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"An Improbable Fiction": How Fans Rewrite Shakespeare

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"An Improbable Fiction": How Fans Rewrite Shakespeare
Amelia Bitely

In his analysis of the interaction of performance and text, W.B. Worthen draws attention to the performer's role--he or she does not merely clarify the "latent" meaning behind text; rather, he or she "reconstitutes the text" (1094, 1097). Therefore, each performance becomes a unique response to the text--and, one might argue, each new text that responds to an original text becomes in some way a performance of it. This perspective becomes particularly salient in the field of Shakespeare studies, which has witnessed hundreds of published textual "reconstitutions." The academic community has devoted some attention to these published works, but it has paid less attention to un-peer-reviewed, nonprofit adaptations, despite the healthy proliferation of such works in the form of Internet fanfiction. Therefore, this paper will discuss the ways in which fan-written stories reconstitute the original text of Shakespeare, their degrees of imitation of or divergence from the source material, and the factors that make Shakespeare fanfiction an insightful variety of Shakespeare performance.

Almost as quickly as Shakespeare wrote his works, others began to retell and rewrite them. As the presence of numerous quartos and folios attest, some of these retellings had little impact on the story's plot and characters; however, the "comic resolution" of Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear* suggests that these revisions could occasionally alter the very narrative arc of the plays (Massai 436). In contrast, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and Lee Blessing's less-read *Fortinbras* leave the narrative of *Hamlet* intact, but explore the consequences that Shakespeare's play has for its minor characters. Andy Fickman's film "She's the Man" envisioned *Twelfth Night* in the twenty-first century (Smith), while *The Forbidden Planet* "export[ed] Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ... to outer space" (Cashill 78). The

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ill-fated musical "Rockabye Hamlet" even attempted to transport *Hamlet* to a different genre, with somewhat less success. Both audiences and critics consider these works in terms of their interaction with Shakespeare's text and their individual merits; because they have passed the test of peer review, they have some cachet as revisionist responses. However, scholars of Shakespeare generally do not devote the same degree of study to fanfiction.

If Shakespeare scholars pay little attention to fanfiction, fanfiction scholars also largely ignore fan revisions of Shakespeare. Prominent fanfiction analyst Henry Jenkins set the bar for the Bard's role in the discourse when he used Shakespeare to justify critical acceptance of the primary fan focus: television shows. Jenkins asks academics to view fans' critical mindsets tolerantly rather than with condescension, asking, "Would ... close attention, careful re-reading, intense discussion ... be read as extreme if they were applied to Shakespeare instead of *Star Trek*?" and then contending that Shakespeare's contemporaries considered his plays a part of the public discourse rather than an elevated "art canon" (53). By creating this dichotomy of "high art" versus popular culture, though, Jenkins and his colleagues privilege the *Star Treks* of the world over the Shakespeare plays in their discussion of fan culture. Francesca Coppa follows Jenkins's lead, using the trope of different performances of *Hamlet* solely to illustrate the legitimacy of different fan performances of *Star Trek* fiction. When fanfiction scholars admit that Shakespeare has been revised with startling frequency, they merely ask, "What are ... *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* or John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* but Hamlet fanfics?" (Young). This question, though, implies that fan revisions of Shakespeare may be considered by the same criteria as other fanfiction. Understanding Shakespeare fanfiction therefore necessitates an understanding of commonalities between fanfiction-writing communities.

Although fanfiction for television shows and films often finds publication and a degree of peer review in "fan magazines"--frequently abbreviated "zines"--by far the greatest number of readers access fanfiction through the Internet (Kustritz 372). The individuals who participate in a specific fan culture--for example, the culture surrounding Shakespeare--refer to themselves as a "fandom," although this discussion will use the term more narrowly to mean the readers and writers of fanfiction or "fanfic" in this culture (Kustritz 371). Members of fandom generally access fanfiction through either personal websites or general archives, such as Fanfiction.Net, Yuletide, and LiveJournal communities. These archives enforce a degree of similarity on the presentation of fiction archived there; each distinct archive has its own form of header which helps readers to locate and discriminate between stories quickly. Some common elements listed in these headers include the work's title, author, fandom, summary, and audience suitability rating ("While," "Fanfiction.net"). The Yuletide archive specifically solicits fanfiction to meet plot parameters requested by would-be readers, but other archives permit the publication or "posting" of fanfiction with minimal or no review. This relative permissiveness creates a culture of writer freedom, in which writers can respond to their chosen source materials in imitative or divergent manners according to their own whims.¹ These responses reveal a great deal about how readers of Shakespeare interpret and then perform the text in familiarizing, expansive, critical, and community-building ways.

