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The Myth of Fanfiction:

An Examination of Two Deeply Connected Traditions of Storytelling

Classical mythology has, ironically, become mythologized in today's world. Some ancient myths and stories have become foundational to modern tales while others remain, relatively unchanged, popular stories. Mythology is often seen as an unparalleled tradition – one built on oral and communal storytelling which has given rise to some of the central stories in human history. However, there does exist today a parallel tradition that has been fostered by the internet: fanfiction. Many tend to dismiss fanfiction as low quality and derivative. However, I would argue that it is the closest thing we have to modern mythology, and it should be valued as such. In this paper, we will examine how these storytelling traditions are linked through their parallel structures and their importance to their communities; we will also briefly explore how, despite their deep connections, the advent of copyright law has led to the widespread dismissal of fanfiction while classical myth remains on a pedestal.

The foundation of this paper comes from the work of Sarah Shaughnessy who presented her research on fanfiction as a continuation of Classical storytelling's 'oral state of mind' in Dr. Gervais' Classics and Pop culture course in 2019. This paper will endeavour to expand upon and develop Shaughnessy's arguments from this presentation and additional personal correspondence. However, I would be remiss if we did not first explore some of them in detail as they are perhaps the best illustration of the structural parallels between fanfiction and myth and they, unfortunately, remain unpublished.

In brief, Shaughnessy identifies several parallels between fanfiction and the oral tradition of mythic storytelling. Fanfiction is, of course, not a literally oral form of storytelling, thus she argues that it fits into the ‘oral state of mind’ – a set of characteristics intrinsic to the oral tradition first identified by Wandtke which describe the creation and structure of classical myth and now fanfiction (Wandtke 2012, 36). Shaughnessy identifies several important structural parallels between these mediums, however, in this paper we will focus on two which are integral to our broader arguments.

The first connection between fanfiction and the oral state of mind is the existence of an ‘official’ canon. Fanfiction typically relies upon another author’s source text to dictate or influence its characters, settings, and plots – this is the canon (Shaughnessy 2022, Personal Correspondence. Pugh 2004, 26). Each story that spawns fanfiction has its own defined canon; the canon of the world of Star Trek is distinct from the canon for the world of Harry Potter. Notably, canons are not fixed things, they can be and are frequently expanded or changed (Shaughnessy 2020). Shaughnessy notes that canons are often altered as a result of spontaneous composition¹; this is the process in which an official creator releases a new story in their world (Shaughnessy 2020). This new story will add new information to its existing canon, often just expanding it, but it can also alter/overtake existing elements of a canon via a literary device known as a retcon or retroactive continuity.² Of course, there are no official rules in fanfiction, writers can ignore and, in many cases, actively contradict elements of the canon of the world about which they are writing. However, even this is a choice dictated by the omnipresence of the

¹ It is important to note here that Shaughnessy offers this idea as its own distinct parallel between fanfiction and the oral tradition, it will not be explored with the same detail in this paper, but the idea of spontaneous composition will return when we examine Classical myth and thus it is another important parallel to bear in mind.

² Meriam-Webster provides an expanded definition of this device at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/retcon-history-and-meaning> as well as an early example of its use: Conan Doyle’s ‘retcon’ of Sherlock Holmes’ death at the Reichenbach Falls.

existing canon in fanfiction. This reliance on the work of another creator has been seen as the defining characteristic of fanfiction; fanfiction is – definitionally – a derivative form of storytelling because of this reliance on an existing canon (Pugh 2004, 26).

There is a clear parallel here to the presence of a canon in mythic storytelling via the oral tradition. Classical myth did not have the multitudes of different canons inherent to fanfiction; rather, it had a single central canon. Yet, it was still a form of storytelling that shares a critical reliance on a unified canon to the point that this canon was taught in schools, giving rise to a community that emphasized ‘mythological correctness’ (Morales 2007, 36). In this community, mythographers were vital. These were men whose job was to keep the mythological canon in order (Morales 2007, 36). While these men were often competitive about the mythological minutia that they could present and prove, they were also known to be important innovators of myth (Morales 2007, 36). In their efforts to prove their complete mastery of the mythological canon – or to simply advance their personal interests – mythographers were known to expand this canon themselves, creating new stories and characters within existing myths that only they could then cite thus proving their mastery of the canon (Morales 2007, 38). It does not seem a leap to argue that, particularly in a time without ‘official’ creators to regulate their official canon, the new derivations of the mythic canon that these mythographers were writing represent a practice akin to Shaughnessy’s spontaneous composition. Simply put, these mythographers composed novel stories stemming from a central canon. This is a practice that can fairly be compared to modern fanfiction. Not only was ancient myth dictated by an official canon, but this canon gave rise to a sort of pseudo fanfiction, solidifying the structural parallels between these forms of storytelling.

