UNLEARNING SHAKESPEARE STUDIES:
SPECULATIVE CRITICISM AND THE PLACE OF
FAN ACTIVISM
LOUISE GEDDES

In his 2014 address to the Shakespeare Association of America, Jonathan Dollimore challenged Shakespearians – who are, he noted, pressed with their back against the wall, ‘in a marketplace pretty indifferent to what they do’1 – to engage in a scholarship that maintains a more robust connection with the problems of the 21st-century world. Dollimore’s critique offers the opportunity to reflect on the current academic environment, which includes ongoing administrative demands to demonstrate a quantifiable relevance to humanities scholarship and has resulted in the yoking of education funding to generic assessment structures. The output of such constraints is institutionally sanctioned discourse that is too often intellectually and economically fortified against those outside of the profession. Cultural materialism’s own evolution from radical discourse to benign staple of the theory classroom is an example of how Marxist thought has been historicized and theorized to the point of inaccessibility to all but the most devoted students. As the rich histories of performed and/or appropriated Shakespeares illustrate, the shift in definition from Shakespeare (singular, text-based, stable) to Shakespeares (pluralized, multi-platform, transforming) is helpful, but limited as long as it is rooted in an ethos of fidelity, offering scholars the challenge of reconciling the presence of a historically identifiable ‘Shakespeare’ text with a more wide-ranging study of cultural, linguistic, and content-based networks. Certainly, while the affective reading practices that drive Shakespeare scholarship hide behind a veneer of objectivity, we cannot hope to produce the pertinent and pithy scholarship that would reaffirm Shakespeare’s capacity to speak to the increasingly polarized communities of the 21st-century world.

---

1 This article was first presented as part of a seminar at the World Shakespeare Congress at Stratford-Upon-Avon in 2016. My thanks to my seminar participants for the helpful questions and comments. Special thanks to Valerie Fazel and Mario Di Gangi for their thoughtful critiques of the article during the revision process.

Jonathan Dollimore, ‘Then and now’, Address to the Shakespeare Association of America Conference, Friday, 11 April 2014.

Aranye Fradenberg and Eileen Joy assert the need for a neuroscientific approach to learning that recognizes a greater complexity in thought, one that accounts for sentient experience — ‘old’ knowledge — and new processes in the networks that build education. Joy argues for the place of affect even in the methodologies we term ‘academic’, asserting affect’s importance as a driving force for the detached reading that scholarship celebrates, noting that ‘if we keep in mind the role of affect in the formation of memories, the question of why we cling or adhere to “tradition” is a matter of affective investments, of cathexis and de-cathexis’. Shakespeare studies perhaps needs to unlearn not its heritage and the subsequent body of thought that has emerged, but the practices that have bound us to institutional capitalist pressures and that are now manifest in a crippling intellectual decorum. Instead, Shakespeare studies might adapt, as the works themselves do, to new practices, new models of reading, and new ontologies — in particular, examining ways we might transverse the current creative/critical binary that is used to separate affective reading from the fallacy of scholarly objectivity. Such reading would affirm the value of transformative and transformed Shakespeares, constructed in accordance with Mercutio’s observation to Romeo that ‘now / art thou what thou art by art as well as by nature’ (Romeo and Juliet, 2.3.82–3).

