

QUEER WRITING AND SUBVERSION: REVIEWING THE POTENTIAL OF SLASH FAN FICTION

Escrita Queer e Subversão: Revisando a Potencialidade de Fan Fiction Slash

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ABSTRACT: Slash fan fiction has been a focus of scholarly attention since the inception of Fan Studies in the 1970s. The main claim surrounding slash fan fiction concerns the queer and subversive motivations and potentials it is believed to actualize. In light of this, we have analyzed fifteen of the most popular works of slash fan fiction written by fans of the television series *Supernatural* (2005), *Sherlock* (2010), and *Teen Wolf* (2011), in order to discuss the perceived relationships between slash fan fiction and queer subversion.

KEYWORDS: Fan fiction. Slash. Fandom. Queer. Homonormativity.

RESUMO: *Fan fiction* slash (ou ficção de fãs do tipo slash) vem sendo um dos focos do campo de Estudos de Fãs desde a década de 1970. Os principais argumentos sobre *fan fiction slash* dizem respeito às motivações e aos potenciais subversivos e *queer* que essas obras supostamente efetivam. Com isso em mente, o presente trabalho analisou quinze das mais populares obras de slash escritas por fãs das séries de televisão *Supernatural* (2005), *Sherlock* (2010) e *Teen Wolf* (2011) a fim de discutir as percepções das relações entre *fan fiction slash* e subversão *queer*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ficção de fãs. Slash. Fandom. Queer. Homonormatividade.

1 Introduction

In Fan Studies, the term *slash* is deployed to describe a genre of fan stories positing “homoerotic affairs between series protagonists” (JENKINS, 1992, p. 192). Since its first iterations in the 1970s, slash has grown into a phenomenon of both fannish and scholarly activity. Whereas then slash was published and distributed in fan zines (JENKINS, 1992)²,

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² The first stand-alone slash zine was printed in 1976 and developed the Kirk/Spock relationship, from the television series *Star Trek*. K/S Zine database compiled by Jenna Sinclair and available at: <http://www.beyonddreamspress.com/database.htm>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

nowadays slash fan fiction is posted and stored in online forums and archives, such as *Live Journal*, *FanFiction.net*, and *Archive of Our Own*. As both a fan practice and the result of such, slash is believed to involve queer modes of reading and writing, potentially creating queer spaces through the deliberate metatextual reimagining and transformation of existing source texts (WILLIS, 2006). Queer, as per the tradition of Fan Studies, is understood as both an umbrella term for LGBTQIA+ sexual identities and as a descriptor for a wide range of experiences that go against the hegemonic grain. Although the former understanding is not without its complications—for the use of umbrella terms to encompass a range of varying identities runs the risk of flattening these into a deceptively uncomplicated monolith—slash scholarship is perhaps less concerned with specific identities than it is with the ways in which non-heterosexual experiences are depicted within these fan works, as well as with how these depictions fit within notions of subversion.

Authors who studied slash in the past have mainly been concerned with framing hegemonic or subversive creative/interpretive modes according to their understanding of heteronormativity (NG and RUSSO, 2017). These authors assume that slash fan fiction works against heteronormativity through the collective rejection of heterosexual experiences and foregrounding of queer imagination. In light of that, the goal of this work is to analyze fifteen of the most popular works of slash fan fiction posted to the *Archive of Our Own* in order to understand if and how they reflect the queer potentials scholars and fans have believed slash to actualize.

2 Slash, the Queer, and the Homonormative

As we have stated previously, slash has been a focus of scholarly attention since the very inception of the field, dating back from the works of Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith (1986), as well as Joanna Russ (1985), who analyzed the stories revolving around the *Star Trek* franchise. In this case, fan fiction authors portrayed a romantic relationship between Kirk and Spock. “Spirk” (the “relationship name” of this particular couple in slash idiom) is considered the founding paradigm of the genre by the highly influential works of Henry Jenkins (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) and Constance Penley (1997).

However, even though these authors share the same object of study, their assumptions

diverge when explaining the drives and motivations of the slash community. Lamb and Veith's (1986) "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and 'Star Trek' Zines" posits that slash was written by heterosexual women trying to imagine an "ideal" relationship, as they longed for "true love and authentic intimacy [that] can exist only between equals" (p. 99). According to this view, slash fan fiction directly responds to the lack of engaging female characters in television and to women's submissive status in society. Since equality could not be obtained in an asymmetrical relationship between a stronger (male) pole that bears representation and autonomy, and a weaker (female) pole that lacks both attributes, slash authors were finding refuge in the ideal of male/male romance. This interpretation veers away from matters of *sexuality* and *sexual identity*: they claim slash fan fiction should not be regarded as homosexual literature since it does not intend to portray "real" same-gender relationships, but to create an ideal, androgynous repository for love and affection, a refuge from society's usual division of power. Lamb and Veith emphasize the genre as a product of the *female* imaginary: in their view, the homoaffective components would be merely incidental stand-ins for women's aspirations.