The data in this document come from a quantitative and qualitative study of 200 works of fanfiction on various archives. Although lovers of well-written literature might feel tempted to select out only the "best" representatives of fanfiction, this study instead attempted to sample the entire quality spectrum of Shakespeare fanfiction in order to explore how and why writers produce Shakespeare fanfic. The study illustrates not only similarities in revisionist technique

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but also similarity in subject matter. Of these works, a full 27.5% reinterpret *Romeo and Juliet*, while 11% rewrite *Macbeth* and another 21% revise *Hamlet*. In light of Peggy O'Brien's contention that "the [high school] curriculum has been stuck on *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*," the fact that 63.5% of analyzed online fanfiction draws from those four sources should come as little surprise (41). Perhaps more surprising, though, is the amount of fanfiction that began life as a class assignment--18% of the sampled works were originally written as English assignments. The statistics suggest not only that high school education in Shakespeare connects with and inspires students, but also that teachers are beginning to recognize fan-created works as valid tools for interrogating the text. This trend toward creative reinterpretation of texts rather than formal criticism only underscores the necessity of understanding fan-created derivative fiction.

For fans, one of the primary functions of writing Shakespeare fanfic is to familiarize these venerated, four-hundred-year-old texts. However, writers adopt various strategies to make the works familiar: a small percentage imitate Shakespeare, while a somewhat larger percentage consciously diverge. In less half of the studied stories, writers imitate either the dramatic "script" format or the Elizabethan and Jacobean style of grammar and vocabulary; a few writers even attempt imitative verse. Some writers idealize this mode of familiarization--a writer who uses the pseudonym "Sasha Ivanova" inserts an author's note to defend her choice of the dramatic format as imitative of her source material, whereas interviewee Tom Manion claims that he does not write Shakespeare fanfiction because he "feel[s] like it ought to be in [i]ambic [p]entameter, and [he] can't do that." Writers who use this technique have taken an authorial approach to understanding Shakespeare: they seek to understand his texts as works scripted by a person, and to learn by imitation the stylistic techniques that this person employed. By

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appropriating and then wielding unfamiliar formats, styles of writing, vocabulary, and grammar, these imitative fanfiction authors force them to become familiar.

On the other hand, many other writers use more divergent tactics such as prose style, modern language, and "alternate universe" stories to reconstitute Shakespeare's plays in a more familiar manner--viewing them as texts from which meaning can be extracted and then reformed. The 7% of studied fanfics that merely "translate" or "summarize" the source plays provide perhaps the strongest example of this philosophy, providing only meaning without technique; however, these works are in good company. A full 65% of analyzed works of fanfiction are written in prose rather than in imitative verse or in dramatic format, and moreover, 70% of authors make no attempt to recreate Shakespeare's linguistic style. Indeed, some writers even disparage what they consider a nigh-bardolatrous emphasis on the technique: "[*Romeo and Juliet*]s just a story!!" exclaims a writer who uses the pseudonym FrenchPea and consciously chooses not to imitate stylistic elements of Shakespeare. This irreverence expands on Erin Presley's argument that "spirited play" is beginning to occur in the online Shakespeare academic community; it indicates that even the lay readership has begun to de-sanctify and re-popularize the mythologized "bard."

While declining stylistic loyalty can be an implicit snub of Shakespeare, imitative or borderline imitative language can have the same demystifying effect by peeling back the stifling and alienating gravity often associated with Shakespeare's style. A playful attitude crops up in 15% of the fanfics under consideration, which parody the very works from which they derive their substance and their style.ⁱⁱ In a story ironically entitled "The Fantastically Awesome and Totally True Account of Several Episodes from the Life of William de la Pole, afterward the Fourth Earl of Suffolk," for example, author Roz McClure details a drink supposedly created by

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this minor character in *Henry V*: "The Harfleur': two parts champagne, one part brandy. Spit a naked cherry upon a pick and dash it against the sides of the glass, meanwhile howling to break the clouds as did the wives of Jewry at Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen. Serve over ice."

The humor here derives from both the author's imitation of linguistic techniques and her divergence from expected content; Roz McClure allows her credibly ornate, pseudo-Shakespearean simile to distract the reader for a moment from fact that she is detailing a cocktail recipe. Falstaff might approve.