Although still tethered to a dichotomy that separates fictional acts of criticism from formal scholarship, the unlearning of traditional models of scholarship has already begun to occur in our field: Will Stockton and Elizabeth Rivlin’s leadership at the open-access Upstart has seen the journal embrace a robust mixture of ‘traditional’ essay-based scholarship and creative criticism, and Punctum’s online journal Lunch offers ‘askew reviews’. Graham Holderness affirms the value of ‘creative collisions’ — novels, short stories, and poetical reflections that explore critical questions. Shakespeare scholarship also benefits from an expansion of critical form beyond the creative/critical binary. Conkie’s recent book, Writing Performative Shakespeares, stylistically rejects the ‘front and center’ placement of the theatre critic, instead embracing a fluid critical form that reflects the ‘provisionality, contingency, indefiniteness and indeterminacy’ that embodies the experience of Shakespeare in performance. Conkie’s work mirrors a re-mapping of critical thought already evident in fan practices, and might offer a more self-conscious assessment of form that recognizes not only the difference between past and present, but the transcultural and transhistorical networks that continue to inform our reading and shape our practices. Creative criticism, which uses abstraction to ‘temporarily stabilise the constantly collapsing and mutating energies of the universe into an evanescent but beautiful coherence’, occupies a fecund place between appropriation and a speculative textual analysis that creates a new literary topography, emerging out of a philosophy that Joy has termed ‘weird’ reading. Weird reading is an approach to a text that ‘might pay more attention to the ways in which any given unit of a text has its own propensities and relations that pull against the system and open it to productive errancy’. Such reading is playful, exploratory, foregrounding the potentiality of a text as a means of articulating one’s experience of literature, and

3 https://upstart.sites.clemson.edu/index.html.
4 www.lunchreview.org/about.
7 Conkie, Writing, p. 5.
8 Holderness, Creative, p. 19.
UNLEARNING SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

is frequently manifest in the aforementioned ‘askew’ critical engagements. In this article, I aim to loop the collisions manifest in fan practices back to more traditional models of scholarship and ask what is to be gained by integrating such capricious thought into Shakespeare scholarship at large. A more speculative critical approach allows for a broad application of weird reading that encompasses literary criticism, creative and performative critical approaches to a text, and both academic and non-academic discourse. In practice, speculative criticism and weird reading both eschew a linear logic in favour of a networked set of intellectual, critical, creative, and cultural associations, and offer a counter-knowledge to the traditional models of scholarship, promoting instead a ‘form of resistance to the idea that the only good movement is forward’. Speculative criticism exists in a space between textual analysis and performance studies, capturing a text at the very cusp of play.

The coalescence here between Shakespeare and both creative and speculative criticism directly correlates with the relative global ubiquity of digital culture, the spread of knowledge economies, and, in particular, the rise of fandoms as makers of cultural matter. The threat of a third wave of capitalism, termed cognitive capitalism, and ‘which is founded on the accumulation of immaterial capital, the dissemination of knowledge and the driving role of the knowledge economy’, is, in many ways, what is at stake for both the circulation of intellectual Shakespeare goods and the increasingly troublesome economics of higher education. For Yann Moulier Boutang, this new capitalism seeks to curtail and utilize the innovation and creativity that arise from networks of communal spaces and shared information, which Shakespeare scholars can see in practice through paywall-protected journals, steadily increasing conference fees, and for-profit file-sharing sites, such as academia.edu. In contemporary online culture, we witness not just an expansion of global knowledge, but ongoing acts of de-territorialization and re-territorialization as intellectual communities construct themselves both inside and outside of capitalist archival institutions that would harvest this work. As such, a radical intellectual stance comes from the scholarly recognition of the relationship of ‘outsider’, or non-academic, discourse to our own methodologies. Joy is clear about the value that speculative, or weird, ontologies carry, but maddeningly opaque about the sources of such knowledge. I would like explicitly to link outsider reading to the practices of fandoms and argue for a speculative Shakespeare criticism that might utilize close reading, historicism, creative writing, performance theory, affective reading, and presentism as a literary practice. Speculative reading practices might encompass creative criticism (in all its varied iterations), as well as more traditionally constructed critical acts that lead directly back to a direct engagement with the text under analysis. Such reading is informed by fannish textual participation and is predicated on the assumption that Shakespeare is essentially transformative, and reading practices that balance an aesthetic critique of Shakespeare with a mining of the text for articulations of contemporary socio-economic concerns. Fan production is a direct material response to the latent power of ghosting, manifesting itself as the visible accumulation of textual referents, and, as such, it mirrors the process of consumption-as-production by the academic critical industry. To recognize this common ground is to claim the opportunity to acknowledge and use the affective networks that shape intellectual inquiry.

