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Rewriting the Romance: Emotion Work and Consent in Arranged Marriage Fanfiction

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore arranged marriage slash fanfiction stories as a space where marriage as an institution is challenged and alternative discourses around sexual consent in unequal intimate relationships are generated.

Fanfiction is amateur fiction based on existing media. Within fanfiction, the arranged marriage trope bears significant resemblance to the marriage of convenience romance novel trope. I argue that by focusing on relationships which involve disparities of social standing, arranged marriage fanfiction stories explore marriage as an institution which reproduces and amplifies inequalities. As a result, they cast marriage consummation – and sex within marriage generally – as an at least potentially coercive practice. Arranged marriage fanfiction stories retain some key elements of the romance genre, notably the Happily Ever After ending and the sex scene (often the marriage consummation) which doubles as the emotional climax. However, they make key changes to how the relationship between the main characters develops, particularly how the emotion work necessary to make the relationship work is divided between the partners. It is these changes which allow arranged marriage fanfiction stories to challenge dominant discourses of sexual consent within marriage and propose an alternative view of how consent within unequal relationships can be made meaningful.

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In this paper, I examine arranged marriage slash fiction – a sub-genre of fanfiction which focuses on same-gender relationships and is widely acknowledged within the online

fanfiction community to be a close cousin of, and share readership with, Regency-setting romance novels, particularly those featuring marriages of convenience. Using theories of meaning creation in fanfiction to show the intertextual relationships between arranged marriage slash fiction and marriage of convenience romance novels, I explore differences and similarities between the two, with particular reference to sexual consent in the often unequal arranged relationships they portray. I use the theoretical framework of emotion work (Hochschild 551) to understand the development of the relationship between the main characters in marriage of convenience romance novels and arranged marriage fanfiction stories. Emotion work is work performed in a private context such as the family (as opposed to emotional labour, which is performed in public settings and particularly the workplace) to manage one's feelings and provide emotional support to others. I argue that by focusing on relationships which involve disparities of social standing and often financial dependence of one partner on the other, arranged marriage fanfiction stories explore marriage as an institution which reproduces and amplifies inequalities. This exploration includes the legal and formal aspects of marriage, as well as the social and emotional ones. As a result, they cast the practice of marriage consummation – and sex within marriage more generally – as an at least potentially coercive practice. Furthermore, while arranged marriage fanfiction stories retain some key elements of the romance genre, notably the Happily Ever After (HEA) ending and the sex scene (often the marriage consummation scene) which doubles as the emotional climax (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 165), they also make key changes to how the relationship between the main characters develops, particularly how the emotion work necessary to make the relationship work is divided between the partners. It is these changes which allow arranged marriage fanfiction stories to challenge dominant discourses of sexual consent within marriage and propose an alternative view of how consent within unequal relationships can be made meaningful. This practice within the fanfiction community indicates a dissatisfaction with elements of the marriage of convenience romance novel, particularly how issues of power inequalities in romantic relationships are handled. Fanfiction provides a space where this dissatisfaction can not only be explored but the perceived issues set to rights.

Romance, work, emotion

As a popular genre predominantly written and read by women (“Romance Readers”), romance novels are a contested space in feminist scholarship and cultural studies. Mainstream romance novels have historically focused on heterosexual relationships culminating in monogamous marriage, although dedicated queer presses have published lesbian and gay romance since the 1970s, and more recently we have seen a proliferation of the LGBTQ romance sub-genre facilitated by digital technologies which enable low-cost electronic publishing and small print runs (Barot). Both in these and in mainstream heterosexual romances, more open “happy for now” endings have become a more common feature (Roach, “Good Man”; *Happily Ever After* 166). Research on the romance genre often focuses on how it relates to – and enables its readers to relate to – patriarchy and gendered power structures in society. Radway, a pioneer of romance research, subtitles her chapter on the “ideal” romance novel “The Promise of Patriarchy” (119). In it, she breaks down the

narrative structure of the typical romance novel into thirteen “functions,” each based on a stage in the hero and heroine’s relationship, progressing from antagonism through the hero punishing the heroine, a rapprochement, to a final sexual and emotional union. Radway repeatedly refers to the initially cold or ambiguous hero being “tamed” by the heroine. Yet she argues that rather than through a radical change in the hero, this taming is achieved largely through a reinterpretation of his behaviour on the heroine’s part. This argument is worth quoting at length:

The romance thematizes the activity of interpretation and reinterpretation for a very good reason, then. In suggesting that the cruelty and indifference that the hero exhibits towards the heroine in the early part of the novel are really of no consequence because they *actually* originated in love and affection, the romance effectively asserts that there are other signs for these two emotions than the traditional ones of physical caresses, oral professions of commitment, and thoughtful care. When the heroine retrospectively reinterprets the hero’s offensive behavior as equivalent to expressions of his basic feeling for her, the reader is encouraged to engage in the same rereading process in order to understand properly what she is offered daily in her own relationship (Radway 151, emphasis in original).

Modleski sees a similar role for romance novels in enabling women to accommodate patriarchy, but crucially argues that romance fiction helps readers actively adapt to (rather than passively accept) the harms of patriarchal society by enabling them to recode men’s violent and aggressive behaviours as expressions of love. In her study of Harlequin romances, she focuses on the transformation of the heroine (and analogously, the reader), arguing that she can only achieve happiness “by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts, her ‘pride,’ and – nearly – her life” (29).

As popular romance studies has evolved as a field, such accounts have increasingly been questioned and complicated through engagements with both romance novels themselves and their audiences. In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Regis challenges pathologising approaches to romance reading, highlighting instead the complexity and variety of works that fall within the romance genre and establishing clear generic links between works commonly considered part of the literary canon and more contemporary mass-market romance novels. She counters the argument that romance novels, through their pre-ordained “happily ever after” ending in monogamous heterosexual marriage, “extinguish” the spirited heroine and “bind” the reader in the structures of patriarchy (11). She questions the assumptions that books have the power to do this, arguing that “[r]eaders are free to ignore, skip, stop, disbelieve, dislike, reject, and otherwise read quite independently of the form” (13). Secondly, Regis says, it is not the ending in marriage that is important to romance readers and writers, but the process of overcoming the barriers and obstacles in the heroine’s path to happiness with the hero. This process takes a heroine who is already bound and frees her. Regis does concede that freedom for the heroine is provisional and constrained, unlike freedom for the hero, which is total and absolute (16). Ultimately, the heroine’s provisional, constrained freedom is achieved through the heroine’s own hard work in taming and healing the hero.

