

# Transgression and Taboo

## The Field of Fan Fiction

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### Introduction

Fan fiction has been defined by Sheenagh Pugh as "[...] fiction based on a situation and characters originally created by someone else." (2005: 9) According to this definition, fan fiction is predicated upon the crossing of clearly defined textual borders whereby the confines of a given fictional world are breached and settings, events, and characters specific to that particular universe are removed to another. To cite a couple of particularly obvious examples from the literary culture of today, Hogwarts, Harry Potter, and the struggle against Voldemort appear not only in the series of seven novels originally created by J. K. Rowling, or in the many adaptations (films, computer games, etc) that Rowling has authorised, but also in a huge number of texts written by fans and made available on, for instance, the Internet and the World Wide Web. Similarly, Gimli, Legolas, and Frodo and Bella and Edward have been removed by fans from the confines of their source texts and inserted into new ones.<sup>1</sup>

Pugh's definition spells out that fan fiction is "based on" an already existing fictional world. Fan fiction, then, appears to be purely derivative. However, Pugh's definition also shows or dramatises how fan fiction, in being fundamentally dependent on the boundaries it traverses, conjures up those very boundaries. That fan fiction

in this manner is responsible for and the reason why those borders are evoked in her definition has to do with the linearity of the signifier of course. In language one thing necessarily comes after another. But we are left with a sense of an inversion of the supposedly derivative relationship, nevertheless. Similarly, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's outline of the concepts of *canon* – "the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters" (2006: 9) – and *fanon* – "the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext" – first identifies fan fiction as derivative before it hints that fan fiction produces that which it is supposed to originate from: "Fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it – or, at times, outright contradicts it. [...] An understanding of canon is particularly important for the creators of fan texts because they are judged on how well they stick to or depart from canon" (9-10). Fanon only makes sense in relation to canon. The writing and reading of fan fiction cannot but produce the very texts they supposedly originate from. Rather than a straightforward relationship of derivation consisting of a source and its copy, we have a kind of loop comprised of a canonical source, which is productive of fanon, which brings about the original text and so on.

The manner in which fan fiction is both the product and producer of canon and canon is both the source and effect of fan fiction recalls the logic of transgression and taboo as outlined by Georges Bataille. Benjamin Noys explains:

These forces [transgression and taboo] are never balanced because transgression has a certain dominance over taboo as the force that makes taboo possible. In the very movement of transgression towards 'infinite excess' [Bataille's term] it solidifies the taboo as it reveals the fragility of the taboo. As Bataille puts it, the taboo can only 'curse gloriously whatever it forbids'. What is forbidden must be possible, for example incest or murder, or there would be no need of the taboo. If it were naturally impossible for us to murder or commit incest then neither possibility would arise. That we do have taboos on these acts makes those taboos secondary to the transgression they rule out. Of

course, at the same time, transgression can only operate as a movement across the boundary of the taboo so, although it may be a 'primary impulse' [Bataille's term], it too is secondary to the limit it crosses. In the complex difference between transgression and taboo which is primary and which is secondary is undecidable and they swirl around each other in the turbulence that Bataille always regards as a play of differences. (2000: 85)

Transgression and taboo, then, are interdependent forces existing in a state of permanent and undecidable imbalance. The governing image is not of a hierarchy of neatly separated opposites, but of two entities spinning around each other in mutually defining ways. Transgression is both a primary impulse and secondary to the barriers it crosses. Conversely, taboos are secondary to the transgressions they rule out, but must already be in place before they can be violated. Whether as primary or secondary, each is in need of the other in order to define itself as different.

