayals and absences of women in the text. In the episode covering the final chapter of Book 5, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Zoltan blessed Dolores Umbridge, an infamous villain in the series. The cohosts make the academic language of privilege and oppression, power structures, and agency accessible and understandable to their nonacademic audience. In so doing, Zoltan and ter Kuile offer their listeners ways to conceptualize these complicated notions in a fictional—and therefore safer—space.

[6] The use of sacred textual reading practices in the podcast offers another tool, as well as a bridge between conceptual discussions and listeners' lived realities. In addition to Ignatian Imagining and Havruta, the podcast also guides listeners through PaRDeS and Lectio Divina—Jewish and Christian practices, respectively, which guide readers through layers of meaning within a text. At the conclusion of Lectio Divina, readers are encouraged to determine whether their analysis of the text has inspired them to any action or to make any change in their life. Similarly, *sod*, the final stage of PaRDeS (which is a transliterated Hebrew acronym for the four stages of the practice), invites readers to encounter the deeper, secret meaning of a text. Such discovery often leads to inspiration to action. Neither political theory nor sacred reading practices were conceived as concepts to be kept in a vacuum; both are analytical methods with the aim of life application, and both are offered by the podcast's cohosts for their listeners.

[7] By offering and modeling these practices, Zoltan and ter Kuile are equipping their listeners to bring the lessons at the heart of the Harry Potter books into conversation with the world around them—including into the realm of political discourse. Early in the podcast, political discussion more frequently dealt with ideas of oppression and privilege, but the fourth season of the podcast offered an opportunity for its cohosts to engage more specifically with the modern, Muggle world. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the fourth novel in the series, climaxes with the reembodiment of Lord Voldemort, a Hitler-type villain who envisions a new world order with pureblood wizards at the top. A concurrent rise in global nationalism offered a striking backdrop to the podcast's discussion of the novel. In the wrap-up episode for *Goblet of Fire*, Zoltan addressed this connection, saying, "I guess what's striking to me is how political of a novel this is, it like starts and ends with terrorist attacks." In a recent episode (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Chapter 21, "The Eye of the Snake"), Zoltan acknowledged the conscious shift of their podcast toward the political: "When we started this podcast, we said that we did not want it to be a political podcast, that we wanted it to be as inclusive as possible. And then when Donald Trump was elected, it became important for us for it to become more political, and we said explicitly that part of the reason why we wanted to say the things that we say is that we want it on the record where we stand." Zoltan and ter Kuile's conscious engagement with political discourse is both an expression of their convictions and one more way that they model meaning-making for their audience.

[8] Zoltan and ter Kuile could easily end their podcast after they offer their blessings, and it would be a fine piece of analysis. However, they have chosen not to. From the beginning of the podcast, the cohosts have invited their listener community to send in voicemails. The

topics of these voicemails are mostly focused on new layers of insight based on listeners' histories and experiences. Sometimes they are arguments advocating for a character to be read differently. There was once a listener voicemail that was a live recording of a best man giving his wedding toast to the Potter-loving bride and groom! However, just as the discussion during the episode itself has tended toward the political as the books have become more political, so also have the voicemails. More frequently, they reflect listeners' fears, experiences, and engagement around political issues, all of which connect to their analysis of Harry Potter as a sacred text. The podcast's creators, in response to the mass of voicemails from their listenership, offer at least one "Owl Post" episode per season composed entirely of listener voicemails. If Zoltan, ter Kuile, Nedelman, and Ursin notice a significant number of voicemails on the same theme, they sometimes create a special episode for them. This was the case with an "Owl Post" episode in November 2018, which featured listener voicemails reflecting on the Kavanaugh hearings in light of Potter-related themes. Zoltan and ter Kuile both invite and allow their listeners to do most of the political discussion for them, and this ultimately creates a more robust encounter; political engagement in the podcast is a two-way street.

