

Shakespeare in OUR Time: Fanworks and the Bard

Ben Jonson's famous observation, that Shakespeare was 'not of an age, but for all time,' can be taken one of two ways: firstly, that the meaning of Shakespeare's work remains stable, giving us an immortal poet. The second interpretation is that Shakespeare adapts to our time. A traditional academic resistance to a more fluid notion of Shakespeare is embodied by Stephen Greenblatt in his lament that his young students' "engagement with language, their own or Shakespeare's, often seems surprisingly shallow or tepid" (Greenblatt). Greenblatt's scathing critique, along with copious amounts of judgement towards mixed media and fandom interaction, This exemplifies a crucial flaw in academic rhetoric: the assumption that fans do not engage with Shakespearean text in any meaningful way.

On the contrary, there exists a thriving culture of interest in Shakespeare, and it is those fans who are at the front lines in creating new, innovative, and socially relevant commentary on Shakespeare's work. The vast libraries of Shakespearian fan fiction, the many blogs and websites devoted to in depth exploration and discussion of the text, the myriad of fan art devoted to the iconography of this canon, all provide ample evidence of this dialogue. Sites such as fuckyeahqueershakespeare.tumblr.com openly invite discourse on queer theory, fan art, fan fiction, and general excitement over queer interpretation of Shakespearean text. Timelessly tragic characters suddenly leave the page again, and we see ourselves in their struggles. Young people do not merely read Shakespeare out of some long demanded obligation to higher education, they are living with the text, and finding themselves within it.

Traditional academic discourse resides in classrooms, books, and scholarly journals. While crucial, these mediums also by their nature create a divide. The privilege of a university education, and the ability to access scholarly journals and books, all inherently possess the ability to at some point “cut off” those who cannot, for any number of reasons, enter those conversations. The internet, unlike previous communities, is open to everyone; everyone can access it, and more importantly, everyone can contribute to it. Without the inherently curated nature of academic framework, it becomes much easier to present a new and unique perspective, and to share that perspective with anyone willing to listen.

Social media offers anyone with internet access a platform to express themselves to an audience. Tumblr as a blogging specific platform exemplifies this. What makes tumblr unique is the ability users have to reblog a post and add commentary to it. This forum curates discourse between users, while inviting others to engage with the posts, creating a multi-user dialogue that allows for in-real-time debate. No longer bound by something as arbitrary as a publication deadline, users freely and engagingly devote their time to discourse surrounding their interests.

These communities, or fandoms, engage with the work on a visceral level. They do not separate themselves from the content discussed, they live within it. For example, a short essay post from tumblr user professorbumblebee entitled “Spare Some Kindness for Romeo and Juliet” describes the tragedy of the two **characters**, and acknowledges the common critical rhetoric of their foolishness. However, rather than add to an echoing symphony of condemnation for their shortcomings, she goes on to humanize them, to emphasize the desperation of their situations. All of this analysis could easily appear in a scholastic venue, but within the context of tumblr, the discourse expands. Not only does this aca-fan explore at length the various conflicts within

the text, but chooses then to critique and engage directly with *how* an audience reacts to the text. She addresses a common frustration the fandom holds with these characters, continues to spin this idea, and offer justification for their motives beyond what explicitly appears in text. Therefore not only has she addressed textual analysis and an analysis of fandom's reaction, but she continues further to close with a poignant *why*. She concludes: "Why is this important? Because there are real people, real children who see no other out besides death. And if you can't spare some kindness for the fictional characters that reflect them, they will think you cannot spare kindness for them." This why includes both an emotionally charged response and a socially aware call for action, addressing and emphasizing the often magnetic connection between fans and characters, defending that unique relationship so often silenced in academic study. In brief: tumblr user professorbumblebee employs academic rhetoric as a means to both comprehend and bring awareness to larger social issues. Whether merely in the realm of the fandom or the greater audience at large, this conversation blurs the lines between an intellectual and emotional discussion of a text. This casual nature does not often exist in an academic setting, but defines the very essence of an academic fan. Something about the way a fan engages with a work inherently differs from an academic pursuit.

One of the most compelling examples of fan interaction comes from fan fiction: works written by fans that serve to supplement, expand, explain, or even replace the canon text. While academic study exists as written commentary about a text, fan fiction embodies, in many respects, the text itself. Succinctly described in an essay entitled "Praxis," fan fiction is known for "negotiating between a belief in the significance of the individual author, Barthes's death of the author, and newer collaborative forms of writing; fans constitute themselves as an

authoritative body in regard to rights of interpreting text or writing fan fiction” (Herzog).

