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### The classical canon and/as transformative work

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## The classical canon and/as transformative work

### Abstract

When Transformative Works and Cultures launched in 2008, with its focus on "transformative works, broadly conceived," my first thought, as a Classical reception scholar— that is, someone who studies transformative adaptations and rewritings of ancient Greek and Roman literary texts in the post-Classical period—was that this journal would be an ideal venue for exploring and expanding notions of transformative work by analyzing practices of transformation comparatively, across different cultural, historical, and material contexts. Eight years later, I am delighted to be editing this special issue on the relationships between Classical literature (and its afterlives) and contemporary fan work.

### Keywords

classical, work, canon, and/as, transformative

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## Editorial

### The classical canon and/as transformative work

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Editorial overview of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 21, special issue, "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work."

[0.2] *Keywords*—Classics; Fan fiction; History; Medieval literature; Mythology; Renaissance

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] When *Transformative Works and Cultures* launched in 2008, with its focus on "transformative works, broadly conceived," my first thought, as a Classical reception scholar—that is, someone who studies transformative adaptations and rewritings of ancient Greek and Roman literary texts in the post-Classical period—was that this journal would be an ideal venue for exploring and expanding notions of transformative work by analyzing practices of transformation comparatively, across different cultural, historical, and material contexts. Eight years later, I am delighted to be editing this special issue on the relationships between Classical literature (and its afterlives) and contemporary fan work.

[1.2] In *Fandom* (2007), Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington argue that the contemporary third wave of fan studies is characterized by three things: first, by a move away from a focus on "possibly the smallest subset of fan groups," active producers of fan fiction (8); second, by an expansion of the range of fannish objects beyond narrative-based fandoms

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into, for example, sport and music fandoms; and third, by the insight that "rather than being a transhistorical phenomenon, fandom emerges in historical studies as a cultural practice tied to specific forms of social and economic organization"—those of "industrial modernity" (9). Contributors to this special issue, however, contribute to the third wave of fan studies by taking fan studies in a diametrically opposite direction. We retain the focus on fan fiction but widen the historical scope of our enquiry beyond industrial modernity back through the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and the Roman Empire, all the way to the oral culture of Homer and archaic Greece.

[1.3] As is noted repeatedly by the contributors to this special issue, contemporary fan authors often compare their practice to that of Classical, medieval, and/or Renaissance authors: the Latin author Virgil is often cited as an early fan fiction writer, as are the medieval writers of stories and poems in the Arthurian legend cycle and the Renaissance playwright Shakespeare, who borrowed and recycled characters and plots from existing works. Indeed, on a narratological level, what in this issue Ahuvia Kahane calls the "conceptual isomorphisms" (¶0.1) between Classical literature and contemporary fan fiction are striking. Both are undeniably transformative modes of writing, whose authors use the techniques of allusion, appropriation, and transvaluation to expand on and/or to critique existing works; both address a highly knowledgeable and engaged audience. The existence of this conceptual isomorphism suggests a shared practice and, importantly, a shared aesthetic between fan fiction and Classical literature—that is, between one of the most delegitimized, lowest forms of cultural production in the contemporary world and one of the highest and most valued. Attending to the similarities between these two communities of practice thus enables us to invert and displace the high/low binary and to expand and nuance our model of transformative work.

[1.4] On the one hand, then, a formal isomorphism exists between Classical literary production and contemporary fan practices. On the other hand, however, there are, of course, significant differences between the historical periods and cultures discussed in this special issue. As every fan knows, context alters meaning: just as an intense moment of emotional connection between the Winchester brothers in an episode of *Supernatural* (2005–) becomes an acknowledgment of sexual attraction when the same moment is inserted into a new narrative context by a slash writer, so literary practices that might appear to be the same on a formal level are altered beyond recognition when they are repeated in

different historical, cultural, social, linguistic, material, and technological contexts. Attending to the differences between Classical literature and fan fiction can sharpen our understanding of their specificities in important ways.

