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Fan culture and fan fiction

Fan fiction is part of the broader - and better-known - concept of fan culture. Many who are not involved in this cultural phenomenon, see it as a strange world of people (mostly Trekkies) with a poor social life. This view is based on prejudice. Of course, there are some people who take their interests further than an average person would consider sane. But most fans are simply exploiting the possibility to participate in the sharing and reworking of media products. They are fans of television shows as well as books. They produce creative output as well as pulp – just like the major media corporations do. Many are fans of several television shows, because their main enjoyment stems from sharing thoughts about material that is also familiar to other people. In short, fan culture is part of convergence culture as described by Henry Jenkins (2008), where people take media - in the broadest sense - into their own hands: “consumers are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture”. (Jenkins 2008: 18) Consumers are no longer passive watchers, but actors themselves. *TIME Magazine* declaring “You” the person of the year in 2006 is indicative of this tendency.¹ Fans are merely a part of this consumer base negotiating more influence. It is hard to quantify the size of this group: when would you call someone a fan? If someone watches a television show and goes online every now and then to talk about it afterwards? Or only when that person also takes part in fan activities in ‘real life’? Does she/he have to call herself/himself a fan? And would we include fans of producers of non-narrative products, like singers and bands? In this time of booming consumer participation and the Internet, it is hard to draw a line. Fan fiction is somewhat easier to pinpoint. It is a part of fan culture and perhaps the ultimate way to take media products into your own hands - fan fiction involves the writing of stories based on popular television shows, films, books, games or anime. The writers use existing characters, plot and/or settings as a basis for their own stories. It is a phenomenon older than the Internet: it can be traced back to the 1930s pulp magazine *Fanzines* (Thomas 2006: 226) but it has been growing more rapidly in the last decade due to the Internet; this medium has made it possible to spread the stories much faster, at least in the western world. The web provides the opportunity to respond to the posted stories immediately through forums, invoking an acute sense of participation. Fanfiction.net probably has the largest collection, it contains hundreds of thousands of stories in all

¹ See the cover of the magazine of December 25, 2006: <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20061225,00.html>

sorts of genres. It has developed its own codes and genres and even its own fans, who write stories based on multiple shows, books, etc. Not all fans write or read fan fiction, because well-written stories are often hard to find and/or because they think it is sacrilege – the original is perfect and should not be meddled with.² And, interestingly enough, not all fan fiction writers are real fans. They want to become writers and using well-known material guarantees a reading public that reviews quickly, often the same day, and is only mildly critical (to which I will return later). Fan fiction seems to be popular online, “fan fiction” gives over 6,5 million hits on Google.³ To quantify the relative importance of fan fiction within fandom in general is not possible, for instance because the word 'fan' is a less specific term than 'fan fiction': it has another meaning (a machine that circulates air), it does not exclusively apply to media products and fans do not always apply the word 'fan' to themselves, due to the stigma I have described. This makes Google searches on the word unreliable. Therefore I will go into this further when looking at specific fandoms.

Fan fiction in academics

Fan culture, up until fairly recently, was not acknowledged as an academic topic. Fan culture's popularity as an academic subject started with Henry Jenkins – its most fervent defender, since he is a fan himself as well as an academic. He began by describing *Star Trek* fan fiction distributed by post in the seventies and eighties and has recently published a book on convergence culture (Jenkins 2008), celebrating the possibilities of participation in this age. Major corporations begin to accept now that consumers are no longer passive users. Therefore Jenkins sees almost limitless possibilities of what influence consumers can exert when they unite. One of his earlier articles, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten” (2006: 37-60, originally published in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* in 1988) was a response to academic critique on fan fiction. There had been, and still is, much debate about the legitimacy of fan fiction concerning copyright and the usefulness of the writing itself – is it a suitable way for children and adolescents to advance their (creative) writing skills or not? Many researchers since then have been trying to prove the political awareness of the communities of fan writers – concerning for instance feminist topics and copyright. The former became of special interest, since research has proven that women⁴ make up the majority

² See for instance a discussion on a Dutch fan site of Jane Austen, <http://www.janeausten.nl/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=117>

³ June 6, 2009

⁴ 'Women' as a concept will be used much in this thesis. This is oversimplifying the category, to say the least, so I will try to narrow it down. When I speak of women, they will be mostly western women with Internet access (so most likely to be at least middleclass – the personal realms the women write about suggest that many have college degrees). I cannot make statements on for instance skin color or sexual preference since the little research I have found does not include these factors – apart from the fact that the researchers queried their subjects online and therefore could not check the verity of some answers. (for instance Collins 2006) So what these writers have in common, is that they are mostly from the US or (Western) Europe, that they have easy access to the Internet, that they like the same shows or books and like to write and read about them. To this group I will refer when I write the words 'women' or 'female (fan)writers'.

of fan writers. (Jenkins 2006: 43) This research has been conducted in the nineteneighties, but quantitative research done in the nineties on *the Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (a spy series) fandom has proven that “men collect, women create”; one-third of the fan base is male, but women are the ones who write the stories, while men collect merchandise. (Jenkins 2007b) And in 2007, women still make up a large part of the fan bases in general (Jenkins 2007a) and of fan fiction.⁵ The large percentage of women writers has led to an inclination to research feminist response in fan fiction. The fan fiction subgenre of slash for instance has been read as such a response. In slash, two male characters have a romantic and/or sexual relationship, the most well-known being Kirk/Spock (the slash between the names has given the genre its name). The term can also be applied to female same-sex relationships, but then it is often referred to as 'femslash'. The fact that women would like to write about two men having a relationship puzzled many and led to a feminist explanation – to which I will return later on. Another example is Jenkins' analysis of the original *Star Trek* series – where hardly any proactive (human) woman could be found although its universe held a promise of equality. (ibidem: 46) He concluded that the writers negotiate different gender roles in marriage and the workplace. (ibidem: 54) More recently, Victoria Somogyi (2002), Angela Thomas (2006) and Anne Kustritz (2003) have researched critical responses in fan fiction based on *Star Trek Voyager*, *Lord of the Rings* and other fan bases. These series are considered to be masculine and/or have male main characters, which has led to questions. Why start with *Star Trek* in the first place?, Jenkins (2006) wondered. When he wrote the article in the eighties, there were alternatives to choose from, like soap operas. They had female lead characters who could be appropriated in ways more similar to the women's own experience. He suggests that it is motivated by feminist creative effort; women want a challenge in fixing a story to fit their social experience.