[9] While listeners offer their Potter-informed political views via listener voicemails, Zoltan and ter Kuile will occasionally offer "Special Edition" episodes directly responding to political crises. The first of these was released five days after the 2016 US election. In this forty-seven-second recording, ter Kuile offers a quote from Chapter 37 of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: "I DON'T CARE!" Harry yelled at them... 'I'VE HAD ENOUGH, I'VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON'T CARE ANYMORE—'... 'You do care,' said Dumbledore... 'You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it.'" Zoltan then offers a short response: "So from all of us here, we just wanna say that we care with you. And you caring with us means the world to us." The recording was short, but its open-ended outreach is a hallmark of the podcast's community engagement: we care that you care, now let's care together.

[10] "Let's care together" took a new direction in the podcast's first true call to action, which occurred in a "Special Edition" episode recorded four days after the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. In it, the podcast follows its typical routine of "analyze, offer tools, and invite," but with a striking new tone. The comparatively longer, nine-minute recording opens with ter Kuile calmly declaring the importance of using accurate names for things, specifically naming white supremacist and Neo-Nazi presence at the Charlottesville rally. Zoltan explains why nuance is an important concept, but not one to be used when naming injustice. The cohosts then offer a resource for having difficult conversations around race and racism for their listeners to use with friends and family members. They conclude with a strong set of statements: "Many people in our listening community have been activists for a long time and many of you maybe haven't stepped into this role before, but we need you. This country needs you, the world needs you. There are Death Eaters on our streets. It's time for the Order to gather and act together." True to form, the creators of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* stop there, after equipping their listenership with tools and inviting them to action.

[11] The aim of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* is to discover new layers of meaning

within the text and to equip its listeners to do the same for the betterment of the world around them. As the podcast website says, "It's the English class you didn't know you missed and the meaningful conversations you didn't know you craved." If study and meaning are their two benchmarks for success, the creators of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* have earned an "Outstanding" on their podcasting O.W.Ls.

# Review

## *Fandom as classroom practice: A teaching guide*, edited by Katherine Anderson Howell

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[0.1] Keywords—Fan studies; Pedagogy; Remix

Golub, Adam. 2019. *Fandom as Classroom Practice: A Teaching Guide*, edited by Katherine Anderson Howell [book review]. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 30. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1825>.

Katherine Anderson Howell, editor. *Fandom as classroom practice: A teaching guide*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018, paperback, \$70 (168p), ISBN 9781609385675.

[1] The curriculum, the classroom, and the very genre of "books about teaching" are all reimagined in innovative ways in *Fandom as Classroom Practice: A Teaching Guide*. Edited and with an introduction by Katherine Anderson Howell, an independent scholar and multigenre writer, this collection of eleven essays demonstrates the pedagogical value of integrating fan practices into our teaching spaces. The volume's central premise is that "the ways that fans create can provide models for students in the academic classroom" (1). Contributors discuss how they use fandom to teach subjects such as literature, market research, composition, communication, literary theory, popular culture, and foreign language. In addition to the core chapters, *Fandom as Classroom Practice* includes three appendices: sample syllabi, sample assignments, and the transcript of an interview conducted by Howell with a student who took her "ReWriting Jane Eyre" course.

[2] A common theme across the essays assembled here is the power of fan practices not only to engage students in the material and teach them critical skills and dispositions but also to transform the classroom environment into one that values play (remix) and community (affinity). When teachers design and create a "remix classroom," they invite students to compose, to "write back," to "play with the material they study" (2). Similarly, an "affinity classroom" encourages students to develop a meaningful relationship with the course topic, the classroom community, and the larger academic culture; it inspires them to "participate in their education, to talk back to experts and authorities, and to shape the discourse themselves" (7). *Fandom as Classroom Practice* makes the case that translating fandom concepts such as remix and affinity spaces into formalized pedagogy can reframe teaching and learning "as actions, practices to be done, not lessons to be consumed" (7).



