DOMESTICATING HERMIONE

The emergence of genre and community from WIKTT’s feminist romance debates

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WIKTT, or “When I Kissed the Teacher,” is a listserv for the circulation and discussion of fan fiction featuring a romantic/erotic relationship between Harry Potter characters Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. WIKTT discussions reflect the discursive functioning of online fan fiction communities, as well as members’ negotiations of the Harry Potter canon, conventions of the romance genre, and current gender norms. Tracing WIKTT’s debates around the representation of rape in Hermione’s fan fiction romances achieves two complementary goals by both showing the variety of modern women’s interpretations of heterosexual exchange, and charting the complex process by which fan fiction communities and genres emerge from ideologically heterogeneous cycles of on-going discussion. Thus, while fan fiction communities can represent an alternative to editorial controls and the supply and demand model of professional publishing, the exact content of those visions will vary widely across and within various writing communities.

KEYWORDS Harry Potter; feminism; internet community; fan fiction; romance narrative

Introduction

In J. K. Rowling’s widely popular Harry Potter series, Hermione Granger, one of the title character’s two closest friends, is clearly going places. Together with Ron Weasley she helps Harry confront the constant crises that plague their time at Hogwarts, a boarding school for magical children, in the on-going conflict against the Dark Wizard Voldemort. From the age of eleven, the three face monsters, corrupt politicians, and evil wizards, while slowly honing their own magical skills and abilities. While most often noted for her voracious appetite for knowledge and encyclopedic memory, Hermione also contributes her bravery and shrewd tactical decisions to the three friends’ annual duels with the forces of darkness, all of which suggest her potential to help shape the future of Wizarding society as an adult. More broadly, her competence and centrality to the plot of such a successful series may represent progress female characters have made in modern mass media.

Yet, some fans see in Hermione another type of potential entirely. In a story pseudonymously posted to an internet archive by Ramos entitled “Hinge of Fate,” Hermione’s plans for the future are a casualty of war when a sexual attack leads to pregnancy, an unexpected marriage to a man twenty years her senior in her last year of school, and the subsequent production of seven children (2002).¹ Chiefly characterized in
Rowling’s books by scholarly achievement and metaphorically racialized by her non-magical parentage, in stark contrast Ramos’s Hermione proudly displays her wedding ring and pregnant stomach, demands to be called only by her married name, and retreats to a life of seclusion, and racial as well as financial privilege after marrying into a “pureblood” line of metaphorical aristocrats. Referring to the baby produced by her rape at the hands of the series’ villains as “a gift,” in “Hinge of Fate” this domesticated version of Hermione’s roles as wife and mother eclipse any other interests she may have had. While commonly referred to as “a classic” of the genre, Ramos’s version of Rowling’s characters also drew criticism from fellow fans and provides one among many examples of controversial fan attempts to reconcile the Hermione of the *Harry Potter* canon with plot devices, like a “benign” rape that eventually leads to true love, a longstanding theme within the romance genre.

On September 29, 2001, one month before the premiere of the first *Harry Potter* film, the electronic mailing list (listserv) WIKTT, or “When I Kissed the Teacher,” was inaugurated with a message from a new member asking, “Has anyone else here ever liked COUGHCOUGH one of their teachers?” (Stitches 2001). This question would remain a structuring principle for those who chose to join the group and, to an extent, a limiting boundary of the list’s discourse. Focused on the posting and discussion of fan fiction, WIKTT only allowed messages that directly pertained to a fictional relationship between Hermione Granger and her teacher, Professor Severus Snape, portrayed by actor Alan Rickman whose image appeared in the original WIKTT header. While stories range in length and sexual explicitness, may include descriptions of relationships between other characters, and borrow from other genres, e-mail could be sent to WIKTT “only if the Snape/Hermione relationship is a major element in the story” (Atumnist, Rhtmchsham, and Elgoose 2004).

As common to fan fiction communities, although not part of the list rules or description, nearly all of the group’s members present themselves as female (Francesca Coppa 2006; Henry Jenkins 1992; Joan Marie Verba 1996).

Within emergent discursive norms, in the over fifty thousand posted messages since its inception, WIKTT became a lightning rod for discussions spurred by members’ attempts to negotiate the canon of the *Harry Potter* universe, the conventions of the romance genre, and current gender norms as inflected by the mixed legacies of global feminist movements. This forum became the site of heated debates about what women can and should be, the purpose of art in life, and the responsibility of authors to their readers, conversations that together shape a dynamic and heterogeneous community and communicative ethics. Thus, tracing WIKTT’s debates around rape in Hermione’s fan fiction romances, particularly the genre-defining controversies spurred by “Hinge of Fate” and “Pawn to Queen” that underlie and shape list members’ enormous response to “Breeding Lilacs Out of Dead Land” (BLooDL hereafter), achieves two complementary goals by showing the variety of modern women’s interpretations of heterosexual exchange, in the process of charting the complex discursive process by which fan fiction communities and genres cannot represent any single static political value, but instead emerge from ideologically heterogeneous cycles of discussion (Areola 2004a; Ramos 2002; Riley 2001).