This reading is contested by Penley (1997), Willis (2006), Hayes and Ball (2009), and Neville (2018), who are not willing to disregard the fact that the characters featured in slash stories are indeed *men* — and *queer* men at that. They highlight that this kind of fiction has the potential to challenge the hegemonic understanding of sexual roles and gender identity, as it crafts a space distinct from the heterosexual realm. Hayes and Ball, for instance, have looked at online communities devoted to *Harry Potter* slash stories, and wonder if the genre might allow writers and fans to explore their particular desires and experiences through fiction and help them better understand the political implications of this act. This approach argues that slash has an inherently political function, because it foments the clash between hegemonic heteronormativity, as a system that enforces the dominance of heterosexual practices and codes (WARNER, 1991), and the queer. If slash portrays homoeroticism, and heteronormativity depends, by definition, on the exclusion of homoeroticism as accepted practice, slash in itself—heedless of the specifics of its content—might be a challenge to heteronormative constraints.

Ng and Russo (2017) further argue that the field of slash studies employs the notion of queer both in identitarian terms and as an opposition to that which is heteronormative, similarly to how Halperin (1995) describes queer as being "by definition whatever is at odds

with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (p. 62). Russo (2018) goes on to highlight that slash often features queer world-making, which "challenges—but also, to put it positively, offers alternatives to—dominant ideas about identity, sex, and relationships" (p. 155), pointing out that slash scholarship has grown to foreground issues of subversion and resistance.

The main point of divergence between these authors lies in their interpretation regarding slash's political implications. Lamb and Veith focus on the private, symbolic strategies fan fiction writers and readers deploy to cope with the fact of inequality between genders. Seeing slash from this prism highlights its conciliatory and non-conflictual nature. The opposite view is to look at slash as a source of political dissidence, in terms of group practices and organizations, and of a reexamination of queer identity.

The assumptions discussed so far converge in one important way: they allow us to question whether or not particular slash stories end up producing the *normativization of homoaffective relationships according to heterosexual standards*. In other words, even though we have fiction about homosexual relationships, the structure of these stories still might reproduce heterosexual norms in everything else. For instance, they may still rely on the primacy of romance, structured by monogamous relationships which ideally culminate in marriage and children. By simply exchanging a female/male pair with a male/male, but keeping everything else intact, we reach the concept of *homonormativity*.

Homonormativity implies that homoaffective relationships only differ from their heterosexual counterparts in the gender of the participants. The critique of homonormativity argues that non-heterosexuality can partake in sustaining heteronormative institutions and values, such as traditional marriage, gender roles, and family dynamics, as well as domesticity and consumption (DUGGAN, 2003). Moreover, it highlights the idealization of heterosexuality as "emotionality plus sexuality" in which sex exists "for the sake of love" (ROSQVIST and ANDERSSON, 2015, p. 33). Because of this, the focus of homoaffective narratives on love could be said to function as a way of making homoaffective relationships more palatable within a normative context. The critique of homonormativity goes hand in hand with the critique of the idea of *assimilation* (SULLIVAN, 2003), the argument that, when speaking of sexual identity, there should be a foregrounding of how homo- and heterosexual people are similar, rather than how they are different. While queer, as previously discussed, is understood as a counter-

hegemonic framework that informs ways of reading/interpreting, writing, and living, the desire to assimilate is informed by a reaffirmation of the hegemonic framework. A desire, thus, which goes against slash's resistant efforts.

3 Methodology

Created by and for fans in 2007, the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) intends "to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms."³ The Archive of Our Own (AO3), one of their major projects, is a fan-created unrestricted archive that currently hosts over 7 million fan works and over 3 million registered users.⁴ Since 2013, AO3 user *centreoftheselights* has been gathering data for a project titled "AO3 Ship Stats"⁵, in which she compiles a yearly list of the one hundred most popular relationship tags on the Archive; as of 2020, 68 out of the overall top 100 relationships on the Archive are M/M (male/male) slash, with the top three having remained the same since the start of the project in 2013. According to her work, *Supernatural* (2005)'s Dean Winchester/Castiel, *BBC Sherlock* (2010)'s Sherlock Holmes/John Watson, and *Teen Wolf* (2011)'s Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski have been the three most popular relationship tags on the Archive since at least 2013.