[T]raditionally “feminine” texts – the soap opera, the popular romance (...) do not need as much reworking as science fiction as westerns do in order to accommodate the social experience of women. The resistance of such texts to feminist reconstruction may require a greater expenditure of creative effort and therefore may push women toward a more thorough reworking of program materials than so-called feminine texts that can be more easily assimilated or negated. (Jenkins 2006: 45)

This is not a logical explanation: assuming that feminists wrote these stories to make them more closely related to their social experience – as working women – soap opera's would be even more of a creative challenge. They often reflect traditional roles and relationships, and the desirability of marriage is an important factor. They need much more feminist reworking in my view. The working life as seen in *Star Trek* was probably pretty close to what the

⁵ See also for instance *An Archive of Our Own*. This fan fiction database published a statement that acknowledges the fan base as being predominantly female (without this archive being explicitly feminist), <http://transformativeworks.org/node/100>.

women themselves knew: male superiors who made the decisions with women in supporting roles. Also, since Jenkins wrote this, many things have changed in the media landscape. The internet became widely accessible in the western world (eventually also to women), series are available on DVD to watch and rewatch and there are many more television shows. Some of them are traditionally 'feminine' and the numbers of stories on these series on fanfiction.net also prove Jenkins wrong. 'Women's series' like *the Gilmore Girls*, *Charmed* or *Grey's Anatomy* generate large numbers of stories, respectively 14.455, 10.803 and 6.755.⁶ And from all the *Star Trek* series, the most popular one for fan fiction is *Star Trek Voyager* – that has a female captain – with 5.616 stories, followed by *Enterprise* with 3.255 stories – still much, but significantly less than the former. Therefore I doubt whether the amount of creative alteration needed to reflect one's own 'female' world is a factor.

But this notion is an interesting starting point since it implies that writers alter stories not just to expand the universe they like, but also to meet their own needs. Angela Thomas (2006) has explored this, considering two aspects of fan fiction: as a means to respond critically to a text and as identity play – I will focus on the former. By critical response Thomas does not mean criticism from a literary standpoint, but that “fans of the text can take it and write in characters and plots that are relevant to their own identities and lives, giving them a voice in a text in which they might otherwise be marginalized.” (Thomas 2006: 234) They “challenge the canon of the original books and movies.” (ibidem) Like I have mentioned earlier, Thomas has explored fan fiction based on 'masculine' texts like *the Lord of the Rings* and she has found that there are women who have created fan websites separate from the ones with male-dominated forums to escape ridicule. (ibidem: 235) In such environments, where women sometimes feel forced to create forums of their own, it is perhaps not strange that they reflect these gender-related struggles in the stories they write. But what happens when women are not marginalized? How do they appropriate the base material? Are they critical? To answer these questions, I have decided to take a look at a female-dominated fan base. Not surprisingly, the fan base of Regency writer Jane Austen consists mainly of women. The *Republic of Pemberley* for instance, a website where fans can discuss Austen's work, asks members to accept the matriarchal governance since “the Republic's citizenry is at least 92 percent women.”⁷ Therefore the critical response of the women from the male-dominated fan bases can be compared to the behavior of the non-marginalized women in the Jane Austen communities. In the communities, the women are dominant, but the women in Austen's work, although they are the main characters, are socially disempowered, their only way of exerting power being the choice of a husband – which is only mildly critiqued in the novels.⁸ Henry Jenkins (2006) describes *Star Trek* fan fiction as a critical view on the original series. He tries to show that the women writing the

⁶ All numbers collected on May 13th, 2009

⁷ <http://www.pemberley.com/faq.html>

⁸ See for instance <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/pptopic2.html#protorefem1>

stories negotiate existing gender roles, by trying to “compromise the needs of women for independence and self-sufficiency on the one hand, and their needs for romance and companionship on the other.” (Jenkins 2006: 54) This combination I will explore in *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction as well, starting with the latter.

I have chosen this novel from Austen’s oeuvre, because it is the most popular of her novels in fan fiction. What is important to note, is that I have not done a quantitative analysis. I have searched for examples throughout the fan fiction communities and have based my rough quantifications on what I have encountered there in general. By exploring the fan fiction on *Pride and Prejudice* and comparing it to the existing research in fan fiction, I hope to pinpoint the critical stance of the fan base, thus answering the question: can a critical stance to existing gender roles – romantically as well as professionally – be found in *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction?

Jane Austen's fans



“Why is Jane Austen all over the god dang place these days? People are peddling her out for every half brained new item they can attach to her already stretched thin name!” (Kate Beaton, “Rolling in her Grave”, April 20 2009,

<http://beatonna.livejournal.com/94320.html>) Kate Beaton is a webcomic artist who makes historic comics. She drew the one printed here, accompanied by this comment in response to the announcement of Marvel Comics that they are making a *Pride and Prejudice* comic.⁹ Jane Austen has indeed become an interesting brand, almost anything with her name on it sells. Deirdre Lynch explains this “Austenmania” by the sense that corporations have that Austen is “safe” - “sure of getting a return on their monetairy investment” and with “few interpretative or political challenges”. (Lynch 2000: 5) Fans – who call themselves Janeites or Austenites – engage in all sorts of activities. The most enthusiastic ones go on tours to visit the houses where Austen resided, go the the Jane Austen festival in Bath, have Regency dresses made and engage in special Austen or Regency dances. Some only engage in online activities. Most of them have seen many of the films made in the last decades. And, what some critics would

⁹ See http://marvel.com/news/comicstories.7021.FIRST_LOOK~colon~Pride-and-Prejudice_%231, scroll down for previews.