Regis's work is firmly situated in a formalist literary theory tradition with little examination of audiences' engagements with the romance genre. More recent approaches have returned to centering audiences alongside texts. Roach, for instance, has examined both the genre and its readers in an (auto)ethnographic study (*Happily Ever After*). She returns to the question of the relationship between romance and patriarchy, and picks up on the Beauty and the Beast themes of taming and healing present in many romance novels. She argues that romance novels and the readerly and writerly communities around them provide – within the limits of the tropes and conventions of the genre – a safe space for imaginative play where (predominantly) women can think through the challenges posed by patriarchy (188). Roach follows Sedgwick's "reparative reading" (Sedgwick 1) model. Sedgwick critiques what she calls "paranoid reading" (1) approaches to texts. Paranoid readings emphasise and expect negative affect, and seek to expose the underlying negative assumptions and effects of texts. By contrast, she proposes a reparative reading mode, where rather than expecting and seeking to expose negativity, a reader approaches a text with hope, open to surprise, regardless of whether that surprise may be positive or negative. Building on this, Roach argues that romance fiction performs "deep work" for women readers struggling with patriarchy. Through their guaranteed "happily ever after" ending, they provide pleasure, an escape from reality, a reparation fantasy and imagined healing. The takeaway message of contemporary romance novels, says Roach, is a simultaneous and contradictory "You can't fight patriarchy"/"You must fight patriarchy" (*Happily Ever After* 185). She identifies risk and hard work on the part of the characters as some of the essential elements of romance, noting that "giving up individuality to coupledness requires a willingness to make changes in one's life for the sake of another" (*Happily Ever After* 23). Yet Roach's analysis often glosses over how exactly this hard work is performed and how risk is taken by characters in romance novels. Here, Modleski and Radway offer a more in-depth and persuasive account of the heroine's hard work to predominantly transform herself rather than the hero – and, by extension, the absence of any such work on the hero's part. Roach herself admits that even at the end of the romance novel the "alpha hero" remains deeply embedded in patriarchy, made only safe for the heroine by his love for her (*Happily Ever After* 188).

It is this hard work, which Roach identifies as such a central element to the romance narrative, that I want to investigate further in examining how fanfiction readers and writers approach the romance trope of arranged marriage or marriage of convenience. To that end, I propose to view the "taming" of the hero which romance heroines and their fanfiction counterparts engage in through the lens of emotion work theory. Emotion work was first proposed by Hochschild (551) as the work involved in managing feelings to bring them in line with societal norms and expectations. In the original definition, emotion work is performed on the self, and is the (not necessarily successful) attempt to induce or inhibit one's feelings to make them appropriate to a particular situation. Hochschild identifies three techniques of emotion work: cognitive (attempting to change ideas or images in order to change the feelings associated with them); bodily (attempting to change physical signs of emotion); and expressive (attempting to change expressive gestures, such as smiling or frowning, to change how one feels). Erickson extends the concept to such activities performed specifically to enhance the emotional well-being of others and provide emotional support, especially in a private, family or domestic context ("Reconceptualizing" 890). Umberson et al. identify activities involved in reading others' emotions as well as managing one's own as part of emotion work (547). Erickson ("Reconceptualizing" 890, "Why Emotion

Work Matters” 349) argues that emotion work is key to perceptions of marital quality. With regards to emotion work and sexuality, Umberson et al. find that where a disparity in desire for sex is present in the relationship, women who desire less sex than their partners often perform emotion work to increase their own desire, and women in relationships with men often experience this as a one-sided effort to please their partner (550).

These experiences are reminiscent of the heroine’s emotion work in the romance novel and illustrate what Radway and Modleski mean when they talk about romance novel readers encountering and adapting to the demands of patriarchy in their own lives. Moreover, viewed through Gavey’s lens of discursively constructed expectations of women’s sexuality and sexual behaviour, especially in relationships with men (146), such experiences acquire an additional meaning. In this way, the pressure women feel to perform such “emotion work” can be seen as societal coercion, casting doubt on the meaningfulness of any consent to sexual activity given by women in these circumstances. Such expectations, often framed in the language of romance, facilitate certain courses of action and subject positions while making others unavailable. Gavey and McPhillips, for instance, argue that the wider discursive construction of what is and is not “romantic” acts as a significant barrier to women’s ability to negotiate consent and enforce boundaries around sexual activity, such as the use of condoms (355). This further underscores the power of the romance discourse within and outside the romance novel to influence not only attitudes but actions. These discursive constructions of romance and emotion work therefore may shed light on the work both the romance heroine and the romance reader (at least according to Radway and Modleski) perform to “tame” or “heal” the romance hero, and on what that means for sexual consent in often unequal romantic relationships.

Both Radway’s reinterpretation of the hero’s actions as motivated by love and Modleski’s recoding of violent or aggressive behaviours and self-subversion of the heroine can be conceptualised as emotion work. It is the heroine’s emotion work which causes the change in the typically gruff, cold, indifferent hero, and it is the reader’s emotion work that enables them to read the hero’s motivation for his gruffness, coldness, or indifference as ultimately moved by love. Of the heroine in Kathleen Woodwiss’s *Ashes in the Wind*, Radway writes:

It is in fact a combination of her womanly sensuality and mothering capacities that will magically remake a man incapable of expressing emotions or admitting dependence. As a result of her effort, he will be transformed into an ideal figure possessing both masculine power and prestige and the more ‘effeminate’ ability to discern her needs and to attend to their fulfillment in a tender, solicitous way. (127-128)

Regis also acknowledges the taming or healing dynamic through not only emotion work but also domestic work. For instance, in discussing Georgette Heyer’s *A Civil Contract*, she writes:

Jenny heals [Adam] through her careful attention to his needs and wants: she manages his households with determined efficiency, she learns the duties of being the lord’s wife. Her motive is love: she has loved him since she met him at Julia’s house as a schoolmate guest. (135)

On the romance novel character's part, these are examples of work performed in a private or domestic context to enhance another's emotional wellbeing and provide emotional support (Erickson *Reconceptualizing*). Additionally, if we accept Radway and Modleski's arguments, they become an exercise in cognitive emotion work for the reader, actively changing ideas and images in order to change the feelings associated with them (Hochschild). The arranged marriage trope in fanfiction parallels the marriage-of-convenience plot in romance novels, such as the one described by Regis above. The courtship in this variation of the romance novel genre occurs after the marriage and culminates in a declaration of love (Regis 135). Similarly to other romance novel plots, however, the heroine still often needs to tame the hero, using her beauty, charm and grace – that is, her emotion work – to soften a man known for gruffness or even cruelty.

Recasting as emotion work the heroine's taming of the hero, and (in Radway's terms) the reader's reinterpretation of the hero's callous initial behaviour as love, provides a framework through which the interactions between the protagonists in both romance fiction and fanfiction based on romance tropes can be explored. However, the romance novels studied by Radway, Modleski, Regis and, to a lesser extent, Roach are highly heteronormative. Investigating the arranged marriage trope in slash fanfiction is further complicated by the fact that the characters are of the same gender. There is a tradition in fan studies which argues that slash erases inequalities between the partners (e.g. Lamb & Veith; Russ). Yet fanfiction writers frequently incorporate and explore inequality in the relationships they write about, and the arranged marriage trope is shaped by such inequalities. In this case, however, they arise from factors other than gender, although some may nonetheless have gendered connotations. I will therefore briefly introduce the arranged marriage trope in the context of the Thor/Loki pairing based on the characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the specific stories I am basing my analysis on, before moving on to an exploration of how such stories investigate marriage as an institution which reproduces and amplifies inequalities in a number of ways.

A note on methodology

Fan studies has a history of approaching fan communities and fanfiction as social practices (e.g. Jenkins; Bacon-Smith; Kustritz), but also of looking at fanfiction as literary text using textual analysis (e.g. Derecho; Stasi). In addition, the field has a tradition of auto-ethnography (e.g. Jenkins), as many fan studies scholars are also fans themselves. These traditions are reflected in my approach to the arranged marriage fanfiction trope. My involvement with the fanfiction community as a reader and writer predates my choice of it as a site for research by decades. I therefore bring to my research a dual perspective: that of fan and that of scholar. This is reflected in my approach to both data collection and data analysis. To select stories for analysis, I followed the path any fan new to a fandom, trope or pairing may follow to find stories that are considered good or impactful by the community at large, a path I myself have followed many times as a fan. I used the technical features of the Archive of Our Own to search, sort and filter stories of interest, and immersed myself in them. I used a range of auto-ethnographic insights for this: my understanding of the technical features of the site, but also of the community's usage practices, and of dynamics and trends within the particular fandom, pairing and trope of interest. The two stories thus selected for

in-depth analysis are representative both in terms of their popularity and impact within fanfiction communities, and in representing trends and themes within fanfiction for this trope and pairing. Finally, in line with fan studies best practice and to protect the privacy of individual fans and fan authors, I have not provided complete URLs for fan works.

Loki/Thor Arranged Marriage

To investigate the arranged marriage trope and how readers and writers of fanfiction use it to explore issues of consent, I have chosen a small selection of stories from the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom, centred on the relationship between Loki and Thor. The Loki/Thor pairing is the largest pairing under the Arranged Marriage tag on the Archive of Our Own, with around 180 stories as of August 2016. The trope is popular for Thor and Loki, as in the originary works the two characters, although not related by blood, are raised as brothers and therefore are an unlikely romantic pairing. They are also antagonists, with Loki being the villain in both of Marvel's Thor movies and in *Avengers Assemble*.

My story selection for this analysis was based on ethnographic knowledge of the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom in general, and a more in-depth ethnographic exercise within the Thor/Loki pairing in particular. I immersed myself in the Thor/Loki pairing, particularly the Arranged Marriage tag on the Archive of Our Own. I traced the steps a fan new to the pairing or the trope would take, using AO3's tagging and filtering features to help me find stories of interest. I read a wide range of Thor/Loki Arranged Marriage works, as well as other readers' comments and discussions around the pairing, and this process of immersion gave me a "feel" for how writers of this particular pairing interpreted and adapted the arranged marriage trope, as well as how they worked with the characters from the originary work. I focused on five of the most popular ones (measured by "Kudos")[1] and identified common themes. I then narrowed my selection down to two complementary stories for in-depth analysis: *Bride* (themantlingdark) and *XVII* (stereobone). My ethnographic exploration of the Thor/Loki fandom and the Arranged Marriage trope enabled me to identify key ways in which the two stories were similar to and different from the originary material, as well as other fanfiction works for that pairing and within the Arranged Marriage trope. These similarities and differences are worth summarising here, as key elements of my readings of the stories arise from them.

Both *Bride* and *XVII* depart from the MCU canon[2] by having Thor and Loki grow up separately rather than be raised as brothers. In both stories, Loki is depicted as intersex, as are all Jötnar, and his gender presentation tends towards the masculine but is sometimes ambiguous. This is a common depiction of Loki in fanfiction, incorporating elements of Norse mythology not present in the MCU version, though they are to an extent present in some of the Marvel comics. It often serves to highlight Loki's otherness and associations with magic and the feminine, which complicates the power relationship between him and Thor. Both stories are told predominantly from Thor's point of view, though in *Bride*, the point of view shifts to Loki on a few occasions. It is the structure of the marriage arrangements that makes these two stories a complementary pair for analysis. In *XVII*, Loki leaves his home to marry Thor and secure a lasting peace between Jötunheim and Asgard. This is by far the more common premise of Loki/Thor arranged marriage fanfiction. Conversely, and unusually for this pairing, in *Bride* it is Thor who must leave his home to marry Loki. As in many other

Arranged Marriage fanfiction stories, these marriage arrangements, alongside other factors, give rise to significant inequality between the partners at the start of each story.