While parody familiarizes Shakespeare by removing an uncomfortable distance between the author, the text, and the reader, some writers choose to bring Shakespeare still closer to their own experiences by setting his storylines in a modern "alternate universe." Just as "She's the Man" places *Twelfth Night* in a high-school context accessible to teenage viewers, so, too, do a quarter of writers of fanfiction transform *Romeo and Juliet* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into familiar high-school romances and talk-show family conflicts. Other fanfics recontextualize Shakespeare's plays into areas of personal interest for fanfiction authors--one author wrote a piece choreographing the duel between Mercutio and Tybalt as a Japanese Kendo fight, providing a commentary on how each fighter's style and movements reflected the subtext of the scene (Lone Swordsman). Still other fanfics create a more familiar context for Shakespeare's plays by shifting them into an "alternate universe" closer to but still removed from our own time; one author rewrote *The Merchant of Venice* as she envisioned it would have been written by Nazis, drawing on a familiar image of anti-Semitism to construct her interpretation (Fae).

Although Shakespeare fanfiction does serve to familiarize unfamiliar texts, it also expands upon the extant occurrences in Shakespeare's plays. The texts themselves do provide a large proportion of the essential data for understanding the story--the basic plot, the characters'

names and personalities and occasionally their histories, and some details of setting--but they also leave both hints and tantalizing gaps. The process of crafting expansive fanfiction is one of using hints to fill gaps, thereby creating a secondary text that augments, supplements, or even destabilizes the source text. A writer who calls herself LillieOz explicitly connects this expansive technique with the character development practiced by actors, claiming that "writing and reading fanfic is a way to do character work [and] explore performance possibilities without actually performing or seeing a show." Like actors performing Shakespeare, writers of expansive fanfiction must make two apparently contradictory efforts into complements: to provide a performance that is at once recognizably congruent with the source text, and at the same time original in conception. Expansive fanfiction includes glimpses into characters' minds, further narrative about minor characters, and sequels and prequels to Shakespeare's plays.

In the realm of externalizing internal conflict, Shakespeare creates a model for his fanfiction writers; his primary characters frequently deliver long monologues and soliloquies that detail their mental conundrums. Similarly, 30% of the works in this study used first-person narrative to give voice to characters' fears, and desires, and motives. Although the majority of these works took the form of unconscious internal monologues, 30% of these first-person fanfics were consciously performative: many included epistolary correspondence between characters, and seven purported to be character diaries. In one such letter-or-diary set between Juliet's first "death" and Paris's death, Paris confesses his extravagant love for the young Capulet, secure in his knowledge that her deceased state prevents her from receiving his letter. This "letter" affirms the affection that Paris expresses in Act V, Scene iii, but it also reads a reticence about this affection in his decision to have his servant douse the light and leave him alone with his grief.

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By creating an auxiliary text, *Chaotic Serenity*--the author of this fanfic--chooses one of many implied performative possibilities for Paris and expands it into the dominant interpretation.

The emphasis on further developing minor characters, so prominent in mainstream derivative works such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, also exists in fanfiction. In 35% of studied fanfics, the storyline focused primarily on secondary or tertiary characters. Like Roz McClure's story of the Earl of Suffolk and *Chaotic Serenity's* confessional letter of Paris, these works attempt to expand the breadth and depth of seemingly insignificant roles. Fanfiction author Rebecca Maxfield explains the reason for this interest in the thinnest threads of narrative: "In Shakespeare, nearly all the characters have some relation to the protagonist or main plotline, but they don't all have their stories filled in." She implies that understanding even the smallest of roles becomes essential to understanding the larger whole, because Shakespeare interweaves his narrative so that minor relationships between primary and tertiary characters have major impact.

These efforts to add implied or missing motivation and narrative, while significant as expansions of Shakespeare's text, seem minor extrapolations when compared with fanfiction sequels or prequels. Just as Lee Blessing's *Fortinbras* explores the fallout of *Hamlet* for the survivors, 33% of studied fanfiction speculates on events causative of or resultant from the events of Shakespeare's plays.² Sequels, by far the more popular form of narrative expansion, occasionally display cogent understanding of the unresolved tensions within the plays. In Arkaidy's series of *Midsummer Night's Dream* sequels, entitled "Autumn," "Winter," and "Spring," she explores the long-term consequences of enchanted love between unconsenting partners. In the end, Helena returns to magical means to maintain her husband's love, and Bottom dies at an advanced age, still pining for Titania. By illustrating the insupportable nature of artificially-imposed affection, Arkaidy takes the fairy *deus ex machina* to task and ultimately

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denounces it as heartless and inhuman. Here, expansive narrative becomes not merely an aid to interpreting and performing characters; it becomes a tool for critical analysis.

