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Catherine Tosenberger

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Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction

Catherine Tosenberger

Many of the most devoted aficionados of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series have not merely contented themselves with the just-completed septilogy, but have gone online in droves to create and publish new Potter stories. These new narratives are called "fanfiction"—fiction that utilizes pre-existing characters and settings from a literary or media text. Fanfiction ("fanfic" or "fic," for short) differs from other forms of "recursive" fiction (Langford 805)—such as Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Geraldine Brooks's Pulitzer Prize-winning *March*, and every Sherlock Holmes pastiche ever created—by its unofficial methods of distribution.¹ The legal status of fanfiction based on in-copyright texts, such as the Potter books, is uncertain, though in the United States it is likely defensible under transformative Fair Use laws.² Fanfiction is, by preference or necessity, not formally published; it initially was circulated by way of self-published "zines," and, these days, on the Internet. While fan writers are unable to capitalize on their work in terms of money or official recognition, they are compensated by not being restricted to institutionalized discourses. Fan writers are often characterized as refusing merely to consume media, but rather to engage actively with texts; fandom as a space of engagement is especially valuable for young fans, who constitute a significant portion of Potter fandom. In our era of what Henry Jenkins calls "convergence culture," fan-produced writing provides a means for studying the impact of the Potter books on creative, motivated readers. One of the most interesting and fruitful areas of study is "slash" fanfiction—fan writing concerned with same-sex romance.³

Internet fanfiction, especially in the Potter fandom, gives younger writers access to a wider audience than ever before. As Ernest Bond and Nancy Michelson observe:

It is not a new phenomenon for young readers to occasionally extend a literary creation by becoming authors of new versions, sequels, or spin-offs of the story. However, the advent of *Harry Potter* has generated an unprecedented number of voluntary literary responses by adolescent readers. (111)

Jenkins has expanded upon this theme, arguing forcefully that adolescent Potter fans who participate in the online fandom benefit enormously, in the form of greatly increased literacy (both traditional and media), from access to this egalitarian, cross-generational space “outside the classroom and beyond any direct adult control” (*Convergence* 177). Jenkins believes, and I agree, that “we should not assume that someone possesses media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves” (170). Moreover, the production and distribution of fanfiction “demystif[es] . . . the creative process,” and allows young writers to take on the mantle of “author,” a role which traditional publishing reserves for a cultural elite (179).

Jenkins is not the only scholar to praise the possible pedagogical benefits of participating in fandom; Bond and Michelson, Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar, and Chris Ebert Flench have all discussed fan communities as spaces where adolescents can hone their writing skills. However, fandom is more than a space to simply acquire technical expertise at writing. One avenue that has yet to be explored, with specific regard to adolescent fans, is the potential to encounter and experiment with alternative modes of sexual discourse, particularly queer discourse. Potter fandom, due in part to its sheer size, but also to the great diversity of ages and sexual orientations of its members, is ideal ground for exploring many varieties of non-heteronormative discourses in fandom. Slash is therefore one of the most popular genres of Potter fanfiction.

The term “slash” arose in *Star Trek* fandom in the 1970s, referring to the punctuation mark separating the characters’ names (Kirk/Spock).⁴ The “X/Y” model indicated that the major romantic pairing was homosexual; stories of heterosexual *Star Trek* romance were labeled “ST” or “adult ST” (Penley, *NASA/TREK* 102). Although later fandoms adopted the slash punctuation mark for all romantic pairings (i.e., Hermione/Ron), the term “slash” stuck, retaining its original meaning of homoerotic romance. I have chosen to concentrate in this article on male/male slash, as these pairings constitute the majority of Potter slash fanfiction, but female/female slash—often marked as “femslash,” “femmeslash,” or even “saffic” (a portmanteau of “Sapphic fic”)—certainly exists and deserves critical attention; the most popular Potter femslash pairing is Hermione/Ginny.

Some fans and academics wish to narrow the definition of slash, and claim that the same-gender relationship must be noncanonical—that is, not present in the source text, in this case the Harry Potter books.

However, this qualification poses several problems. First, it does not reflect common usage within fandom. The term “slash” generally functions in fandom as the binary opposite of “het” (heterosexual) fic, which features romantic and sexual relationships between characters of different genders. As no one places a similar limitation on het fics—stories that concern canonical heterosexual pairings, such as Molly/Arthur, are still labeled “het”—most fans reason that it doesn’t make sense to apply the restriction to slash. Second, no one has ever come up with a satisfactory term for fanfic that concerns canonical same-sex relationships; in the fandoms for television programs such as *Queer as Folk* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, fan stories about the canonical homosexual relationships are still usually called “slash.”

Third, and perhaps most importantly, is that what constitutes “canon” is never a clear-cut issue: as Mafalda Stasi points out, “beyond the bare factual minimum, canon constitution and interpretation are a highly debated and controversial critical activity in the fannish milieu” (120). A number of slash stories and pairings build upon on a reading of subtext that fans claim *is* present in the canon. In the case of the relationship between the young Albus Dumbledore and his boyhood friend-turned-enemy Gellert Grindelwald, Rowling would agree. Three months after the release of *Deathly Hallows*, she confirmed the speculations of many slash fans, and announced, in response to a fan’s question, that Dumbledore was gay and had loved Grindelwald (Italie). She commented, “I think a child will see a friendship and I think a sensitive adult may well understand that it was an infatuation” (Ahearn). Slash fans, who constitute many of these “sensitive adults,” are often accused of “distorting” or “misreading” texts, so this public validation of their method of reading is a somewhat rare pleasure. Though Rowling has never made any explicit statements on the topic, many fans defend, passionately, the pairing of Remus Lupin/Sirius Black as canon, a reading which many other fans just as passionately oppose; I will discuss these issues in greater detail below.

