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FAN FICTION

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Fan fiction and fairy tales share some enemies. As the practice of writing new stories using public figures or previously published fictional characters, situations, and settings, fan fiction is often derided as hopelessly derivative. Fairy-tale history likewise traces promiscuous networks of retellings, across media forms, voiced by multiple, often unnamed authors and storytellers. For many academic and popular commentators, such conditions of anonymity, pseudonymity, and repetition mark both fan fiction and fairy tales as low culture with little artistic or political potential. That fan fiction is authored almost exclusively by women, and fairy tales often become gendered in their association with the home, childrearing, kinship, and romance, only appear to further consign both to frivolousness and obscurity (Coppa 2006; Coppa 2008; Jenkins 1992; Kustritz 2003; Lee 2008; Stone 1975).

Yet, while some theoretical traditions view repetition as a sign of stultifying cultural deadening associated with capitalist culture industries, others view it as the space of potential agency and critique. The ubiquity of fairy-tale themes and narratives throughout Western storytelling and popular culture make such stories profitable, but also powerful, as part of a shared pre-capitalist language that remains available for appropriation and retelling by anyone. On the one hand, it is a language of cultural reproduction in which brands and commodities are enunciated, reproducing economic, patriarchal, heteronormative, and racial hierarchies. However, feminist critics, academics, and fans can also enunciate fairy-tale language as an open and widely recognizable system of resonant signs, widely understood and easily circulated for critiques of the modern world. For example, because the fairy tale deals so often with coming of age and courtship, it offers fertile ground to feminist, queer, and trans appropriation. Thus, fan fiction that borrows fairy tale themes, specifically fairy-tale alternate universes (AUs), occupies a complex crossroads between mass and folk culture and can offer a shared language wherein anyone can negotiate, discuss, and critique modern culture.

Repetition in Folk Culture, Fan Culture, and Shared Culture

Although each is steeped in repetition, fan fiction's prominent connection with popular culture and mass media creates potential political tensions with fairy tales. Investigating these relationships also connects to a longstanding conversation in which fairy tales have historically been a testing ground for questions swirling around the discipline of folklore about the relationship between oral, literary, and media forms, the nature of the folk, and the meaning of authenticity (Darnton 2009; Foster and Tolbert 2015). In much of Western culture repetition obscures the origins of folk narratives, which then become common property. As such, they need not be explicitly marked like recursive literary texts. Indeed, the Romantic conception of art and folklore is in direct opposition; folk narratives' value resides precisely in their lack

of originality, that is, their status as survivals from an earlier age. These hierarchies of value downplay or disparage repetition and recursivity in literature as unoriginal and innovation in folk narrative as inauthentic (Bendix 1997; Tosenberger 2014).

Yet, while folktales' and fairy tales' status as allegedly authentic relics of pre-industrial traditional culture devalues them in comparison to high culture, it also rhetorically elevates and protects them from a much more pernicious force: the capitalist market. This tripartite system of cultural value thus rhetorically constructs one compromised and two "pure positions" (Clifford 1988) from which culture may be produced in the modern world: the market is opposed both to high culture, focused on unmarketably exclusive audiences, and to folk culture, with its demonstrable lineage connected to the pre-capitalist past and an artisan mentality that evades mass reproduction. Like salvage anthropology, which sought to document cultures untouched by modernity, such an approach for storytelling similarly inspires a salvage mentality, seeking to preserve any authentic expressions of folk culture before the influence of global mass media taints everything: what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls "eleventh hour" folklore scholarship (1998, 300). Thus J. Barre Toelken likewise notes that traditional folklorists "concerned themselves with the recording and study of customs, ideas, and expressions that were thought to be survivals of ancient cultural systems still existing in the modern world" (1979, 4). Faye Ginsburg and Fred Meyers note the unfairness and impracticality of basing authenticity on a stagnant definition of culture and argue for forms of storytelling about Aboriginal futures in a variety of technologies and media, accessing a hybrid intercultural space in which Native people often re-appropriate Western archival material and culture to create new critical meanings (2006). Their work points toward many forms of collage art, like fan fiction, that play at the juncture between cultural registers and trouble understandings of authenticity and genuine popular expression.