### **Fans: Loyal Subjects of Transgression**

Fan fiction is fiction written by fans and fans as producers of fan fiction are the incarnations of transgression as well as taboo. Etymologically, *fan* connotes transgression. According to the *OED*, a fan is an abbreviation of fanatic; and a fanatic is "characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm, esp. in religious matters." As a fanatic, a fan is out of control, or driven by a passion that is somehow in violation of that which is right. Even though the *OED* reminds us that, in its modern uses, the word has lost its connotation of madness, the category of fan remains linked to the idea of a violation of particular limits and is figured as a transgressor of key taboos by representative examples of recent main stream culture. Thus, Tony Scott's adaptation of Peter Abrahams' novel *The Fan* (1996) starring Robert De Niro gives us the fan as someone who sacrifices everything including his family and his job for the sake of his favourite baseball team and who stops at nothing, including murder and kidnapping, to accomplish his goals. Similarly, Annie Wilkes – the "number-one fan" (6), who both resuscitates and abuses her favourite author, in Steven King's award winning 1987 novel *Misery* – turns out to be a homicidal

maniac on top of everything else. But the mad and bad female fan for whom no taboo appears to be sacred is also an extremely faithful and loyal fan, who constitutes the taboo. Annie Wilkes disciplines and punishes her favourite writer out of her respect for his original creation – the Misery books and their eponymous heroine. Her transgressions of the fundamental laws that govern human interaction are grounded in her reverence of a higher law, i.e. the series of Misery books, a higher law which their author has sinned against by discontinuing the book series.

Few fans, if any, are like their Hollywood representations, of course. Fans form a highly inhomogeneous category, in fact, spanning the casual admirer and the devoted disciple. Matt Hills, for instance, attempts a distinction between fan and cult fan – between followers and “a particular (enduring) form of affective fan relationship” (Hills 2002: xi). But, academic discussions of fans tend to favour the latter and more devoted fans who are – like Annie Wilkes – simultaneously in violation and respect of a set of basic laws. For instance, in Henry Jenkins’s early and very influential conceptualization of fans, he appeals to the aspects of transgression and taboo, too. Relying upon Michel de Certeau’s idea of poaching as a particular way of reading against the grain, Jenkins identifies fan writers as “poachers’ of textual meanings” (2006:40). According to Jenkins, poaching connotes more than just the infringement and violation of the law, however. In a manner that recalls Annie Wilkes, he claims that poaching is, in fact, also a form of loyalty. Jenkins relates the concept of poaching to E. P. Thompson’s notion of moral economy which denotes “[...] an informal set of consensual norms [...]” (41) subscribed to by people who were rising up against the authorities in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century. More particularly, peasants justified their revolt against powers that be by appealing to the existence of an original order that the present system allegedly had corrupted. Similarly, according to Jenkins

[...] the fans often cast themselves not as poachers but as loyalists, rescuing essential elements of the primary text “misused” by those who maintain copyright control over the program materials. Respecting literary property even as they seek to appropriate it for their own uses, these fans become reluctant poachers, hesitant about their rela-

tionship to the program text, uneasy about the degree of manipulation they can “legitimately” perform on its materials, policing each other for “abuses” of their interpretive license, as they wander across a terrain pockmarked with confusions and contradictions. (41)

Like watered down versions of the transgressively loyal Annie Wilkes, fans, according to Jenkins, are characterised by a kind of ambiguous or double motivation. As loyalists they save their favourite source text from what they regard as misappropriations by fitting it to their own ends. The notions of appropriating a text respectfully, of reluctant poaching, of legitimate manipulation that Jenkins is developing in the quotation involve the notions of transgression and taboo. The reluctance and hesitance of fans arises out of an idea of the taboo. Similarly, the policing of fans by fans speaks of a strong awareness of the taboo and the extent to which the fans themselves constitute the taboo.<sup>2</sup> To subscribe to the moral economy of a particular fandom, then, involves both the transgression of the original text and the recognition of its authority.