In the next section, I explore how the institution of marriage in its legal, social and emotional aspects is constructed in these stories. I focus in particular on how the marriage arrangements relate to the inequalities between the partners in a range of gendered and non-gendered ways, and what these inequalities mean for sexual consent. I then explore how the power imbalances are addressed through emotion work, and finally analyse in detail the consummation of each of the marriages and how sexual consent in the presence of power imbalances is handled in these stories.

Thor/Loki and the inequalities of marriage

Marriage as a social and legal institution has a history of constructing and legitimising gendered social inequalities. One mechanism for this is through the legal structures which codify marriage, for instance, the historical doctrine of coverture (Donovan 3) or exemptions for marriage in rape law (e.g. Smart; Donovan). Yet despite extensive reforms of the legal institution of marriage, changes in the material circumstances of women have been slower and more difficult to achieve (Smart 160). Discourse, and the subject positions it makes available or inaccessible, may account for some of this discrepancy, as Gavey argues:

Those discourses which are commensurate with widely shared commonsense understanding of the world are perhaps most powerful in constituting subjectivity, yet their influence can most easily remain hidden and difficult to identify and, therefore, resist (92).

The subject position of “wife” as constructed in discourses of marriage is particularly relevant here with regards to inequality and sexual consent. Gavey, for instance, shows how sex is still constructed as the “duty” of a wife, and how this discourse influences her interview participants’ perceptions of themselves, constructions of their own identity, and their material experience of sex within marriage. With this in mind, it is worth examining how arranged marriage fanfiction stories depict marriage as an institution, including the possible inequalities it produces, reproduces and amplifies.

While gender has historically been a key structuring element of marriage, it is not the primary source of power differentials in arranged marriage slash fanfiction relationships. There are, however, gendered elements to how both Thor and Loki are presented and it is worth exploring those briefly, particularly as they relate to other inequalities and are reproduced and amplified by the marriage arrangements. Lamb and Veith argue that the primary effect of slash is to remove power imbalances from sexual and romantic relationships by focusing on same-gender relationships. They also note that in slash fanfiction, characters who are men – often extremely masculine men – in the originary work acquire androgynous characteristics (243).

This kind of androgynous characterisation is present for both Thor and Loki in all five of the stories reviewed, and particularly in the two chosen for in-depth analysis. Thor is most obviously feminised in *Bride*, where even the title associates him with the feminine role in a heterosexual marriage. In this story, Thor is both younger and – unusually for fanfiction

about this pairing – physically smaller than Loki. While Loki is heir to the throne of Jötunheim, Thor’s arranged marriage with Loki precludes him from inheriting the throne of Asgard which will pass to his younger brother: an arrangement which evokes the practice of male-preference primogeniture, serving to further feminise Thor. He is also forced to leave his home and join the family and household of his husband. While getting dressed for the wedding – in a white gown – Thor is explicitly described as feeling “feminine” and “delicate,” particularly compared to the frost giants surrounding him. Conversely, Loki in this story has a reputation for coldness and cruelty, adding to Thor’s apprehension about the marriage. These elements evoke the first of Radway’s narrative functions: “the heroine’s social identity is destroyed” (134). Through his removal from his home and family, therefore, Thor here is cast in the heroine role, while Loki’s coldness and cruelty mark him out as a romance hero. Through the mechanism of side-by-side reading (Derecho 73), this gendering of the characters therefore clearly evokes popular romance novel tropes and sets expectations for the reader based on the generic conventions of romance novels many fanfiction readers are familiar with: by the end of the story Thor will have tamed Loki and transformed him into a loving and caring husband. Additionally, these gendered inequalities within the context of the arranged marriage also highlight the structural inequalities of the marriage itself, as Thor leaves behind his own family to formally become part of Loki’s, and as the settlement of property and titles is a key aspect of the marriage arrangement.

Yet the characterisation of Thor as feminine heroine and Loki as masculine hero is complicated in *Bride* in two key ways. Firstly, Loki himself is shown to have feminine characteristics as well as masculine ones. On a bodily level, Loki, like all Jötnar, is intersex.[3] He is also physically smaller than other Jötnar, and is known for his intelligence, gift for magic, and manipulateness: characteristics frequently associated with femininity. He is described as both beautiful and handsome. Secondly, on several occasions factors which make Thor feel feminine and vulnerable in the context of his wedding are shown to have gender-neutral or masculine associations in other contexts. When Thor objects to wearing the white wedding “dress,” his mother, Frigga, explains that Loki will also be wearing a white gown. When Thor balks at the expectation to be nude for part of the wedding ceremony, Frigga again re-contextualises this for him by pointing out that in Asgard Thor is frequently nude, for instance in public baths. This complication of the characters’ gender coding and the social structures around them already signals a departure from the generic conventions and power imbalances of the romance novel. This “repetition with a difference” (Derecho 73) encourages a side-by-side reading where the differences between the fanfiction story and the romance novel trope are highlighted. Such departures in turn are a key tool for fanfiction writers and readers to explore and challenge dominant discourses about power, gender and sexuality in romance novels.

As *Bride* can be seen as part of three different archives – those of romance novels, arranged marriage fanfiction stories, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe – additional layers of meanings are created through other side-by-side readings, with both the MCU and other works of fanfiction. The story is fairly unusual within Thor/Loki arranged marriage fanfiction in that it casts Thor in the less powerful position within the relationship. The author’s notes which accompany the story indicate that this is a deliberate choice to explore the change in the power dynamics between the characters. More frequently, it is Thor who starts out as the more powerful partner in the relationship, as is the case in *XVII*: he is the heir of Asgard, with Loki having to leave his family and make a life for himself in a realm

strange to him. Ambiguous or androgynous gendering of both Thor and Loki is also present in *XVII*. Loki's physical beauty is emphasised, as are his magic use, intelligence, and reputation for being manipulative. Yet it is Thor who is too nervous to eat at their wedding feast, while Loki is also described as muscled and a competent fighter. Both *Bride* and *XVII* therefore rework their central characters – men in the ordinary work – into more androgynous versions of themselves, incorporating characteristics associated with both femininity and masculinity. However, far from entirely removing inequality from the relationship, as Lamb and Veith would argue (238), these stories use the arranged marriage trope and related romance novel conventions to introduce other power imbalances between the characters.

