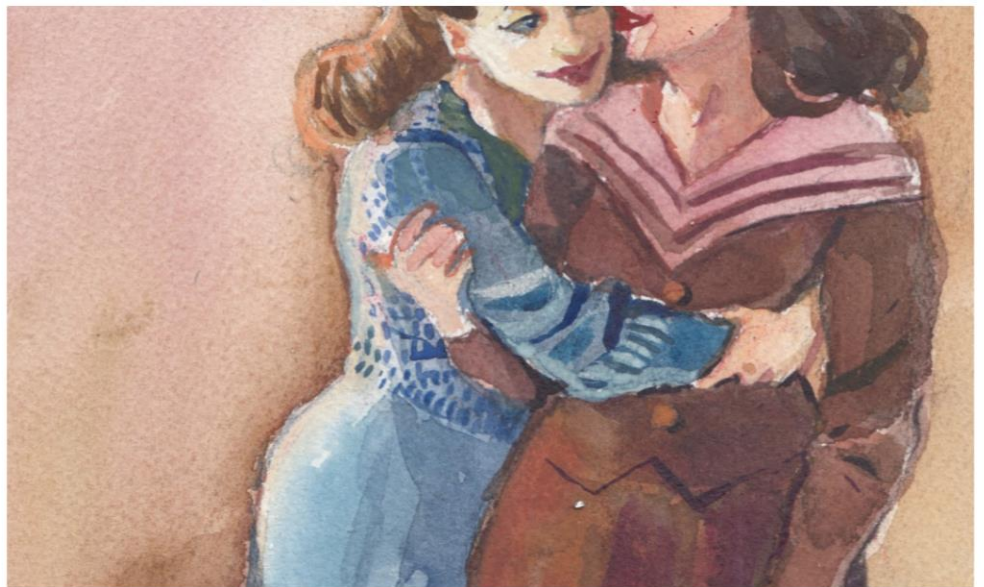


“Just Humor Me and Roll With It”: Depictions of Queerphobia and Sexism in Cartinelli Fanfiction.



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Abstract

This paper considers the ways in which entertainment media consumers assess realism in order to account for the ways in which queer identity is depicted in works of Cartinelli fanfiction. While the consumption and production of femslash fanfiction can serve as a way in which writers can redefine patriarchal and heteronormative entertainment media, it is also a site on which conformity to the social realities of issues related to queerphobia and sexism occurs. This work aims to make the reader aware of the ways in which depictions of queer identity and relationships in works of derivative fiction relies on real world expectations surrounding the experiences of non-heterosexual minority group members. I would furthermore like to make the reader critically consider how the creation of literary fiction is contingent on existing social power dynamics and social structures. In doing so, a contribution will be made to the literature on fanfiction in a more academic context, primarily with regards to femslash fanfiction specifically, which has yet to receive much academic interest. By conducting this research, the scope of knowledge on the ways in which individuals with non-normative identities engage with entertainment media can be augmented.

Key words: Fanfiction, copyright, queer identity, transformative fiction, unrealism in fiction.

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“Just Humor Me and Roll With It”: Depictions of Queerphobia and Sexism in Cartinelli
Fanfiction.

Introduction

In Jamison’s words, “Writing and reading fanfiction isn’t just something you do; it’s a way of thinking critically about the media you consume, of being aware of all the implicit assumptions that a canonical work carries with it, and of considering the possibility that those assumptions might not be the only way things have to be.” This quote provides a summation of the subversive nature of the creative process of fanfiction, and gives insight into how the creation of fanfiction is not purely tied to absolute acceptance of the status quo within the work from which the fanfiction is derived. Jamison reports three occurrences which took place in 1966 and resulted in a shift in the ways in which fiction is regarded, the first being the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. The publication of this novel, a reconceptualisation of the story of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, proved to be an exemplification of the ways in which the audience could contest the authoritative exclusivity that authors had so far possessed on their creations in this time. The second occurrence was the staging of Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, an expansion on the lives of two minor characters originally from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. With these two publications, it was implicitly shown that readers and viewers were free to diverge from the state of mute passivity that had been the status quo regarding fictional works at this point in time specifically (Jamison). The idea that the consumption of fictional works could lead to derivative adaptations for some personal purpose was once again at its onset. This shift in the ways in which fiction is approached was further corroborated by the premiere of *Star Trek*, which Jamison reports to be one of the first television

series to succeed in attracting a fan community. This congregation would eventually lead to the circulation of *Star Trek* themed zines, which included unsanctioned stories revolving the original *Star Trek* characters (Jamison). The prevalence of fanfiction as a subgenre of contemporary fiction is thus partially a result of the dynamism in the ways in which fiction is considered.