Fandom is a network of self-identifying aficionados, audiences who knowingly create ‘their own cultural environment from the cultural resources that are available to them’, gravitating towards a fan object or artefact representative of affective experience. Prior to the advent of Web 2.0, fandoms were concretely tied to more carefully constructed cultural productions of pleasure – socially sanctioned, consumer-oriented spaces of release

---

11 Fradenberg and Joy, Unlearning, p. 169.
13 Boutang, Cognitive, p. 49.
manifest in affective pleasure, protest, or subcultural group identity. The rise of what Henry Jenkins has famously termed a participatory culture as the model of online interaction has changed the nature of fandoms in two significant ways. Firstly, the Internet has facilitated the collapse of spatial-temporal order – simply put, time is flattened when material is made indiscriminately accessible. Secondly, the participatory shift in Internet behaviour has changed pleasure’s reliance on manufactured offerings; with such infinite variety available, consumers of cultural goods are rewarded for actively seeking out their own affective pleasures – no matter what a fan is searching for, there is a good chance that they can either find, commission, or create it themselves online. Jenkins’s definition of participatory culture is one that carves a space for the latent power of fan activism through a variety of means, embracing ‘the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other – one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and that we should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices’.

The relocation of fandoms online has also had the effect of bringing fannishness into common parlance – fandom is no longer the underground realm of obsessive consumers of a cultural product, but a carefully articulated communal identity that affirms a creative engagement with a particular object. For example, the Shakespeare fandom encompasses the many academics who proudly brandish their Shakespeare-themed conference swag, the online bloggers Shakespeare Geek or Good Tickle Brain, and the teenage Whovian, who follows David Tennant as he forges his career as a classical actor on the RSC stages. Fandom is a carefully constructed ‘space between media production and consumption’, where affective experience networks with cultural products and intellectual debate, and creates a discourse community around a particular fan object. Undeniably, Jenkins’s definition is idealistic – as we know, political structures inhibit access on a daily basis. And yet, at the very least, Jenkins’s definition can be seen as productively aspirational. The emergence of fans as agents of social change suggests a space for optimism about how Shakespeare may be used. Joy notes that ‘networks of material relationships always under construction that affect our circumstances (whether at unimaginable distances of time and space or not) are still relationships that have implications for all affective experience’, and the rise of fandom as an autonomous creative force, increasingly visible through the auspices of the web, posits consumers as active agents who can drive the content and orientation of the culture they adore.

Participatory fandom has already made its presence felt in entertainment, using its power as a body of consumers, and this energy is spreading beyond the fan objects themselves, making explicit the link between reading practices, fan communities, and social engagement. Fandom has also become a model for the organizing principles of political activism, and, in some cases, the impetus for change itself. The Harry Potter Alliance, for example, is a formidable activist organization that uses the values promoted in the Harry Potter book series, as well as the recognizable bonds of fan communities, to take on real-life issues, positioning itself as a proactive user of literature. Its mission declares that ‘we know fantasy is not only an escape from our world, but an invitation to go deeper into it’, and, at the time of publishing, the organization had donated over 250,000 books to libraries across America, partnered with Public Knowledge in support of net neutrality, and it continues to support small ‘Granger Grants’ to assist local chapters with grassroots service projects. Like academia,

21 www.thehpalliance.org.
fandom offers an opportunity to form discourse communities around a shared subject, and, because of the self-reflexive nature of affective fandoms, participants demonstrate a sophisticated interplay of life experience, ideology, and close study of the fanish object, practices that literary critics might term cultural materialist, presentist, feminist, queer, post-colonial, and so forth, were they performed in an institutional academic setting. In May 2016, one Tumblr user built a visual guide to non-traditional casting, based on a note given in a lecture by their Shakespeare professor at the University of Southern California. Linked to various fandoms through use of hashtags, this brief discursive note has been reblogged thousands of times, demonstrating the visible network through which fan discourse reaches out.22