Fairy tales frequently become associated with particularly resonant and well-known versions, such as those by Disney or the Grimm brothers; yet even so, their strongest characteristic is a lack of any completely fixed form and a proliferation throughout culture in multiple media, described by Cristina Bacchilega as a "fairy tale web" (2013). Fan fiction likewise defines itself as a way to take familiar story elements and ask "what if?" How would the story be different if it continued, or were set in coffee shop, or all the characters were actually androids? The transformations, for fairy-tale stories and fan fiction stories, are as limitless as the storytellers' imaginations. Both also play across cultural registers, appearing in a variety of media and borrowing from high and low culture alike. Fairy-tale themes appear in the most revered forms of painting and literature, and although fan fiction is known almost exclusively for appropriating popular texts, fan fiction stories also exist for an almost limitless number of sources, including high-culture objects like Jane Austen (Steenhuyse 2011). Thus within the fairy-tale web, and within fan fiction, cultural artifacts from all across the spectrum intermingle.

Yet the repetitive nature of fairy-tale themes in Western culture, especially mass culture, and fans' consistent rereading of the same characters and situations with minor variations can sound less like populist freedom and the authentic culture of the people and more like the result of the market's cultural homogenization. Many theorists and critics following Frankfurt School scholars have argued that the mass media's reliance on formula and cliché are politically and aesthetically dangerous. For T. W. Adorno repetition lulls audiences into complacency through the pleasurable comfort of familiarity (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944). Such arguments have not been kind to the creative cultures and pleasures of women or minorities and would deride fan fiction as merely market-oriented false consciousness. This position has been critiqued from a number of fronts, with many questioning Adorno's entrenchment of elitist standards of cultural value, which associate literary and artistic accomplishment with the works

preferred by wealthy Western men and deny the complexity and expressivity of art associated with historically oppressed people, including jazz and melodrama (Bourdieu 1984; Hall 1981). Similarly, others note that those who emphasize popular culture's reliance on repetition and formula underestimate the extent to which high-art objects like the plays of Shakespeare, for example, also rely on extensive borrowing from, and intertextuality with, a long history of other works. As a form of recursive literature, similar to the fairy tale, and as a women's writing community, fan fiction frequently comes under attack as inferior to original literature, due to its borrowing from published works, and inferior to folk creativity, due to its intimate imbrications with popular culture. That it primarily serves the pleasures of women, and forms the basis of relationships between women, only reaffirms its cultural status; yet these elements are precisely also why unique forms of aesthetic and political experimentation may also arise in fan fiction and via the language of fairy-tale tropes (Coppa 2008, 2011; Coppa and Tushnet 2011).

Perhaps contrary to expectations, the supposedly stultifying space of repetition can also become the space of critique. For many queer theorists drawing upon Michel Foucault, including Judith Butler and Judith/Jack Halberstam, it is in the moment that cultural norms and hierarchies must be translated into living bodies and repeatedly woven into the fabric of everyday life that individual people have the greatest agency and power to enact change (Halberstam 2011). As Butler argues, repetition is the moment when individuals may introduce variation, aberration, and dissonance into the system (1999). In Foucault's terms, these non-identical repetitions of social norms will not always become culturally meaningful. A revolution, according to Foucault (1978), and likewise Lauren Berlant (2011), is just a form of storytelling that narrates all these individual, often private instances of subversion, disruption, and failure into one unified public story about a "better good life." Psychoanalysis and cognitive psychology also invest in the potential therapeutic and liberatory power of narrative repetition (Johnson 1993). Analysis often seeks to transform the chaos of life into a coherent and affirmative story of self by narrating and renarrating events and emotions until arriving at a version that accommodates both the dictates of reality and the needs for self-esteem and agency. In remarkably similar language uniting the therapeutic and political models, Henry Jenkins described fan fiction as a way of "repairing the damage" wrought by living with the mass media and a culture of domination (2003). By repeating and renarrating mass media and collective forms of modern mythology, fan fiction authors intervene in the seemingly seamless process of cultural reproduction and thereby repair and re-envision damaging scripts by repeating them differently.

Fairy tales become especially fertile ground for this work because they form a shared cultural language that pre-exists modern mass media and cultural industries and thus offers a common cultural property that normalizes universal participation. Because the movement of fairy tales across media forms, cultural groups, and cultural registers throughout Bacchilega's "fairy tale web" began hundreds of years before the advent of mechanical reproduction and modern "transmedia storytelling," they manage to circulate widely without the limitations of copyright law (2013). Although certain versions of fairy tales become copyrighted property, and Disney has been especially aggressive in protecting its copyright claims (Hendenkamp 2002; Litman 1993; Sprigman 2002), fairy tales still offer a well-known, easily recognized set of tropes, characters, and iconography with which anyone may enter into an ongoing dialogue for the purpose of expression, critique, and community building.