Although only a small percentage of Shakespeare fanfiction writers participate in mainstream academic discourse, substantial parallels exist between critical conceptions of Shakespeare and fanfictional re-conceptions. Fanfic writer Kylee Adams articulates the connection between the two: "The thing that's unique to Shakespearefic, I suppose, is the amount of criticism that's out there on Shakespeare already--a lot of those critics have the imagination of fic writers." Unfortunately, just as the diversity of critical perspectives defies the scope of any one paper, so too do the diversity of critical works of fanfiction defy the scope of this paper. Therefore, with the caveat that many dozens of other perspectives exist, this discussion will instead highlight only three critical readings and rewritings: the post-colonial, the queer, and the metafictional.

In mainstream academia, post-colonial criticism has often indicated *The Tempest* as a clear example of European colonization and subjugation of indigenous property. Thomas Cartelli suggests that the play has such an archetypal construction as a work of colonialist literature that a "critical practice of applying *Tempest* paradigms to postcolonial literature" has begun to emerge (84). Fanfiction such as Koanju's "Stymied in Rock," on the other hand, eschews the paradigm in favor of a creating an overtly post-colonial prequel. This 385-word fanfic evokes the spirit of Elizabeth Nunez's *Prospero's Daughter* and Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, retelling Prospero's account of the crudeness and lechery of Caliban from Caliban's own perspective. Koanju creates a belief system for Caliban that centers around the freely available bounty of the "Divine Tree" in which Ariel dwells as a captive. Prospero, on the other hand, claims sole ownership over the tree and enslaves its spirit. The subjugation that Caliban

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then experiences at Prospero's hands parallels the experience of colonized people across the world: "[Caliban] only knew that the sorcerer was taking from him, taking and taking, taking and never giving anything back. He was forced to sleep on the rocks across the island, ... forced to do labor for the sorcerer" (Koanju). Broken by this ill-treatment, Caliban falls into despair and idealizes the beautiful and kind Miranda. In this succinct fic, the author reinserts issues of counter-discourse, cultural and material appropriation, and fear of racial mixing into the original text--interrogating it adroitly through a post-colonial lens.

In much the same way, the fanfiction subgenre of "slash," or "hom[o]erotic or homosexual" reconstructions of homosocial relationships in the source text, shares many interpretive strategies with queer theory (Pugh 244). In an article on *The Merchant of Venice*, Steve Patterson notes a scholarly trend that he calls "the modern cliché ... of Antonio as a lovelorn homosexual" (9). The critical trend finds expression in "The Town after Venice," an R-rated fanfic in which Antonio contemplates the demise of his erotic friendship with Bassanio upon the other man's marriage to Portia. Antonio indulges in fantasies of Shylock sexually dominating Portia, then forces himself to remember more pleasant encounters with Bassanio before at last fantasizing that he had lost his court case and died "in such a satisfactory, final way" (Aerachnae). Like works of queer theory, this fanfic makes explicit--and erotic--the implicit, seemingly platonic affection that underlies Bassanio's conflicted loyalties between his new wife and his old friend. "The Town after Venice" not only critiques Shakespeare, though; it also comments on the slash fanfiction subgenre. This story's sharp dichotomy of brutal heterosexual versus affectionate homosexual relationships seems to corroborate a trend that Anne Kustritz notes in slash fanfiction in other genres: the privileging of the "equal" same-gender relationship over the "conquest"-centered different-gender relationship of the traditional

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romance novel (377). However, Aerachnae problematizes that simplistic construction by relegating the idealized egalitarianism and fetishized conquest to Antonio's fantasies--suggesting that the conventional narratives of slash fanfiction are equally fantastic.

A final critical response favored by fanfiction writers concerns the creation of metafictional, overtly responsive narratives. Of the works studied, 15% contained direct references to Shakespeare as an author or even to the fanfiction author him/herself. Just as Shakespeare takes care to caution his audiences that they watch fiction in such works as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, fanfiction authors display an awareness that the ultimate motive cause of every action in these plays is simply that the author wills it so. These fanfiction authors unintentionally display their works as the antidote to T.S. Eliot's statement that an artist must "surrender him[- or her]self wholly to the work"--they contend instead that the work surrenders wholly to the author (503). One such fanfic shows a particularly strong sense of the constructed nature of narrative; in "Letter to Mercutio," Tybalt apologizes for having killed the title character, but also hedges, "if you wish to lay blame put the weight on William Shakespeare. He was, technically, the one who killed you, not I. If it were not for his ... plays you would still be alive" (AkSweetCheeks). Tybalt concludes his letter with a cheeky farewell, telling Mercutio, "See you at the next performance" (AkSweetCheeks). Not only does the author make clear to the audience that the characters that she has pre-empted exist within a constructed fictional environment, she also acknowledges that her performance of them has no real power to alter the nature of Shakespeare's text.