The other argument proposed by Shaughnessy that we will examine is the idea of creator-audience interaction as a key element of fanfiction's oral state of mind. Ancient myths were transmitted via the oral tradition from a speaker to an assembled audience which created a strong and mutually beneficial relationship between the two parties (Mackiewicz 2016). This relationship fostered a dialogue through which listeners could provide feedback to a storyteller who could, in turn, hone his myths, improving both his craft and the experiences of his future audiences.

Shaughnessy describes this dialogue as a lost art of retelling stories that fanfiction has begun to resurrect (Shaughnessy 2022, Personal Correspondence). Fanfiction is primarily uploaded online in an episodic structure which facilitates this creator-audience interaction (Shaughnessy 2022, Personal Correspondence).³ While the process can vary based on the fanfiction writer and the platform they have chosen to use to upload their work, there is typically a way for readers to leave comments to convey praise, criticism, or simply their general thoughts on a chapter or the entire piece (Shaughnessy 2022, Personal Correspondence). The writer, in turn, can choose to consider these comments when writing additional chapters or revising their existing work. The revised versions of a piece of fanfiction effectively amount to the retellings given by storytellers in the classical era. In fanfiction, previous versions of a story continue to exist on the internet in some form despite additional rewrites. However, their continued existence just allows further dialogue between the creator and their audience; a reader could leave a comment on an outdated version of a story that may still be relevant in further retellings or in other projects the creator undertakes. The new medium for storytelling afforded by the internet

³ The episodic structure in which fanfiction stories are uploaded and ancient myths were spoken is another mirrored element in the epic state of mind of each medium identified by Shaughnessy and is thus worth noting here.

has not moved fanfiction further away from mythology's oral tradition, rather, by providing a platform for creator-audience interactions, it has brought fanfiction further in line with the oral state of mind and helped cement it as a form of modern mythology.

Shaughnessy's arguments around the structural links highlighted by the oral state of mind of fanfiction and myth are vital in establishing initial connections between these traditions of storytelling. However, the aim of this paper is not just to identify two related forms of storytelling. Our goal is to argue that fanfiction is a form of modern myth and for this, we must undertake a deeper examination of the nature of these traditions and the role they play in the lives of their 'fans'. While many parallels could be identified in this examination, we will focus on one that illustrates the intrinsic link between fanfiction and myth both in terms of the purposes of these stories and how they influence their audience: their religious nature.

To the uninitiated – a group in which I would place myself until quite recently – a primary feature of Classical myth is the centrality of religion. Alternatively, many would find the suggestion that there is any religious element to fanfiction laughable. In the next section of this paper, I will argue that each of the above notions is incorrect – that these storytelling traditions do not fit into a binary of religious or areligious. To further establish their connectedness, I will show that they each occupy a space in between these opposites, a place that we can call religion adjacent. Each form of storytelling is not explicitly religious in nature, yet neither is bereft of what could be identified as religious elements. For each medium, this is not a simple claim, and we will need an examination to prove that they do occupy the same religious adjacent space.

To reasonably evaluate the religious nature of myth we must extricate our modern perceptions. In her paper "Exit, pursued by a fan: Shakespeare, Fandom, and the Lure of the Alternate Universe" Katavia Finn argues that to study myth we must be "able to break away

from historical attempts that provide positivist definitions of myth (creation myth, hero myth, apocalypse myth)” (Finn 2016, 31). For many of us, the enduring religious monuments of the classical world or the explicitly religious nature of stories like the Bible or the Quran have created a deep association between myth and religion. Finn is asserting that if we can separate ourselves from this positivist view, then we can see that fandom, rather than religion, was the driving force behind mythic storytelling. (Finn 2016, 31). To take Finn’s method further and try to begin to understand the intended purpose of classical myth we must try to view myth as the Greeks would have.