These characteristics make fairy tales the epitome of what Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) call a "spreadable" form: because nearly everyone recognizes fairy tales, new, independent, and amateur artists and authors can easily reach vast audiences by speaking their language, and cultural critiques can travel farther if enunciated through fairy-tale forms. This appears contrary to Jenkins's prognostications in *Convergence Culture*, wherein he argues that although participatory

culture enables the involvement of more average people in the production of common culture, industrial mass-media products remain the touchstone around which amateur conversations and production are organized (2006); the participatory transmedia spreadability of fairy tales offers a different potential model of collective storytelling in the absence of one shared mass-media object, instead suggesting that participatory culture could include narrative worlds with their core content in the public domain, allowing both amateur and professional authors and artists to all add, critique, and collaborate with each other on more equal footing.

Fans Remix Fairy Tales

The open and collaborative nature of fairy-tale and fan fiction authorship means that numerous ideologies circulate under their aegeses, but both forms also support strong traditions of critique and counterculture. As an example, studying one point of intersection between fairy tales and fan fiction, the fairy-tale AU genre, can bring one particular tradition of critique based on gender and sexuality into focus. Although not all fairy tales include courtship plots, for feminist and queer artists, activists, authors, and academics, fairy tales have often become fruitful vehicles for intervention into modern mythologies about womanhood, marriage, reproduction, and heteropatriarchy. Indeed, these projects often overlap; as Vanessa Joosen (2011) has memorably demonstrated, the intertextuality of postmodern recursive fairy-tale retellings is also explicitly and implicitly in dialogue with fairy-tale scholarship, particularly well-known works of feminist scholarship such as that of Marsha P. Lieberman, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. Bacchilega similarly argues that at this point in history, feminist critiques of fairy tales have gained enough cultural traction that most audience members can be expected to be aware that such critiques exist and to bring that awareness to their reading of any new fairy-tale text (2013). Thus, as demonstrated in the case studies that follow, fan fiction that borrows fairy-tale themes, specifically fairy-tale AUs, stages new versions as a form of repetition with a difference, and in so doing negotiates and critiques current conceptions of romance, sexuality, and gendered life.

The fan fiction site the Archive of Our Own currently contains 2,671 fairy-tale AU works, and authors and readers together collectively interpret and reinvent the form via several central themes (2015). Introducing erotic elements unearths long-acknowledged subtexts within fairy tales, allows readers the naughty pleasure of dirtying up stories associated with childhood, and enables a genre transposition, offering characters a new, magical means of addressing problems and inequalities. As I argue elsewhere, fairy tales, especially Disney versions, have become associated with idealism and lack of realism (Kustritz 2016). The phrase "this isn't a fairy tale" is often used to indicate this cultural value, suggesting that fairy tales are overly idealized and that what will follow contains a more grounded depiction of messy reality. Fan fiction fairy-tale AUs often serve as an interface for the collision between fantasy and reality by allowing fairy-tale story worlds and more realist story worlds to intersect. These links can provide opportunities to examine disparities between fantasy and material experience of cultural norms regarding romance, womanhood, motherhood, beauty, and goodness. Bringing together all these themes of eroticism, magic/wonder, and realism are stories addressing the happy ending. Chief among the reasons Disney versions of fairy tales promoted the preconception that fairy tales are not realistic is their inevitable happy ending of married, monogamous heterosexual privilege. This tendency has been roundly criticized on both feminist and queer grounds as enforcing marriage as the only welcome conclusion of a woman's life, making her story literally end in marriage, and silencing queer relationships and family structures (Kustritz 2003; Lee 2008; Stone 1975).

However, the feeling that once a fairy tale begins, it will naturally and inevitably end in wedded bliss may also be turned to progressive political purposes when the couple (or three-some, or moresome) involved challenges dominant heteronormative assumptions. When the romantic couple or group (termed a "pairing") in a piece of fan fiction had little or no contact or were antagonistic in the source material, their romance may appear unlikely. However, when a pairing differs from cultural standards because of sexuality, age, class, deviation from beauty norms, and so on, some fan fiction authors may perceive that they had excellent screen chemis-try, but dominant production codes for mass media made their romantic and erotic connection unlikely for structural reasons, whether due to cultural taboo or overt censorship. The fairy tale's ostensibly overwhelming momentum toward a happy ending can help overcome such cultural resistance. Once these characters are placed in a fairy-tale context, readers know the likely outcome. Getting to the happy ending thus requires rooting for this otherwise unlikely couple to overcome their differences and external social pressures so that they can be together and the story can arrive where many previous repetitions indicate is the correct point—with the couple together. Because audiences have seen this pattern repeated many times, the happy ending may feel like a satisfying return to a comfortably familiar place; however, by changing the players in this formula, an otherwise overwhelmingly heteronormative and patriarchal structure can serve very different ends, queering the fairy tale and the mass culture source material.