### **Producers: Incorporating Transgression**

Jenkins’ study of fans as poachers was first published in 1988 and focussed exclusively on the Star Trek fandom and the fan fiction circulated in fanzines and other printed material at the margins of mainstream culture. Since then he has come to prefer the conceptualization of fandom as *convergence culture*. He prefers the notion of convergence rather than poaching since it defines “[...] a moment when fans are central to how culture operates. The concept of the active audience [...] is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry. New technologies are enabling average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content” (1). While the notion of poaching is perhaps no longer adequate to capture the ways in which fans participate in contemporary culture, the general notions of transgression and taboo are still relevant all the same. Perhaps they are even more relevant than ever. If we look at the authors and media producers that furnish the source texts in the field of fan fiction, their behaviour has become an inversion of that of their fans. As inventors and originators of specific fictional universes, authors and media producers

constitute the taboo. They legislate what belongs to a fictional world and what doesn't. However, the notion of the active audience means that authors and producers have begun to make room for and incorporate transgression. In fact, taboo courts transgression. According to Jenkins:

Media producers monitor Web forums such as "Television without Pity," planting trial balloons to test viewer response, measuring reactions to controversial plot twists. Game companies give the public access to their design tools, publicize the best results, and hire top amateur programmers. [...] News stories appear regularly about media companies suing their consumers, trying to beat them back into submission. (2)

However, while taboo admits transgression into its very constitution in this manner, a basic sense of difference is maintained between the two. Those in control of the limits of specific fictional universes *monitor, test, measure, and give access* to the audience. They invite their *response, reactions, and make public the results* of their participation. The difference between media producers and companies, on the one hand, and, on the other, media consumers and fans is maintained in this way. Each defines the other. While some form of collaboration may be taking place between the two, the former, the taboo, provokes the latter, the transgression exactly because it is different. Convergence culture rests on and maintains the fundamental difference between fans and media producers.

Rowling's relationship with her fans furnishes an excellent example of literary convergence culture where fans and author are brought together yet kept distinct. In contrast to other writers, e.g. Anne Rice's ban on fan fiction (Pugh 2006: 13), Rowling is famous for acknowledging and welcoming fan fiction. For instance, when, to the complete surprise of most readers of Potter fiction, she declared that one of the key characters in her books, Dumbledore, is actually gay, she immediately added, "'Oh my God, the fan fiction now, eh?'" (Westcott 2008: np). Her remark betrays a keen awareness of the Harry Potter fan fiction and suggests that fans and writers are converging. However, while the two are in a process of moving closer together, they are still separate and mutually defining

entities. Her comment implies that she influences her fans and their fan fiction as the author and originator of the Harry Potter universe. She is the taboo in the form of the author who exercises complete control over her fictional universe, including the sexualities of her characters. Moreover, her statement relies upon the notion of the fan as someone who transgresses creatively the borders of that universe in loyal subjection. This process of the convergence of divergent and separate identities is also apparent in a recent video featuring Rowling. In the video, she addresses her fans in a manner that both recalls Jenkins' terms of convergence and acknowledges the fundamental difference between her fans, the transgressors, and herself, the taboo. In the video, Rowling announces<sup>3</sup> the launching of her web site for Harry Potter fan fiction called Pottermore.<sup>4</sup> Rowling says:

13 years after the first Harry Potter book was published I'm still astonished and delighted by the response the stories met. [...] I'm still receiving hundreds of letters every week and Harry's fans remain as enthusiastic and inventive as ever. So I'd like to take this opportunity to say thank you because no author could have asked for a more wonderful, diverse and loyal readership.