In short, the insistence that slash must transgress the existing canon rather troublingly assigns to the canon a heteronormativity it may not necessarily possess. Moreover, it reinforces the assumption that queer readings are always readings “imposed” from the outside (Willis 154; see also Jones). This is not to say that slash lacks transgressive or subversive potential: in a homophobic culture that attempts to police or censor expressions of non-heteronormativity, any depiction of queerness, especially a positive, sympathetic depiction, qualifies as such. However,

for the reasons outlined above, I believe it is a mistake to claim that slash is intrinsically more transgressive/subversive of a given text than other forms of fanfiction.⁵

Regarding transgression, how do depictions of adolescent sexuality in Potter fanfiction differ from those of published literature for adolescents? The cultural construct of adolescence and its literature does, albeit grudgingly, allow a space for sexuality, and the discourse shifts from blanket condemnation to strategies for containment. Our culture's relationship with adolescent sexuality is complex and contradictory: on the one hand, we valorize their youth and beauty, their erotic appeal, and often wink at "horny teenagers'" sexual escapades on television and film; on the other, we are anxious to contain adolescent sexuality within parameters acceptable to adult sensibilities. The literature aimed at teenage audiences reflects this tension. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that "adolescent literature is as often an ideological tool used to curb teenagers' libido as it is some sort of depiction of what adolescents' sexuality actually is" (85). While YA literature has gradually allowed itself to become more sexually explicit, there is still a strong imperative towards pedagogy—inculcating "correct" attitudes about sexuality to an audience deemed in need of education. Trites expresses frustration at the overwhelming emphasis in our discourses concerning sexuality in general, and adolescent sexuality in particular, upon "repression" rather than "*jouissance*" (95).

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

Slash, like other forms of fanfiction in the modern era, initially circulated by way of self-published zines. Because of the controversial nature of the stories, slash was available only to those who knew the right people in order to be put on mailing lists, and who had the financial resources to order zines and attend conventions—in other words, adults. Equally important, those who wished to write and distribute slash were subject to the whims, preferences, and limited resources of zine editors; writers of unpopular pairings or scenarios had a more difficult time getting their stories published and therefore finding an

audience. The Internet cut out the middlemen; anyone, of any age, with a computer and a modem could obtain access. The rise of Potter coincided with the mainstreaming of the Internet, and this combination of a source text aimed at young readers with advanced communications technology enabled young fans not only to access slash, but also to write and distribute their own.⁶

Many of the most influential academic studies of slash—Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers*, Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women*, and Constance Penley’s “Brownian Motion,” in particular—date from the pre-Internet period, and many academic theories reflect this. All of these scholars report that slash (like most fanfiction in general) is written primarily by women, and discuss the feminist implications of this in great detail. The existence of slash complicated conventional notions about women’s interest in erotica in general, and the types of erotic material women were supposed to be interested in (i.e., heterosexual romance novels). It is unsurprising that most fandom scholarship presents slash as a potential site for women to resist the dominant ideologies of patriarchal, heteronormative culture. Penley draws upon the work of Joanna Russ, as well as that of Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, and discusses slash as a subversive act, wherein women can articulate a fantasy of equality between romantic partners that is difficult to achieve in heterosexual relationships (see “Brownian” 155–57, and *NASA/TREK* 127–30).

The focus in slash scholarship on these adult female writers—and their engagement with media oriented toward adults, such as *Blake’s 7*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and especially *Star Trek*—had a noticeable effect on removing some of the adolescent stigma of fannishness. The popular image of the fan was marked by immaturity: the teenage girl able to express her sexuality only by screaming and crying for pop stars (see Ehrenreich, et al.), or the adult man who lives in his parents’ basement and has never kissed a girl are the standard gender stereotypes.⁷ The concept of “adolescence,” whether actual or inappropriately retained, is a key component of the stereotypical fan (see Jenson 12 and Lewis 157–58). The work of scholars writing not just about fandom, but slash fandom in particular, changed that: they recast slash fandom as a space for savvy, subversive women, engaging in creative—and very adult—ways with media texts.

The advent of the Internet and the popularity of the Potter books, which allowed for an influx of actual teenagers into participatory fandom (as reported by Jenkins, “Heather,” and Bond and Michelson),

are forcing a reassessment not just of fandom in general, but of slash in particular—and expansion of the potential liberatory benefits of slash fandom to young people. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins have spoken of the importance of queer-positive YA lit, the “community on the page,” for young people exploring their sexual orientation (xvii). But fandom, especially Harry Potter fandom, offers young people the opportunity not simply to passively absorb queer-positive (and adult-approved) messages, but to actively engage with a supportive artistic community as readers, writers, and critics. Moreover, the identity-bending, pseudonymous nature of online fannish discourse affords fans a certain measure of concealment, which proves especially valuable for young fans who fear the consequences of expressing non-heteronormative desires. Julad, a fan, proposes a theory of slash as a space:

[S]lash is not so much queer in the act as it is queer in the space Slash is a sandbox where women come to be strange and unusual, or to do strange and unusual things, or to play with strange and unusual sand. The women may be queer or not, strange or not, unusual or not. The many different acts and behaviors of slash may be queer or not, strange or not, unusual or not. The queerness may be sexualized or it may not, and what is sexual for one woman may not be for another. The space is simply that: a space, where women can be strange and unusual and/or do strange and unusual things.⁸

This conception of slash as a space is, I believe, the most useful way of understanding it; what slash writers have done is to carve out a space for themselves where they are free to tell the narratives they wish, linked only by the common thread of queerness. Julad speaks of a space where “women come to be strange and unusual.” In the Potter fandom, it is not just adult women, but young people as well who have a safe space in which to be “strange and unusual.”