This is not an easy thing to do – even the Romans, living at a relatively small remove from the height of ancient Greece, would have seen Greek mythology as a ‘discrete body of material’ (Morales 2007, 41). It has been convincingly argued that even this seemingly basic observation would have been seen by the Greeks as incorrect – in fact, in his companion to Greek myth, Woodward argues that neither myth nor religion existed as discrete categories in Greek thought (Morales 2007, 41. Woodward 2007, 259). For the Greeks, these stories pervaded everyday life; this included religious rituals and traditions, but also commerce, travel, governance, and war (Morales 2007, 41). These stories defined how the Greeks saw themselves, their world, and their place in it – to their creators, their purpose extended far beyond religion. As Helen Morales puts it: “When we are living with, through, and around myths, we are too close to them to recognize them as ‘mythology’” (Morales 2007, 41). It was long after the time of the Greeks that these stories began to be associated with modern religion and viewed as a defined mythology (Morales 2007, 63). Certainly, Greek myth had religious aspects, but these did not define it. Rather, these aspects see Greek myth occupy a space adjacent to true religious texts.

As we turn to fanfiction, we must take an opposite approach: finding religion in stories that most consider bereft of it. To do this we will examine two core elements of religion and how they exist in fandom. Before we begin, it is worth noting that fandom is not fanfiction. Rather, fandom is the driver of fanfiction – fanfiction would not be written if not for motivated fans. Thus, if religious undertones exist in fandom, it follows that they can also be found in fanfiction.

The first religious element we will examine is the pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a religiously motivated journey to a site of deep, often religious, significance wherein the pilgrim hopes to gain a deeper knowledge of themselves, their world, or their religion. Traditionally destinations can include Jerusalem, Mecca, or Rome. But what about London, Scranton, and New Zealand? Jennifer Bickerdike opens her paper “The Secular Religion of Fandom” by describing an afternoon waiting in London’s King’s Cross Station where she was startled to see a line – consistently about 100 people long – to have their picture taken with the ‘Platform 9 ¾’ sign from *Harry Potter* (Bickerdike 2015, 1-3). Bickerdike defined this gathering of fans as a “modern-day, media-induced pilgrimage” (Bickerdike 2015, 3). There was no specific draw to the site beyond its innate significance to fans; the specific platform fans lined up at was not actually used in filming, no actors were signing autographs, and beyond buying a souvenir or taking a picture there was nothing to do there (Visit Britain Shop, 2022). Nevertheless, there was the horde of fans, many of whom had come from distant countries at great personal expense, simply to be at a place of significance to a story that means so much to them. What is this if not a pilgrimage? This phenomenon is not unique to fans of *Harry Potter*, each year fans of *Lord of the Rings* flock to its filming locations in New Zealand while droves of devoted fans of *The Office* travel to Scranton Pennsylvania to attend ‘Dundercon’. No authority is telling fans to

make these pilgrimages, and yet these stories inspire such devotion that they do so enthusiastically, with a fervour that could be described as religious.

While the pilgrimage is a notable example of a religious practice existing in fandom, to reasonably connect religion and fandom we must take a broader approach and understand how fandom can dictate how fans live their lives and define themselves in much the same way that a religion can for its followers. This can manifest itself in simple ways like wearing merchandise from the fandom or getting a tattoo of a symbol or quote from the canon – both of which have obvious parallels to the actions of religious devotees. However, it goes far deeper than that. Statements like “Dumbledore would never discriminate against muggles” have appeared at various political marches and protests, exemplifying how the themes and characters in these stories can dictate the political beliefs of their fans (Hanson 2019). There even exist churches based on fandom; census data has shown that hundreds of thousands of people identify their religion as ‘Jedi’ and a ‘Church of the Jedi Order’ has been founded in Texas (Hanson 2019).⁴ These stories inspire devotion in sections of their fanbase that could easily be described as religious. Certainly, they are not written for this purpose, and no one would call them explicitly religious stories. Nevertheless, they have come to join Classical myth in a space that we can fairly call religion adjacent.