not expect¹⁰: they do read the books. Not all of them, of course, but the in-depth discussions found on some websites prove that the original works are savoured by fans.¹¹ Many read books written by other authors that are based on Austen's novels or that are modern rewritings, like *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding. And of course, the writers of these stories are mostly fans themselves. The line between these books and fan fiction can be thin, as I will show later on. There are Jane Austen etiquette books, create-your-own-Austen-story books and strange reworkings as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Seth Grahame-Smith, with Elizabeth Bennet as a kungfu expert killing zombies. There are numerous Jane Austen societies, many of them in the United States, for instance the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA, www.jasna.org) which organises trips, publishes a yearly online journal, *Persuasions*, and issues an essay contest every year in the categories 'high school', 'college/university', and 'post-graduate'. When browsing Jane Austen-related pages on the Internet, one can find numerous websites, forums and weblogs on her works and life, for instance www.austenblog.com, www.austenfans.com, www.austen.com and in the Netherlands www.janeausten.nl. The websites with message boards always have fan fiction as a subject, in the form of books in print. Online fan fiction is not as popular in the communities, but two well-known websites (austen.com and pemberley.com) contain fan fiction. Mugs, T-shirts with quotes and other paraphernalia are sold in webshops. And many play with her characters online, fan fiction of course being part of that. There are people who have started to post novels by Jane Austen on Twitter line by line or those who are summarising them chapter by chapter – ironically or not. Some people even assume the identity of one of her characters and post ironic comments about the postings of other people. To quantify the size of her fan base, I have googled “Jane Austen” (with quotation marks) and found 5.680.000 hits. The combination of “Jane Austen” and 'fan' lists 826.000. However, this is much less than “Star Trek” (that in combination with 'fan' gives 31.500.000 hits) or “Harry Potter” (with 'fan', 23.000.000 hits).¹² Thus, Jane Austen is popular on the net, but her fan base is a lot less big than the best-known fan bases. Interestingly, “Jane Austen” and “fan fiction” gives 85.900 hits (about ten percent of the number of hits on “Jane Austen” and 'fan'), while “Star Trek” and “fan fiction” gives 374.000 (roughly one percent) and “Harry Potter” and “fan fiction” generates 833.000 hits (about 3,5 percent). So it seems that fan fiction is a bigger part of her fan base than it is in the others – which might be explained by the fact that the fan base consists of more women relatively. To learn more about the fans themselves, I have visited the introduction boards on some forums. The fans are mainly women, as I have stated earlier. Unfortunately, on one of the biggest

¹⁰ See this Dutch article by Arjan Peters, “De Echte Jane Austen” (“The Real Jane Austen”), http://extra.volkskrant.nl/ opinie/artikel/show/id/3241/De_echte_Jane_Austen, April 24 2009.

¹¹ See for instance www.pemberley.com or, in Dutch, www.janeausten.nl.

¹² All numbers from June 4, 2009. I have set the search to “pages from the internet”, but these results are influenced by the fact that I am accessing Google from the Netherlands. Therefore I asked an American friend to do the same searches on the same day. She presented similar numbers.

Jane Austen websites, pemberley.com, the members do not tell personal details on the introduction board. The members of austen.com (a fan fiction website) do. Almost all women – who share their age – are between twenty and sixty years old. There are women with jobs (lawyer, teacher, translator, graphic designer), college students and housewives. I have not found much information about ethnicity, apart from the fact that the women tell where they come from. I think they are mainly white, but do not know this for sure. Many are from America, but I have also seen several women from other countries (the USA is a relatively big western country, so its majority is perhaps not strange). Several mention being married. These characteristics I have also roughly found on the introduction board on the Dutch fan site www.janeausten.nl, but there were also some teenagers. Thus, the category of 'women' as I have described earlier, overall matches these findings: western, heterosexual, middleclass women who are probably white.

Jane Austen fan fiction

Jane Austen fan fiction (JAFF) differs not only from the fan fiction researched by others because of the feminine base text, but also because the writers have more freedom in their adoption of that material. There is no copyright on the characters or the stories – Austen's finished novels are all available online for free and free of copyright. There is no struggle between a company and the fans, so the latter have complete freedom to use the materials however they like, still many of them do credit Jane Austen at the introduction of their stories. However, some of the movies and series that have been made over the last fifteen years have become so popular that they have been incorporated in the fan fiction as well, sometimes without the author or the reviewers even noticing this.¹³ For instance, in the story *Better For Loving You* from www.austen.com, Helen credits Jane Austen for the dialogue, while most of the dialogue she uses is actually from the 1995 BBC-series (named P&P2 online, the most popular Austen adaptation according to numerous polls) and cannot be found in the book. She has probably seen the movie so many times that she knows the lines by heart and doesn't remember where the words came from – or she might have never read the book at all and simply assumes that the dialogue in the series comes straight from the book. In any case, she has used copyrighted material from the BBC. The BBC is not very flexible concerning these issues, but I have not found anything to suggest that they have tried to prevent such use of their series.¹⁴ Probably because it is usually very hard to discern what part is imagination (does Elizabeth Bennet have brown hair?), what part is the book and what part the series. So we can safely say that the JAFF-writers have much freedom in their use of the material.

¹³ See for a small discussion of this topic: <http://faithful-narrative.blogspot.com/2008/12/names-that-stick.html>.

¹⁴ For clashes between fans and the BBC, see for instance http://625.uk.com/copywrong/bad_aunt.htm and <http://www.openrightsgroup.org/2008/05/08/bbc-removes-doctor-who-fans-knitting-patterns-from-the-web/>

This does not make her works a more popular subject, though. Jane Austen fan fiction is not as numerous on fanfiction.net as for instance *the Gilmore Girls* or *Star Trek Voyager*. Her complete oeuvre has about 1300 stories there. But numerous fan fiction stories can be found on specific Jane Austen fan sites. These are websites with message boards where people post and discuss their fan fiction, but also other Austen-related material and of course the books and writer themselves. They are often also a stage for non-Austen stories the fans have written. They form tight communities, where rules are laid down to ensure all the members feel welcome. One rule, not always specified, is that the writers respect each others stories and although they may criticize each other, this should not be done too harshly. One well-known website I have already mentioned, www.austen.com, has a special board for JAFF, the *Derbyshire Writers Guild*. The writers who publish there are called dwiggies. Another popular website is www.pemberley.com, with interesting message boards, but without much fan fiction. It only has an archive of stories called *Bits of Ivory* without reader comments. A third site is www.meryton.com, with a board called *A Happy Assembly* for readers 18 years and up, since it contains R-rated stories, and diverse forum topics: tips for writers concerning grammar or the Regency period, private topics, but also recommended fan fiction. *Mrs. Darcy's Story Site* (www.mrsdarcy.com) is a somewhat smaller site, because it works with a small selection of writers. It also contains fan fiction as well as comments. The website is in English, but it is run by a Dutch woman. There is also a practical index, the *Jane Austen Fan Fiction Index* (JAFF Index, at www.jaffindex.com), which is very well kept and includes the stories from all of these websites and others. It is searchable in many ways, for instance by author, by title and by category. These are the websites I have limited my search to. There are many more sites with fan fiction, but usually these are websites without message boards where the owner and a few friends post their own stories.