Harry Potter Slash: The Beast in the Plumbing

Potter fandom particularly resists “univocal” (Green, et al. 11) theories of slash. Since the Potter fandom was born and bred on the Internet, its members never experienced the top-down editorial control of zine-based fandoms. Fan communities develop their own cultural norms for what is or is not acceptable in fanfiction; in small fandoms where everyone knows one another, those rules can extend over the entire

group. But the sheer size of the Potter fandom makes this impossible. The result is very much a fandom of subgroups, and each subgroup can churn out its own stories for its own audience with impunity.⁹ The enormous number of people participating in the online fandom almost guarantees that however outré your fanfictional desires, someone will share them—and will have written a story, or be willing to read yours. Moreover, while slash has always been far less isolated from the general fannish landscape than many academic accounts would have readers believe (Green, et al. 11)—just as fanfiction in general has been treated as if isolated from literary discourse as a whole (see Derecho, Stasi, and Woledge)—fans sometimes perceive it as a dominant mode within the Potter fandom. A panel at a recent Potter conference was entitled “Heterosexuality and Feminism in a Male/Male Slashcentric Fandom” (Holmes, et al.). The size of the fandom, and the variety of material on offer, means that Potter fans are spoiled for choice when it comes to fanfiction; with so many subgroups, they can without too much effort find themselves a comfortable niche where they can explore their interests in a more-or-less nonjudgmental environment. This is especially important for young fans, whose desires, and the expressions of those desires, are policed more heavily than are those of adults.

The fragmentation of the fannish landscape means that in Potter fandom, there is no dominant “One True Pairing” (abbreviated “OTP”), like *Star Trek*’s Kirk/Spock. Unlike classic slash fandoms (*Star Trek*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *The Professionals*), which were built around television series with, in Bacon-Smith’s term, a “hero dyad” (145), the Potter books contain an enormous cast of intriguing characters, in a wide variety of emotional relationships to one another, all of whom have been slashed at some point. But in a landscape where most available slash stories explored romance between men who were best friends and/or professional partners (Kirk/Spock, Starsky/Hutch, Bodie/Doyle), the equality theory, based on what fan Dira Sudis calls the “buddyslash” model, made a great deal of sense. Market forces and the limitations of technology meant that those fans who preferred narratives other than “friends become lovers” had fewer opportunities to publish their stories, at least in spaces where academics would see them. However, the Internet changed all that. Among those other narratives made more visible by the Internet are what Dira Sudis identifies as “enemyslash” (slash between characters who are foes or foils) and “powerslash” (slash between characters who have differing levels of personal, social, or cultural agency), neither of which have tended to receive quite as much attention in scholarship (Sudis).

Buddyslash, enemyslash, and powerslash are all highly visible in Potter fandom. The most popular Potter slash pairing—indeed, one of the most popular pairings in general—is Harry/Draco, followed by Sirius/Remus and Snape/Harry. A number of the early stories in the Potter fandom were Harry/Draco; after the release of *Goblet of Fire*, Potter fandom grew to gargantuan proportions, and Harry/Draco grew accordingly, helped along by the “Big Name Fan” (abbreviated “BNF”) status of many of the early writers—Aja’s *Love Under Will* and Rhysenn’s *Irresistible Poison* were among the most influential early stories. Eventually, such a glut of Harry/Draco stories appeared that older fans who felt the possibilities of the pairing had been exhausted, and fans who had no interest in it at all, produced reams of stories about other characters. The nature of Internet technology meant that the popularity of Harry/Draco did not limit the existence of other pairings, but rather enabled them to flourish—market forces were not pressuring writers to keep churning out Harry/Draco, and fans who didn’t like the pairing had equal access to the means of publication. Perhaps most importantly, the sheer number of Harry/Draco stories meant that fan readers—including teenagers—who had never heard the term “slash” were likely to encounter it, and thus more likely to become slash writers themselves.

Slash about Harry and Draco, who are enemies in canon, complicates academic theories of slash that are predicated upon the Kirk/Spock buddieslash model. Jenkins, referencing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s articulation of homosocial desire, argues that

[s]lash throws conventional notions of masculinity into crisis by removing the barriers blocking the realization of homosocial desire. Slash unmask[s] the erotics of male friendship, confronting the fears keeping men from achieving intimacy. (*Poachers* 205)

While this is an excellent model for talking about Kirk/Spock, Starsky/Hutch, or in the Potter fandom, Harry/Ron (among many others), it clearly cannot currently function as a global assessment of slash, if indeed it ever could. Jenkins, always nuanced, discusses other, non-buddy forms of slash (such as the classic *Blake’s 7* enemyslash pairing Blake/Avon), but other writers have often tended to treat “slash” as if it were synonymous with “buddyslash.” Happily, this is changing, though there is still overall a somewhat disproportionate emphasis on the buddieslash model, which is most amenable to the equality theory. But Harry/Draco, as an enemyslash pairing, must negotiate a rather different “semiotics of masculinity” than theories predicated upon a

buddyslash model will allow.¹⁰ And powerslash, such as Harry/Snape, contradicts outright the premises of the equality theory.¹¹

The joy of an enemyslash pairing is in watching antagonists overcome their differences, at least long enough to have sex. Dislike is recast as sexual tension, and when the characters are both men, part of the pleasure is in seeing their negotiation of expectations of male aggression (rather than friendship) in terms of desire. A scene in Aja's "Pop Quiz" captures this tension nicely:

Whenever they pass in the hallways, Malfoy does his best to jostle Harry. He is scrawny and bony, so if Harry doesn't feel like moving that day, their sides scrape together, and Harry's hip might bruise a little. If that happens, he has the satisfaction of knowing that Malfoy's is bruised a little, too. When he reaches his palm up, his hand connects briefly with the flat plane of Malfoy's hip. He can only do this once, on the excuse of shoving Malfoy away—but it's not bad, really. Just stupid, like the whole thing is to begin with.