There are several other factors, both internal and external to the relationship, through which power differentials are established between Thor and Loki in the two stories. Differences in physical size and strength, for instance, are used to establish – and sometimes negate – power differentials between the characters. In both *Bride* and *XVII*, Thor does not meet Loki before the wedding and expects him to be a giant like other Jötunar. This causes him significant anxiety, as this extract from *Bride* shows:

The Frost Giants that Thor sees on his way through the palace leave him shaken.

I'm going to be torn apart, he thinks.

Even in *XVII*, where Thor in many ways has the upper hand in the marriage arrangement, he is concerned about Loki being a frost giant:

'This is your duty,' [Frigga] says. 'I know it is hard, my darling, but it is for the good of our realm.'

Thor knows that, he does, but it doesn't stop it from being hard. Jötun are not an ugly people by any means, but they are giants. And they are cold. Thor doesn't see how anyone can expect him to marry one. He doesn't say this, but his mother seems to sense it anyway.

It is only once he meets Loki that Thor's perception of the power imbalances between them begins to change, and he is palpably relieved in both stories. While Thor is generally depicted as physically stronger than Loki in MCU fanfiction, in both *Bride* and *XVII* Loki is presented as a competent fighter. In addition to that, Loki is a powerful magic user, and often uses his magic and intelligence to get his way. Finally, differences in age and experience play a significant role in *Bride*. The author's notes accompanying the story specify that Thor is 18 and Loki is 27 in this setting, and this age difference is reflected in the characters' behaviours, attitudes and even physicality throughout the story. Even after he finds out that Loki is not a giant, Thor continues to be intimidated by his physical size, repeatedly reflecting that he himself is not "fully grown" or as muscular as Loki. Loki is also more sexually experienced than Thor: although neither character has had any sexual experience with a partner, Loki's

magic allows him to create doubles of himself which he indicates he has done for sexual reasons in the past.

The arranged marriage trope allows external factors such as political considerations, marriage laws and customs, and the characters' relationships with their families to play a significant role. In *XVII*, Loki's marriage to Thor means that he is no longer considered a Jötun: he will not be able to return to Jötunheim or see his family ever again, and he is completely dependent on Thor for everything from basics like food and shelter to emotional support. Conversely in *Bride*, while Thor has to leave Asgard and is somewhat dependent on Loki, his parents repeatedly reassure him that they will continue to visit and support him. Therefore the consequences of a failed marriage for Loki in *XVII* are much greater than those for Thor in *Bride*, which in turn exacerbates the power differential. When read side by side with both romance novels and an understanding of the history of marriage laws and customs in Western cultures, these stories then clearly cast marriage as an institution characterised by and potentially reproducing and exacerbating inequalities. Marriage here is not the "happily ever after," but rather the beginning of a process of negotiation, with significant personal and social risks attached to failure of such negotiation. While Roach sees risk-taking in the name of love as a key element of the romance novel (*Happily Ever After* 24), the risks in arranged marriage fanfiction stories are often taken out of a lack of options instead, as the personal, social and legal repercussions of failure – a life spent in an unhappy and unloving marriage, social isolation, or loss of legal status and the financial means for survival – are simply too great. In the face of these risks and power differentials within the relationship, the characters' options are limited.

There are, therefore, clear power imbalances in Thor and Loki's marriage in both *Bride* and *XVII*. They are caused by factors internal to the characters – physical size and strength, age, experience – as well as exacerbated by ones external to them – marriage customs and access to material and emotional support outside the relationship. While both characters are given androgynous characteristics, the overall picture of their relationship is still one of inequality: more specifically, inequality similar to that in marriage of convenience romance novels (Regis 135). It can be argued that at the outset of the relationship, Thor has considerably more power than Loki in *XVII*, and Loki has more power in *Bride*. The construction of marriage as a sexual relationship, as evidenced by the emphasis on marriage consummation I shall explore further below, puts additional pressures on the partner with less power. Even though these inequalities are only partially structural within the setting, they cast doubt on the ability of the less powerful character to give consent to sexual relations in a meaningful way. In the next section, I turn to the emotion work framework to examine how such power imbalances are negotiated within the relationships in the two stories, how the happily ever after ending is achieved, and what this means for sexual consent.

Emotion Work and the Happily Ever After

The Happily Ever After, or at least Happy For Now, ending is an essential feature of the romance novel genre (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 165). The hero and the heroine have taken risks, worked hard, the heroine has tamed the hero, and they finally come together in

a mutually loving relationship, often a marriage. In marriage of convenience stories, of course, the marriage itself has already happened, but it is transformed from a purely transactional arrangement into one of love (Regis 135). It is useful to view the way this transformation is achieved in romance novels as a result of the heroine's emotion work. Emotion work is often gendered and the burden of it falls disproportionately on women, particularly in heterosexual relationships (Erickson 346; Umberson et al. 546). This is reflected in marriage of convenience romance novels, where the young bride – who has relatively little power in her marriage and is often financially and otherwise dependent on her husband – has to become skilled at reading the male hero's moods, negotiating them and transforming his gruff personality in order to achieve happiness and fulfilment in marriage (Regis 135). Radway and Modleski both make convincing arguments as to why, rather than a transformation of the hero or the relationship, this development is actually a transformation of the heroine. In arranged marriage fanfiction stories, the Happily Ever After ending is retained as an essential element and generic convention. Yet even if we accept Regis's argument that the more important element in the romance novel is not the HEA ending itself but the process of getting there (15), how that ending is achieved differs significantly between fanfiction and the romance novel, though emotion work is still at the centre of the transformation. It plays a vital role in negotiating the multiple and layered power differentials between Thor and Loki in both *Bride* and *XVII*, allowing them over the course of the story to create a more equal dynamic. What distinguishes many fanfiction stories featuring the arranged marriage trope from more traditional marriage of convenience romance novels is who within the relationship performs this kind of work. In both *Bride* and *XVII*, the bulk of the emotion work depicted falls on the partner portrayed as more powerful in the relationship: Thor in the case of *XVII* and Loki in *Bride*.