Let us first take a look at the JAFF Index. Their 'quick search' gives a global idea of what types of stories one can expect. The stories can be Regency (R) – thus situated in the period in which Austen wrote – Modern (M) or Other (O). Some stories are very brief, others full novels. *Pride and Prejudice* has its own category search field while the other books do not, indicating as I have stated that it is by far the most popular novel as a subject for fan fiction. In the overall category list we find themes of different types. Most concern the content of the books like 'altered partnerships', 'pairings and possibilities', 'what ifs', 'altered backstory', 'other viewpoints', but there are also meta-categories (genres) as 'crossovers', 'angst' and 'humour'. These are well-known genres in fan fiction, see for instance the genrelist on fanfiction.net. There are some more covert genres, which do not appear in the general list, like slash or PWP (plot, what plot? referring to hardcore pornography stories).¹⁵ On the JAFF

¹⁵ There are no academic overviews of fan fiction terms, since the communities do not all use the same terms for the same genres. But overviews do exist, see for instance <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A632062>.

Index, slash is indexed as a subgenre of angst, a telling categorization.

Exploring relationships

Singling out certain characters and pairing them can be a political act. Slash for instance gives writers a chance to express themselves in ways they might not in their everyday lives. (Jenkins 2006: 85) There have been several explanations for the use of slash. One explanation is that the writers try to subvert patriarchal culture by appropriating traditional men to suit their own (female) views. Another is the wish to negate - inherently unequal - heterosexual relationships, see for instance Somogyi (2002). In *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction, slash is rare. On fanfiction.net some stories can be found, but they are usually very brief and not well-developed, some containing little more than sex and some only referencing homosexuality. (This is for instance the case in *A Matter of Propriety* where the women of P&P find out that the men experimented when they were at college.) The male pairing chosen the most is not Darcy/Bingley, but Darcy/Wickham, the arch-enemies. The writers suggest that the hate was born out of repressed feelings on one side, or that a sexual relationship started their hatred for one another. One interesting exception can be found in – even more rare – femslash, *Sweet Caroline*, a more elaborate story (an abandoned one, it was never finished) where Caroline Bingley's malignant attitude is explained by the restrictions society has placed upon her since she was a child. It uses a minor character who has little depth in the book and gives her another dimension. Caroline falls in love with Elizabeth, in whom she recognizes a kindred soul. Her abuse of Elizabeth stems from her frustrations: “Perhaps she did this, because self consciously [sic] she knew she could never win Elizabeth, so she couldn't bare [sic] to lose Darcy who she had a much, much more realistic chance with.” (Frenchtosser, http://www.fanfiction.net/s/3096486/1/Sweet_Caroline, chapter 7) Her feelings are coupled with a feminist take on women's lives in that period. I will reproduce a larger section.¹⁶

Caroline that's a horrid thing to say, simply because of her financial status and means, the family seems happy enough, and there is more to life than-than-marriage.”

“What more is there for women Charles? Tell me, please, besides the option of spinster what other route in life to we have?”

“And supposing she doesn't want to marry, supposing she never falls in love, what is so wrong with spinsterhood if one chooses it.” Charles said “I dare say, if I weren't so bad off on my own I might not ever marry myself.”

“Charles, even you cannot pretend to be so oblivious to the fact that there is a large difference between spinster and bachelor.”

¹⁶ I will point out only spelling mistakes. Her punctuation is sloppy and her grammar not always correct.

“But women have an advantage too, all that is expected of them is to be accomplished, men have to do so much more grueling and-”

“And, writing business letters and hunting are grueling?” Caroline hadn’t had such a [sic] argument with her brother since they were both young children.

“Do you think you could do them?” Charles asked half laughing half serious [sic].

“Of course I do, I would love to be in your place! Always outdoors, always! Dare I step out and I might drop dead of a cold, a cold that takes us fair maidens so hard like poor frail Jane Bennet! Practically dying upstairs because she rode horseback in the rain. Do you think I enjoy having endless balls and parties, talking ridiculous nonsense and gossip to fat old toads in tiaras or floppy hats, no! But why do I do it, ah to catch a husband...my lot in life.” Caroline’s face burned with the revelation that had roasted inside of her for longer than she could remember. She don’t know why she had chosen tonight to spill her desires, or why she felt so many unstable emotions in one day, but she knew who was causing it all...Elizabeth Bennet. (ibidem)

This pinpoints exactly the restrictions of women in the Regency era. This is something not often acknowledged in P&P fan fiction in such an elaborate fashion. Women of higher rank are not allowed to have professions, and the only way they can make a fortune, is by marrying or through an inheritance that is not entailed away.