Harry is careful to articulate his consideration of Malfoy as a combination of violence and disinterest ("if Harry doesn't feel like moving that day, their sides scrape together"), which underlines both the depth of his attraction and his denial of same. He then denigrates their enmity, and expressions of that enmity, as "stupid"—a disavowal that foreshadows their later romantic connection.

Fear of a homophobic response, or a struggle with internalized homophobia is, as Jenkins notes (*Poachers* 205), an effective way of creating tension in a buddieslash story, and there are a number of Potter stories that treat homophobia, internal or external, as an obstacle to the lovers' happiness. In Mireille's "Falling," Oliver Wood finally musters his courage to tell Percy Weasley how much he loves him, and how happy he is in their secret relationship, but his heart is broken when he discovers that Percy is dating Penelope Clearwater in order to keep suspicions at bay:

I could have seen this coming if I'd been willing to look. Too many secrets, too many nights when Percy went off by himself, too many times when he couldn't look me in the eye. But all I had to do was hear "I need you, Oliver," and I was willing to forget them. To close my eyes and wait to hit the ground.

Enemyslash pairings such as Harry/Draco, however, generate an enormous amount of tension on their own; while a number of Harry/Draco stories deal with homophobia, lingering upon the issue may come

across as overkill. Indeed, many Potter slash stories completely ignore the issue of homophobia, or articulate it in different ways. One factor is the more widespread (Muggle-world) societal acceptance of gays and lesbians, so both authors and characters may feel less of a need to have characters confront homophobia in themselves and others than in earlier fanfiction. The “we’re not gay, we just love each other” trope that featured in so much pre-Internet slash is fairly rare in Potter slash. Again, the more widespread acceptance of gays and lesbians has had an effect, as neither authors nor characters feel the need to distance themselves from the term. The sometime corollary, “I’ve never been with another man before,” tends not to be loaded with the homophobic overtones sometimes present in earlier slash, where the implication was often that macho Kirk is assuredly not the sort of man attracted to other men, but his connection with Spock is simply too transcendent to ignore. In Potter slash, given the ages of many of the characters, it’s quite likely that a character’s first sexual encounter with the same gender is also his/her first sexual encounter with anyone. That so many of the characters are teenagers—in a British boarding school, no less—carries its own powerful discourse as well. This will be discussed in more detail later, but for now, that the characters are “horny teenagers” is often treated as good enough justification for any variety of sexual activity: hetero, homo, or interspecies.

Another key feature of the Kirk/Spock model is that the characters will embark upon a committed, monogamous relationship—buddyslash as a genre tends to argue that the characters are soulmates, and understand one another better than anyone else ever could. While a number of Potter slash stories do, in fact, move toward this end, “romance ending in committed relationship” is far from the only story told by slash writers. PWPs (“Plot? What Plot?” or “Porn Without Plot”) stories abound, as they always have, but Potter fans are by no means limited to these models.

The buddyslash, enemyslash, and powerslash models will be familiar to readers of heterosexual genre romance novels; indeed, Catherine Driscoll argues that “the most consistent conventions of [fanfiction] remain that of formulaic romance” (84). Likewise, Sarah Gwenllian Jones and Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons argue that romance novels are the primary influence upon slash narratives. This is not necessarily incorrect—slash is concerned with love and desire, and it makes sense that the literary genre most visibly dedicated to those themes should bear a strong relationship to slash fanfiction. However, what scholar and

romance novelist Jennifer Crusie Smith names the overriding theme of genre romance—belief in “an emotionally just universe” (56), where good people are rewarded with love—is common, but not universal, in romantic fanfic, both het and slash.¹² The presence or absence of this theme as an organizing principle depends on the fandom, the characters, the pairing, the author, and the story. Insisting too strongly that genre romance is the primary influence upon slash is just as troublesome as a sole focus on buddyslash narratives, in that it ignores the intense specificity of slash fiction. There really is no such thing as a typical Potter slash story: with such a variety of characters available, the tropes in Potter slash are highly dependent upon the pairing.

For example, the buddyslash pairing Remus/Sirius can never, post-*Order of the Phoenix*, fit unproblematically within the discourse of the genre romance, as their relationship trajectory in the books is one of mistrust, betrayal, despair, and Sirius’s senseless and preventable death. In the face of that, it is difficult to construct a believable narrative of an “emotionally just universe.” And yet, Remus/Sirius is one of the most popular pairings; fan writers relish both the opportunity to explore the dark, painful aspects of love and loss, and the challenge of creating a hopeful narrative under such sad conditions.