For the purpose of this work, the five most popular fan stories under each of these three tags have been analyzed. The popularity of the stories has been asserted through the use of the Archive's filtering system, which allows users to sort works by the number of hits, kudos⁶, comments, or bookmarks, as well as by the dates of posting and uploading. While hits, comments, and bookmarks do not necessarily imply fans' approval of the story or complicity with its contents, it is widely understood within the context of *Archive of Our Own* users that that kudos represent fandom approval. Thus, for the purpose of this work, the stories

³Available at <https://archiveofourown.org/about>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

⁴Available at <https://www.transformativeworks.org/the-archive-of-our-own-reaches-seven-million-fanworks/>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

⁵Available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/25671457/chapters/62325097#workskin>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

⁶ A "hit" is obtained when a reader opens the text and reads it partially or in full. A "kudo" is the equivalent of actively "liking" a story, or giving it a "thumbs up".

considered most popular for each of the selected fandoms are the ones to have received the largest numbers of kudos.

The five works deemed most popular among the Sherlock Holmes/John Watson fandom on the Archive are titled, respectively: “The Internet Is Not Just For Porn”⁷, “Nature and Nurture”⁸, “What Meets the Eye”⁹, and stand there at the edge of my affection”¹⁰, and “Performance In a Leading Role”¹¹. Under the Stiles Stilinski/Derek Hale tag, the most popular are “Lock All The Doors Behind You”¹², “Stilinski's Home for Wayward Wolves”¹³, “Darling It Is No Joke”¹⁴, “DILF”¹⁵, and “Every Step You Take”¹⁶. For Dean Winchester/Castiel, the five stories with the highest number of kudos are “Twist and Shout”¹⁷, “Dean Doesn’t Listen to Eurythmics”¹⁸, “Revealed”¹⁹, “An Exercise In ‘Worthless’”²⁰, and “A Room of One’s Own”²¹.

The selected works of slash fan fiction have been analyzed with a focus on features that may point to a foregrounding of homonormative imaginations, such as the primacy of marriage

⁷ Written by cyerus and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/304382>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

⁸ Written by earlgreytea68 and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/729134>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

⁹ Written by worldaccordingtofangirls and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/347350>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹⁰ Written by coloredink and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/187762>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹¹ Written by Mad_Lori and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/225563/chapters/341590>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹² Written by entanglednow and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/522776>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹³ Written by owlpostagain and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/822737>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹⁴ Written by thehoyden and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/399194>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹⁵ Written by twentysomething and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/487739>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹⁶ Written by Nokomis and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/454948/chapters/781487>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹⁷ Written by gabriel and standbyme, available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/537876/chapters/955188>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹⁸ Written by Annie D (scaramouche), available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/74460>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

¹⁹ Written by Valinde (Valyria), available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/1085028/chapters/2182033>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

²⁰ Written by beastofthesky and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/535676>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

²¹ Written by NorthernSparrow and available at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/1417834/chapters/2978790>. Last accessed on July 1st 2021.

as a consolidation of love, the mimicking of traditional gender roles, nuclear family dynamics, and a centering on the notions of domesticity and reproduction.

4 Discussion and Results

The analysis of the fifteen selected works showed that despite scholarly assumptions regarding how slash challenges hegemony through the rejection of heteronormativity, the majority of these stories still depend on the reproduction of gender roles and nuclear family dynamics, as well as on the centering of marriage and domesticity.

An exception to this was the *Supernatural* fan fiction. Perhaps in accordance to Sara Gwenllien Jones's (2002) argument that fictional genres such as science fiction and fantasy lend themselves more easily to the queer-worldmaking of slash fan fiction due to the pre-existing de-centering of heteronormative institutions in their diegesis, *Supernatural* fan fiction does not appear to be particularly homonormative. Out of the five selected *Supernatural* works, only two—"Revealed" and "Twist and Shout"—give particular focus to the mimicking of gendered dynamics and roles, and none appear to find in marriage and/or reproduction a consolidation for neither love nor desire.