The term fanfiction denotes fan-created works of fiction which take a pre-existing aspect or character of a fictive world, part of the “canon,” as their foundation and then reinterpret the canonical narrative through means such as switching the original perspective, altering relationship combinations, expanding on particular narrative elements, or by influencing temporal boundaries (Leavenworth 40). The creation of fanfiction thus possesses a transformative quality, with the original text being reshaped into new works of fiction (Barnes 71). It has been indicated that queer individuals may engage in information practices unique to their identity-related needs due to the deficient capability of mainstream sources to cater to the needs of the queer consumer population (Floegel and Costello 32). In recent years, there has been an increase in interest in fanfiction, with a particular focus on the ways in which the deviations in fanfiction, with regards to their canonical counterparts, can give insight into the consumption of entertainment media by fans (Milli and Bamman 2049). Research has also been done on the relationship between the information practices, the ways in which people engage with entertainment media and information resources, of queer individuals and the role fanfiction plays in the identity formation of the queer individuals in question. Barnes does, however, indicate that the premise on which fanfiction is often studied, mainly as the product of a peripheral faction, has led to little research being undertaken to evaluate the relationship between the production of fanfiction and alternative forms of imaginative engagement with fiction (80). Furthermore, the limited research that exists on the information practices of queer individuals is

still primarily focused on social media platforms (Floegel and Costello 31). By conducting research centering the production of femslash fanfiction and queerphobia, the scope of knowledge on the ways in which individuals with non-normative identities engage with media can be augmented.

Here the following question will be investigated: To what extent does femslash fanfiction depicting the Cartinelli pairing in the Agent Carter fandom conform to existent power dynamics and hierarchies related to issues of gender inequality and queerphobia? The preliminary hypothesis is that the inclusion of these dynamics in the written narratives occurs insofar as it is deemed necessary to the coherence of the internal structure of the story being told. This then relates to the considerations of the author onto the enjoyment of the consumer of the work of fanfiction being offered. The problematisation of fanfiction as a form of copyright infringement will be briefly touched upon, in order to emphasise the transformative nature of fanfiction. The view of fanfiction as transformative is important to keep in mind when considering how fanfiction authors attempt to meet their goal of exploring depictions of non-normative identities. The ways in which people interpret fictional realism will be discussed in order to better understand the relationship between the necessity of a realistic representation of a fictitious story setting and the ways in which this relates to the portrayals of queer relationships in fanfiction. A close reading will then be done of a number of works of femslash fanfiction in the Agent Carter fandom. These works all centre Cartinelli as a pairing, Cartinelli being the fandom collocation for the (romantic) relationship between the fictional characters Peggy Carter, the female lead of the Agent Carter television series, and Angie Martinelli, a minor character in the show. These works were chosen as they serve as good examples of the ways in which fanfiction authors choose to include both queerphobia and misogyny in their works written with the purpose of the

subversion of these two phenomena. The works of fanfiction in question will be analysed using a queer and feminist theoretical approach in order to locate and dissect instances of hypermasculine values. Ideas relating to audience perception of unrealism in fiction will be applied to the observations that can be made through reading these works of fanfiction in order to account for the systematic inclusion of hierarchical social structures.

Copyright and Fanfiction

The relationship between copyright and the existence of fanfiction is relevant seeing as copyright laws form the basis on which a distinction is made between fanfiction and “legitimate” artistic works. Through considering the ways in which fanfiction authors rely on fair use defenses for their right to produce derivative art, it will be further solidified that works of fanfiction are often inherently transformative. Contemporarily, the reception of fanfiction by the original copyright owners can range anywhere from idle contempt, to enthusiastic encouragement, to rejection in the form of legal action. Within fanfiction community circles, it is often Anne Rice who has been said to have made a lasting impression. By banning works of fanfiction written with her characters, Anne Rice led to either the decimation or reworking of many fanfiction hosting websites, with Fanfiction.net being the most notable. Over two decades later, fan blogs still discuss the Anne Rice scare, which has been posthumously named the “SpecWriter Massacre,” in order to warn new community members about the possible ramifications of fanfiction production (e.g. Jackson; Jacobs; Taylor). These debates illustrate the ways in which fanfiction production is still influenced by writer awareness of potential legal action against their derivative works.

It can thus be inferred that fanfiction writers are aware of the non-traditional relationship created between themselves and the copyright holder of the source material as result of their

writing practices. Kelly describes the production of fanfiction as a form of active media consumption that provides an enriching quality to the canonical work on which it is derived from due to its endless narrative possibilities (43). Through the reinterpretation of the canonical text, fans are able to reaffirm a degree of ownership over the original source material and adapt it to better fit their desires as an audience. Within the context of fanfiction creation, fans can be considered to engage with fictional works as both consumers and producers thereof, seeing as they make up the audience of the source material, while simultaneously adding on to said world through their artistic creations. This form of media consumption has contemporarily been the cause for tension between the original creator and the fanbase. With regards to fanfiction, this is because the creation of fanfiction is typically not authorised by the author of the original work.

The multiplicity in potential reactions to fanfiction is of interest, seeing as fanfiction in itself has been culturally lauded for centuries, though not in the form as it is now known. Indeed, some of the most significant works in the English literary canon are non-authorised derivative works. Take *Paradise Lost* by John Milton for example, which has been described as “the quintessential example of Christian literature in English” (Goodrich 313). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton discusses Adam and Eve’s banishment from Eden, from the perspective of both the humans in question and demons who have previously fallen from heaven. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is thus a classic example of one of the characteristics of fanfiction which has been previously mentioned, namely the shifting of character perspective to illuminate the narrative from a different angle. If the English literary canon constitutes works of literature which possess a derivative nature, of which *Paradise Lost* is only one example, then “unoriginality” should not be a factor in the dismissal of fanfiction as a genre. This explicates that the condemnation of

fanfiction as a whole may be derived not from issues of inventiveness, but the result of shifting cultural views on property ownership.