One of the most haunting Remus/Sirius stories is “That the Science of Cartography is Limited,” by Rave. Remus, living alone in Grimmauld Place after Sirius’s death, drifts between the present and the past, preferring to dwell on happier moments at Hogwarts when he and Sirius first fell in love. As they work on the Marauders’ Map, Remus solves the puzzle of how to account for the fact that Hogwarts is essentially a sentient organism whose walls move about at will. However, in the empty, silent Black house, Remus’s discovery of a way to track the lives of that which is not living takes on a bitterly ironic cast in the face of Sirius’s death, and his own inability to keep track of the traces of Sirius that are left: “Remus has heard of haunted houses being full of the dead; he thinks it is strange that anyone could find this terrible.” Remus’s attempts at precision—all of his skill with words, with understanding—break down in the face of crushing loss:

But none of them, he realizes now, ever really got round to explaining the everyday weirdness of loss: the way things get quiet, and bright, and far away, and how everything is slightly out of focus, mis-timed—except when they aren’t, sometimes, some things that make no sense.

The story is intensely romantic, but bears little resemblance to what is commonly understood as genre romance. Even happy Remus/Sirius, such as Victoria P.'s "The Love There That's Sleeping"—a sweet school-boy love story, set to the soundtrack of the Beatles albums Remus smuggles into Hogwarts—can never fully escape the shadow of the coming tragedy.

Prior to Rowling's announcement of Dumbledore's homosexuality, fans most often articulated the pairing of Sirius/Remus as (possibly) canon, and it is therefore a good segue into a more detailed discussion of how Potter slash comments upon the books themselves.

Queering the Canon

Whether slash fans view their pairings as supported or unsupported by canon, and how important that is, varies from pairing to pairing, and from fan to fan. The Potter books invoke a number of cultural and literary narratives, gleefully seized upon by fans, which leave the text open to a slash reading. Some fans argue vehemently that their favored pairing is canon; as mentioned earlier, Rowling announced that in her view Dumbledore was in love with Grindelwald, which pleased fans of that pairing and many slash fans in general. However, Internet debates sprang up immediately over the canonicity of Rowling's outing of Dumbledore, coming as it did after the publication of the books. Jeffrey Weiss expressed the views of some fans when he said, "If you didn't put it in the books, please don't tell us now." Rebecca Traister elaborated further when she argued, "[Rowling's] pronouncements are robbing us of the chance to let our imagination take over where she left off, one of the great treats of engaging with fictional narrative." (Neither Weiss nor Traister seems willing to read Dumbledore's love for Grindelwald as actually present in the books, which some fans have claimed, and which Rowling appears to believe.) However, fans have always been perfectly content to "let [their] imagination take over where she left off," and ignore Rowling's commentary on the books, or even elements that are indisputably canon, if it conflicts with the stories they want to tell. Rowling has insisted for years that Draco and Snape are unattractive, unappealing characters, but the effect her views have had on the Draco and Snape segments of the fandom is negligible. Likewise, Rowling's lack of explicit commentary upon Remus/Sirius has certainly not altered some fans' willingness to read the pairing as canonical.

Even Lupin's marriage to Tonks hasn't stopped the widespread fandom perception that Sirius was his one true love.¹³ At Nimbus 2003, a Potter conference that took place shortly after the release of *Phoenix*, a speaker shouted, "Joint Christmas presents!"—a reference to Sirius and Remus giving a present to Harry from both of them (*Phoenix* 501), as couples often will—which earned a resounding cheer from the audience. Fans also cite the coding of Remus's werewolfism as a terminal illness analogous to AIDS: victims, while posing a genuine danger to others, are subject to fear and discrimination far out of proportion to their likelihood of infecting anyone.¹⁴ One of the most interesting Remus/Sirius stories, "The Most Ridiculous First Name I've Ever Heard," by Mousapelli, takes this argument to a terrifying conclusion, and argues that the lycanthropy "virus" becomes, when transmitted to Muggles, HIV—and Gaetan Dugas, HIV's "Patient Zero," was the name Remus had chosen for himself on his travels. Lending further credence to the Remus/Sirius reading of the text, fans point out that of all the Animagi (wizards who can change into animals) depicted in the series, Remus and Sirius are the only two characters who are physically compatible in both human and animal forms. And last but not least, Sirius's character trajectory in *Phoenix* follows the trope in early gay-themed YA literature that homosexual characters must be lonely, tormented, and then die—though he is dispatched by a fall through a veil rather than a car crash.¹⁵

Remus/Sirius slash stories explore all these themes and more, especially concentrating upon the characters' school days in the 1970s—for fans who want a happy ending, Hogwarts is the last chance for Remus and Sirius. (Compare Victoria P.'s previously-mentioned "The Love There That's Sleeping" to her post-Hogwarts "All the Sinners, Saints," or the flashbacks in Rave's "That the Science of Cartography is Limited.") Alfonso Cuarón's film of *Prisoner of Azkaban* strengthened the Remus/Sirius reading even further. Actor David Thewlis, who plays Lupin, confirmed that both he and Cuarón read Lupin as gay (*CityNews.ca*). The film contains a number of lines—not found in the book—which support this: Snape accuses Sirius and Remus of arguing like an "old married couple"; when Remus begins his (in the book, involuntary) change to wolf form, Sirius makes a non-book-supported appeal to Remus's humanity, embracing him and shouting, "this is not the man you are inside!"; and finally, Remus explains his resignation by saying that "parents will not want a, um, . . . *someone like me* teaching their children." In the book, he simply says "werewolf" (*Azkaban* 423). All of these additions lend support to the Remus/Sirius reading of the text.

Other fans couldn't care less about the canonicity, or lack thereof, of their favorite pairing, but may still argue for subtext, and scour the text for details that can be spun into a story. And fans take the nature of such support with varying degrees of seriousness: when Ron declared that going out with Lavender Brown was "like going out with the giant squid" (*Prince* 450), some fans jokingly declared Ron/squid canon—how would he know what dating the giant squid was like unless. . . ? Also, the sexual attitudes of the Potterverse are, in Rowling's text, unclear. Fans have a great deal of freedom to imagine the discourse of homosexuality in the wizarding world, and may actively construct or passively assume a more tolerant culture than that of the Muggles. A current topic of debate within the fandom is whether Dumbledore was out or not, as the text and Rowling give few clues in either direction.