**Feminists, Anti-Feminists, Post-Feminists, and Their Romances:**
**The Social Politics of WIKTT Debates**

Investigating the discursive history of WIKTT members’ disagreements over the politics and aesthetics of rape in fan writing helps illuminate longstanding questions about
the ideological value of fan fiction texts and community structures. Fan writing, especially the more highly publicized homoerotic form known as “slash,” has gained a certain rebel mystique. As media conglomerates become ever larger and copyright law expands to curb the free exchange of internet file-sharing, any instance of consumer agency may be interpreted as subversive to corporate control, while stories written by amateur authors and circulated beyond the professional publishing apparatus may appear stridently rebellious.

In an article entitled “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?” influential fan theorist Henry Jenkins sums up this populist potential of fan fiction. He writes,

Fan fiction repairs some of the damage caused by the privatization of culture, allowing these potentially rich cultural archetypes to speak to and for a much broader range of social and political visions . . . tailoring it to cultural niches underrepresented within and under-served by the aired material. (2003)

Thus commentators often conflate fan fiction’s radical production with radical content, emphasizing progressive structures and implicitly assuming that as fan production and distribution exceed the capitalist profit imperative, their content likewise exceeds the industry’s ideological constraints (Rhiannon Bury 2004; Kristina Busse, Francesca Coppa, Karen Hellekson, Abigail De Kosnik, Julie Levin Russo and Alexis Lothian 2009; Anne Kustritz 2003; Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith 1986; Constance Penley 1991; Joanna Russ 1985; Victoria Somogyi 2002).

Yet, Ramos’s pregnant, married, and upwardly mobile rewrite of Rowling’s feisty female heroine may feel little like a challenging “repair” and more like a return to normative, or even antiquated, standards of female behavior. Far from “under-represented,” the fantasy provided by “Hinge of Fate” reflects tropes for the representation of heterosexual exchange whose omnipresence is apparent in their commonality not only among paperback romances like the Harlequin line, but also in “high brow” depictions immortalized by Jane Austin and the Brontë sisters. Implicit assumptions that the content of fan writing meaningfully diverges from the limited set of options provided in mainstream mass media cannot account for fans’ creative work that happily reproduces forms, themes, and content borrowed directly from the mainstream, at times even normalizing conventions, like “benign rape,” which could arguably be termed reactive and regressive.

Some fan fiction does indeed produce radically transformative and transgressive racial, sexual, and class scenarios, but after living in the same culture as professional writers, fans’ writing cannot be assumed to present a meaningful ideological divergence merely by virtue of its amateur status or provocative appropriation of published characters. Fan discourses not only proliferate meanings and potential ways of being, but also simultaneously limit, foreclose, and control possibilities for imagining. Further, as a field of discourse bisected by numerous vectors of power, oppression, and opposition, not just any reconfiguration of popular culture may be understood as resistant in every possible sense. However, simply making the reverse argument, as proposed by some recent studies, that fan fiction reproduces the homophobia, misogyny, and racism of established genres, also fails to account for the dialogic process by which fan fiction communities work through various forms of representational politics and the resultant multiplicity of ideological positions within fan fiction genres (Kyra Hunting 2012; Sara Gwenllian Jones 2002; Christine Scodari 2003).

How, then, is one to understand a fan fiction community like WIKTT whose focus on non-canonical romance between Harry Potter characters Hermione Granger and her teacher...
Severus Snape produce stories ranging from “Hinge of Fate’s” appropriation of normative or regressive romance tropes to tales that exhibit drastic innovation in their representations of gender and sexuality? Founded on September 29, 2001, over a year after the release of the fourth Harry Potter book, WIKTT didn’t hit its stride until December of 2001 after the release of the first Harry Potter film. Thereafter, an average of around a thousand messages, some of them fiction and some commentary, were sent to the nearly ten thousand WIKTT members every month (ranging from 2,064 messages in October of 2002 to 699 messages in March of 2002). Before the Harry Potter series’ translation into film, Professor Severus Snape may have seemed like an unlikely candidate to become the romantic lead in thousands of fan rewrites. Described by Rowling as greasy haired, sallow skinned, and hook nosed, in his appearances as Hogwarts’ potions teacher Snape ruthlessly punishes minor infractions while making no attempt to hide his personal antipathy toward Harry Potter and by extension his friend Hermione. However, Snape’s dedication to defeating Voldemort, the series’ principal villain, places him in the ranks of “good” and even heroic characters; yet, he does not display characteristics culturally associated with goodness like kindness, fairness, or beauty. Canon interactions specifically between Hermione and Snape at first glance don’t present promising preludes to romance as Snape repeatedly disparages Hermione’s appearance and eagerness in class. Thus, Rowling’s canon provides little suggestive material for a romance between Hermione Granger and Severus Snape (HG/SS hereafter).