Considering how these shifts in what is considered legal use of someone else's work is indispensable when accounting for how copyright laws influence the entertainment market as a whole. The law predisposes all artistic creation; fan-made or otherwise, and will either lead to the impairment or reinforcement of creativity, depending on which angle is taken (Katyal 465). The law is intended to regulate the interactions between not only humans, but also between humans and objects. It is therefore in a position to reinforce certain expressions over others (Katyal 497). Intellectual property law, under which copyright laws, are engrained in society in such a way that they possess the ability to govern depictions related to representations of non-normative sexualities, as well as representations of racial, ethnic, and political identities (Katyal 462). If it is assumed that copyrighted products should be diverse enough to represent the multiplicity of cultural ideas, then the inaccessibility of these markets to certain types of authorship may contribute to an exclusion of less mainstream ideas (Katyal 465).

According to Tushnet, technological advancements have led to an increase in the abilities of individuals to circulate information, making copyright laws more relevant and applicable to everyday affairs (651). This increase in liability has not gone unnoticed. Tushnet states that while fanfiction is not the pure copying of a source material, the copyright of the original creators may still be infringed upon due to the borrowing of the characters (658). These characters can be regarded as "unique personalities created to express a concept," making them vehicles for a given narrative (Tushnet 658). This is particularly relevant when considering the importance of the characters within works of femslash fanfiction. Because femslash fanfiction is largely contingent on the emotional responses of the paired characters to each other and the world

around them, their “unique personalities” will undoubtedly need to be transported to the fanfiction narratives.

The archive which hosts the works of fanfiction to be analysed within this essay itself offers support and defense in cases of legal challenge. Archive of Our Own, colloquially known as AO3, run by The Organisation for Transformative Works, shows its support of fan works, stating that:

We are proactive and innovative in protecting and defending our work from commercial exploitation and legal challenge. We preserve our fannish economy, values, and creative expression by protecting and nurturing our fellow fans, our work, our commentary, our history, and our identity while providing the broadest possible access to fannish activity for all fans. (“About the OTW”)

This response by AO3 to the known lawful danger that comes with hosting works of fanfiction illustrates the other side of the legal debate. A computational analysis conducted in 2016 of the fanfiction userbase estimates that the related social network was then made up of more than 2 million users (Milli and Bamman 2048). This has particular implications for members of non-normative identity or minority groups. Milli and Bamman elucidate that the ways in which fanfiction systemically diverge from the canonical works on which they are based can offer insight into the kinds of stories that are desired by the consumers of mainstream media, but which are in short supply therein (2049). What the writers of works of fanfiction hope to achieve with their reinterpretation of the main storyline, is to create a space in which they can explore identity representations which have historically gone underprivileged.

Though the preclusion and elimination of the unauthorised use of copyrighted characters has been sought out by certain corporations, it has been argued that fanfiction constitutes fair use exceptions (Tushnet 653). Tushnet states that the fair use of copyrighted material is allowed under section 107 of the Copyright Act (654). In cases of alleged copyright infringement, the following fair use factors may be invoked:

1. The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes;
2. The nature of the copyrighted work;
3. The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole;
4. The effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.

(“Subject Matter and Scope of Copyright”)

Tushnet argues that the appropriation of source material in order to write fanfiction should be considered fair use, seeing as it is (normally) non-commercial and cannot compete on the market with the original work (654). This the case, because fanfiction often does what authors refuse to do, or cannot do, in the canonical works, often with regards to plotlines or non-normative behaviours. Tushnet further draws upon the cultural aspect of fanfiction creation when coming to its defence, stating that fanfiction provides readers and authors alike with meaning and enjoyment, as well as the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of culture without jeopardising the livelihood of the copyright holder (654). Though it has been argued that the fanfiction genre should be permitted on the grounds of the fair use factors, the fair use defences seem to be characterised by a level of precariousness. This view is further affirmed by Katyal, who states

that the lack of predictability when it comes to the mediative effects between boundaries of copyright property and fan-made artistic productions occasionally lead to instability within the legal field (464).

It has thus been illustrated that the naturally subversive and transformative nature of fanfiction often forms the basis on which arguments can be made in favour of the existence of fanfiction. These characteristics, as well as the non-profit nature of fanfiction works, are in direct correlation to the fair use factors that may be invoked when arguing for the legitimacy of fanfiction as a fictive work with the right to exist. It can thus be argued that the existence of copyright laws are simultaneously the defining factor in the distinction between works of fiction recognised as professional and those which are considered to be derivative. Through revitalising core features of professional fictive works in order to undermine the dominant status quo of heteronormative conformity, fanfiction writers may contend that their work is valuable as a form of cultural meaning making for unrepresented communities. Though the privileging of minority groups is a key component of queer fanfiction, it is still discernible that social hierarchies are still included in fanfiction pertaining to the relationship between two women.