Beyond the familiarizing, expansive, and critical functions that fanfiction writing serves for the writers, this process also gives fanfiction authors a place within extant and self-constructed communities. Through collaborative work between writers, communications

external to fanfiction-writing, and participation in the wider community of Shakespeare

recreation and analysis, writers find a network of both critics and fellow performers.

In her case study of a *Lord of the Rings* fanfiction community, Angela Thomas pointed out that one of the most distinct aspects of a functioning fanfiction-writing community was the collaborative process of constructing stories. She cited role-playing, in which authors take on the personas of distinct characters and act out their dialogue and actions, as one prominent collaborative strategy; this strategy has special significance in a fandom devoted to theatrical works, and Shakespeare roleplaying games and characters abound. On the LiveJournal web community alone, at least six distinct roleplaying communities contain Shakespeare characters, ranging from the modern-day Hamlet alternate universe of Elsinore_XX to the multi-fandom literary role-playing game Desperate Fans. In these communities, writers take Shakespeare's characters from a specific point in their source plays and introduce them into a context determined by the premise of the game. The objective of such games is twofold: first, to explore the characters outside of the play's context, and second, to do so in the company of other writers with the same interests and knowledge of source material.

In much the same way, writers of fanfiction frequently display awareness of and attachment to one another outside of the context of fanfiction writing. As writer Julie Cramer explains, these attachments occasionally dictate participation in the Shakespeare fandom--she "stopped [writing fanfiction] because ... [her friend] Zara stopped being around." In the sample group, writers August Rose and Brynhild GoUrL also interacted with one another by name; in her summary of "The Compressed *Twelfth Night*," Brynhild GoUrL said, "Blame Oni Hime [August Rose] for inspiring me," to which August Rose responded with approbation. These interactive and emotionally beneficial relationships parallel the friendly commentary and

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criticism that Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar witnessed in a case study of two

fanfiction writers who had met in middle school, but in most cases, these friendships have instead been forged online. However, fans do not always interact positively. Fanfiction author Aylaa, irritated at the preponderance of what she called "twelve-year-old girls who write about their crushes and claim it to be based on ... Romeo and Juliet," composed "Resting Unpeacefully," a fanfic in which Shakespeare rises from the grave to avenge his works. To her audience's credit, they took the joke in stride and left only positive comments on the story.

Finally, Shakespeare fanfiction allows fanfic authors to participate in the extant performative and critical discourse on Shakespeare. One author, who calls herself Liz Skywalker, claimed that her short *Hamlet* poem "No More" was inspired not merely by Shakespeare, but specifically by Ethan Hawke's portrayal of the Danish prince. In a similar display of intertextual performance, "The Secret Diary of Puck" not only references *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also borrows its style from the "Very Secret Diary" *Lord of the Rings* parodies written by Cassandra Claire--which themselves borrow their style from *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Works of fanfiction can also participate in peer-reviewed, legitimized forms of discourse; one author claims that her poem about Ophelia was published in the University of South Carolina's literary magazine (Lynch). A few fanfiction writers even purposefully draw the critical community into their works; in their homoerotic revision of *Richard II*, writers Commodorified and Angevin2 follow the story itself with 2,143 words of critical footnotes that reference Holinshed, Froissart, Foucault, and various plays and productions of Shakespeare. This careful attention to detail helps to situate these authors in relation to a critical discursive community.

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Writing Shakespeare fanfiction helps authors to familiarize themselves with the plays, expand upon the texts, engage in critical reading, and participate in an interactive community of readers and scholars. Just as mainstream academics and performers interpret and revise Shakespeare's works, so, too, do lay readers. As W.B. Worthen suggested, each new performance reconstitutes the text in new and exciting ways, and the academic community would do well to consider fanfiction in a valuable supporting role.

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Notes

ⁱ Members of the Shakespeare fandom also experience a freedom not present for members of more contemporary media fandoms; Shakespeare's plays have entered public domain, and therefore writers in the Shakespeare fandom need not fear violating copyright and facing corporate reprisals ("Originality").

ⁱⁱ A further 16% use another form of "alternate universe" to alter the endings and events of the plays themselves, which also indicates a consciousness of causative factors.

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