[3] What is especially noteworthy—and, frankly, exciting—about this essay collection is its commitment to bringing student voices into the pedagogical conversation. Here, we do not just see the classroom through the eyes of the instructor. Much as fan studies writ large seeks to foreground and take seriously the voices of fans, *Fandom as Classroom Practice* listens to learners, creating space for students to comment and reflect on their experience in remix classrooms. To this end, the book maintains a dual focus on "praxis and response." As Howell writes in the introduction, "This volume does not rely solely on an instructor's perceptions of student work or on evaluations as mere data but rather values students as coscholars and cocreators of the classroom" (8). Indeed, a number of the chapters are designed to be read in tandem: in one chapter, a teacher will describe their pedagogy, and in the succeeding and correlating chapter, a student or students will write about what they learned in that particular class. You can find four instances of such couplings in the table of contents, and the remaining three chapters, though not paired with student responses, adeptly find ways to integrate the voices of learners into their discussion, using various forms of student feedback.

[4] The essays themselves lay out pedagogical strategies that are both fresh and readily adaptable to a variety of academic subjects and instructional levels. Readers who do not necessarily teach these specific subjects will very likely find ideas and activities they can borrow, modify, and implement. For example, in "Adaptation as Analysis: Creative Work in an English Classroom," Anna Smol describes how she incorporates fandom into her undergraduate course on medievalism. The course looks at the "re-creation of any aspect of the Middle Ages in a later time," with a special focus on the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and the concepts of adaptation and intertextuality (17). Because her students are exploring Tolkien's revisioning of texts like *Beowulf*, Smol uses the class as an opportunity to challenge them to create adaptations of their own. "Why just study adaptations as an external observer when you can create an adaptation and experience the process...from the inside?" she asks (20). Accordingly, Smol tasks her students with creating a "transformative work in any medium" that responds in some kind of way to a text they are studying.

[5] While this is a creative assignment that invites playful learning, Smol carefully structures and sequences the project so that students have clear parameters for their research and their final product. Smol helpfully describes a three-stage assignment she uses to guide students' thinking as well as focus her evaluation of their creative work. Students must keep a planning journal, or "design log," throughout the semester, where they narrate their research process: each journal entry must be dated and written in complete sentences and should discuss the sources students have read, how they found those sources, and how their ideas are evolving. Smol encourages students to "keep track of dead ends as well as discoveries" (23). The first step in the adaptation process is design: students should talk about what they are planning to do. The second step is craft: how will they effectively portray their ideas to their audience? And finally, insight: what did they learn from producing an adaptation? Students are given deadlines and word counts for addressing these steps in their planning journal. Smol also schedules time for students to present their adaptations to the class. And at the end of the semester, they have the opportunity to revise any portions of their design log "if they wish to express more clearly their project aims or to develop their ideas further" (28). For any teacher who has aspired to assign creative work in the classroom but has

grappled with how to structure and assess student products, this essay is a terrific resource.

[6] Smol's adaptation assignment appears to have been a success. For her project, one student did a dramatic retelling of an Old Norse poem that influenced Tolkien but told it using American Sign Language. Another student produced artwork that explored Tolkien's use of color in his writing. Another student composed a storyboard of photographs for an imagined dystopian film version of *The Lord of the Rings* set in the future. In each case, the students' creative work was guided by focused research, deep consideration of craft, and meaningful exploration of fan practices of adaptation and intertextual engagement. One of Smol's students wrote a response that serves as the next chapter in the book. The author, Rebecca Power, talks about the excitement of becoming a "subcreator" in Smol's class, a "creator of myths and worlds through the use of language" (32). The creative assignment helped Power make connections among texts. In addition, she felt it allowed her to "become part of the ongoing conversation that adaptation creates" (33). Ultimately, writes Power, the remix classroom "reunited me with creative and abstract thinking" (34). It also, incidentally, inspired her to pursue graduate work in English.