[1.5] The essays in this special issue, attending to both the formal isomorphism and the historical differences between Classical literature and contemporary fan fiction, expand the possible range of objects for fan scholarship and Classical reception studies alike. The double focus of the essays produces exemplary and sometimes startling readings of a dizzying range of texts: an inscription on a little clay drinking cup from Pithekoussai in the eighth century BCE; the second-century CE treatise *On His Own Books* by the physician Galen; Sir Philip Sidney's late 16th-century *Arcadia*; a 21st-century fan story about the mythical Despoine, the daughter of Demeter and Poseidon, training *Supernatural's* Dean Winchester in BDSM. In addition, these essays also expand our theoretical and historical frameworks for understanding and analyzing contemporary transformative work and its relationship to earlier forms. The theoretical orientation of this special issue is reflected in the fact that, perhaps for the first time in *TWC's* history, all the full-length essays fall into the Theory rather than the Praxis section.

[1.6] As one might expect, this special issue contains several essays that examine the use of Classical material in contemporary transformative work—both fan work and commercially produced theatre—as well as essays that explicitly compare and contrast Classical practices with those of contemporary fan writers. Other essays intervene in our paradigms for analyzing transformative work, creating a definition broad enough to encompass both Classical and contemporary work yet historically informed enough to retain critical purchase on the specific characteristics of different communities of practice. Perhaps one of the most innovative aspects of the issue, however, is the use of concepts and theories drawn from contemporary fan practice and scholarship to illuminate medieval literature—a reversal of the usual historical and theoretical hierarchy. Here, fandom, its practices, and its vocabularies are used as a heuristic lens to open up new approaches to Classical, medieval, and early modern texts.

[1.7] The essays in this special issue thus expand both the possible range of objects for fan scholarship and Classical reception studies alike and the tools we have for thinking about the formal, aesthetic, cultural, and historical aspects of transformative work. I hope that they will lead to further scholarship in this area. In particular, I would be excited to

see more work on canonicity, representation, and power relations, especially around class and race, two very vexed areas for both Classical scholarship and fandom. While I was editing this special issue, the news broke that black actor Noma Dumezweni was cast as Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, a two-part London West End stage play scheduled to open in July 2016. The resulting #blackHermione hashtag can't help but remind a Classicist of the "black Athena" controversy that arose from the publication of Martin Bernal's book of that title in 1987. Comparisons between black Athena and black Hermione might help us deepen our understanding of both these powerful figures and of their very different historical and cultural contexts, just as the comparative work in this special issue deepens our understanding of Classical literature and of contemporary fan work.

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## 2. Theory

[2.1] Amanda Potter's essay examines differences in the way that monsters from classical myth are treated in canon and in fan fiction in new *Doctor Who* (2005–). Through close readings of the Sirens and the Minotaur in two episodes and five fan stories, Potter demonstrates that fan writers synthesize the story worlds of Doctor Who and classical mythology more fully than canon writers do, frequently drawing on richly contextualized understandings of myth to create new stories. Canon writers, by contrast, tend simply to "raid the cultural archives" (¶4.1) for monsters to fill a gap in a story, as when Stephen Moffat needed a monster at the heart of a mazelike hotel in 6.11 "The God Complex" and thought of the Minotaur.

[2.2] My own essay, like Potter's, deals with fan fiction and classical myth, but it focuses less on the use of mythological material in fan fiction and more on the theories and models of myth that are implicitly or explicitly articulated in fan fiction and fannish and scholarly meta. I show that fannish and critical appeals to myth to explain the structure and function of fan fiction are often undertheorized or dehistoricizing. Again like Potter, however, I conclude by arguing that specific fan fictional techniques, notably crossover, can be used to perform a satisfying synthesis of story worlds—which, moreover, can be understood as indeed mythic because fan fiction "intervenes not only in the narrative worlds of its source material but also in the social world of its telling" (¶4.43).

[2.3] Shannon K. Farley's essay on "Versions of Homer" uses

systems theory to understand and compare examples of transformative work from different historical and cultural contexts. Arguing that the difference between fan fiction and Classical literature is "more economic and cultural than narrative" (§13.1), her essay aligns with Keen's and Kahane's works in this issue in emphasizing the formal similarities between transformative works from different periods but also the important differences in authorial motivation and context. Through her comparisons between transformative reworkings of Homer from Pope's translation to Yuletide fan fiction, she suggests a new theoretical paradigm for transformative work that brings together translation studies, reception theory, and fan fiction studies.