New canon invariably inspires a great deal of fanfiction, and not only about whatever new characters are introduced. Canon is able to dramatically invigorate little known or stagnating slash pairings. *Phoenix* featured Harry and Snape (a powerslash pairing par excellence) forced to become uncomfortably intimate with each other: Snape is teaching Harry how to prevent Voldemort from reading his thoughts by . . . reading Harry's thoughts; Harry, angry and frustrated, does the wizarding equivalent of reading Snape's diary, and peeks at his most secret, humiliating memory. Snape/Harry fans rejoiced, and many fans who had never been interested in the pairing before were inspired to write it. And *Half-Blood Prince* gave Harry/Draco fans their previously elusive holy grail: a Harry fixated upon Draco. Before this book, the chief narrative problem for Harry/Draco writers was that while Draco is canonically obsessed with Harry, Harry had never seen Draco as anything more than a passing nuisance. To overcome this, fans devised a number of ingenious schemes, often involving magical accidents, to force the two together: for example, Rhysenn's *Irresistible Poison* had Harry and Draco accidentally ingest a love potion. In *Phoenix*, Draco barely registered in the book at all, which effectively slowed down production in the already saturated Harry/Draco portion of the fandom. Snape/Draco writers, though fewer in number and a bit drowned out by the cheers of the Harry/Draco crowd, were also immensely pleased with *Prince*, and immediately started work on stories about Snape and Draco, on the run from Death Eaters and the Ministry alike, comforting each other sexually (or having angry resentful sex). Harry slashers cheered the number of times Harry described a male

character (usually Tom Riddle) as “handsome.” Little things, perhaps, especially when compared with the overt Harry/Ginny romance plot, but more than enough to construct a story around—and in fandom, that’s all one needs.

And of course, *Deathly Hallows* introduced the pairing of Dumbledore/Grindelwald; while fans began writing this pairing the day after *Hallows* was released, Rowling’s announcement has kindled even more interest, and new stories are appearing daily. Like Remus/Sirius, Dumbledore/Grindelwald ends in tragedy: there is an even darker cast to their narrative trajectory, as Grindelwald actually turns out to be as evil as pre-*Azkaban* Remus believes Sirius to be.

The construction of the Potterverse itself, as well as its characters, is conducive to slash readings. Fans long anticipated the argument put forth by Tison Pugh and David A. Wallace (264–65) that Harry’s discovery of his wizard nature is akin to a coming-out narrative—he escapes from a literal closet, and his relatives’ horrified reactions bear a striking resemblance to the language of homophobia, especially in the way they hurl about words like “abnormality” (*Chamber 2*) as weapons. Thus, one can, from the perspective of the Muggle realm, read the entire wizarding world in terms of Julad’s “queer space.” Even more telling is Harry’s destination: Hogwarts is a British boarding school, an institution that is so consistently coded as queer space that it’s practically shorthand for homosexuality, British-style.¹⁶ The “school story” has a long pedigree in children’s literature, most famously in Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857). While Hughes’s novel was not the first school story, it was the most influential; although the bulk of the text exalts the boarding school as the ideal place to form manly Christian servants of the empire, a curious passage, emphasized by a footnote, troubles its complacent uprightness:

He was one of the miserable little pretty white-handed curly-headed boys, petted and pampered by some of the big fellows, who wrote their verses for them, taught them to drink and use bad language, and did all they could to spoil them for everything in this world and the next. (Hughes 233)

The footnote coyly claims, “there were many noble friendships between big and little boys, but I can’t strike out the passage; many boys will know why it was left in” (233). The adult version of the genre dispenses with the coyness; Stephen Fry’s *The Liar*, and pornographic novels like the works of Chris Kent—including, appropriately enough,

The Real Tom Brown's School Days—among many others, depict boarding school as a locus for homoerotic encounters.

Although Hogwarts is coeducational, which neutralizes some of the queer coding, students are still somewhat isolated from the other gender, and living with almost no privacy among students of the same gender, which affords ample temptation and opportunity. Stories in which the characters share a dormitory—Harry and Ron, Percy and Oliver, Crabbe and Goyle—frequently use this lack of privacy as the catalyst for slash; there are dozens of stories in which one character walks in on or overhears another character calling out in his sleep or masturbating. Oliver and Percy also have the advantage of being the only two named characters of their year in Gryffindor, which has led some fans to posit that they have the dormitory to themselves (Mireille's "Falling" makes use of this trope). Quidditch players have postgame showers, prefects have a special bathroom, and of course all students have access to the Astronomy Tower, sundry abandoned classrooms and broom closets, dark corners of the library, the Room of Requirement (which features in enough stories to qualify as a character in its own right), and Snape's desk.

While other highly structured sex-segregated communities, such as the military, are coded as homoerotic, the cocktail of teenage hormones lends boarding school narratives a special potency. Teenage characters' newfound overwhelming desires can, to a certain extent, function as a get-out-of-jail-free card for all manner of sexual behavior; our culture often winks at homosexual activity among teenagers, reading it as "experimentation." Not that most fan writers dismiss the plight of GLBTQ teenagers or construct homosexuality as something that characters will grow out of, but the narrative of "horny teenagers experimenting," in addition to the unspecified general sexual mores of the wizarding world, means that slashers do not have to depict characters going through a lot of soul searching about their attraction to the same gender, unless they want it to be a major issue. (Aja, in the author's note for her story "Monsoon Season," remarks, "The idea for the story arose out of a discussion . . . regarding under what circumstances touching would be appropriate for two teenage boys.")