At least two factors facilitated the rise of HG/SS as one of Harry Potter fandom’s most popular fan fiction pairings. First, the decision to cast Alan Rickman as Snape brought the role his pre-constituted personal fan following. Known primarily to an American audience for playing villains, in Snape Rickman’s “bad boy” sex appeal combined with fan memories of his portrayal of Colonel Brandon in a film adaptation of Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility. Trademarks of that iconically English romantic role reappear frequently in Harry Potter fan fiction, as even after the books clarified Snape’s half-blood, and economically constrained social position, fans repeatedly wrote him in the style of an Austenian aristocrat. Although a small trickle of HG/SS stories had been written before the announcement of Rickman’s acceptance of the role, the incredible fan investment and production surrounding Snape fully developed shortly thereafter.

A second major force involved in the popularization of HG/SS comes from synergy between the characters’ canon and other cultural discourses for narrating love and sex. Although Snape’s canon temper tantrums and unrestrained malice may appear almost cartoonishly cruel, they also map onto a particular tradition for representing romance heroes. Familiar to modern audiences from many Harlequin paperback “bodice rippers” and film rom-coms, romantic heroes whose dismissiveness and even brutality toward the heroine are slowly softened by her saintly forgiveness, love, and acceptance have long antecedents, including Heathcliff of Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights, Charlotte Bronte’s Mr Rochester of Jane Eyre, and Jane Austen’s Mr Darcy from Pride and Prejudice. In their analyses of the romance genre Janice Radway, Tania Modleski, Carol Thurston, and Jan Cohn write that, with the addition of gothic romances wherein intimidating and potentially violent men function as a central trope, archetypes from Austen and the Brontës structure modern romance novels (Jan Cohn 1988; Tania Modleski 1982; Janice Radway 1984; Carol Thurston 1987). Thus a naïve, young, usually virginal, but plucky woman’s struggle for recognition by an imposing, unfriendly, older man, often of high social standing, has become an iconic formula, as has the channeling, understanding, and diffusion of male aggression.
As these underlying discourses concern consent and the possibility of male sexual violence, WIKTT repeatedly found itself embroiled in heated debate regarding the ethics of representing rape and situations of compromised or dubious consent, exemplified most strongly in the enormous argument surrounding BLooDL by Areola. Yet, as Judith Butler discussed in *Antigone’s Claim*, the law only becomes visible when publicly violated and enforced (2000). Thus WIKTT debates about rape in romance do not merely reflect contestation of already existing norms, but are themselves the very moments that produce community identity, shared vocabulary, and genre forms, while each controversy implicitly contests and interacts with the temporary stasis established at the close of previous rounds of debate. Thus, although “Hinge of Fate” is merely one among many stories of the pairing to depict Hermione falling in love with Snape after he had raped her, its importance lies in its status within the community’s unofficial literary canon and its prominence in list discussions, making former “Hinge of Fate” debates one of the subtextual skirmishes fueling later dispute over BLooDL. Notably, “Hinge of Fate” manages modern feminist concerns about rape romance by making Snape an unwilling victim; Voldemort’s supporters force him to rape Hermione by using the Imperius curse, a kind of magical mind control from Rowling’s canon. Ramos thus attempts to bridge the gap between feminist repudiation of male sexual violence and the romance tradition; although Ramos allows her heroine to fall in love with her rapist, by shifting blame for the rape onto a third party, both Hermione and Severus are situated equally as victims of a larger system of metaphorical racial rather than patriarchal violence. Thus, “Hinge of Fate” repeatedly arose in WIKTT discussions of “classic,” “must read” fan fiction for the pairing not only because of its own merits, but because its Imperius-aided moral sleight of hand became a standard HG/SS plot allowing readers to have their feminist-inflected indignation regarding male-perpetrated sexual violence and enjoy rape romances too.