Locating Queerphobia and Sexism in Fanfiction

It is interesting to note that conformity to the existent social power dynamics can still be located in fanfiction works. In order to locate these instances of conformity, the multiple works of Cartinelli fanfiction will be approached using a queer and feminist perspective. These two perspectives serve to identify components of the representative works of fiction which depict heteronormative ideologies. Though distinct, it has been indicated that these theoretical frameworks are interconnected. This can be said considering the fact that both feminist theory

and queer theory investigate and respond to the operations of social systems, such as policies, cultures and processes, which privilege some while suppressing others (Gedro and Mizzi 446).

According to Gedro and Mizzi, queer theory and feminist theory lay bare and explicate the presence of the heteromasculinist values integrated into societal power structures (446). This is done through the critical viewpoint taken when using queer and feminist theory to reconsidering dominant societal characteristics and their impact (Gendro and Mizzi 446). Here heteromasculinism is defined using Anderson's conceptualisation, which describes it as "masculinity that suppresses women and sexual minorities through the unmediated and unchallenged use of language, understandings, beliefs, or practices that privilege heterosexual men" (Anderson qtd. in Gedro and Mizzi 445-446). These theories are relevant, because of the subversive nature of the works to be discussed. By examining femslash fanfiction in particular, emphasis can be added to the feminine and queer perspectives, seeing as the narrative focalisers are in this case non-heterosexual women. It can then be inferred that the respective authors of these works must consider the societal constraints on queer womanhood as the results of queerphobia or misogyny, if they wish to construct a representational narrative.

The use of the queer and feminist lens are also relevant when taking the ways in which the writers of fanfiction approach their source material into consideration. Through her research analysing how fanfiction writers reshape entertainment media, Floegel developed the concept of "information world-queering," which can be defined as the creation of non-heterosexual information worlds through the production of queer fanfiction (789), with an information world meaning information related to a particular social context. In this case the queer context. The constituent components of the processes characteristic of information world-queering transpire within the largely cisnormative and heteronormative contexts of modern society (Floegel 789).

Through information world-queering, the fanfiction community is thus subverting the heteronormative themes in mainstream entertainment media, while simultaneously reorienting the production models thereof because fanfiction writers often do not have making a profit as their motivation (Floegel 789). In this sense, the authors of queer derivative works are also approaching entertainment media with queer and feminist perspectives, seeing as they must first locate the gaps in feminist and sexual minority representation in order to address it.

By taking on a queer and feminist perspective when approaching the relevant works of fanfiction, the (deliberately placed) heteronormative and heteromale discourses embedded in the fictitious works can more easily be perceived, seeing as the reader's attention will be focused on instances of social inequalities. This can be demonstrated using the work of fanfiction titled *Living Arrangements*, a fanfiction which takes place in a time after the first season of the original series and which centres the fan-made shift from friendship to a romantic relationship between the two female leads. Though the underlying premise is humorous and entertaining in nature, instances of social commentary can still be found. In *Living Arrangements*, the author inserts an example of the ease with which it is possible to adhere to the dominant status quo regarding gender issues, such as the employment gender gap. As a conversation between Peggy and Angie, the two protagonists, it can be read how Angie responds to Peggy requesting she help during a mission, by reminding Peggy that diversification is needed at Peggy's work place.

Netgirl_Y2k writes:

'I wouldn't have asked, but I needed a woman, and Agent Lee in a dress wasn't going to cut it this time.' 'You need to hire more women at that alphabet soup of yours, English.'

Peggy looks seriously at Angie. "I know. I always mean to. It's easy to fall back into old

patterns, I suppose. Well, I really must get back to the office and write my report.’

(Netgirl_Y2k)

In this passage, multiple representational dynamics intersect. Earlier in the fanfiction, the author makes it known that Peggy had been promoted to director of a counterintelligence agency. One underlying premise of the story is thus that Peggy is a woman in a position of power in a male dominated field in the 1940s. Moreover, the author takes the time to make it explicit that Peggy “looks seriously at Angie” (Netgirl_Y2k). This can be interpreted to mean that the added salience to the reception of Angie’s remark shows the deliberate nature of the conversation. Angie is explicitly bringing Peggy’s attention to the need of diversification at her agency, seeing as Peggy is now in a position to go against the heteromasculinist practices at her workplace. Peggy offers no apology in response to this, but simply makes her awareness of her own conformity known, while simultaneously reaffirming that Angie had been heard. In this way, the reader is thus confronted with the invitation to critically consider their own behavioural patterns and how they may unconsciously be complicit in perpetuating detrimental social practices. The assumed reader is here a concept meant to denote the undefined recipient of a textual work (Schmid 307). This “presumed addressee” serves the function of providing the author with a hypothetical recipient for their text to which they can direct the particular “linguistic codes, ideological norms, and aesthetic ideas” necessary to make the work comprehensible (Schmid 302). In making sure Angie’s comment is seriously considered, the author seems to invite the assumed reader to do the same, and asserts that even highly inclusive characters can fall victim to detrimental societal hegemonies.

In anamatics’s *The Hustle*, a similar pattern of in-text patriarchal embedment can be perceived. In *The Hustle*, just as is the case in *Living Arrangements*, Angie’s perspective is

privileged. The story follows Angie as she tries to gather up enough money to pay off her cousin's debt to a mafia leader. The author writes the following conversation between Angie and the doctor treating Angie's cousin after he had been assaulted by the gang as a warning:

“This is Doctor Sam Fraum. I was wondering if I might speak to your husband.”