These are two storytelling traditions separated by millennia and yet they are intrinsically linked. Whether we are examining the structure of these stories and their roots in canon, their uniquely interactive mode of composition, or the pseudo-religious devotion they inspire in their readers we can find deep parallels between these traditions. Of course, they are not identical – we

⁴ The official webpage of The Temple of the Jedi Order can be found at: <https://www.templeofthejediorder.org/>

live in a very different world from that of the ancient Greeks. But I would argue that the connections we have established allow us to fairly identify fanfiction as a modern iteration of mythic storytelling. Despite our work thus far, this claim raises many questions and invites many arguments. While most of these are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper I would like to devote the remainder of our space to one question that follows from our conclusion: why do the majority of people see classical myths as important stories worthy of study and retelling while so many people see fanfiction as an intrinsically bad thing or at least a medium not worthy of attention?

One does not need to look far to find derisive commentaries on fanfiction, questions about whether the practice is ‘bad’ or ‘evil’, or admissions to indulging in fanfiction that read like a confession of sin.⁵ There is, of course, not a single answer to why fanfiction has bred this climate of disdain while we so frequently mythologize myth. We could point to the general weight that is attached to historical ‘artifacts’, the use of the internet to find and often spread the very worst or the most vulgar examples of fanfiction, or even the predominance of female fanfiction writers as opposed to male mythographers (Coppa 2017, 9). However, I would cite the advent of copyright law as the single greatest cause of the differing perceptions of these storytelling traditions. Put simply, copyright law – a modern invention – has made most fanfiction technically illegal derivations of copyrighted works (Higgins-Dailey 2021). There are nuances to this statement, caveats like fair use and transformative works mean that there are legal arguments in favour of fanfiction’s legitimacy, yet these are typically subject to interpretation by

⁵ Notable examples are available at the following links: <https://www.overthinkingit.com/2008/09/22/why-im-not-going-to-read-your-fanfic/>, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/07/05/health/kids-teens-fanfiction-partner>, <https://www.quora.com/Why-do-so-many-people-detest-fanfiction>

a presiding judge and therefore not a consistent defence.⁶ Plainly, the existence of copyright has given rise to the idea that stories are personal property, not communal traditions.

While the oral tradition of mythic storytelling was a genuine give and take between creator and audience in which all participants could claim ownership of a story, copyright means that their authors or corporations representing them do own their stories. This in turn gives these parties an incentive to discourage fanfiction, which many of them, including notable authors like George R.R. Martin or Diana Gabaldon, do with zeal.⁷ Naturally, when figures with such immense platforms and authorities within their own fandoms come out so strongly against fanfiction it can lead to a generally negative perception of the practice. This goes beyond mere discouragement though, as legal grievances can be and are regularly levelled against the writers of fanfiction (Montano 2013, 692). Copyright law threatens the very existence of fanfiction – the modern iteration of a tradition that has been shown to have immense benefits both to its immediate readership and the public at large (Montano 2013, 689). Important arguments in favour of the legal existence of fanfiction - based on its transformative nature, the intrinsically derivative nature of all stories, and its societal benefits – exist and are a cause for optimism (Montano 2013, 689). However, if we hope to preserve fanfiction – our modern mythology – we must replace modern ideas of personal ownership for commercial gain with the ancient ideas of communal ownership for societal benefit.

Fanfiction is our modern iteration of classical mythology. Whether we take Shaughnessy's lead and examine these mediums structurally, in terms of their oral state of mind,

⁶ Specific definitions of these practices are beyond this paper's scope but an explanation in the context of fanfiction can be found at: <https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/copyright-and-fanfiction-a-primer/>

⁷ The aforementioned discouragements of fanfiction remain available at the following links:
<https://www.outlandishobservations.com/2010/05/fan-fiction-and-copyright.html>
<https://grrm.livejournal.com/151914.html>

or we look deeper at what these stories mean to their audiences, the parallels are clear. I hope that, in shining a light on this deep and surprising connection, we can gain a greater appreciation for fanfiction and the tradition that it represents. Like myth, fanfiction is not perfect – for every truly quality text written there are many which can only be described as pornographic or vulgar – yet it represents a rare moment where the advent of modern technology has allowed an ancient tradition to flourish again. This is a tradition of collective storytelling that is built on the foundations of strong and interactive communities, something that, in these times of enforced isolation, should be celebrated. So let us celebrate the continued existence of communal storytelling in the form of fanfiction and make sure that we do not lose a tradition so valuable to personal commercial interests born out of copyright law.

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