Spinsterhood is seen as something abominable. The last chapter finished ends with an intense kissing scene between the women. The peer reviews are positive concerning the content (“Wow - this is not usually my type of storyline, but I really like how you have written Caroline! Great job!” and “This story is awesome. is finally evolving from endless modern rehashings of *Pride and Prejudice* and doing some unconventional work. Good job.”), but critical of the use of language, which is extremely sloppy. The last review also indicates the rareness of this type of story. Other critique of the material is also by a femslash writer¹⁷, Sophie (screen name sqbr), who writes on her blog:

I've been reading *Pride and Prejudice* fanfic. I realise that if I want genuinely feminist plots I should avoid stuff set in sexist times but it still annoys me that modern writers of regency romance are almost all more rigidly heteronormative etc than Jane Austen/Charlotte Bronte etc. (Admittedly they still do better than the average writer of that era, I say having been introduced to the plot of Pamela) (sqbr, “Rambly 4am post”, February 25 2009 <http://sqbr.dreamwidth.org/?skip=20&tag=thinky>)

She equals feminism with non-heteronormativity, which is of course oversimplifying the matter, but there has been much discussion of the heteronormativity of Austen's novels – some academics reading queerness between the

¹⁷ She wrote her own *Pride and Prejudice* femslash story with the telling title *Wedding is Destiny, and Hanging Likewise*, which is unfortunately a work in progress (WIP) or maybe even abandoned, and shows only the beginning of an evolving friendship between Mary Bennet and Anne de Bourgh, see <http://www.archiveofourown.com/works/1873>.

lines, while others try to prove that is not possible. (Johnson 2000) While this discussion is irrelevant here, Claudia Johnson shows that both 'sides' have tried to claim Austen. Therefore it is not unlikely that queerness is written into the novel by fans. However, the BBC-series of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) has foregrounded the relationship, for instance by entering some scenes showing Darcy's struggles with his infatuation, putting the 'perfect romance' up front. And as I have mentioned earlier, many writers can hardly distinguish between the book and the series, which can for instance be inferred from the fact that a number of them call Mrs. Bennet Fanny, a name only mentioned in the film and describing Elizabeth Bennet as a woman with auburn curls (like Jennifer Ehle who plays Elizabeth in the series), while in the novel she is not described as such. The heteronormativity of the fan writers might then be inferred from the fact that 1) the alternate pairings made are usually between a man and a woman (which can be seen in the extended topic list on the JAFF index) and 2) Elizabeth/Darcy¹⁸ is the coupling that is used most often – the fans seem overall to be pleased with the pairing. In modern versions, the plot is copied (strong-headed woman and proud man meet, dislike each other, learn of their mistakes and end up together); in Regency versions the story in the novel is expanded in different ways – for instance by describing the wedding night, showing their life together at Pemberley (when they have children), or writing from Darcy's perspective. One popular fan fiction story that eventually came into print (and was of course immediately removed from the Internet) was a trilogy, *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*, by Pamela Aidan. It describes the well-known events in the original novel from Darcy's perspective, not changing but expanding the universe. Ritrosky (2005) suggests that the (psychological) equality between the characters in the book is an important reason for fans to expand the relationship instead of altering it. “*Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction takes a powerful love story and explores ideas about gender and intimacy, where a sense of equality comes from shifting subject-object positions, receptive pleasures, and mutual self-discovery.” (Ritrosky 2005) Ritrosky also argues that the relationship is so popular in fan fiction, because Mr. Darcy is not a typical masculine figure.

Darcy's heterosexual masculinity is never in question even as he plunges beyond “rational” control and into the “messy” realm of amorphous pleasures. As a representation of masculinity, this is a hugely vulnerable position. The “masculine” is guileless, unhinged, and out of control in euphoria. (ibidem)

He is androgynous in the sense that he is masculine and vulnerable at the same time. We see this seeming paradox for instance in the story *An Anniversary* where Elizabeth seduces her husband and we read his point of view: “The

¹⁸ Elizabeth is the first to be named, which is significant, but also her first name is used, which might note inequality. It is necessary to distinguish her from her sister, but on the other hand, Mr Bingley is described as Bingley, while his sister is called Caroline. I think this partly stems from the book itself: the men are seldomly referred to by their first names while the women are.

thought that was with him during almost every waking moment became paramount. 'This woman is mine. This lovely woman whom I thought never would have me. . .' Today she had reminded him how close he had coming to losing this treasure." (Myretta, <http://www.pemberley.com/derby/oldb/myretta2.htm>) He sees her as a possession, but at the same time she was in control of the choice. This combination of qualities can often be found in the male love interest in romance stories, perhaps indicating that there, too, women try to negotiate a different type of masculinity. Lack of typical masculinity in Austen's male characters has been noted by scholars as well. "[Jane Austen] is a woman whose fiction does not reverence the love of virile men." (Johnson 2000: 29)¹⁹ And this is what apparently makes Mr. Darcy as a character an example of an ideal partner for many straight western women, also in this day and time.²⁰ And this does not just apply to teenage girls, women who consider themselves to be feminist respond to his character as well. As one blogger wrote:

His example gives lie to the notion that feminism is about wanting a weak and malleable romantic partner. His example also gives lie to the notion that even self-professed feminist women really want to be dominated by men. It's really quite simple: the best romances are between strong people who appreciate each other's strength and Jane Austen recognized that truth two whole centuries ago. (The happy feminist, "the Perfect Feminist Romantic Hero – Updated", April 26, 2006,

http://happyfeminist.typepad.com/happyfeminist/2006/04/there_is_nothin.html),²¹

Interestingly, the search for a relationship based on equality and male characters who are not merely masculine have been considered motivations for fan writing and specifically, for writing slash, as I have stated earlier. The men in the original material "reproduce numerous patriarchal norms, including an understanding of masculinity as unfeeling, unmoving, masterful and impenetrable." (Kustritz 2003: 374) Compare the description just given of Darcy and Kustritz' explanation for rewriting a tough male character (Maximus in *Gladiator*):

Thus the extremely withdrawn character we are presented with in the film no longer represents an image of masculine perfection, but rather becomes a particular individual whose brooding is not a sign of strength, but of fear and fracture. (Kustritz 2003: 375)

¹⁹ Johnson also describes that Charlotte Brontë disliked Austen's work because of this aspect, she preferred the more rugged man and sexually tense relationships. (ibidem)

²⁰ See http://happyfeminist.typepad.com/happyfeminist/2006/04/there_is_nothin.html

²¹ She then notes that although this may sound heteronormative, she believes that not only straight women want a partner like Mr. Darcy – she herself had a crush on a woman who resembled him. Which might have resulted in fan fiction with a female version of Darcy. I have found a modern version with a female Darcy, but then Elizabeth is also turned into a man.