In addition to “Hinge of Fate,” one of the pairing’s very first stories, “Pawn to Queen” by Riley, exerted considerable influence upon the conventions of HG/SS fan writing and the development of community-specific genre conventions. “Pawn to Queen’s” first chapters preceded the establishment of WIKTT; yet its author’s and readers’ repeated and highly contentious discussions on the listserv eventually led to the story’s abandonment in February of 2003. “Pawn to Queen” produced several lasting fanon legacies including the “dark revel.” Although, as noted by WIKTT member Azazello, rumors about witches’ depravities have circulated since the middle ages, Riley’s “dark revel” offered a vivid form that other authors in HG/SS fan fiction consistently repeated (2004). At a dark revel thrown by Voldemort’s followers featuring drinking, debauchery, and the torture and rape of metaphorically racialized non-magical people, in “Pawn to Queen” circumstances force Snape to magically molest Hermione to maintain his undercover role. Snape’s enormous guilt and Hermione’s recovery from the traumatic event produce the story’s central dramatic tension. Calling on self-consciously feminist discourse about “coming to consciousness,” “Pawn to Queen” constructs its own mythology of magical power as Hermione slowly discovers her destiny among the “Strega,” a group of especially powerful witches whose source of strength lies in their self-confidence and self-actualization as women. In “Pawn to Queen” Riley attempts to combine rape recovery with rape romance by again shifting culpability from Snape onto a larger, in this case explicitly both patriarchal and racially supremacist structure. Riley allows Hermione to fall in love with her rapist in “Pawn to Queen” because Snape clearly and violently repents his participation in her molestation and the larger social system of female sexual exploitation.
“Pawn to Queen” provoked controversy on a number of fronts, but due to its strong metaphorical association with second wave feminist politics list members could more directly discuss their many interpretations of feminism than in other cases when such talk qualified as OT or “Off Topic,” a discursive structure strongly mirrored in BLooDL debates. In a revitalization of “Pawn to Queen” controversy provoked by discussion of another story, from December 3, 2004 through to December 8, especially in the approximately 120 posts on December 4 and 5, WIKTT once again questioned the place of feminist politics in romance fiction and women’s lives. Although this particular conversation came several months after the discussion of BLooDL which follows, argument about “Pawn to Queen” had become so standard on WIKTT that this group of messages speaks generally to such conversations’ form, and also to the lasting legacy of “Pawn to Queen” as a genre marker within HG/SS, and a social structure that constructs community norms and expectations. In this particular iteration, Rebecca began the discussion by using the example of Strega witches in relation to feminism, explaining, “I thought ‘strega’ was a concept which pulled in the absolute worst aspects of the feminist movement, to the point of being anti-male” (2004). Others quickly responded defending “Pawn to Queen” (PtQ in some posts) and feminism in general. Raven wrote,

I could not disagree with you more. I loved Pawn to Queen, and I thought the superiority of strega was amazing. Some people are stronger than others, males as well as females, but because women are (and I am generalizing) usually dismissed more often simply because of their sex, it is sometimes necessary to show more strength...

As e-mails came fast and heavy some supported feminism while attacking “Pawn to Queen” as in Shiv’s post, “I tended not to like PtQ, but not for its perceived uberfeminism, but because it wasn’t feminist enough” (2004a). Others wrote about “Pawn to Queen” as a direct feminist critique of Harry Potter. Sylvia wrote, “Surely the strega aren’t more threatening than Voldemort and his merry band of Death Eaters, who—regardless of their sex—are right and tight with the HP universe brand of patriarchy” (2004). Veneratia similarly wrote, “I really don’t see anything wrong with the Strega concept because you so rarely see anything so feminist in the HP universe” (2004).

Eventually the debate left the issue of “Pawn to Queen’s” feminist metaphors in favor of direct discussion of feminism itself. A number of members expressed distaste for feminism because they felt the concept had been tainted by or always only described extremist “man haters” or “female supremacists.” Veneratia provided the first explicit distancing denial in a post that included the line, “I am not a feminist” (2004). Gabriella wrote that she disliked “Pawn to Queen” because she perceived it as matriarchal which she suggests is just as damaging and inherently unfair as patriarchy (2004). Beatrix wrote that imagining some women as more powerful than men qualifies as “reverse sexism” (2004). Some of these positions strongly reinforce a post-feminist ethos, defined by Angela McRobbie, among others, as the notion that the feminist movement may have been necessary at one point in history, but is no longer needed and/or actively harmful now that gender equity has supposedly been addressed (Amanda Lotz 2010; Angela McRobbie 2007; Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra, Justine Ashby, Charlotte Brunsdon, Chris Holmlund and Linda Mizejewski 2005). Thus, Gabriella wrote that in the present age “feminists” degrade the welfare of women, while Greenstripe addressed her feelings on affirmative action as a type of reverse-discrimination (2004). Jean responded with a condemnation of what could be termed “post-feminists,” in her terms, women who distance themselves from feminism.
despite their belief in “equal work for equal pay” and despite all the ways that they benefit from the work performed by feminists in the past (2004).