“Don't got one,” Angie replies, eyes half-closing in annoyance at the convention.

“Is your father home?”

“I don't live with him, doctor.” (anamatics)

The doctor's first assumption upon being informed that Angie does not have a husband is that she then must of course still be under the care of her male guardian. This conversation is meant to give the impression that Angie's independent lifestyle, as the roommate of another woman at that, is something that is often considered confusing at best for the general member of society in the time period and location in which the story is set. This is the case, seeing as this description is in line with the ways in which the role of women in the United States in the Cold War era is viewed.

Meyerowitz states that the modern views on the female role in society were strongly influenced by Betty Friedan's publication *The Feminine Mystique*, which argued that the deep discontent felt by American women in the post-war period was a result of propaganda influencing women into stay-home positions through implicitly spreading repressive images of womanhood (1455). While Meyerowitz was able to conclude through her research on the representations of women in magazines between 1946 and 1958 that the situation was more nuanced than described by Friedman, she indicates that Friedman's account of the conservative post-war experience has been virtually accepted as the way things were (1456). Though

Friedman's account has been challenged, it is still the prevailing assumption made when considering life in the later years of the 1940s in the western world. Because this is the time in which most works of Cartinelli fanfiction is set, the assumptions that the assumed reader has of this time period is what should be drawn upon when writing the narrative.

Other examples of sexist behaviour include when Angie's male landlord attempts to insult Peggy in *Scarlett Cross* by calling her a woman, or even when Peggy tells Angie to multitask during a conversation, because she is a woman and should be able to handle it. By drawing solely on Peggy's gender when attempting to degrade her, the landlord insinuates that her gender is enough cause for shame. When it comes to the second example, Peggy is invoking stereotypical assumptions of the female ability to better handle multiple simultaneous demands in comparison to men.

It is not only of relevance to consider how the inclusion of patriarchal and sexist rhetoric in these narratives serve to create a sense of realism, as will be discussed in further chapters, but also to turn to the constant tension felt between Peggy and Angie in these stories as a result of their queerness and their mutual attraction to one another. This tension is a key attribute of the characterisation of the two characters being prominently featured. The previously mentioned works take Angie's struggle in coping with her queer nature, as well as the implications it has for her daily life, as a prominent factor. Within the first few paragraphs of *The Hustle*, the following can be read:

The good pious girl is gone to the big bands and flashing lights of Broadway.

She was gone long before that, though. Gone when she'd confessed to Father Bosco that something wasn't quite right about her. Her mother doesn't talk about that day when

Angie was fifteen when she'd come home to find Tito sitting with her mother. He'd heard her confession, he said, and it wasn't right. She doesn't talk about how her mother went to the church and the priest had recommended an institution, or how Angie had spent three months shut away there when her family could scarcely afford food and there was no work for her mother. They told her it was to fix her, but she'd never felt broken.

(anamatics)

This passage sets the tone for much of the themes that will consistently return in *The Hustle* to create narrative conflicts. Key tensions that can be identified in the excerpt above include the friction between Angie and her family due to their religious backgrounds and her queerness, her ingrained belief in the inherent wrongness of being queer, alongside her wavering acceptance of it as a part of herself, as well as Angie's time spent in an "institution," meant to imply conversion therapy. These descriptions provide the reader with an understanding of Angie's characterisation within this particular fanfiction as someone who grapples with her upbringing, as well as someone with an ingrained fear for the possible ramifications of her getting caught practicing her sexuality, namely a return to the so called institution in order to be "fixed." The internal struggle of being queer is further exemplified by the description of Angie recalling how she'd both admitted to the priest that she felt that something was wrong with her, while still asserting that she'd never felt particularly "broken" in the first place. This last assertion is particularly relevant, seeing as the interplay between personal feelings and societal expectations recurringly return throughout the narrative with regards to Angie's romantic and sexual feelings towards Peggy.

While the previous passage serves to orient the reader with the general character dispositions with the work, later interaction within the same fanfiction further highlight issues of

family rejection as a result of homophobia. The following conversation occurs between Angie and her mother:

“You can’t live with girls.”

Angie sticks her chin up definitely. “I can live with whomever I choose.”

“It’s a sin.”

“So’s eatin’ shellfish but don’t let me stop you.”

The look her mother gives her in response makes Angie want to curl up into a small ball and never speak again. (...)

“You’re broken, Angela. You’re broken and I can’t fix you.” Her ma’s words cut like a knife. (...)

This is an old argument, it’s tired and twisted up inside both of them so tightly that it will never be let go. (anamatics)

This excerpt demonstrates the non-acceptance Angie faces from her mother, but this passage goes deeper than that. The author uses this chapter to exemplify how Angie is familiar enough with the religious teachings of her upbringing to counter the disdain her family has against the queer aspect of her identity by using religious comments. Angie’s reaction towards her mother’s words is a clear indication that she does care about what her mother thinks. She furthermore goes on to counter her mother’s words by referencing the moments in which her mother goes against the Bible, namely when eating shellfish, which is forbidden according to Leviticus 11: 9-12. Though Angie is perceived as a sexual deviant by her church, she is still familiar enough with their customs in order to see the hypocrisy in their teachings. This reply is

also interesting, seeing as it constitutes Angie indirectly telling her mother to go get food poisoning. As reported by the author of this work, New York City had been known as a major oyster producer before pollution caused the decline of the oyster quality to unsafe levels (anamatics; see also Nigro). Angie does love her mother, but feels enough resentment to harbour malicious thoughts. In this way, the author is showing the complexities that may arise through familial queerphobic rejection.