Fandom creates a space in which the author of the canon text does not maintain full authority over the text, but rather shares that authority with fan authors. Many fan writers take on the role of co-author, expanding upon a story and filling in missing gaps. Many more fan writers will supplement their own timelines, their own plots, even their own characters, to create an entirely new canon. Depending upon how popular within the fandom that work becomes, it may be coined fanon^{[1][2]}, and considered widely accepted as canon to the story.

Often these fanon tropes will stem from a combination of canon ambiguity. One such example appears in the *Hamlet* fandom, in which a popular thematic addition to Shakespeare’s most revered play comes in the form of a romantic subplot between Hamlet and Horatio. Fan fictions that reflect this plot occur in abundance. A sample of this work comes from Archive of Our Own, a highly popular archive for fan fiction, critical theory, and other fan created works. User highlyannoying, who authors a supplemental plot to Shakespeare’s, adding in scenes to the timeline of the play. They dramatize these scenes in a series of vignettes, straying from Shakespeare’s iconic iambic pentameter and instead reaching for a thematically comparable tone:

Being with Hamlet starts to feel synonymous with talking to the stars. Distant. Horatio can’t be sure if his words are reaching. Incomprehensible.

Horatio is a scholar. Educated. The stars cannot be explained by the actions of a Prince, he knows that. But when he looks at Hamlet, he can’t help but think he understands the night sky a little better (Our lives don’t collide)

The motif of stars, Horatio referring to Hamlet by his title, and the melancholy voice of the piece all mirror the play. The romantic plot however remains a creation of the fan author, likely

influenced by the *Hamlet* fandom prior to writing it, thus further blurring the lines between that of a fan and of a creator.

Alternatively, there exists a body of fan work designed to embrace the absurd, and manipulate character and plot, evolving tragedy to comedy. One such example of this work, “Geraldus Spring, the Shakespearean Talk Show” by Archive of Our Own user marruman, chooses to maintain the form of Shakespeare’s plays, preserving the dramatist form and iambic rhythm, but modernizes the material by sending Hamlet to a daytime talk show to resolve his many familial issues. The host, Geraldus, introduces himself and Hamlet and invites him to explain his tale of woe:

...I’m Geraldus Spring, and we’ll see tonight
 “My father is dead and wants his revenge
 And my mother has married the killer!”
 We have with us now, the Prince of all Danes
 And Hamlet is his name. Please tell us now,
 Goodly prince, thou claimst this but how?
 Surely your royal mother could not
 House such a villain, or t’ him should marry!

HAMLET: Alas, ‘tis true! My noble mother did submit
 To mine treacherous uncle, when she was still
 In black cloth’d and his nails still with grave-dirt stain’d. (Geraldus Spring)

By spinning the story through this lens, marruman reconciles Shakespeare’s lofty form and content with an accessible pop culture reference. While at first glance merely an exercise in hilarity, this writing method creates a wider range of accessibility, zooming in on just how massive of circumstances Hamlet must attempt to endure and comprehend, thus garnering sympathy for a character often harshly judged in other critical analyses.

Hamlet merely exemplifies one fandom that further fleshes out their expansive canonical extensions in a plethora of head canons that aca-fans theorize about on various social media platforms. The blog fuckyeahqueershakespeare collects submissions from fans all over the world to compare notes on different productions, studies, and interpretations of Shakespeare's characters in conjunction with queer theory. Many of the submissions highlight student led performances, or express observations made while studying. In addition, the blog runners moderate the page to include not only fan art and fan fiction, but to also address the scholarly tradition of these theories.

Once again, the distinction between a scholar and a fan becomes incredibly grey, and it becomes an arbitrary matter of language and publishing medium to distinguish an academic argument from a fan perspective. Naturally either side possesses an interest, but the driving motivation behind fans often comes from a point of desire. Fans identify with these works, and thus they live and breathe the discussion in a way that academic discourse strives to separate from. When discussing a work objectively, as traditional academic discourse would dictate, the emotional connection to any work must remain apart. Blogs like fuckyeahqueershakespeare allow these two spheres to meet and engage, considering both fan theory and scholarly hypothesis equal weighted.

What makes this a radical, timely discussion is the very nature of Shakespeare. The pinnacle of academic study in the English language, ubiquitous in our cultural currency and educational growth, returning at last to the groundlings. The young, the poor, the marginalized, once again have access to his work and are claiming it as their own. Shakespeare in our time,

comes down off of the dusty bookshelf and becomes electrified. Shakespeare in our time becomes a dialogue of scholastic and fanatic inquiry, an explosive scene born again from a stale soliloquy.

Works Cited

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