I'm thrilled to say that I'm now in a position to give you something unique. An online reading experience unlike any other: It's called Pottermore. It's the same story with a few crucial additions. The most important one is you. Just as the experience of reading requires that the imagination of the author and reader work together to create the story so Pottermore will be built – in part – by you, the reader. The digital generation will be able to enjoy a safe, unique, online reading experience built around the Harry Potter books. Pottermore will be the place where fans of any age can share, participate in, and rediscover stories. It will also be the exclusive place to purchase digital audio books and, for the first time, e-books of the Harry Potter series. I'll be joining in, too. Because I'll be sharing additional information I've been hoarding for years about the world of Harry Potter. Pottermore is open to everyone from October. But a lucky few can enter early and help

shape the experience. Simply follow the owl. Good luck.  
(Rowling 2011)

The verbal part of Rowling's video announcement exemplifies her high degree of awareness of her fans. Her video is very much a recognition and a celebration of "Harry's fans". She begins by confessing her wonder, pleasure, and gratitude in the face of the passion, creativity, diversity, and loyalty she has witnessed. After casting herself in this manner as the grateful recipient of fan response, she reverses the roles and fashions herself as the exited donor of an exceptional gift to her fans, i.e. Pottermore. Pottermore is an opportunity for fans to "share, participate in, and rediscover" her fictional universe with other fans and, last but not least, herself. So far, Rowling's invitation suggests that Jenkins's recent idea of convergence rather than poaching describes fans and the practice of fan fiction correctly. If fans are invited to produce fan fiction, it doesn't really make sense to conceptualise them as poachers anymore. While the aspects of poaching are side-stepped in this manner, and the emphasis of the spoken discourse is on the sharing, participation, working together and joining in of fans and author rather than transgression and taboo, the latter is particularly present and the former conspicuously absent from the visual aspects of the video.

In contrast to the omnipresence of the second person pronoun in Rowling's spoken address, the visual aspects of Rowling's video contain not a single reference to her fans. Instead, the video combines shots of Rowling, the author, alone in a room and, secondly, computer generated images of her work – i.e. a Harry Potter book. The Rowling shots alternate between medium-shots and close-ups. In the medium-shots she is sitting on a leather couch in the middle of a room. The room is relatively bare and without ornamentation. It forms a semi-industrial space with brick walls, large window frames, lighting equipment to the back and some sort of filing cabinet to the left. The mise-en-scène emphasises the traditional image of the author as someone who works on his or her own. She is, moreover, sitting, completely immobile, in the left hand corner of the couch. Her left leg remains crossed over her right throughout. For the duration of the video, her left arm is placed on the left armrest of the couch and her right hand is positioned on her left thigh. She stays completely stock-still with the exception of her face and head which



she uses to underline her speech. Rowling's face, or her talking head, is the focus of the close-ups where motion is used to mimic emotion. A slight shake of her head, for instance, emphasises her feeling of gratitude: "no author could have asked for" (0:20). Similarly, her concluding "good luck" is followed by a little smile to emphasise her feelings towards her fans (1:34). If her fans are represented at all visually, they are reduced to traces on Rowling's face that register her emotions. Not only are these traces reduced to a minimum, Rowling's immobility in the medium-shots tends to contradict her confession of astonishment, delight and thrill. In the very grip of strong emotions, Rowling is figured as unmoved.

The video also features computer generated images of her work, i.e. a Harry Potter book. The images are designed to specifically exclude the representations of fans. In the beginning of the video, individual pages from recognisable volumes of the Harry Potter books are turning as if by their own accord (00:00-00:30). Rowling's work, the source text, does not need a reader. It is – all by itself – literally a *page turner*. Subsequent CGI shots show the pages of the Harry Potter book *coming alive*. As if by magic, and certainly without the help of a reader, origami-like concrete objects emerge from its pages, for instance, a gate with the words "Pottermore" inscribed (00:33), three trees in the shapes of three recognisable letters spelling *you* (00:40), a forest with giant spiders (00:44), a pair of "Harry Potter" spectacles (00:49), the Sorting Hat (00:53), and an owl (01:26). The *you*, the reader, the fan, like all other objects, is produced by the source text rather than its producer.