This flurry of posts is indicative of WIKTT’s role as an impact zone between numerous enunciations of and reactions to global feminist movements and their legacies, as well as between Rowling’s published canon, conventions of the romance genre, and aesthetics of fan rewriting. These and other similar incidents highlight the discursive process that produces fan writing and social conventions through on-going, open-ended dialogue between multiple ideological positions, and the implausibility of assigning a single political position to an entire fan genre or culture. List members’ widely divergent feelings toward the legacy of second wave feminism strongly influence and to some extent produce controversy on a number of fan written stories. Although nearly all WIKTT members present themselves as women, their shared sex/genre category provides little if any shared ideological, political, or aesthetic space. In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler famously wrote that rather than the obvious and natural basis of feminism, cultural construction of the category “woman” as natural and internally coherent ought to be a feminist problem (1990). Butler thus showed that few if any experiences are shared by all “women,” and that not all people who feel themselves to be women have the same anatomy or genetic XX sex chromosomes. As argued by many theorists, feminism, therefore, cannot merely arise from women’s shared interests, and insistence upon mutual recognition of shared experience “as women” only alienates people whose experiences are not interpolated by such narratives (Judith Halberstam 1998; J. Jack Halberstam 2012; Bell Hooks 1984; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa 1983). “Post-feminist” positions may in part be interpreted as a rejection of second wave feminist discourse by some who felt their desires and aims had been misidentified in the movement’s totalizing language. Precisely because second wave feminists attempted and failed to speak for all women, post-feminists often utilize distancing rhetoric that seeks to clearly demonstrate that “those angry women” don’t represent them. Thus this post-feminist ethos strongly surfaced in WIKTT’s many “Pawn to Queen” controversies, partly because that story so strongly evoked contentious aspects of the second wave and women’s “essential” shared character. Arguments about “Hinge of Fate,” “Pawn to Queen,” BLOODL, and the many other HG/SS stores that included rape thereby often became centrally a question of debating the merits of feminist movements, and the role of politics and ethics in fan listserves’ social rules and fan fiction texts, thereby revealing the multiple politics and pleasures enacted through HG/SS.

**Rape Romance versus Romanticized Rape: Dialogic Production of Genre Expectations and Community Norms**

In late March of 2004 a discussion of WIKTT authors’ characterizations of Hermione led to a discursive explosion over authors’ portrayal of rape, which demonstrates both the multiplicity of interpretive and ideological positions taken by list members, as well as the conversational process that produces collective understandings of community standards and genre conventions in an online fan fiction culture. Although participants rarely spoke of feminism directly, previous debates on the topic remained an unspoken foundation of list members’ arguments. The incident began when Areola offered her story BLOODL as an example of a realistic representation of redemption and forgiveness as opposed to stories like “Hinge of Fate” and “Pawn to Queen.” Unsatisfied with shifting culpability away from Snape to make him a more palatable romantic hero, Areola’s post explains her choices as an author,
I can’t actually say I believe in forgiveness for all rapists . . . However, there are exceptions . . . after reading considerable number of rape fics (I love rape fics), and not to mention, fics where Dark Revels and the likes occur, I was sickened to see . . . what idiotic, lame excuses author provides their Snypes with . . . even those writers who put Snape under Imperius in order for him to rape Hermione without his consent must acknowledge the fact he must be aroused by the notion of rape . . . Therefore, the reason I wanted to have a rapist . . . Snape, is also in order for me to be able to say—look folks: this man RAPED. He might be ordered to rape, but he took pleasure in doing it. (2004c)

In the following days from March 28 to April 7 of 2004 discussion of Areola’s post and her story BLooDL would dominate the list’s 644 messages, accumulating well over two hundred pages of commentary, demonstrating that discussion of rape in fan fiction becomes a prism for analyzing both attitudes about feminist ideologies, and the futility of trying to discern a singular ideological function for fan fiction’s narrative multiplicity.

Almost immediately responses shifted focus from Areola’s protest to protest about BLooDL. Members fought three primary types of verbal skirmishes: those which compared BLooDL to Rowling’s canon; those which debated BLooDL’s “realism”; and those which disputed the morality of writing and reading BLooDL and other similar stories. Canon played by far the smallest role, but a few reviewers used particular scenes from the Harry Potter books as evidence that Areola’s writing was either well done because it followed some readers’ interpretation of canon, or poorly crafted because Hermione or Snape acted “Out of Character” (OOC). Euphist exemplified these attempts to return to canon in her plea, “Think about the character JK created” (2004). Although a contentious issue in its own right, character interpretation often falls into a subjective circularity, and in this case concerns about realism and morality greatly eclipsed arguments based solely on canon.

Disputes about realism dealt primarily with the questions of whether or not real rape victims can forgive and fall in love with their rapists, and whether or not fan fiction ought to be realistic. The former thread prompted first posters who claimed authority by calling upon conversations with rape victims, then later the direct disclosure of rape experiences by list members, and finally a ruling by Elgoose, one of WIKTT’s three moderators, that according to the group’s guidelines, “Discussion of rapefic—on topic. Discussion of personal experience of rape—off topic. Taking moral high ground while discussing personal experience of rape—off topic AND annoying” (2004). Central to second wave feminists’ “coming to consciousness” process, rape narratives served as an extreme example of the way women learned to publicly discuss their experiences of male victimization not as individual trauma, but as collective evidence of patriarchal domination and violence. Speaking publicly about rape throws down a politically loaded verbal gauntlet, as dismissing or criticizing claims made by a raped woman carries extremely reactionary, anti-feminist cultural baggage (Lauren Berlant 1997). WIKTT members who wrote as raped women or on behalf of raped women therefore wielded an enormously powerful authority while responses to personal rape narratives tread an extremely fine line in attempts to deny that authority.