The reproduction of heteronormative gendered dynamics is found, however, in all five of the selected *Teen Wolf* stories. They feature the common fandom trope of "Pack Mom Stiles Stilinski", a self-appointed title which refers to a depiction of the character in the role of the caretaker for the rest of the ensemble. To this end, the character of Stiles Stilinski is constructed to embody normatively feminine traits, such as emotional intelligence, a particular affinity for putting others before himself, for managing the other characters' home environment as well as their emotions and expectations. He is an antithesis to the other half of the pairing, as the characterization of Derek is often centered around brute force, the absence of emotional intelligence and an unwillingness to create affective bonds with the remaining characters, doing so only through Stiles.

These are most prominently illustrated by *owlpostagain's* "Stilinski's Home for Wayward Wolves", in which the pack grows together under Stiles's care. Throughout the story, Stiles often describes the other characters by comparing them to children in need of his attention; he entertains them, cooks for them, talks them through their troubles and resolves

conflict through sensible, emotional means that he is said to have acquired from his own mother. As the story's central theme is shown to be the development of family ties within the context of their pack, there is a frequent repetition of how this construction relies on the presence of both a mother and a father figure. "I'm just saying maybe you need me. Maybe I kind of need you too. And maybe the pack needs both of us," says Stiles, as the fic draws to a close, pointing to how a romantic relationship between him and Derek may work as the foundation for their found family.

Interestingly, in the case of Stiles Stilinski/Derek Hale fan fiction, there seems to be a degree of self-awareness in relation to how fans' portrayal of the M/M pairing restates gender and sexual normativity. Despite having started as a tongue-in-cheek portmanteau, "Pack Mom Stiles" is a trope frequently used to mean just that, featuring not a critique of normative gender roles, but a deliberate (albeit possibly ironic) reiteration. Although the fulfilling of gendered family roles is most explicitly notable in the aforementioned story, the trend of Stiles and Derek working as opposites who must complement each other in their assigned roles to the group and family dynamics they are part of remains a feature of most selected *Teen Wolf* fan fiction; *entanglednow's* "Lock All the Doors Behind You" relies on Stiles once again being placed in a caretaker position as he must protect Derek not through brutal strength but through his care after he turns feral, and *twentysomething's* "DILF" once again restates Stiles's proficiency as someone who thrives in providing an emotionally stable center for Derek to rely on.

In a similar manner, the selected *Sherlock* fan fiction relies on the mimicking of these heteronormative dynamics. Because Sherlock Holmes is characterized in the show—and in previous iterations—as a character of low emotional intelligence, fan fiction seems to attempt to balance this out by depicting John Watson as the embodiment of such trait, which often-case leads to the character's fulfilling of other normatively gendered roles. Unlike the works from the previous two fandoms, the analyzed Sherlock Holmes/John Watson stories put particular emphasis on the notion of marriage and reproduction as obligatory final destinations, marking the consolidation of the characters' sexual and/or romantic relationships. We highlight, among the *Sherlock* works, the stories "Nature and Nurture" and "Performance In a Leading Role", as both are long stories—stretching to over 200,000 and 150,000 words

respectively—which explicitly culminate in the actualization of desire through marriage and assimilation.

Written by user earlgreytea68, “Nature and Nurture” revolves around Sherlock Holmes and John Watson as the characters develop a romantic relationship and start a family. The events of the story unfold due to the appearance of Sherlock's clone as a baby, which the pair ends up raising as a child of their own. The premise itself suggests that the story relies on traditional family dynamics, as the pair’s feelings for one another develop as they each fulfill their roles as caretakers for the child. As previously mentioned, Sherlock embodies normatively masculine traits as the father figure; throughout the narrative, Holmes is less emotionally present, often able to leave for work while Watson must stay home to care for the child and provide a sense of stability. Along with the reiteration of normative gender dynamics, the story likewise rests on the notion of marriage as a consolidation of love and of their status as a family, while the idea of love itself works to make desire acceptable in the eyes of the characters, as illustrated, for example, by the following passage:

“Because it wasn’t worth discussing. Ordinary people find sex to be so fascinating. It’s so simplistic, biologically speaking. Who has time to let their brains be so addled by something so ridiculous? I’ve had sex, I never saw the point.”

“No. I never saw the point. And then I met you. And suddenly I understood, why so many people all around me placed such importance on sex.”²²

The foregrounding of love as a requirement for sexual desire is a frequent motif in the selected *Sherlock* stories, tying back to Rosqvist and Andersson’s (2015) understanding of how the focus on love in queer narratives works to morally justify and make palatable same-gender desire in ways that may serve to assimilate it into hegemonic modes of living.