[7] Paul Booth similarly has his students produce fan work in his course on "Fandom and Active Audiences," as described in his chapter, "Waves of Fandom in the Fan Studies Classroom." Booth's course focuses on fandom's historical development and study, and to help students investigate the issues raised by this subject matter, he gives them a term-long assignment "that asks them to analyze their fandom as it applies to their own lives" (116). A copy of Booth's syllabus is helpfully reproduced in Appendix B. Students must select a media text (book, video game, film, television series) that they are interested in. They must maintain a Tumblr account that follows their chosen text. Their first assignment is to analyze their text and describe the generic and component parts—characters, narrative, plot, locations—that fans "take hold of and attach to themselves" (145). Then, students write their own fan fiction story about the media text they have chosen; the story is accompanied by an analysis that "describes how it connects to the media text and offers historical context for the genre of fan fiction" (145). Next, students offer a critical reading of a fan-created work, such as fiction or a video, and compare it to their own product. Then, students create a fan video three to five minutes long, along with a statement that describes how it fits in with topics discussed in class. Finally, students must reflect on their Tumblr experience as a "community of voices." In the succeeding chapter, Booth's student Ashlyn Keefe remarks that the course's "twofold process of in-depth creation and objective yet subjective analysis of our own fan creations masterfully coerced us into a critical engagement with our fan texts" (127). Keefe also notes that the class helped her understand the importance of fan studies in giving students a critical lens for understanding today's media environment.

[8] Still other inventive ideas appear in this anthology. Shannon K. Farley talks about how she uses fan-created videos to teach deconstructive reading in her class on literary theory. Leslie Leonard and Lee Hibbard describe how they use online blogging spaces in the composition classroom to involve their students in "low-stake activities that would make them comfortable with their own writing voices and their ability to craft and sustain an argument" (48). Mattias Aronsson, Anneli Fjordevik, and Hiroko Inose discuss the use of manga to teach Japanese and English translation. Maura Grady, Richard J. "Robby"

Roberson, Jr., and Erika Gallion recount a fascinating service learning project that had students surveying fans of local film tourism in Ohio (specifically, fans of "The Shawshank Trail," which features sites that appear in the motion picture *The Shawshank Redemption*). Rukmini Pande explains how she uses a *Lion King* casting exercise—asking students to imagine themselves as directors of a live-action adaptation—to enable a critical discussion about racebending in popular culture.

[9] One can see how many of the ideas presented in *Fandom as Classroom Practice* would be portable to other disciplinary and interdisciplinary topics and educational settings. The book serves as a useful primer on fan studies—the chapters collectively make clear why and how we should study audiences—and also presents itself as a handy toolbox for teachers. In recent years, more and more scholars have been writing about the pedagogical applications of fandom, with such work appearing in the pages of various academic journals or in the form of an occasional chapter within a larger fan studies collection. So it is both timely and welcome to now have an entire book dedicated to the topic. *Fandom as Classroom Practice* delivers what its title promises, and I can see the anthology inspiring even further avenues of related inquiry. For example, one wonders how fandom might be a productive lens for studying history. So much of what is presented in this collection is digital and relentlessly of the now, but how might fandom practices of the past shape and inform the teaching and learning of history today? How did audiences engage with popular culture phenomena pre-internet, via fan mail and scrapbooking and postcard collecting and photography and fan clubs, for instance, and what might students learn from engaging with these analog practices in the twenty-first century?

[10] As Howell writes in the book's introduction, the experimentation that is authorized by playful learning "leads [students] to new knowledge and interpretations" (9). And for teachers, I would argue, the tales of remix classrooms collected here invite us to remix our own pedagogy and see what transpires.

# Review

## *Television 2.0: Viewer and fan engagement with digital TV,* by Rhiannon Bury

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**Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, United States**

[0.1] Keywords—Audience; Convergence; Participatory culture

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**Rhiannon Bury. *Television 2.0: Viewer and Fan Engagement with Digital TV*. New York: Peter Lang, 2017, paperback, \$48 (147p) ISBN 978-1-4331-3852-2.**

[1] The end of the first decade of the new millennium was a period of swiftly changing media technologies. In 2006, Amazon launched Unbox, a service that allowed users to download television episodes and films—a precursor to Amazon Instant Video (now Prime Video). Tiny netbooks with seven- to nine-inch screens sold cheaply, offering portability and affordability, until they declined in popularity as the iPad was launched in 2010. Among fan communities, adoption of LiveJournal gradually shifted to Dreamwidth and Tumblr. It was at this moment—in 2010—that Rhiannon Bury launched a global survey into television viewing habits that became the foundation for *Television 2.0: Viewer and Fan Engagement with Digital TV*.