For many fans, fandoms and socio-political identity are inextricably bound. Since the late 1950s, concurrent with the rise of television and the displacement of theatre as mass media, Shakespeare has become an increasingly protected cultural commodity, and, under these conditions, access to Shakespeare becomes a political act. The primary passage to Shakespeare education is increasingly barricaded by paywalls, often excluding students and scholars alike. The claim of ‘alternative’ Shakespeare has emerged as a countercultural response to his elite status. As we progress (or regress), what constitutes alterity is constantly in flux, but the continued resistance to the values of fan networks stubbornly upholds a binary between the passionate fan and the objective scholar. Digital fan cultures, in particular, have continued to resist the value placed on the distinction between enthusiasm and objectivity and, in doing so, offer new ways to think about how we encounter a text. Instead of a high–low spectrum, we now locate intellectual enquiry in a network of use that accommodates an ever-moving arrangement of associations, forcing recognition of the common ground that scholarship shares with fandom. Elsewhere, Valerie M. Fazel and I have argued for this new construction of Shakespearian as a Shakespeare user.23 Users can include academics, artists, bored teenagers, their parents, general enthusiasts, proclaimed Shakespeare fans, and members of alternative fandoms who have been drawn in through curiosity, cross-interests, or simply through hashtag association. As well as advancing discourses on topics of current interest, the users who exist in fan communities engage in weird reading that strives to understand their relationship to a given text, enmeshed as it is in linguistic, aesthetic, and socio-political networks of its own.

In fandoms, there exists a phenomenon known as ‘fanon’, a portmanteau of ‘fan’ and ‘canon’ that affirms the value of communal shared interpretation. Fanon is an interpretive practice rooted in close reading, and I wish to spend some time considering the accumulation of Mercutio fanon as a source for new critical readings of Romeo and Juliet. Fanon is fan-generated ontology that is largely accepted as essential to the fanish object, albeit something that exists out of the ‘canon’ – in this case, I mean the multimedia composite of Romeo and Juliet. That is to say that, in the twenty-first century, Romeo and Juliet refers to not only Shakespeare’s play, but also the extensive cultural associations it has accrued, and fanon, when accepted widely enough, becomes absorbed into the topography of the text. Fan culture’s use of Mercutio exemplifies this point: the fanon that has built up around Mercutio as a site of difference is informed not only by the experience of reading Romeo and Juliet but also by both the pedagogical setting in which most students first encounter the text and a composite of Harold Perrineau’s scenery-chewing performance in the 1996 film William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet, a 2010 production of

22 Because of the uncertainty of the identity, and age, of the user, I am choosing not to cite user names of fans who offer personal narratives or speak directly to lived experience. For further elaboration on the ethical use of social media, see Valerie Fazel, ‘Researching YouTube Shakespeare: literary scholars and the ethical challenges of social media’, Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation 10.1 (Spring/Summer 2016), www.borrowers.uga.edu/1755/show.

Gérard Presgurvic’s 2001 French musical entitled *Romeo et Juliette, Les enfants de Vérone,* and its subsequent 2012 Hungarian operatic version, by Magyar Színhás, *Rómeó és Júlia,* as well as discourses on male sexuality from contemporary culture. As is entirely typical with fannish production, the hierarchy and timeline of influence are at best convoluted, and work is littered with partial citations and incorrect references, making apparent the messy circulation of influence. And yet, in many ways, this lack of accountability is what has endowed the Mercutio fandom with such potency and created fanon knowledge that is consistent with much academic criticism. By tracing these connections, a scholar rooted in weird reading practices can advance a speculative critical reading of *Romeo and Juliet* in different ways. For example, weird reading makes visible the dialogic relationship a reader has with their text and materializes the cognitive process that drives affective reading. Weird reading manifests a two-way reading process through which personal narratives use Shakespeare as a means of articulating experience, and, on the level of media, it enacts activism through community discourse. From a literary perspective, weird reading carves a space to read radical politics back into the play.