Fanfiction writers are not bound to a pedagogical imperative, which means they are free to concentrate on eroticism rather than on social issues. Published YA novels, a category to which the later Potter books belong, do not have this luxury. Trites observes that the majority of YA novels about gay and lesbian teens "are very Foucaultian in their

tendency to privilege the discourse of homosexuality over the physical sexual acts of gay men, defining homosexuality more rhetorically than physically” (102–03). She later states, “[d]enying the corporeality of homosexuality too easily divorces it from pleasure, which potentially disempowers gay sexuality” (114). Published YA novels, hemmed in as they are by institutional discourses of teenage and queer sexuality—not to mention that of bibliotherapy—have until fairly recently shied away from graphic depictions of gay sex, and even nonexplicit gay and lesbian novels for teens suffer localized repression in the form of censorship and book burnings. But slash, like all fanfiction, is subject to no such constraints; while it is important to note that not all slash is overtly erotic, the point is that it can be. Slash fans can be as graphic or as circumspect as they wish, but on the whole, the balance tips toward the corporeal. Potter slash readers and writers have access to a space where queer sexuality, whether teen or adult, can be depicted in its full, messy, exuberant glory, and the emphasis is on *jouissance*.

As an exemplar of these issues, V’s “True But Not Nice” is one of the finest depictions of adolescent boarding school culture in Potter slash, and makes full use of the Potter fandom’s freedom to tell a charmingly foul-mouthed and unapologetically erotic story about an affair between two teenage boys. The pairing is Oliver Wood/Marcus Flint, the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch captains,¹⁷ and the story features a funny portrait of teenage whispering campaigns and the paranoia they can induce; the characters’ responses to gossip are both individual and believable. Marcus wants to make it very clear that, whatever gossip has been floating around, he certainly does not like Oliver. After threatening violence upon those responsible for the rumors, Marcus hunts Oliver down to tell him so. This, of course, ends in sex in an abandoned classroom. Oliver makes the first move, and pride compels him to follow through, even though Marcus insists, unconvincingly, that he does not have feelings for the other boy:

“I fucking *told* you,” [Marcus] started, but the words seemed to die on his tongue. “Just don’t,” he said, but Oliver couldn’t *not* do it, because there’d be talk, more talk about how he couldn’t even land the fucking worst catch in the whole school.

Oliver, tellingly, frames his actions not in terms of desire (which both he and Marcus are too embarrassed to admit to—out of fear of rejection, not homophobia), but in terms of what others will say. V has a terrific ear for hilariously profane teenage dialogue, especially when it comes to the

rumormongering that kicks off the story. While the boys are enemies, which provides the apparent obstacle to their relationship (Adrian Pucey assures Marcus, "It's fine, no one thinks you're a traitor"), the real obstacle is their inability to express themselves. Marcus and Oliver are both rather stupid adolescent boys, and while their incoherence provides much of the humor of the story, it also causes them genuine frustration and anxiety, and V never condescends to them. They are athletes, physical creatures, and V makes their experience of the sex act a way of delineating their less-than-articulate characters—Marcus and Oliver are completely lost when it comes to negotiating the skillful speech of those around them, but this they can do. The story is a romance, but a cockeyed, antiromantic one; funny as it is, there is far too much of an undercurrent of anxiety (on Oliver's part) and rage (on Marcus's) to make this an unequivocal romp, though it ends on a hopeful note. Their desire, and, at the end, their budding regard for one another, are, as the title says, "true but not nice."

Jenkins argues that the Potter books, because of their championing of "children's rights over institutional constraints" and their enormous success among reluctant readers, are an ideal road into considerations of the ways in which literacy—especially young people's freedoms to read and write—is policed and curtailed (*Convergence* 171). Potter fiction—a form of literacy that is not subject to the usual constraints on young people's reading and writing—offers a safe space for them not only to improve their writing skills, but also to explore discourses of sexuality, especially queerness, outside of the various culturally official stances marketed to them, and with the support of a community of like-minded readers and writers. In an era when representations of adolescent sexuality are both exploited and policed, Potter fandom is an arena in which fans of all ages, genders, and sexual orientations can tell stories to satisfy their own desires; this freedom is especially valuable for younger fans, whose self-expressions are heavily monitored in institutional settings. Fans are able to tell narratives of sexuality in a space not directly controlled by adults, and do not have to shape their stories to adult sensibilities and comfort levels. Potter fandom is a lively, intellectually stimulating, and tolerant interpretive community, and fans reap great rewards not only in the form of increased literacy, but also by exposure to discourses outside of culturally mandated heteronormativity.

Though the series is now complete, it is highly unlikely that Potter fans will stop producing new fanfiction, if not necessarily in the same

volume as before; completion of the canon has certainly not stopped fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or even Jane Austen's novels from churning out new stories. Rowling has left an enormous amount of room for speculation; the famous epilogue of *Hallows* only discusses certain aspects of the fates of a few major characters, nineteen years after the events of the main narrative—and for those readers dissatisfied with the epilogue, “correcting” the text has long been a motivating factor for many fan writers. While I do not wish to speculate too fervently about directions Potter slash will take at this early stage, I predict that Harry/Draco will continue to thrive, Remus/Sirius will acquire even more emotional urgency, and, of course, there will be an explosion of Dumbledore/Grindelwald. For those who wish to assess the overall impact of the Potter books, especially regarding issues of sexuality and same-sex relationships, Potter slash will provide an invaluable record of the creative responses of some of the series' most dedicated and engaged readers.