The last line in the excerpt may be interpreted to apply to society as a whole. The argument between Angie and her mother about what is right or wrong is a microcosm of debates that are often heard in the western world. Through the conversation, the assumed reader feels the exhaustion that Angie feels at, yet again, being confronted with her mother's ire and having to defend how she feels romantic and sexual attraction. The story is set roughly seven decades before it was published and still serves as a mirror to contemporary discourses of queerness, seeing as the author uses religious arguments that are still used by anti-queer groups in a modern setting. The reader may therefore consider how it is indeed an old argument, and wonder at its continuous prevalence and presence within supposedly inclusive modern societies.

Some authors also choose to include clear depictions of the aspects of physical violence that may result from queerphobia in their work, as shown by the following text by wreckofherheart:

Y'know what that beast would do?' He looks at Peggy now, eyes wide and looking defeated. 'He'd put a baseball bat and a belt on the table, and then he'd tell her to choose.' Peggy stiffens. (wreckofherheart)

Here Peggy has just met Angie's brother and is privy to his emotional outburst at the harsh treatment his sister has had to endure. The fact that Angie's father continuously made Angie choose how she'd receive his punishment is testament to the notion behind this character's behaviour that it is Angie's own fault that she is being abused for her non-heterosexual identity.

All the previously mentioned examples thus help illustrate how queerphobic and misogynistic rhetoric are often embedded within works of femslash fanfiction, though often with the intent of the subversion of the usual context in which they appear. The inclusion of these scenes is especially notable, seeing as the fanfiction universe is one in which writer's may experience much more freedom. Theoretically speaking, anything goes. Jamison notes that fanfiction has encouraged writers to "do something they'd never thought they could do," as a result of the privacy offered by the infrastructures of fanfiction writing. Though Jamison writes this in the context of offering people whose writing has been historically given less value, such as women, the ability to engage with writing, the concept is easily applicable to the content of the written work as a whole. If fanfiction is a portal in which alternate worlds can be explored with beloved characters by people who have not been given the same access to what is mainstream, why can't the constraints of contemporary and historical exclusive thinking be shaken off as well?

Audience Perception and the Interpretation of Fiction

Fiction realities are often built on worlds inexistent from the one we know, despite certain genres being rooted in realism. This then creates the assumption that the criticism of works of fiction as unrealistic is contingent on something other than what is considered to be possible in the world we inhabit. When creating fictional content, certain rules related to coherency should be adhered to, in order to create a pleasant experience for the reader. The

(un)realism of fiction is thus tied to the rules which have been set in the fictional world of the story, and on what is likely in the real world, though the level on which both factors are drawn upon are dependent on the genre of the work (Hazlett and Uidhir 34). In fiction, the unrealistic nature of the setting and actions being described are of less importance than the perceived unlikelihood of the said story components based on what the reader already knows to be true, either according to the rules established in the fictive world by the author, or related to common sense of the set-up of the actual world. Hazlett and Uidhir use the scene in which John McClane jumps onto a fighter jet in the movie *Live Free or Die Hard* to substantiate the claim that the unrealistic nature of the scene is found not in the falsehood of the action depicted, namely McClane jumping, but the fact that jumping onto airplanes is something that a human being would be very unlikely to do (34).

The idea of unlikelihood when considering what is or is not possible in a fictive world can be applied to works of fanfiction in the relevant fanfiction category as well. Peggy Carter has been established to be a skilled martial artist and marksman within the Marvel Universe, capable of going head-to-head with a genetically enhanced specially trained assassin. The unrealism lies not in the fictive nature of this portrayal of the character; the fictive Peggy Carter never actually fought a fictive assassin, but in the unlikelihood of a regular human reaching that level of physical prowess without genetic enhancement.

Just as the acceptance for Peggy's adherence to untypical physical capabilities is situated within a particular context and set of conventions, so do other expectations of any given narrative. Here it will be argued that the depictions of queerphobia and sexist rhetoric within the discussed works of fanfiction is necessary in order to create a sense of narrative realism, which will in turn facilitate the coherency of the written work. This is the case seeing as the reader will

otherwise be tasked with processing information presented to them with regards to the social world of the fanfiction which is contradictory to what they know to be true about the time in which the fanfiction is set. In limiting the amount of conflict felt by the reader, the author is better able to create a story in which the reader will have less difficulty when processing the narrative content.

The ways in which readers engage with the world created in fanfiction is related to both their perceptions of the world, as well as their knowledge of the fictive world of the Agent Carter show. Busselle et al. reiterate Bordwell's argument that the reader should not be regarded as the passive recipient of a given narrative, but should be thought of as the person piecing together the story based off of the descriptions made available by the plot (367). In this sense, the story is contingent on the conceptualisations of the reader and would not be possible separate from the reader (Busselle et al. 367). Matters of realism are then relevant when considering this, seeing as it has been argued that the level of interest and compulsion the reader feels for the narrative, influences their level of involvement therein (Busselle et al. 368). The importance of a realistic portrayal is further highlighted by Busselle et al., stating that content is more powerful when perceived as being realistic (365).