This is also what Jenkins asserts when he tries to find a common factor in slash, “slash represents a way of rethinking and rewriting traditional masculinity.” (Jenkins 2006: 71) In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy's weaknesses are already exposed; he proclaims his struggles and love to Elizabeth: “In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” (Austen 2008: 314) This outburst can hardly be called traditionally masculine, like we often see in male-oriented series or films, nor his desire to change when Elizabeth rejects him. What the fan writers do, is merely expand this character, since he has no need for change. This also counts for Elizabeth, who is seen as a strong character and an example by many fans. In *36D* for instance, a modern, pornographic fanfic, Elizabeth owns a lingerie store that William visits. They connect and when it leads to sex, Elizabeth is the one who takes control and exerts power over William. (Tracey, <http://tracey2.mrsdarcy.com/36D.html>) Elizabeth Bennet as well as Fitzwilliam Darcy are used as focalisers in the stories. The reasons for choosing one or the other could be researched further – but this would take me too far from my subject here.

Jenkins in “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten” (2006: 37-60) tries to marginalize the centrality of the romance plot in *Star Trek* fan fiction by showing that the women who write the stories have feminist views. He does this by quoting some of their comments on *Star Trek* which show that they also focus on professional issues (to which I will return shortly). But it is apparent from the quotes he uses from the stories themselves that they are most of all formed around romantic relationships – however based on some form of negotiated equality, but that is no different from many of the *Pride and Prejudice* stories. This means that an important reason to write slash about the original *Star Trek* series is the fact that there are no female major characters the writers can relate to, unlike *Pride and Prejudice*. Of course, this does not account for all slash; just as in *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction, there are cultural critics as well as misogynists and everything in between. (Jenkins 2006: 61-88) But the 'need' for slash seems to lessen when the writers base themselves on a story where the main characters are a man and a woman who are not traditionally masculine and feminine. This is also apparent from *Star Trek Voyager* fan fiction, where the romantic and sexual pairing of captain Kathryn Janeway and her first officer Chakotay is extremely popular. (Somogyi 2002: 399) So the choice for expanding the primal relationship of *Pride and Prejudice* is perhaps not so much born out of heteronormativity, as it comes from a desire to play with a psychologically equal relationship of major characters. More research should be done however to assert whether most P&P fan writers are heteronormative or not (for instance by interviewing them), since one cannot infer from this explanation that they are not. But the simple interpretation that some researchers have given of slash – namely that it is about feminist writers who use male characters to bypass the inherent inequality of male-female relationships – can no longer be deemed valid. As Somogyi also states:

To a large degree, these responses ignore the possibility that it was not that the writers couldn't imagine powerful women, but that television had not yet offered them any sufficiently interesting and powerful characters about whom to write fanfic. (ibidem)

The fan fiction writers, no matter if they write about *Star Trek* or *Pride and Prejudice*, and whether they write about heterosexual or male same-sex relationships, all seem to negotiate the same two things: a different type of masculinity and a relationship based on psychological equality. Some of the writers however do acknowledge the inequality of the time (and the traditional aspects of *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction) and take an explicit feminist view in the stories they write. Perhaps not surprisingly, this is most easily found in femslash.

Professional inequality

In slash narratives, authors meticulously create an equality relationship dynamic in which characters are completely equal in everything from decision making to love making, and from patterns of dress to household chores to levels of attractiveness and financial security. (Kustritz 2003: 377)

The need for psychological equality I have established as a basic property of romance fan fiction, but with this quote, we stumble upon one important aspect of gender equality that is not frequently dealt with in P&P fan fiction: professional equality. What Jenkins has pointed out on *Star Trek* fan fiction, is that the stories not only focus on romance, but that the writers (he does not discern levels of awareness) are highly sensitive to professional inequality as well. (Jenkins 2006: 54) The P&P fan fiction writers hardly acknowledge this inequality. In *Star Trek*, since the characters all have ranks, their professional positions are an important part of the series and therefore crucial in relationships between them – they cannot be overlooked. This is reflected in its fan fiction. The writers try to write relationships based on equality, preferably on important characters in the series, whether they are male or female. Obtaining equality in *Star Trek* means considering the (lack of) equality of rank among other things. In *Pride and Prejudice*, professional hierarchies are irrelevant, social rank is much more important. And, perhaps not surprisingly, this is what is often reflected in the fan fiction stories of that novel. In *A Modern Day Pride and Prejudice*, the Bingleys are also rich people from high society, while the Bennets are middleclass. One story that changes Elizabeth's status by changing her whole family's, is *All That This Entails*, written by Noells. It is a project taking three years and nearly fifty chapters. This is a well-written story that is popular among the fanfic readers.²²

²² It is interesting to note here that although the reviewers are often very mild in their comments - they point out

Through a complicated – but historically correct – development, the Bennets inherit a title. Mr. Bennet is now a Duke. This happens after Mr. Darcy's first marriage proposal to Elizabeth. In the original story he insults her by saying that he wants to marry her now he has not succeeded in fighting his feelings for her, since they are improper due to her inferiority of birth. Now that they are equal socially in the new story, and Elizabeth is a lady, he does not renew his marriage proposal when the misunderstandings are out of the way, like in the original story. Instead, they become friends – they discuss literature for instance – and his courtship is extended. Mr. Darcy has to make a bigger effort to win Elizabeth as she takes her time to make sure his love is not an infatuation. Although they are more socially equal now and this is reflected in the courtship, Elizabeth has become more of a meek character, and the ending is shockingly traditional: Mr. Darcy has to rescue her after she has been abducted and then she agrees to marry him. The reviewers of the story are loving it.²³ In *Better For Loving You* Elizabeth is not a Bennet, but is rich and of high society, Lady Casterton. This time her chances with Darcy seem ruined because of a family secret: her late mother's past of numerous infidelities. When her shame is known and Darcy shuns her, one reviewer posted: "On the upside: this Lizzy doesn't have to worry about starving in the hedgerows. Yet." (Ladytrapper, <http://meryton.com/aha/index.php?showtopic=4097&st=40>) And they acknowledge the writer's knowledge: "Great debates - you can definitely tell that you study politics at uni!!" (kate t, ibidem) Also, one reviewer posted a critical comment on the double standards of the time:

I've been pondering something though... What I truly don't understand is why his wife's adultery would severely tarnish the Baron's reputation? It truly was a man's world. If Lord Casterton remained honorable in his dealings with other men, I would imagine his wife's promiscuity would have no lasting effect on him socially. I bet he would never be unwelcomed anywhere or by anyone because he is the one with the money, the power, the title, the grand family history, and the name. I would imagine that people would still wish for his favor and court him for all the reasons listed above. I think the same is true for Darcy. If his sister had eloped (and even come back pregnant and unmarried), Darcy could probably still marry wherever he chose. It would be Georgiana's life that was ruined. I was thinking these things in relation to the real life Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. Her infidelity may have been an embarrassment to him but it did not ruin his reputation. And he was unfaithful to her (of course that was the double-standard of the time... people really didn't care if men were unfaithful to their wives). (jafan, <http://meryton.com/aha/index.php?showtopic=4097&st=60>)

inconsistencies in the story itself or in relation to the original and comment on grammar and spelling, but are supportive overall – the stories that are the most popular (which can be affirmed by browsing the several boards and reading recommendations) are stories that are usually well-composed and well-written.

²³ See

http://www.austen.com/phorum/search.php?5,search=all+that+this+entails,author=,page=1,match_type=ALL,match_dates=365,match_forum=ALL,match_threads=0

These posts all show interesting dealings with the text the reviewers read, providing support for Jenkins' idea that although fan fiction is "a literature of reform, not of revolt" (Jenkins 2006: 54) and "most of what the amateurs create is gosh-awful bad" (Jenkins 2008: 140) their interaction with these texts do give them a chance to reflect on certain gender equality issues, especially when some of these stories do have a critical stance or when the writer uses a story to display her own historical, or in this case, political knowledge.

What happens in most modern-day stories, is that Elizabeth and Darcy are simply assumed to be professionally equal: they both study or have full-time jobs. The professional equality does not have to be negotiated. However, Darcy is often her senior, following the original novel. In *The Muse* for instance, a very popular fan fiction novel (a 161-pages long story that is recommended at *Mrs. Darcy's Story Site* by several women), Elizabeth Bennet is a promising ballet dancer, while William Darcy has retired from dancing and is now a choreographer. They start a relationship and when William asks Elizabeth to move in together, she says:

"I thought you didn't like it when I left my underwear on the floor and didn't clean my dishes."

"I don't like it."

"I...I just didn't think we'd live well together."

William frowned. "Because you don't clean your room?"

Elizabeth nodded. "And don't do the dishes or the laundry." (Jessi,

<http://meryton.com/ellenspdf/Muse.pdf>)

Elizabeth is a modern woman: she has a profession that requires application and she does not care for her household. And the writer chooses to make the proposal one of moving in together instead of one of marriage. But, here also, the romance plot is put up front at the end: her important performance is still in the future when the story ends at his asking her to move in together.

There are also stories that combine a Regency and a modern rewriting. They often evolve around professional 21st century women thrown into the Regency period in one way or the other, trying to adjust to an unequal society. In *The Quest of Time*, Elizabeth is a career-woman who gets in a car-accident on a business trip and as a result ends up in the Regency period. It is a poorly written and rather naive story, but the writer wants to affirm her independence and condemns the inequality of women in those times.

Lizzie also raised her voice and said "Screw the propriety, I can count ten times today you shouted at me and make sarcastic comments. This is plain hypocrisy and sexism, men can do anything and women have to be all

mild and coy. What kind of society is that?" (Sav3MyS0ul,
http://www.fanfiction.net/s/4929538/6/The_Quest_of_Time_Now_or_Never, chapter 6)

It is a work in progress (WIP), so we cannot read yet whether Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam end up together or not. Up until now²⁴ she has not used any other characters but the two of them and she uses the same plotline I described earlier, so it does point that way.

Thus, the fan writers use elements that can be traced back to the original text. This means in *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction that the writers focus on the interpersonal relationships that are also central to the novel. Social or professional equality are usually not an issue, and if they are, the romance plot is still the thread of the story. If in *Star Trek* fan fiction the writers were to stay close to the series premiss, they would centre their stories around the professional lives of the characters. Since in the series the characters are put together as professionals, that is what the episodes evolve around. Their personal lives are a background to their encounters with other life forms. But what many fan writers do, is make the interpersonal relationships at least equally important. (Jenkins 2006: 50-54 and Somogyi (2002)) This shows again that romance and personal relationships are simply a big part of fan fiction in general where the professional lives are used as a background – like in chicklit or soap operas. The *Jane Austen* communities also treat the material as such. The writers post chapters and the peers comment on them, often waiting anxiously for next chapters. When a story is established in the community and it is followed by many, the comments are on the style of writing, choice of plot and the likeability of characters. The reviewers also start speculating on what comes next and expressing hopes for the characters or the story lines.

And I'm still loving the idea of Bingley and Anne de Bourgh together--oh, I cannot wait to see Lady Catherine's reaction! Miss Bingley should at least be satisfied with *that* engagement. One of the other engagements will make both of them unhappy, of course...can't wait for that, either. (JulieH,

<http://www.austen.com/phorum/read.php?5,34812,34816#msg-34816>)

On the *A Happy Assembly* board on meryton.com, there is a 'WIP support group' for women who are waiting for new chapters on the stories they are following, wondering whether the writer is ill for instance when it takes her some time to post a new chapter. Finished stories are often archived and still read, but since they are often very long and screenreading is still not very comfortable, many prefer to use the series-format the boards offer, making the reading of fan fiction much like the viewing of a series.

²⁴ June 8, 2009

This shows that the fan fiction writers like to construct their own soap opera's – closely related to chicklit, since the centre of the story is often the romance between two young persons. Again, this is not different from *Star Trek* fan fiction, as Henry Jenkins wrote that the women writers turn the “Space Opera” into a “Soap Opera”. (Jenkins 2006: 49) The professional lives of the women, or social equality in the case of Regency stories, serve as a background to the romance in most stories, in *Pride and Prejudice* as well as *Star Trek* fan fiction.