The first time Loki performs emotion work in *Bride* is shortly after the wedding ceremony at which Thor and Loki meet. At the wedding feast, Loki seeks to put Thor – still too nervous to eat or engage in much conversation – at ease:

Loki has kept his hands largely to himself. He has leaned over a few times and set his hand at the small of Thor's back, pointing out the members of court with a nod of his head and breathing the best gossip about them into Thor's ear. He brushed his fingers over Thor's when he took his goblet from him to refill it with wine, but Thor wasn't certain if it was meant to be friendly or if it was incidental. They danced, but Frigga had held Thor closer when she was teaching him the steps than Loki held him as they spun through the hall.

Thor's surprise at Loki's behaviour can be viewed through the lens of Western gender roles, with Thor coded as feminine and Loki as masculine and Thor's expectations of his husband shaped accordingly. It is not clear whether Loki's behaviour is in line with Jötun gender roles, which are implied to be different to Asgardian (and therefore Western) ones, as most of the story is told from Thor's point of view. It is, however, clear that Loki is making an effort to set at ease the younger Thor, who is also at that point experiencing culture shock. When the two newlyweds are finally alone on their wedding night, Loki uses his magic to shapeshift into Aesir (or more human-like) form instead of the frosty blue skin of the Jötun in another effort to provide some reassurance and familiarity for Thor. This is also the first occasion where Thor acknowledges and reciprocates Loki's emotion work:

Loki shifts his skin to match his spouse's and Thor pauses in his pacing to stare.

'Which do you prefer?' Loki asks.

'The night does not compete with the day. As a Jötun you are fairest among your own folk, and as an Aesir you are lovelier than mine.'

'They are all *our* people now,' Loki reminds him, and Thor nods and smiles.

Loki shifts back into his blue skin, pleased with the lad's pretty speech, and pulls out a seat for Thor.

It is significant that Loki is proactive about making Thor feel more comfortable, as it shows that he clearly understands that Thor is feeling vulnerable and isolated. The gesture of shape-shifting is intended to reduce that feeling of isolation. It is also important that Loki asks for Thor's opinion and gives him a choice, thereby empowering him to make decisions within the relationship very early on. At the same time, this choice clearly makes Thor uncomfortable as he does not want to cause offence to his husband. He therefore retreats into language which can be seen as rather diplomatic and deliberately flattering, effectively passing the decision back to Loki. So while Loki's emotion work goes some way towards making Thor feel more at ease, the power imbalances between them are still clearly reflected in this exchange. The fact that Thor declines to make a choice indicates that he may not be feeling safe yet to do so, and by extension to meaningfully give or deny consent to any sexual relations between the couple.

Conversely, in *XVII* it is Thor who performs the majority of emotion work, both in trying to read Loki and understand how he feels and trying to make Loki feel at home in Asgard, particularly early on in the story. At the same time, Loki is studying Thor and trying to understand him, but he makes no move to initiate conversation or work on their relationship. As Loki expresses a desire for safety and privacy, Thor gives him space by leaving their quarters during the daytime and bringing him food rather than making Loki join the family at mealtimes. This is in stark contrast to Radway's romance heroine:

Because she cannot seem to avoid contact with him despite her dislike, the heroine's principal activity throughout the rest of the story consists of the mental process of trying to assign particular signifieds to his overt acts. In effect, what she is trying to do in discovering the significance of his behavior by uncovering his motives is to understand what the fact of male presence and attention means for her, a woman. (139)

A side-by-side reading (Derecho 73) of *XVII* with this understanding of the heroine's behaviour in romance novels indicates that this is precisely what Loki is expecting to have to do in this story. He is watching Thor carefully and testing out the limits of any freedom he may have in this new situation. However, where the heroine in a romance novel would then use any knowledge gained this way to provide emotional comfort and support for the hero, in *XVII*, Loki finds every wish he expresses respected and as much space is given to him as

the social and legal restrictions on both partners allow. Thus Loki does not need to account for and come to terms with Thor's presence in his life in the same way as a romance novel heroine would.

Thor also seeks to engage Loki in conversation and takes clues from his behaviour to find activities Loki might enjoy. The first breakthrough in their relationship comes when Thor, having seen Loki read the single book he has brought with him from Jötunheim, takes him to Asgard's library. As the relationship develops, the emotion work involved in deepening and sustaining it evolves to being shared equally between Thor and Loki, indicating that they have reached a level of mutual trust. While the inequality of the marriage arrangement is never erased, and formally, Loki remains dependent on Thor, Thor repeatedly demonstrates that he views his husband as an equal. When Loki is given the choice to dissolve the marriage and return to Jötunheim or stay in Asgard with Thor, he freely chooses to stay and negotiates a reopening of the border between the two realms, indicating that he feels confident in his own status and power as Thor's husband. Thor's emotion work has transformed the relationship to one where Loki is a loved and respected equal and feels able to make choices freely and without constraint. Thus, while the Happily Ever After ending is achieved, the process by which it is achieved, and how the obstacles are overcome, differs considerably between arranged marriage fanfiction stories and romance novels.

For readers versed in romance novels as well as fanfiction, the arranged marriage fanfiction story becomes a part of both archives, and the differences in how emotion work is approached in each body of work become a key site of meaning creation. While fanfiction stories retain the romance novel's Happily Ever After ending, they make key changes in how this ending is achieved. The contrast between the romance novel heroine's efforts to understand and accommodate the hero on the one hand, and the partner with less power in the fanfiction arranged marriage on the other, who ultimately has emotion work performed for them, becomes a challenge to the power imbalances in the romance novel trope. It is important that the "equality-centered relationship dynamic" (Kustritz 377) is not present in these fanfiction stories from the start. Neither is the "hero" tamed by the "heroine" (Radway). Rather, through persistent performance of emotion work, the partner with more power in the relationship levels the playing field to build trust and minimise inequality in the partners' day-to-day interactions. In the next section, I explore what these changes to the romance novel generic conventions mean for sexual consent within the relationship.