[2.4] The concept of textual abuse, so often fleshed out in vivid metaphors of fan fiction as a violation of a canonical author's body (or children), is at the center of Francesca Middleton's rigorous and lively essay. She argues that we need to understand contemporary textuality and its anxieties in order to understand fan fiction, and she teases out such an understanding through a detailed and richly contextualized comparison of discourses of authorship in the Roman Imperial period and the late 20th/early 21st centuries. Where for Galen in the early second century "style and formal qualities are so significant to the text that a poorly written *Galen the Doctor* simply cannot be a Galen" (§2.12), today texts are understood both as extensions of the author's self and as themselves extensible beyond their formal and material limits (for example, through sequels or transmedia adaptations), so that fan fiction becomes a prime site for textual anxiety.

[2.5] Ahuvia Kahane's essay on canonicity once more takes up the theme of the formal similarities and cultural/historical differences between Classical literature and fan fiction as he attempts to steer a "middle road that on the one hand will highlight historical difference...but that on the other hand will expose meaningful isomorphism" (§1.3). Using theories of canonicity drawn from fan studies, Classics, and music history, he reads several material artifacts from archaic Greece in ways that do indeed expose meaningful—and startling—similarities between practices of textual poaching in this period and in our own. In the process, the essay evolves a new theory of canon as a practice of containment, developed in response to textual "surplus."

[2.6] Balaka Basu's essay uses terms and theories drawn from fandom to read selected poems from the English Renaissance period, for example characterizing Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* as a Mary Sue fic and Anna Weamys's *A Continuation to Sir Philip's Sidney's*

*Arcadia* as a curtain fic. This use of contemporary terminology for texts from a different historical period insists on continuity, rather than difference, across time; the affective connections we might make with texts from the distant past; and the importance of affective connection for the writers it describes. Basu thus elaborates a theory of fan fiction as a practice of wandering, uncontainable, queer desire that crosses both textual and temporal boundaries.

[2.7] This theory is developed further in Anna Wilson's essay on fan fiction as an affective hermeneutic—a way of knowing texts and pasts through attachment, empathy, and emotion rather than through critical detachment. Wilson grounds her theoretical argument in contemporary scholarship on noncritical and affective reading practices but also in accomplished close readings of Yuletide letters about historical real person fiction. These readings demonstrate the way in which fans negotiate different, apparently oppositional, ways of knowing the past (scholarly and fannish, detached and attached), as well as the way in which they/we use affective hermeneutics to fill gaps in historical knowledge.

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### 3. Symposium and reviews

[3.1] Tony Keen's Symposium contribution returns to the questions about fan fiction and mythology addressed by Amanda Potter and me in the Theory section, but it focuses on enumerating and analyzing the significant qualitative differences between classical literary treatments of myth and contemporary fan work. In particular, he focuses on the different status of canon in each period and the way in which the hierarchical valuation of canon over fan fiction in the 20th and 21st centuries means that fan fiction tends to fill in gaps in texts, while Classical literary texts often retell core mythic stories, thus functioning more like reboots than fan fictions. Juliette Harrison, by contrast, finds important but unexpected parallels between Achilles/Patroclus shipping in Plato's *Symposium* and Dean/Castiel shipping in *Supernatural* fandom, arguing that both function (*pace* much scholarship on slash as a counterhegemonic queer reading practice) to bring same-sex relationships more closely into line with their contemporary norms. Tisha Turk reads Robert Icke's 2015 London production of the *Oresteia* as a "transformative adaptation" enabling an "active re-engagement" (¶15.1) with the themes of Aeschylus's trilogy for a contemporary audience.

[3.2] One of the two book reviews that close out this issue, Judith May Fathallah's review of *Fandom at the Crossroads*



and *Fangasm!*, returns to the complexities of the relationship between scholarship and fandom that many of the essays in this special issue have addressed. The two books that Fathallah reviews—one more scholarly and the other more fannish in its orientation, and both by the same authors, Kathy Larsen and Lynn Zubernis—were originally designed to be a single text breaking down the scholar/fan divide, but publishing norms made this ambition impossible. Meanwhile, Bertha Chin's review of Kristin M. Barton and Jonathan Malcolm Lampley's edited collection *Fan CULTure* focuses on its historical aspects—its attention to "old" fandoms like the original *Battlestar Galactica*—and its expansion of the usual objects of analysis in fan studies beyond fan fiction and media texts to fannish interactions with LEGO, Disneyland, and sports, so that, despite its contemporary focus, it neatly complements the ambitions of this special issue.

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## 5. Work cited

Gray, Jonathan, Cornell Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds. 2007. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York: New York University Press.

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