It is safe to say, then, that there is a certain amount of tension between the visual and the verbal fashioning of the relationship between Rowling and her fans. The almost complete absence of motion in Rowling documented by the video contradicts her confessions of astonishment, delight, and thrill. Similarly, the addressees that are continuously evoked by her speech are glaringly absent from the *mise-en-scène*. Ultimately, the ideas of convergence and participation, sharing and joining in are contradicted in this manner. We are left instead with a sense of fundamental difference between the author, the taboo, and her fans, the transgressors. Rowling courts her fans, inviting them to join in, but makes sure that the fundamental difference between taboo and transgression is maintained.

The maintenance of that difference between taboo and transgression is a necessary condition for the success of the website. First of all, Rowling's promise to furnish a "safe"<sup>5</sup> experience for the reader of fan fiction presupposes a hierarchy of taboo and transgression, author and fan. Secondly, her separate identity as the author of her work is important for guaranteeing the site as the *exclusive* place where Potter audio and e-books are sold.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, maintaining the fundamental distinction between author and fan underwrites the value of the collaborative expansions of her fictional universe. In contrast to the participatory endeavours by her fans, the supplementary information emanating from Rowling is particularly important because it increases the parameters and borders of the known Potter universe authoritatively

### **Conclusion: The Fan Is in the Text**

The notions of transgression and taboo suggest that fans, on the one hand, and authors and media producers, on the other, cannot be conceptualised monolithically as transgression and taboo. Rather, both categories manifest an awareness of and a dependency on the other. Fans violate the boundaries of their favourite fictional worlds by creating fan fiction, for instance, but they do so out of a sense of loyalty to that universe. This loyalty to specific characters, events, and places gives them their identity of fans in the first place. Conversely, authors and media producers, who lay down the law and incarnate the taboo as the inventors and originators of fictional characters, events, and places, achieve their identities by making room for and taking into account fan practices that may violate the very borders they set up. Few writers have done what Rowling is doing with her new web site, of course. Instead, the majority of writers, in fact, rely on their work to do just that. Texts, in creating fictional worlds with boundaries, provoke transgression and make room for fannish production. To qualify as a source text, in fact, a text has to be producerly in this way according to John Fiske. Source texts "(...) have to be open, to contain gaps, irresolutions, contradictions, which both *allow* and *invite* fan productivity" (1992: 42. Emphases mine). Fiske is suggesting that source texts are particular kinds of speech acts that not only map out the boundaries of fictional universes but also request and facilitate their violation through inciting audience participation. To

discuss specific source texts in this manner as taboo and transgression would be highly interesting, but falls outside the scope of this essay, however.

### Notes

- 1 Fanfiction.net lists *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *Lord of the Rings* as the three most popular books or series of books for generating fan fiction (<http://www.fanfiction.net/book/#>). Fanfiction.net, which is just one of many sites for fan fictions on WWW contains more than 800,000 fan-fics relating to those books.
- 2 In the field of fan fiction, policing is often institutionalised in the form of 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).
- 3 Thanks to Steen Christiansen for calling my attention to Rowling’s announcement.
- 4 It should be pointed out that Rowling’s initiative is hardly a response to an unfulfilled desire among fans for a Harry Potter knowledge space on WWW. In fact, several web sites for Harry Potter fan fiction are already in existence making available thousands of Potter related fan stories. To give just three examples to add to the one mentioned in Note 1, see, for instance, Harrypotterfanfiction.com (<http://www.harrypotterfanfiction.com/>), which styles itself as “the oldest, (and best) unofficial dedicated Harry Potter Fanfiction site on the net”, Mugglenet Fan Fiction (<http://fanfiction.mugglenet.com/>), and Fiction Alley (<http://fictionalley.blogspot.com/>).
- 5 Interestingly, the nature of the security is never made explicit. Is Rowling offering an environment protected from electronic dangers such as computer virus? Or does her web site offer a moral sanctuary where Rowling will ensure that, for instance, slash and adult material are disallowed?
- 6 That Pottermore in this way becomes a market place intensifies the divide between Rowling and her fans in terms of buyers and sellers and consumers and suppliers.

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