Two different fairy-tale AU versions of "Beauty and the Beast" (ATU 425C), with two very dissimilar couples, help demonstrate this effect. "Beauty and the Beast" by Imagine-agreatadventure (2015) features a romance between Jaime Lannister and Brienne of Tarth from the dystopian quasi-medieval fantasy book and TV series *Game of Thrones* (2015–), while "The Beast" by Mangosong pairs *American Idol* singer contestants Adam Lambert and Kris Allen (2010). Imagineagreatadventure's version hews closely to the Disney version, which melds with the *Game of Thrones* story world as both include royalty, castles, and magic. The plot follows tightly as well, with Brienne's love transforming arrogant Jaime back from beast to prince. However, although she is called Brienne the Beauty in the *Game of Thrones* books (2005), the name sarcastically disparages her ugliness, and unlike Beauty, Brienne is more likely to be found sword fighting than reading. The "Beauty and the Beast" framework introduces romance into the book's friendship between Jaime and Brienne, but also challenges expec-tations about beauty standards, leading the audience to a happy ending involving a union between a tall, muscular, ugly woman and a golden, beautiful man—once their love breaks the curse, of course.

In Mangosong's "The Beast," the fairy-tale happy ending lends magical power to natural-izing same-sex attraction and relationships, as well as challenging fat phobia and, like Imagin-eagreatadventure's story, questioning dominant beauty standards. "The Beast," set in modern LA, depicts an Adam Lambert who never auditioned for *American Idol*. Insulting the wrong fan transforms him into his high school body, before weight loss and hair dye catapulted him into the cabaret and theater scene. He then has one year to find love and accept his body or the transformation will become permanent. Struggling musician Kris Allen becomes Adam's roommate, not his prisoner, and as Adam begins to accept his new-old body, they fall in love. Coming out, bashing, homophobia, body dysmorphia, poverty, and economics of the modern music industry are framed within a fairy-tale plot that pulls the audience toward the inevitable conclusion that Adam and Kris are meant for each other and should be happy together forever.

In both instances, the happy ending—in other circumstances one of the fairy tale's most conservative elements—becomes a tool for social critique, repeating the trope with players who challenge dominant assumptions about who deserves love and which kinds of relationships

merit a blissful ever after. Fairy tales' pre-established momentum toward happy couple-dom structurally positions the audience in solidarity with pairs otherwise unthinkable in modern mass media: a physically imposing woman and a beautiful man, and a flamboyantly gay, over-weight cabaret singer and his Southern, Christian roommate. Thus in these cases, the famil-iarity of fairy-tale romantic plots and happy endings helps naturalize non-normative sexual practices, pairings, and identities while simultaneously queering pop culture and the fairy tale.

Collective Authorship and Open Texts in Fan Fiction and Fairy-Tale Traditions

Fan fiction and fairy tales share similar origins, cultural tensions, narrative structures, and contemporary cultures of production. Stories that explicitly hybridize the two genres offer a fruitful space for studying current popular storytelling and its potential for addressing and representing average people's needs, desires, and critiques of modern life (Kustritz 2016). Both fan fiction and fairy tales are culturally marked by their association with women, courtship, repetition, and anonymous and collective authorship. Yet their origin in collective storytelling, especially among communities of women, opens a radical space for alternative forms of sto-rytelling while cycles of narrative repetition in both genres create a shared symbolic language through which anyone can communicate with a potentially broad audience. Fan fiction stories that draw on fairy-tale tropes and traditions thus often mobilize repetition with a difference to make the familiar strange or to use genre conventions like the happy ending in the service of redefining cultural norms and ideals. Thus despite dour prognostications, repetition and romance can become spaces of radical queer possibility, and even forms of storytelling as shot through with mass culture complicity as fan fiction and the fairy tale can become vehicles for folk creativity, expression, and critique.

Related topics: Adaptation and the Fairy-Tale Web; Convergence Culture; Fandom/Fan Cultures; Fantasy; Gender; Intellectual Property; Romance; Sexualities/Queer and Trans Stud-ies; Storytelling

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