Conservatism and misogyny

It is a choice to read *Pride and Prejudice* as a love story, as Karenlee on www.janeausten.nl pointed out when someone on the forum called Jane Austen “the queen of genuine romance”.

I don't think Austen is a fan of 'romance' in the sense of passion or heat. When you mindlessly give over to that, you only get in trouble. Consider Lydia, Eliza Brandon and, in a lesser degree, Marianne. No, for me Austen is the queen of genuine *insight* – the importance of getting insight in to your character and that of others. (Karenlee, <http://www.janeausten.nl/forum/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=4&start=10>, my translation, her italics)

But to distill romance from *Pride and Prejudice* is not hard. That is what many fan writers do, they use the original story to construct a simple love story of their own. This applies especially to modern-day P&P-stories, however based on at least psychological equality. In dealing with secondary characters though, some writers express values that are more conservative than the ones in the original novel and sometimes even misogynist. In *Cousin Harry* for instance, a new cousin of Elizabeth is introduced as a love interest. The women in the story are all, except Elizabeth, portrayed as silly and loud and men as sensible and calm. Even Mr. Phillips, who is described as a not very intelligent man in *Pride and Prejudice*, is portrayed as wise. Sentences like “Mr. Bennet's library was a safe haven of male company” and “Things had come to a pretty pass if a man had no place where he was safe from female intrusion, and in his own house, no less” (Ulrike, <http://austen.com/derby/ulrike8.htm>) prove a negative take on women in general in the story – which cannot be found in the original. In one extreme example, *Lydia's just desserts*, Lydia Bennet (who elopes with George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* but is saved by Darcy's making them marry) is not rescued in time, but sold as a whore and raped. Only then is she found. As the title suggests, this is a good thing. Elizabeth expresses the fear that Lydia may have 'learned' nothing of her ordeal, because an officer has asked her to marry him after the events. Darcy replies: “[H]er forward ways are a thing of the past. I have no doubt that she will make a most respectable young matron.” (Kaurifish,

http://www.fanfiction.net/s/3278088/1/Lydias_Just_Desserts) And, as a final example of conservative ideas, on austen.com one woman defends her asking a man to prom using *Pride and Prejudice* characters:

Good Lord DebraAnne, I hope you don't consider me a Lydia because I asked a guy to prom rather than sitting at home alone on my prom night! I would give you more recent examples but I've been with DH since freshman year of college so I really haven't has a chance to ask anyone out since high school. I have no doubt in my mind that a modern Lizzy would ask someone out that she liked... (Allison OM, <http://www.austen.com/phorum/read.php?5,33081,33082#msg-33082>)

The woman who writes this, affirms the idea that Elizabeth as a character is an independent person, but she also speaks a traditional view of dating by equalling the asking of a long-time boyfriend to prom to acting frivolously and silly ('being a Lydia').

So although there are many writers who negotiate at least psychological equality for men and women in relationships, there are also a few writers who express more conservative views than the original novel does and who can even be extremely misogynist.

Conclusion

The *Pride and Prejudice* fan base is as diverse as society. Where there are women who are reflexive on the patriarchal structures in the works they rewrite, like the femslash writers I described, there are many more who are not. They use *Pride and Prejudice* to write stories of relationships that are based on mutual respect and spiritual equality, which is in a sense empowering, but shows only one aspect of a redefinition of gender roles – often not reflecting on the professional dimension in modern-day stories or the social dimension in Regency ones. Moreover, many writers show no reflection on the reasons for their need of that kind of relationship. And on the other end of the spectrum, there are writers who produce even more conservative material than Jane Austen did. The writers often write about their everyday lives, not acknowledging its heteronormative and misogynous aspects. Since Jenkins and other scholars - in trying to prove the reforming qualities of the *Star Trek* fan writers - hardly pay attention to other than critical responses, and I have not the time or space to examine another realm of fan fiction, I cannot affirm whether this is typical of *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction. But as I have tried to show the two fan bases are not as different as they might appear at a first glance.²⁵ This indicates that, even in the critical stories Jenkins and others use, the majority of the writers have a preference to write about an equal romantic relationship (as Jenkins

²⁵ They are probably not even completely separate, since many fan fiction writers write stories based on multiple texts – as can be seen when one clicks on a writer's name on fanfiction.net.

acknowledges in Jenkins 2006: 54) based on major characters, which happen to be male in the original *Star Trek* series. Therefore I would argue that to really make a good representation of fan fiction in general, the less critical and even misogynist views should be put next to the more critical, allowing for a broader range of responses to be considered, just as Jenkins did in his article on slash fiction. (Jenkins 2006: 61-88)

This broader research in multiple fan bases might also lead to an explanation for the choice of topic. The question that I could not answer here is why fan fiction writers, no matter whether the base material they use is 'masculine' or 'feminine', choose to write mostly romance stories. Jenkins has sought an explanation in the fact that women prefer psychological stories instead of action-oriented stories, but this leaves room for stories on other relationships (families and friends for instance) which are not often written. (Jenkins 2006: 50) It could perhaps also be explained by the development of the genre of fan fiction – maybe people write these stories because others write them, or because they think that is what is expected. Historical research in combination with interviews of the writers themselves might show if this is a valid theory. I cannot give a simple answer here.

Moreover, research on fan fiction has been concentrated – unjustly – on male-oriented books and films. My search into *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction has shown, that although the majority of writers are not susceptible to cultural inequalities, there are critical responses to be found, just as in the stories based on more 'masculine' texts, where men have a larger part in the overall fan base. By just focusing on these texts, female culture has been marginalized again, by simply assuming that fan fiction based on 'feminine' texts cannot be critical since the base material is qualified as such. It asserts that female efforts are only worth researching when they appropriate texts that are seen as dominantly masculine. Also, comparing a female-based fandom to a male-based one has shown that easy feminist explanations for the appropriation of masculine texts might be originating from somewhere else than a feminist standpoint. From researching *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction, I believe a feminist standpoint can be more easily found in femslash than in slash about all-male relationships. Thus, in researching fan culture, the whole should be taken into account, not excluding feminine culture and perhaps even explicitly including female gay culture. The (mostly female) researchers' choice of topic proves that they too in their pride sometimes forget to reflect on their prejudices.

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