Notes

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¹Abigail Derecho argues the need for a replacement for the more usual terms “derivative” or “appropriative” fiction, which, as she rightly points out, contain an implied value judgment on the quality of the work. She proposes the term “archontic” (63–64), but I prefer the breakdowns put forth by Langford and Clute in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, in part because their terms allow for a more nuanced distinction between folk and literary sources.

²See Jenkins, *Convergence* 185–91 for a discussion of legal issues and Potter fanfiction. There has never been a case of amateur, not-for-profit fiction making it to court for copyright infringement. The current legal dispute over the print publication of Steve Vander Ark's *Harry Potter Lexicon* is due to the fact that it will be published for profit—Rowling has repeatedly stated that she has no problems with fan material available on the Web for free. See “Warner Brothers, J. K. Rowling Sue,” for more information.

³There are some who attempt to define “slash” as “any romantic/erotic pairing” (see Brooker), but this is incorrect; fans, and the vast majority of scholars, reserve “slash” for same-sex pairings only—see Jenkins, Lamb and Veith, Russ, Bacon-Smith, Green, et al., Salmon and Symons, Kustritz, Stasi, Jones, and so forth. Brooker admitted that fans resisted his attempt to push the definition of “slash” beyond same-sex pairings (144).

⁴*Star Trek* is widely considered to be the first “modern” fandom, and the majority of studies of participatory media fandom begin their history with Trek fans. However, activities that could be called “fannish” go back much further, and include eighteenth-century unauthorized sequels of works such as *Gulliver's Travels*, the aforementioned Sherlock Holmes pastiches, and the entire body of literary and folk “retellings.” See Brewer, Pflieger, Derecho, and Stasi.

⁵See Jones and Willis for detailed critiques of the “incorporation/resistance” paradigm.

⁶Of course, the Internet was not entirely a free-for-all: access to the technology was, and is, still a privilege of those in the middle and upper socioeconomic tiers. However, investing in a computer and Internet access is not the same thing as laying aside comparable amounts of money for strictly fannish activities, such as attendance at fan conventions; Internet users who bought (or received from their parents) their computers for school and work usage were able to find and participate in fandom. See Coppa for an overview of the history of modern fandom.

⁷It comes as no surprise that the titular *40-Year-Old Virgin* of the 2005 film engaged in stereotypical fannish activities like toy collecting.

⁸All quotation of and reference to specific online fan materials is with the permission of the authors.

⁹According to Francesca Coppa, the Internet enabled “an increasingly customizable fannish experience” (54). As a result, “[a]rguably, this may be fandom’s postmodern moment, where the rules are ‘there ain’t no rules’ and traditions are made to be broken” (57). This is especially observable in a fandom the size of Potter.

¹⁰Tania Modleski, qtd. in Jenkins, *Poachers* 207.

¹¹See Willis for a discussion of Harry/Snape fic, an excellent example of slash scholarship moving beyond the buddyslash model.

¹²Wolledge rightly questions the privileging of genre romance in considerations of slash, arguing that it is unnecessary to “recast homoeroticism into heterosexuality” (98). Wolledge’s reading of the fantasy world of what is here called “buddyslash” as an “intimastopia” (in contrast to Salmon and Symons’s “romantopia”), where the “central defining feature is exploration of intimacy” (99), is an interesting take upon the model.

¹³Tonks, a Metamorphagus (a wizard who can change her appearance at will), is often read as queer herself. The Remus/Tonks marriage, which takes place more than a year after Sirius’s death, does not necessarily negate Remus’s love for Sirius; he could very well be bisexual. Moreover, Remus seems rather ambivalent about the entire process—he resists Tonks’s advances throughout *Prince*, and has to be practically ordered by Harry to go back to his wife and child in *Hallows*. (Harry also links Tonks with Sirius in *Prince* when he assumes that her grief is over his death.) And finally, when Harry goes to what he believes is his death in *Hallows*, he is accompanied not only by his parents, but by Sirius and Remus together.

¹⁴Philip Nel reports that Rowling specifically designed the response to Lupin’s werewolfism to be “a metaphor for people’s reactions to illness and disability” (15–16); as fans realized, the discourse of AIDS seems to be a primary influence. Pugh and Wallace also note the correspondences, but, I feel, stretch the metaphor beyond its breaking point when they argue that werewolfism equals queerness in general. Fan readings do not bear this out, especially given that Sirius, Remus’s usual partner in slash, is not similarly “diseased.”

¹⁵See Cart, *Romance* 225–26, and Cart and Jenkins. Dumbledore also arguably fits into the category of the “safely contained” homosexual, as he is both elderly (and therefore presumably celibate) and dead. However, fans have seized upon the textual glimpses of a young, handsome Dumbledore, and have found them adequate for their purposes.

¹⁶For a thorough discussion of the history of homosexuality in the British boarding school, see Hickson.

¹⁷Marcus/Oliver became popular after the release of the film version of *Sorcerer’s Stone*. The pairing has been characterized as “Harry/Draco light”: it contains some of the same tensions as Harry/Draco, but without all the canon and fandom baggage. Another appealing element of the pairing is its potential for goofiness, as neither Oliver nor Marcus is, in fannish readings, over-blessed with intelligence. Also, while movie-Oliver (Sean Biggerstaff) is exceptionally handsome, Marcus is described as “trollish” (*Stone* 185), and movie-Marcus (Jamie Yeates) was fitted with hideous teeth for the role. Many stories treat the pairing as a skewed Beauty and the Beast.

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