Marriage consummation

Marriage consummation is a recurring feature of arranged marriage fanfiction stories. Part of the reason for this lies in the generic conventions of slash fiction and romance novels, which often feature sex scenes. In the romance novel, a sex scene is often used to mark the Happily Ever After ending, with the couple consummating their relationship in a mutually loving and respectful way. While this may not be the first sex scene of the novel, or even for the couple, this final, emotional sex scene is still nonetheless a popular feature of a range of subgenres of romance novels. Roach argues that part of the message here for the (mostly) women who read romance novels is that they are *entitled* to love and great sex in their relationships, and that their partner *should* be devoted to their sexual pleasure (*Happily*

Ever After 87, emphasis added). Yet it can be argued the questions raised by the romance novel premise with its unequal relationship around the meaningfulness of sexual consent are often not satisfactorily addressed in the genre, particularly if the transformation of the hero and the relationship has happened largely through the emotion work performed by the heroine. Roach herself admits that the hero at the end of the romance novel is still embedded within patriarchy outside the relationship even if he does submit to the heroine within the relationship (*Happily Ever After* 187). Thus any re-negotiation of the power imbalance between them is limited and contingent at best.

In arranged marriage fanfiction, the consummation scene too is a key generic convention. While sometimes it is used in the same way as the climactic sex scene in romance novels to indicate the Happily Ever After ending, it has a different function in many fanfiction stories. A closer look at the metadata around the stories and the construction of these scenes in arranged marriage fiction shows how they are used to examine complex issues around sexual consent, power and inequality in intimate relationships. Of the 3600 works tagged "Arranged Marriage" on AO3 in August 2016, 466 also use a tag related to at least one of the following: "Consent Issues," "Non-Consensual," "Rape/Non-Con." Of the five Loki/Thor stories I selected for this analysis, consummation was a central feature in four, with pre-marital sex performing a similar function in the final one. One story presented consummation as an outright rape, and the other three, including the two selected for in-depth analysis, contained discussion of consent issues in light of the arranged marriage and inequality of the partners. Consummation is presented as expected in these relationships, both through the legal structures surrounding the marriage arrangements and through the cultural expectations which construct marriage as a sexual relationship. Through both the metadata around the stories and key features of the stories themselves, arranged marriage fanfiction casts marriage consummation as an at least potentially a coercive practice. References to the range of different sources of power imbalances and inequalities in the relationship discussed previously are present throughout the stories and support this, keeping the issue of meaningful consent as a focal point of the works. This focus evokes both issues around the legal construction of marriage (Smart) and the social and cultural constructions of potentially coercive heterosex practices as "just sex" (Gavey). Where arranged marriage fanfiction departs from the generic conventions of romance novels is again in the distribution of emotion work between the partners. In stories where consummation is explicitly addressed as coercive or potentially coercive, another sex scene later in the relationship may take its place in establishing the Happily Ever After ending.

XVII illustrates well the problematic nature of marriage consummation within arranged marriage fanfiction. In this story, when Thor meets Loki and finds he is not a giant, he is immediately sexually attracted to him. Once the wedding feast is over and the couple are alone in their room, Loki makes it clear that he expects the marriage to be consummated even though he is not feeling enthusiastic about the prospect. When Thor refuses on the basis that Loki would clearly not be a willing participant, Loki is both confused and angry. He accuses Thor of making a fool of him and continues to be cold and hostile but eventually accepts that he has some agency within their marriage. There is a similar, though far less confrontational, conversation in *Bride*. This time it is Loki who makes it clear that Thor's consent matters and that he will not insist on consummating the marriage unless Thor is willing. Thor, while nervous, does prove willing, though the language used in reaching their

mutual agreement to have sex is rather formal and carries connotations of meeting expectations, both social and each other's:

'I would not have you unwilling,' Loki says, turning toward Thor. 'I'm not a monster. This marriage was no more of my making than of yours. We needn't punish each other for it.'

'It is no punishment,' Thor answers. 'It is a gift, is it not? I mean to keep my promises. I would not rob my husband of the pleasures of his wedding night.'

'Nor I mine,' Loki agrees, smiling.

Thor's phrasing of his consent reflects the discursive construction of the institution of marriage and the wedding ceremony, as it clearly references – and legitimises – the expectations of sexual intercourse generated by their wedding. The word "rob" in particular implies a sense of obligation on Thor's part and an entitlement for Loki. In *XVII*, Thor thinks that wedding night rape is "not an uncommon practice, but certainly no practice Thor would ever take part in," while Loki concedes that he "did not expect [Thor] to be so honorable." In *Bride*, while ultimately the expectation is met and the marriage is consummated, this only happens with mutual agreement. It is Loki's final response in this exchange, picking up on the implications of Thor's phrasing and the word "rob", which performs the work of putting them on equal footing, as it acknowledges that the entitlement and obligation of being a new husband applies in reverse too.

The status of marriage as a legal institution is a key factor which influences and shapes the practice of marriage consummation. In the Western legal context, there are consequences for non-consummation which may put one or both parties at risk. As Smart argues, "[t]he civil law on marriage is still interested in whether marital intercourse takes place, and whether the child of a woman is also the child of her husband" (92). In the UK, for instance, non-consummation is grounds for annulment (except for same-gender couples) ("When You Can Annul a Marriage"), which in turn has different legal implications to divorce. In the US, annulment may have a significant negative impact on an immigrant spouse's application for permanent residence. The exact legal context for Thor and Loki's marriage is not specified in either *Bride* or *XVII*. It is therefore possible to read these stories side by side with the complexities of marriage law. Loki's anger at "being made a fool of" in *XVII* can be read as reflecting a similar concern with his legal situation as Thor's husband. This again highlights the risks of a failed marriage, particularly for the partner with less power in the relationship, and therefore the stakes for the characters in making the relationship work. Far from being a risk taken willingly and in the name of love (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 24), however, the risks here are clearly ones the characters are forced to take for lack of other options, and potentially at peril of death.