Responding directly to Areola’s original post, Shiv initiated the use of authority associated with rape experience in her argument about BLooDL’s realism, explaining,

... the last time I raised the issue of forgiving a rapist on my LJ most people agreed with me that you just wouldn’t. Especially those people who had been raped ... It’s more
fundamental than Hermione being OOC and has more to do with no rational human being behaving like this. (2004c)

Like Shiv, many members called upon universalist language to talk about the experience of rape, suggesting that all people (any “rational human being”) who had been raped or talked to rape victims would understand and interpret BLooDL in the same way. Thus in some anti-BLooDL arguments rape victimization, rather than shared womanhood, becomes a completely deterministic, internally homogenous identity category and standardized reception pattern. Thus a post by Janice argued that those who enjoy BLooDL and similar stories could be converted to critics’ position if they were to have more contact with rape victims (2004). Others questioned Areola’s right to discuss or represent rape as someone without direct experience, often constructing a natural and uniform difference of opinion between people who have and have not experienced rape (BosonQueen 2004; Wendy 2004a).

Even after the moderator’s warnings about straying “off topic” WIKTT members continued to call upon narrating their own experiences with rape as a source of authority. However, after the arguments of rape survivors against BLooDL’s realism had been strongly stated, it was left to women with similar cultural authority to articulate the argument that fiction shouldn’t have to be realistic. Although a number of members argued that fantasy rather than reality should motivate fan fiction, the use of calling upon personal experience of rape to substantiate these claims emerged in messages which directly responded to other rape survivors, implicitly arguing that shared experience does not produce a homogenous audience.

Emphasizing the importance of a free space for fantasy, Jen explained that although she experienced rape, “Hinge of Fate” and BLooDL were enjoyable because she found them well written. Similarly, in a reply to charges that rape victims can’t enjoy fan fiction that includes rape, Ivy wrote, “And yet, it’s still a false statement. As I have both enjoyed fiction involving nonconsensual sex AND have been the victim of sexual assault, I just disproved it” (2004b). In another post Ivy called upon feminism to bridge the realism and morality debates,

Some see nonconsensual sex in fiction as undermining feminism, while others see it as a way for women so inclined to freely express her fantasy life, and therefore quite feminist . . . In an ideal world, a woman wouldn’t have to worry about her personal erotic fantasy being the actual nightmare of rape. (2004a)

Thus, arguments ostensibly only about realism often circle back to expose their basis in moral concerns. Discussion of realism leads Ivy to write about which topics women should safely be able to dream and fanaticize about.

By presenting her story as a morally superior alternative to Imperio-based rape stories like “Hinge of Fate,” Areola created an opening for another kind of comparison wherein a cascade of e-mails found her piece morally lacking. Although “Hinge of Fate,” “Pawn to Queen” and their numerous derivatives clearly place blame for Severus’s rape of Hermione on a third party, Severus’s paroxysms of guilty self-hatred nearly surpass Hermione’s own grief and trauma. Authors exploit Severus’s obvious and repeated repudiation of male sexual aggression to diffuse common feminist objections to rape romance. Although Areola and a handful of supporters argued that BLooDL’s Snape felt remorse for raping Hermione, an incredible torrent of WIKTT members wrote that Snape’s inability to express repentance...
invalidated any allure that a post-rape romance may have held (Areola 2004b). The author wrote, “All in all, I don’t attempt to morally judge my characters,” but many readers disagreed calling BLooDL “morally repugnant” and a “romanticization of rape” (Areola 2004b; Ashley 2004; Leah 2004; Shiv 2004b). Many list members consequently objected to the narrative’s structure, which Janine argues ultimately “rewards” Snape’s assault, explaining,

But rape NEEDS to have some consequences for the rapist, whether internal or external, and the man sure as hell shouldn’t get the girl. That’s harkening back to the old disgusting myth that women want to be raped and that yes really means no. (2004)

Janine’s post, borrowing from feminist “no means no” anti-rape discourse, points toward a set of real life consequences, making the implied argument that writing and reading rape in a way that a number of list members identify as socially irresponsible could lead to larger problems. As WIKTT members are assumed female in list discourse, participants focused on what such portrayals could do to potential rape survivors and appealed to writers’ responsibility to create socially conscientious fiction. Writing in this mode Gretchen comments, “This is NOT a good example of how women should think about abuse” (2004).