[2] This book is a reporting and analysis of findings from the survey, in which Bury describes shifts in viewing habits and fan practices resulting from changes to television options, like digital video recorders, internet downloads, and streaming services. She pays special attention to questions of access: how viewers determine whether to view favorite programs via terrestrial channels, cable, or time-shifted recordings or downloads. Bury is also concerned with how technologies like social media and downloadable content might change our conception of participatory culture from its current overemphasis on fan production. This project flows out of Bury's previously authored *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (2005), as well as numerous articles about fans and technology.

[3] The survey was undertaken in 2010–2011. As a consequence, some of the findings that Bury shares already feel more like nostalgia than insights into contemporary viewers. Streaming options have expanded, the television series discussed by survey respondents have moved off the air, and new cult series have emerged. As a result, some of the survey

findings would be different if the study were undertaken today. But with nearly one thousand responses (671 of which were fully completed), 110 follow-up interviews, and more than 31 countries represented, Bury's survey is a remarkable undertaking that provides both qualitative and quantitative snapshots of viewing habits and fan practices at the time.

[4] The first chapter describes a history of the "television assemblage," a term Bury borrows from Raymond Williams (1975), from radio to the internet. She moves through wireless to wired and analog, the history of VCR adoption to digital broadcast and streaming services. By describing how television has always been a part of an assemblage of other technologies, Bury sets up survey findings in which respondents navigate among broadcast or terrestrial television, cable and satellite, recorded material, and internet-based media in their own twenty-first-century assemblages. Much of the history in this chapter is sourced from previously published works like Joshua Greenberg's (2008) study of the VCR and videotapes. For media historians, this is probably the least useful chapter of the book, but as recent experiences with my students have reminded me, a traditionally aged undergraduate student today has only ever lived in the internet age. Undergraduate and graduate students may therefore benefit from the chapter's brief history to provide useful context for the survey results, which are the real centerpiece of the book.

[5] In the second chapter, Bury begins introducing results of the survey, starting with how respondents actually watch and connect their various devices. Among the major findings in this chapter is that the conventional distinction between broadcast consumption and internet use is a flawed model that fails to account for the "leakiness" between the two categories. Survey respondents report their continued preference for terrestrial or cable television for its convenience; however, many also acknowledged a preference for streaming services and downloads to access missed content or content inaccessible at a particular place or time. Home television, Bury concludes, is "not a coherent category but a loose collection of multiscreen users and multimodal viewers" (53). Additionally, Bury argues that terrestrial, cable, or satellite services should not be presumed as being in decline on the way to more internet use, since the reasons respondents gave for continuing to watch cable and broadcast varied beyond technology and accessibility, often a result of personal tastes and household preferences.

[6] The third chapter explores how viewers watch on their various assemblages, both in terms of technological setups and in their social connections with the media being screened. It is this chapter that may most reflect the moment of the survey. Several respondents cite the awkwardness of lying on the couch with a laptop or connecting the laptop to a television. Today, smart television, which can access terrestrial and cable channels as well as a user's choice of streaming apps, removes many of the assemblage difficulties respondents identified. A follow-up to see if the same participants continue to prefer watching on a television set from the comfort of a living room couch would be interesting. At the time the survey was live, the popular press declared the "third golden age of television," in which television viewers sought a more immersive and cinematic viewing experience. Many of Bury's survey respondents, however, participate in the kind of distracted viewing John Ellis described of television viewers nearly forty years ago (2000, 168–69). Respondents report having broadcast programs in the background during dinner or chores, with DVRs,

downloads, and DVDs reserved for favorite programs viewers want to pay attention to. Social viewing and time-shifting correspond to allow couples, families, and friends to create "their own viewer-centered flow and otherwise [integrate] television with other aspects of daily life" (Bury 2017, 70).