When it comes to the comprehension of readers when consuming fiction, a certain level of non-realism is allowed. It is generally assumed by literary scholars that the audience avoidance of critical assessment to the level of realism provided in the consumed work depicts a basic level of trust taken before the reader starts reading (Böcking 1). This idea is then worked into the theory of the (willing) suspension of disbelief, which Böcking generally describes as "an audience's tolerance of the fictionality of media content" (1). When suspending their disbelief, the audience sacrifices either realism, logic, or believability in favour of personal enjoyment

(Böcking 1). The lacking critical attitude of the audience is a result of the individual audience member choosing to privilege the pleasurable experience of transportation into the story

(Böcking 2). An example of this would be readers refraining from questioning the existence of super-powered individuals in the Marvel Universe.

Though the idea of the willing suspension of disbelief has been challenged by research done in the last few decades, both competing theories come to the conclusion that critical thinking when consuming media may be detrimental to the overall enjoyment felt by the reader. The countering theoretical premise to the ideas of the suspension of disbelief is that the acceptance of fictional information when consuming fiction is the “default cognitive mode”, suggesting that the acceptance of unrealism is an effortless occurrence, but can be challenged in certain cases (Prentice et al. qtd. in Busselle et al. 372). The audience thus accepts Peggy’s fighting capabilities, as well as the existence of super-human assassins, in order to more fully immerse themselves in the story. However, critical evaluation can be activated by certain occurrences and it has been suggested that the evaluation of realism does not occur within the person consuming fiction unless prompted (Busselle et al. 366).

Research has indicated perceived typicality to be relevant in the ways in which an individual audience member would assess realism in fiction, with typicality being defined as “the extent to which an event occurs in the text as it would if it were to happen in real life” (Busselle et al. 369-370). Busselle et al. describe the findings of their predecessors in this field, stating that Hall was able to affirm that realism judgements were partly contingent on the similarities between the fictional people or situations and the majority of people and situations in the actual world (369). Shapiro and his colleagues were also drawn upon by Busselle et al., with Shapiro stating that it should be recognised that ideas of typicality are created through a combination of

comparisons between real life experiences on the level of plausibility and probability (Busselle et al. 369). The findings of Shapiro and his colleagues are further in line with the reports of Hazlett and Uidhir on the content of fiction, who state that actual world truths are often imposed on the worlds of fiction (35).

Additionally, Hazlett and Uidhir indicate two ways in which a work of fiction can lean into unrealism, with the first being related to issues of (in)consistency. They explicate the importance of consistency of fictive works through their research, stating that inconsistencies in fictions create an “aesthetically flawed” premise, seeing as it creates incoherency for the audience (38). If a fanfiction author has made it known that Peggy avidly drinks tea, for example, the reader would then be confronted if suddenly Peggy were to switch to coffee with no explanation. By inviting the consumer to believe contradicting reports, the reader will have more difficulty in grasping the narrative and thematic content, which will in turn reduce the induction of the intended aesthetic response in the media consumer (Hazlett and Uidhir 38). Secondly, fiction can also be described as unrealistic when violating the readers’ expectations about real world matters (Hazlett and Uidhir 38). This second factor then falls in line with the idea of typicality as described by Busselle et al.

Genre also plays an important role in the extent to which deviations in typicality are “allowed.” Hazlett and Uidhir describe fictions as “invitations to imagine” (35), though human imagination will still be constrained by assumptions of reality. However, the assumptions made when processing fictional worlds are not only partly based on the actual world, but also on the conventions and agreements made about distinct made-up worlds (Hazlett and Uidhir 35). This is relevant, seeing as each made-up world belongs to its own genre, with its own distinct set of characteristics. Dragons may exist in fantasy novels, but not in historical fiction. Through genre,

the similarity class between fictive works can be ascertained, giving readers an indication of the rules they may expect in the work of fiction that they are engaging with as a result of what the reader already knows from other works belonging to the same genre. In their work, Hazlett and Uidhir argue that the critique of unrealistic fictions is often afforded to fictions which are actually inconsistent, as opposed to not realistic (33). Though they further go on to clarify that, considering the role of genre in the narratives, inconsistencies need not always be a condemning shortcoming (Hazlett and Uidhir 33).