In fan cultures, Mercutio has emerged as a voice of non-conformity in an otherwise culturally conservative, heteronormative Verona. Drawing from the aforementioned appropriative representations, Mercutio fanon identifies him as gay, ethnically Eastern European or African American, sexually sadomasochist, occasionally transvestite, and both sexually and verbally unfettered. The robust corpus of fan fiction that exists for Mercutio is almost always erotic, coupling him with Tybalt (known as ‘Tycutio’), Benvolio (‘Bencutio’), or Romeo (‘Rocutio’). These sexual scenarios are frequently masochistic co-dependent relationships – for example in Tycutio fanon, where Tybalt can only respond to Mercutio’s linguistic excess with sex and violence. Such reading draws attention to the play’s exploration of the social impact of sex and death, but is nonetheless rooted in literalizing Mercutio’s recommendation to ‘beat love down’ (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.28), and his Queen Mab speech, which ‘personifies imagination and performs precisely the task of providing imagined objects of desire for a panoply of social agents’.

For the play to kill Mercutio, as constructed through fanon and canon, is to silence the voice of open dissent. Fanon alignment of Mercutio with queer sexuality and non-white racial identity also draws attention to class, as Mercutio exists as part of a lower stratum of Veronese citizen who labours his body in service of an aristocracy that attempts to enact self-affirming social rituals using his blood as a sacrifice. This pointless feud is only resolved when faced with the loss of the final Montague and Capulet bodies that are capable of producing heirs. Keeping Mercutio alive, keeping him weird, and keeping him subversive, then becomes a political statement against the enforced participation in a hierarchy of corporeal uses at work in the play.

Hugh Grady’s recent work on the text suggests that ‘the harmony between sex and death described by Friar Lawrence becomes the rupture in the social fabric brought about first by Romeo and Juliet’s transgressive, mutual passion, and then by the deaths Romeo becomes involved in,’ a not altogether atypical assessment of the challenge to patriarchy, homosociality, and heteronormativity that Romeo and Juliet’s passion represents. Fannish work such as the digital erotica publisher Slipshine’s pornographic comic strip *Mercutio* (Illustration 38) and the wealth of erotic fan art that highlights Mercutio’s sadomasochistic pleasures (Illustration 39), however, apply that critique to Mercutio, by offering the character ownership of the

---

24 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xi2tXHWVd4&list=PLPgmjimMjAT-cHz-daTX_vRhSLUhO_krix.
25 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okItGmJQaQM.
UNLEARNING SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

38. 'Mercutio'. Slipshine.net.
hyper-sexuality that characterizes his language, and is more often than not critically assumed to be aimed at the primary sexualized male of the play, Romeo. Fanon’s own assumption of Mercutio’s lack of discrimination (evidenced by the equal production of Rocutio, Benutio, and Tycutio slash fiction and art) sets Mercutio apart from Romeo through his conscious disengagement with not only monogamy but the compulsory heterosexuality at work within the text. This self-awareness of his own sexual appetite without requiring the self-placating myth of love as a justification for hedonistic impulses makes him a realist in relation to his friend. Moreover, Mercutio’s seduction of his audience, his wit and charm, his pleasure in his own liberty (both linguistic and sexual), is then presented as violently curtailed by his unwilling involvement in the play’s blood-feud.

Often, fan readings build a network between multiple texts. Thamina Laska’s poem, for example, ‘Tragedy without a soul’, imagines Mercutio alongside Jay Gatsby, as part of a body of characters who ‘expanded knowledge / And added imagination’. Such a fan-generated analogy suggests a hedonism that drives Verona, and identifies either Juliet, or (more likely) Romeo, with the hedonistic and selfish Daisy Buchanan, opening up a reading that pits the idle pursuit of aristocratic leisure—in this case, manifest in both the families’ uncontextualized feud and the romantic and sexual satisfaction of the two noble teens—against all the bodies employed in a larger economy of grudge-holding that appears to serve no other purpose than to bind the lower-class citizens of Verona to a self-sacrificial loyalty. Such a reading might focus, for example, on the Nurse’s incredulity at Juliet’s response to Mercutio’s death. The Nurse’s request that Juliet fulfill her obligation to the family by joining the communal lament is met with an astounding lack of empathy for the larger loss at hand. When framed as part of a Shakespeare/Fitzgerald network, Juliet’s response, ‘come nurse; I’ll to my wedding bed, / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!’ (Romeo and Juliet, 3.2.136–7), is a microcosm of her family’s own insularity and self-regard.