Others objected not to BLooDL’s content, but to its classification as romance, opening discussion of the community’s genre definitions. BLooDL, they contend, could have been successful had the author left “you with the sense that something wrong had been done” (Wendy 2004b). Marsha writes, “If all of this were meant to be a [portrait] of tortured dark Snape and emotionally flawed Hermione, it would still be a disturbing and [questionably] believable story. But as a romance? It doesn’t fly at all” (2004). Annalisa suggests, “The story has more merit as a darkfic, not a romance” indicating that the story should have been classified as dystopian (2004). While condemning rape romance, Wendy argues for saving a space to explore non-consensual sex in a separate fan genre: the PWP or “porn without plot” (2004b). These semantic debates do not compare the author’s usage of genre conventions to an established standard, but instead attempt to produce a new social consensus on semantics. There is no obvious or natural difference between “rape romance,” “romanticized rape,” “post-rape romance,” and “non-consensual PWP,” but if enough list members agreed with Wendy’s argument, they would produce a new social consensus around genre usage from this point onwards—until the next major list discussion which renegotiates them again.

Yet, recapitulating arguments that women ought to fantasize in whatever way they find most pleasurable, a slew of posters declined Wendy’s division between acceptable and unacceptable genres for exploring non-consensual sex. They framed anti-BLooDL posts as attempts at censorship. Like Laura Kipnis, who argues in her book Bound and Gagged that critics only subject “low art” to scrutiny while no one blames Shakespeare for violence (1996), Mary called into question the implicit association between morally suspect reading and morally suspect actions. She wrote,

My philosophy—as long as it’s fiction and you’re reading not acting upon it—what’s the harm? And if someone is going to use fiction as an excuse to go out and rape or hate or whatever there were problems with that person to begin with. (2004)

Like Kipnis, who defends pornography as provocative and psychologically rich art, some WIKTT members, regardless of their feelings about BLooDL and its content, defended
authors’ imperative to engage with ideas considered taboo or controversial by the outside world. Casting the BLooDL argument as a debate about free speech, Scape writes, “I am also very strongly for free speech, especially in the arts. I think what is being lost in this discussion is the fact that people are exploring complex ideas about power, gender and sex ... not justifying reprehensible [behavior]” (2004a). In a later post Scape summarizes the “If you don’t like it, don’t read it” position held by many WIKTT members,

I consider it a responsibility to be respectful enough to allow other adults to make their own decisions about what they read ... I am really baffled as to why you don’t just stop reading rape fics. ... I don’t think I (or anyone) has the right to make these decisions for other adults. [I] just don’t read what [I] don’t like. (2004b)

Mary highlighted internal contradictions within arguments about BLooDL’s morality by stressing that a relationship between a student and teacher would be classified as amoral to most outside of the WIKTT community. As in the realism debate, she called upon fan fiction’s status as fantasy,

... where do we stop? No rape fics or any other type stories unless the bad guy gets his just desserts? ... Who’s morals do we use? Nothing that offends anyone at anytime? That’s censorship. There are a lot of people that feel that we on this list that love the SS/HG storyline are immoral and not “nice people” due to the student/age thing ... I think that the bulk of us realize that we are dealing with fiction here. (2004)

However, critics of BLooDL were quick to clarify their position. Shiv wrote,

Sea Lilis\(^4\) is free to disregard everything we said; but we are not disqualified from saying it—freedom of speech goes both ways, and we are allowed to seek to persuade others of our views. It is a cheap shot to say that we are seeking to deny freedom of speech, when at no time has anyone of us said that the fic should not be posted, that it should be removed, or anything else of that nature. (2004d)

WIKTT members who disliked BLooDL attempted to garner public support by referencing canon, the experience of rape victims, and feminist inflected morality, but their arguments were restricted to appeals to writers’ sense of responsibility, not to activist web administrators. Although many expressed unease with BLooDL’s content and suggested authors shouldn’t write such stories, they attempted no concerted effort to remove BLooDL from the web. Rather, critics insisted that the same freedom of speech which allows authors free reign to publicly post stories also includes their right to offer public analysis (Leah 2004).

Therefore, content in fan fiction by and large comes under editorial control not through the dictates of a centralized review board, but through public dialogue between authors and readers. Few if any uniform restrictions exist across all public forums where fan fiction may be posted, but stories’ content may be publicly called into question at any time. As in the debate over BLooDL that raged across WIKTT for eleven days, although rarely if ever formally silenced or censored, authors of controversial stories can be readily questioned and held accountable by their community. In her post responding to allegations that anti-BLooDL list members were pro-censorship, Wendy calls for continued dialogue between authors and readers writing, “When a reader says she doesn’t like rape fics, or questions the motivations of those who do, that’s not censorship, its communication” (2004c). When Autumnmist, another WIKTT moderator, stepped in on the...
ninth day of debate over BLooDL she reinforced that as a community WIKTT was founded to provide an open space for review and dialogue about fan fiction, writing, “... regardless of your moral reactions to BLooDL or your criticisms, calls for the story to be removed from [the internet] do not belong on this list” (2004). Although the moderators enforce WIKTT rules, those discursive guidelines are always themselves subject to review by WIKTT members. Thus by reinforcing WIKTT’s purpose as an open space for discussion, not censorship, the moderator’s statements reflect a collective ethos of open exchange.