[7] In the final two chapters, Bury turns to affect and fan engagement, and it is these chapters that will probably be of most interest to readers of this journal. In chapter four, Bury reports on how viewers determine which series warrant live viewing, time-shifting, and even DVD purchase. She finds that different levels of affective intensity drive viewers' decisions about how and when to watch particular programs. But interestingly, "the more intense the relationship and the more involved one is in fan communities, the more likely one is to anticipate new episodes and seek them out, using whichever mode provides the most immediate access" (88). At the time of the survey, "marathon viewing" (my preferred term and Bury's for its lack of moral judgment) was swiftly being labeled "binge watching," which Bury rightly notes connotes a lack of impulse control, as with the terms "binge drinking" and "binge eating" (86). As Netflix and some cable channels have further promoted the idea of bingeing in anticipation of a new season or finale, Bury finds that there are other reasons for marathon viewing, including a viewer's distaste for interruptions, segmentation, and the ad content so common in television's broadcast model.

[8] The fifth and final chapter has the most provocative findings for fan and audience studies. Although participants reported using social media and accessing fan content on the internet, Bury notes that many are not engaging in fan communities in which there is a reciprocal relationship. For instance, some respondents note the pleasure of feeling connected to a community of fellow fans when using appropriate hashtags on Twitter for screenings, despite previous research that shows many of the tweets during and immediately after television broadcasts do not indicate that Twitter users are talking to each other but instead are talking at each other (Wohn and Na 2011; Bury 2017, 100). Other respondents noted enjoying some fan-created works without feeling the impetus to create their own. This leads Bury to conclude that we tend to conflate participation with participatory culture and thus have overinflated the role of the fan. Bury argues that Television 2.0's real impact may be on those individuals typically described as the least involved in participatory culture. Social media, Bury finds, does not seem to be converting viewers into highly involved and productive fans.

[9] Bury concludes by reiterating the ways television viewing, particularly broadcast or terrestrial consumption, is changing because of the internet. She resists the claim that the internet is a game changer by reminding us that television viewing and fan practices have always been part of a "rhizomatic assemblage" of entertainment media and apparatuses and that a hybridization between broadcast or cable and the internet is only the latest iteration of this assemblage.

[10] The survey and the book analyzing it are not without limitations, which Bury concedes in the introduction and conclusion. Although respondents were from varied countries, the majority were North American. Though Canadian, British, Australian, and American respondents commented on their enjoyment of English-language media from beyond their national borders, these findings are hardly global or transnational beyond a limited set. The

respondents were also predominantly white and middle-class. This leaves open questions about the use of television assemblages and engagement with television among viewers of color and of different economic classes with varying access to infrastructures that enable television viewing and internet use. Age is also a limitation. I found myself wanting more detailed reminders of the respondents' ages in order to contextualize their remarks. These limits to the survey leave open questions and possibilities for future research that will target nonwhite, non-Anglophone, and non-middle-class viewers. Finally, Bury offers some temporal contextualization in the conclusion, noting that broadcast viewing is on the decline and that services like Netflix and social media platforms like Twitter are having a real impact on viewing habits and fan practices as we approach the 2020s. It would be useful to compare Bury's findings to more recent survey results on the same subject, if such exists. Overall, though, the book provides qualitative and quantitative findings about viewing practices among white middle-class respondents. Through its study of which devices these viewers prefer, in which rooms and in what social circumstances they watch television, and how their emotional connections to television programs affect their viewing habits and social media use, *Television 2.0* offers an interesting snapshot of television and fandom at a moment in time not long ago and yet still somehow a different era, a moment at which television was in rapid transition. More importantly, the book challenges assumptions we made back then and continue to make today about viewers, fans, and participatory culture.

## References

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