Written by Mad_Lori, “Performance in a Leading Role” likewise reaffirms the role of love as a key point in the characters’ understanding of desire and sexuality, and of marriage as the only imaginable consolidation of such emotion. The narrative, which imagines Sherlock and John as actors cast in an independent drama in which they are set to play each other’s romantic interests, repetitively leans on discussions that place emphasis on the importance of marriage,

²² Excerpt from chapter 17.

and moves towards its ending by having its characters discuss their own journeys, a session which features the following passage:

“One day I looked at Sherlock and realized that I was in love with him. Does that change who I am? No. That potential must have been within me all along. I’ll leave the debate to the philosophers. I’m content to be married to him, and grateful to be a citizen of a country that allows me to be.”

5 Queer Subversive Potentials

The results discussed above suggest that there might be a number of conflicting impulses embedded in the writing and reading of slash stories. On the one hand, the negotiation of meaning involved in slash fans’ reimagining of a source text devoid of explicit queer relationships reveals a collective desire to experience an articulation of non-heterosexuality in popular media. The ways in which slash fans transform their chosen texts so the stories mirror their desired non-heterosexual subjectivities should, to some degree, be understood as queer articulations. The finding and/or the forcible creation of fissures in the continuity of texts which are produced and read under hegemonic constraints highlight the existence of alternatives to heterosexuality. That these articulations may be understood as queer due to their limited rejection of the hegemonic primacy of heterosexuality, however, evidences the need to complicate how the very concept of queer may work as a descriptor and propulsor.

As previously seen, existing literature on slash fan fiction is often centered on notions of resistance and subversion, which are articulated through the creation of queer fiction. The fiction present in slash is queer insofar as it privileges depictions of non-heterosexuality in multiple levels: sexual, romantic, erotic. It should be noted that heterosexuality, under the domain of heteronormativity, is not so much comprised of sexual, romantic and erotic experiences in their most literal understanding as it is of experiences intrinsically bound to institutionalized powers (SULLIVAN, 2003). With this in mind, the opposite may be true as well—the understanding of non-heterosexuality may require us to recognize the powers and intentions that pervade sexual, romantic and erotic desires. This understanding is not necessary to the imagination of queerness as simply non-heterosexuality, which may work under the assumption that to reject its most overt facet – its matching sexual, romantic, and erotic

dynamics – is resistance enough. It is, however, necessary to the understanding of queer as it is used by slash scholarship, centered on the subversive potentials the queer fictions of slash actualize.

The notion of subversion and resistance, pivotal to slash literature, is likewise essential to the articulation of what it is to be queer. Plenty of authors have worked to both answer and complicate this question, highlighting the possible pitfalls of employing queer to describe and delineate a wide range of subjects, experiences, objects, etc. which in totalizing or non-totalizing ways may articulate some alternative to the dominant (SULLIVAN, 2003). When dominance is understood in terms of hegemony—a deeply pervasive thread which weaves all lived experience under its domain—it complicates these matters by limiting the possibilities of opposition and subversion, while at the same time allowing space for the notion that even the smallest movements may be said to run against the grain. The analysis of works described as queer for their depictions of non-heterosexual sexual, romantic and erotic experiences, but that nonetheless ground these depictions within the larger field comprised of the institutions of heterosexuality, reveals a particular kind of incongruence. Featuring the transposing of M/M relationships into the mold of heteronormative gendered roles and dynamics, as well as into institutions such as marriage and the nuclear family, the selected slash stories are marked by a dissonance that lies in the complicated negotiation between potential and actualization. This suggests that the actualization of subversion may require a critical articulation grounded more in the complex machinery (or types of machinery) of heterosexuality than in a simplistic imagination of their rejection.

6 Conclusion

The resistant and subversive potentials of slash fan fiction have been in the crux of slash scholarship since the inception of the field. In dialogue with the assumptions around the actualization of this potentiality, our work analyzed fifteen popular works of slash fan fiction from the three largest fandoms on the *Archive of Our Own* in order to understand their inner workings. It has not been the purpose of this work to provide an answer on what is to be queer, nor to evaluate whether the works of slash fan fiction which are read by the largest number of readers on the *Archive* can be deemed “queer enough”. Rather, we purposefully intended to

question the relationship between popular slash fan fiction and subversion. We suggest that the actualization of queer potential requires an articulated, critical effort to recognize not the ways in which slash fan fiction—or in fact any text—may arguably be subversive, but the ways in which it may not, lingering on the facets that reveal the impossibility or, at the very least, the *improbability* of subversion. Through this lens, the process and the result of queering that is configured by hegemony demands an understanding of the many hands, all at work in simultaneous and contradictory ways, that make it so that the queering itself may be shaped likewise.

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