When it comes to the actual consummation of Loki and Thor's marriage in both *Bride* and *XVII*, emotion work plays a key role in facilitating meaningful consent between unequal partners. As previously discussed, unlike in romance novels where emotion work is predominantly performed by the heroine who is also the partner with less leverage in the relationship (Radway; Regis; Roach, "Getting a Good Man"), emotion work in both these stories is performed by the partner who is more powerful: Thor in *XVII*, and Loki in *Bride*.

This applies not only to the emotion work needed to build trust within the relationship but also to that needed to ensure any consent given is and continues to be meaningful.

In *Bride*, the conversation between Loki and Thor once they are alone in their room quickly becomes an equal exchange, both of them working towards building trust and rapport. However, once they agree to consummate the marriage, it is Loki who works to read Thor's feelings, calm his nerves, and provide reassurance. In *XVII*, after Thor's initial refusal to consummate his marriage with an unwilling Loki, the couple grow closer over the course of weeks, largely due to Thor's efforts to make Loki feel more comfortable and at ease with him. Their first kiss is triggered by a scuffle following a trip away from Asgard during which Loki is verbally assaulted by another character. The kiss leads on to the consummation of their marriage, but throughout this scene Thor continues to consciously read Loki's reactions and feelings, and verbally or through gestures asks for consent on several occasions:

It gets Thor hot all over, and suddenly he has too many clothes on, and this isn't going fast enough.

Thor leans back and Loki looks angry, not because Thor is kissing him but because he's stopped. The look disappears once Thor pulls him upright and leads him to the bed. Loki understands then what's happening. He keeps himself pressed very close to Thor, like he can't stand to be pulled away from him right now. Thor doesn't move them onto the bed though, not yet. He searches Loki's eyes, tries to figure out what he's thinking, what he's feeling. He made a promise before, and he means to keep it, despite the lust that grips him tight all over and threatens to drive him crazy.

Here, Thor repeatedly performs the bodily emotion work (Hochschild 562) of controlling his own desire. As he is both the more powerful partner in the relationship and the one who so far has shown a greater desire for sex, this is a key indicator that he is actively thinking about issues of consent and looking to ensure that Loki has the space to deny or withdraw consent if needed. To that end, Thor is also carefully reading Loki's emotional expressions in order to be able to react and adapt to them. This stands in stark contrast to the findings by Umberson et al. where emotion work around sexuality and desire was performed predominantly by women who desired less sex than their partner, with the aim of increasing their own desire (550). Read side by side with women's own experiences of such emotion work, this story therefore reveals some key differences. It and other arranged marriage fanfiction stories construct the partner who is more powerful in the relationship and desires more sex as the one responsible for the emotion work of managing their desire and of ensuring that any sexual consent is meaningful. Where the dominant cultural construction of potentially coercive heterosex is "just sex" (Gavey), in these stories this is challenged and presented as "potentially rape" unless, through emotion work and a conscious effort to negotiate and manage power inequalities, consent has been made truly meaningful.

Conclusion

Arranged marriage fanfiction can be seen as part of several different archives (Derecho 64): the romance novel genre as a whole, fanfiction, the archive surrounding the originary work the fanfiction is based on, as well as potentially that of readers' and writers' own life experiences and relationships with dominant cultural discourses of sexuality and consent. Reading arranged marriage fanfiction in this way – side by side with romance novels, originary works, other fanfiction, as well as dominant discourses on consent – gives access to a range of meanings created through similarities and differences with aspects of these different archives.

Arranged marriage fanfiction retains certain key generic conventions of the romance novel: the Happily Ever After ending and the climactic sex scene. However, fanfiction stories employing this trope also directly address issues of power imbalances and inequalities in relationships, casting marriage as an institution which reproduces and potentially exacerbates them. This construction of marriage is built on both its legal and formal aspects, as well as the social and emotional ones. As a result, these stories reframe the practice of consummation – an often taken for granted feature of marriage, commonly constructed as “just sex” – as at least potentially coercive. To resolve this conflict and retain the Happily Ever After ending, arranged marriage fanfiction stories also make key changes to the generic conventions of romance novels, particularly in the way the HEA ending is achieved. Where in romance novels the transformation of the relationship is effected predominantly through the heroine's emotion work – that is, her effort to understand and support the hero – in fanfiction it is the partner with more power in the relationship, the equivalent of the romance novel hero, whose responsibility it is to perform this emotion work. Through it, inequalities in the relationship are negotiated, the playing field is levelled, and space for meaningful consent (or the denial or withdrawal thereof) is created. It is these changes which allow arranged marriage fanfiction stories to challenge dominant discourses of “just sex” and cast them as “potentially rape”. An alternative discourse then emerges where through emotion work and a conscious effort to negotiate and manage power inequalities, consent is made truly meaningful.

[1] Kudos are a feature of the Archive of Our Own which allows readers to quickly and easily express their appreciation of a story through clicking a single button. A logged-in user can only leave kudos on a story once. The number of kudos on any given story is driven by several factors beyond quality or even popularity of the story: how long it has been available on the archive, how big the community around that particular fandom is, or even the format of the work. Ranking by kudos is therefore a good way to find stories within a single fandom for a long time, but it may miss more recent stories. This method has significant issues when trying to compare the popularity of stories across different fandoms.

[2] The Marvel character Thor is loosely based on Norse mythology. He is a member of the Aesir, an extremely long-lived and god-like (albeit human in appearance) race who inhabit a world called Asgard. Asgard's historical enemies in the MCU canon are the Frost Giants or Jötnar (singular: Jötun), a race of large, humanoid, blue-skinned creatures who inhabit the ice world Jötunheim.

[3] Intersex representation in both Norse mythology and Thor/Loki fanfiction is a fascinating topic that is beyond the scope of this research. I am using the pronouns “he/his/him” for Loki in this paper in line with both mythological and fan community usage.

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