By combining the previously discussed theories, it can thus be inferred that the three main pillars on which an audience member may found their critique of unrealism in fiction are narrative inconsistencies (e.g. Hazlett and Uidhir), perceived typicality (e.g. Busselle et al.), as well as a lack of adherence to genre conventions (e.g. Hazlett and Uidhir). Fanfiction author's also show a certain level of awareness and consideration with regards to these ideas. In order to exemplify this, the author's note at the beginning of the first chapter of the Cartinelli fanfiction *In The Company of Only Us* will be used. In this fanfiction, Peggy and Angie fall in love after being reunited years after high school when Angie becomes a witness in a high profile case and Peggy volunteers to be her witness protection agent. In most works of fanfiction, it is common for authors to communicate additional information about their fanfiction or their personal lives at the beginning of each chapter. Author's notes in fanfiction are thus generally informally used in order for an author to make contact with their audience. The first author's note in *In The Company of Only Us* reads "There's not a whole lot of information on the intricacies of the Witness Protection program and this is a highly unlikely scenario but just humor me and roll with it" (cassiopeiasara). The author is thus already prompting the reader to forsake a critical approach when engaging with their fanfiction. The author's request, however, is only viable on

certain grounds. The author acknowledges that being placed in witness protection is generally a very unlikely scenario, which then ties into the perceived typicality of the action being described to the reader. It is also important to note that readers of fanfiction are aware that the authors of their favourite works are fans themselves, and thus do not expect the writers to be completely factual when writing about topics outside of their field of familiarity. Fanfiction as a genre is considered to be more informal in nature than professionally published works, meaning that the genre conventions allow the author to make their lack of awareness of their writing project known. While the audience may be forgiving in these respects, it can be inferred that narrative inconsistencies will not as easily be forgiven, seeing as the author is responsible for upholding the internal logic in the story, even if said logic is not realistic.

In fanfiction, more so for works of fanfiction with a fictional pairing at its centre, more allowances can be made in regards to world-building, seeing as the focus is on the developing relationship between the characters involved. What is relevant for femslash romance works of fanfiction is the characterisation of the female leads, as well as any general attitudes that may influence them. What is important then, is the ways in which the characters engage with the world, and the way that the characters' world view is described. With most stories containing Peggy and Angie as a romantic pairing being set in the second half of the 1940s, in line with the setting of the original television series from which the fanfiction works are derived, it is important to consider social attitudes towards women and same-sex relationships in the narrative. It can logically be assumed that any queer person living during the 1940s would be aware of possible ramifications of their queerness on their everyday life as a result of the general disposition of American society at the time. Peggy and Angie would then of course have had a

similar experience, which would influence their romantic relationship. It is thus evident why any author for this pairing would choose to include queerphobia in their works.

Through an interview with the author of *The Hustle*, it can be inferred that the writers of fanfiction are also often aware of the importance of narrative consistency, either for their own satisfaction, or that of their audience. When asked about the reasoning behind including moments of sexism in her narrative, despite these moments not being paramount to the progression of the story, she replied:

Society at the time was very sexist. It would be unrealistic to write a story that did not include that. Moreover, sexism is a major theme of Agent Carter and it's one the show unpacks and addresses in multiple ways. The story I told in *The Hustle* is one that captures this same sexism but does not glorify it – but rather doesn't erase it to write some feminist and queer utopia into the very homophobic and sexist 1940s-New York.

It was previously explained that class similarities in genre, as well as notions of realism in the actual world, largely determine the constraints in which works of fiction must situate themselves in order to not create negative friction with the perception of the reader. Though fanfiction is a site of heavy fan-engagement, it is not exempt from the rules of fiction narrative formation.

Conclusion

This paper was intended to demonstrate the relationship between derivative fictional worlds and the ways in which these worlds must adhere to certain rules in order to remain realistic in the eyes of the implied reader. By using the Cartinelli fandom as a case study, it was found that the conformity to queerphobic and sexist rhetoric in the written narratives is done in order to create a sense of realism to the story so that the reader may better grasp the narrative

themes. The legitimacy of fanfiction as a fictive genre is challenged due to concern for the level of ownership that the original author should possess of their work. This can be seen through the copyright laws, which limit the ways in which fictive works can be drawn upon as direct inspiration for new artistic creations. Fanfiction writers receive protection from the fair use factors which can be invoked in the case of the unlicensed use of copyrighted works. Cartinelli fanfiction, and fanfiction in general, is able to argue its legitimacy not only because of its non-profit nature, but also because of the fact that it does not impede with the potential market of the source material. This is largely due to the often transformative nature of the fan-made fiction, seeing as fanfiction provides a site on which something can be done which would otherwise not so easily occur. Fanfiction writers base the right of their creations to exist on the fair use laws and the factors that can be invoked in those cases. However, a certain level of conformity to contemporary ideas of social hierarchies is still noticeable within queer fanfiction. This is in spite of the transformativity of the fictive works. By using the queer and feminist perspective as described by queer and feminist theorists, adherence to the social power structures with regards to queerphobic and sexist rhetoric can be located. The queer and feminist lens are particularly suited to this, seeing as these frameworks are meant to reconsider dominant societal structures and how they privilege some while oppressing others. The inclusion of these depictions is related to the perceived realism of the story by the reader, the degree of which is in direct correlation to the level of engagement felt by the reader. These judgements are based on typicality, genre conventions, and narrative consistency. Matters of representation in media are thus not only contingent on lawful restrictions, but also on the potential interpretations of the intended audience. Queer people engage with fictive works differently, as a result of unsatisfactory portrayals of non-heterosexual relationships. The creation of fanfiction can be considered a way

for people belonging to underrepresented groups to create more desired portrayals of non-normative identities. This is interesting seeing as fanfiction writers must conform to certain depictions of the social dynamics they are attempting to subvert. This would then be depictions of queerphobia and sexism in the case of Cartinelli fanfiction. Fiction and unrealism thus do not exist separate from the world as it is known by the intended audience.

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