Notably, this open exchange is not limited to rape romances which certainly provide one central narrative structure to HG/SS fan fiction, but remain one of many common tropes. “Chaos is Come Again” by Theatresm, although not formally associated with WIKTT, was widely read, recommended, and discussed there (2005). Writing against the rape romance, Theatresm’s multi-novel-length story questions the notion that rape is a crime committed by specific bad men, instead explicitly placing rape within the context of a larger patriarchal system whose oppressive tendrils extend through (wizarding) law, tradition, and popular culture. Never a comfortable tale, Theatresm borrows from the genre conventions of dystopian literature rather than romance, which drastically reframes her representation of heterosexual exchange, allowing the story to end in happily divorced political revolution rather than happily ever after. Other classic WIKTT stories engage directly with the heteronormative romance model at the heart of feminist concerns with the genre. In Anne and Abby’s highly acclaimed novel-length story “The Fire and the Rose” a potions accident causes Snape’s and Hermione’s consciousnesses to swap bodies (2002). A common plot device across fandoms and pairings, bodyswap stories allow characters to literally walk a mile in each other’s shoes. In the case of “The Fire and the Rose,” Snape and Hermione’s romance occurs while they occupy each other’s opposite-sexed bodies and their relationship and sexual practices profoundly question naturalized sex, gender, and sexuality categories. A WIKTT writing challenge which asked authors to produce HG/SS romances featuring crossdressing also formally approved attempts to complicate gender and sexuality on the list, while the ready presence of fiction featuring threesomes, like Arsenic’s “Care of Magical Creatures” wherein an adult Hermione maintains a romantic and erotic relationship with both Remus Lupin and Snape, although relatively under-represented, ensures that options outside the heteronormative matrix remain part of WIKTT dialogue (Arsenic 2006; Betzstump 2004; Megan 2004). Thus, Hermione’s many lives and their reception in WIKTT discussions reflect numerous definitions of what women and relationships can and should be.

Multiple Readings, Multiple Ideologies: Open-Ended Community Interrogation of Representation

The presences of stories like “The Fire and the Rose” and BLooDL in the same public cyberspace indicates WIKTT’s role as a microcosm of larger cultural tensions over changing gender and sexual norms, and the romance tradition. Although certainly not completely free, the largely self-imposed rules which govern speech, relationships, and the use of space on the internet have not yet been solidified. As corporate control increases, capital slowly colonizes ever greater blocs of the internet; yet even now spaces still exist which have not been fully subordinated to market imperatives. Online fan fiction communities can represent an alternative to editorial controls and the supply and demand model of professional publishing, forming a counter-public sphere where non-professionals may distribute their own visions of the world.
The exact content of those visions will, however, vary widely across and within various writing communities. Unlike some fan communities whose self-constructed identity emerges from a shared political or aesthetic concern, WIKTT members show little evidence of thinking of themselves as a coherent whole with any kind of direct agenda in the physical world. Rather, WIKTT serves as an intermediate space wherein romance can be both loved and deconstructed, and where feminism can be mobilized, critiqued, and revised. WIKTT performs a valuable service by examining the tensions of modern femininity and sexual exchange, negotiating between still performative romance traditions, feminism, anti-feminism, post-feminism, and popular culture. Although the contradictory content of WIKTT fan fiction and discussions cannot be considered a coherent “resistance” to dominant romance mythology, they deeply reflect a period of cultural contestation and transition, perhaps pointing the way toward emerging narratives produced in a clash of ideologies central to the public, intergenerational discussion of sexual ethics. Hermione, whether forcibly domesticated, self-consciously feminist, subversively cross-gendered, or skittishly submissive, represents a central symbol in WIKTT members’ struggle to represent and imagine modern heterosexual exchange within an on-going and open-ended community dialogue.

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NOTES

1. All names are pen names, but some pseudonyms have been changed to protect list members’ identities.
2. “Fanon” derives from the phrase “fan canon” and refers to aspects of plot, setting, or characterization that become standard in fan works, yet derive from fan culture and practice rather than the published source.
3. PWP also stands for “Plot? What Plot” and designates stories focused on descriptions of sex.
4. “Sea Lilis” is Areola’s alternate pseudonym.

REFERENCES


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