Fan readings that accentuate Mercutio’s own perceived masochistic leanings, evidenced in the S&M imagery that circulates around him in fan art and fictions such as Ryouhei Akane’s ‘You speak in tongues I don’t understand’, draws attention to a perversity that arguably drives Romeo and Juliet, and is suggested by the language of piety that surrounds their rhetoric of sex and death. By embodying the sexual potency bubbling underneath the homoerotic violence that runs throughout the play, Mercutio also implicates Romeo and Juliet’s own fascination with the corporeal that is masked by their effusive romantic hyperbole and that must be displaced for the sake of tragedy. To foreground Mercutio is to complicate further

the notion that ‘adolescent desire becomes itself the object of ambivalent desire’\(^{32}\) by giving space to Mercutio’s thwarted longing. Moreover, Mercutio’s centrality demands that the reader take stock of the collateral damage that occurs, in spite of the play’s dramaturgical resistance to lingering on Mercutio’s death, and offers a way to circle back to his central critique: ‘a plague o’ both your houses’ (Romeo and Juliet, 3.1.91). As well as exploration through creative critical acts, such a reading could be manifest in traditional, critical scholarship, and would no doubt echo the work done by cultural materialists and queer theorists, expanding Carla Freccero’s critique of ‘the text’s seemingly endless infernal ability to breed new iterations of the myth of heterosexual love’.\(^{33}\) The speculations that draw together aspects such as race and sexuality are the work of an interpretive community and eventually morph into fanon, consolidated through the various reference material available and the communal issues that concern the fans. Together, this practice reframes traditional critical discourse in a new model of knowledge distribution. Moreover, circulations of fan art and the accompanying meta-critical commentary suggest that fan work is often knowingly produced for a self-identified fannish community, and offered up with the expectation that it will generate further discussion and offshoots. Such evolutions are rooted in affect and, as an object of fannish devotion, Mercutio can simultaneously represent an erotic fantasy of dangerous and joyful liberation in an otherwise structured world, an affirmation of omni-sexual hedonism, a conscious commitment to an ideology of equality, and stand as a statement of the diminished value of black male bodies in a violent, white society – in explorations that follow Perrineau’s performance and accentuate race, Mercutio’s blackness condemns him as an outsider as much as his sexuality does. Speculative critical practices embrace the affective experience that shapes such readings, and welcomes the new ontologies founded in the playful and erratic associations that Shakespeare facilitates.

From an activist standpoint, weird readings of the play allow speculative reconstructions of the Shakespearian narrative that foreground the outsider, linking such work to Dollimore and Sinfield’s own cultural materialist agenda. Returning to the position of the text as an affective billboard\(^{34}\) for the consumerist, socio-economic and cultural investments of a particular generation allows us to see the radical ways in which Shakespeare is being used as a conduit for exploring affective experience. Fan fiction, for example (particularly, for this instance, the slash fiction that circulates around Mercutio), queers Romeo by the ‘contra-normative positioning of sexuality within media texts’\(^{35}\) – in this case, Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare, then, becomes a vehicle for change as the works are used to reflect personal narrative, explore ideas, and engage in ideological discourse. Through weird reading, Shakespeare becomes a safe, imaginary space to push the boundaries of class, race, sexuality, and gender. Typical of a methodology that consciously abandons the pretence of objectivity, speculative identification also manifests itself through confessional, which is supported and affirmed by the reading community. On Tumblr, one anonymous user revealed that ‘mercutio being gay\(^{36}\) is so important to me. i remember bringing it up in english and my teacher just looked at me from where she was perched on her stool and i could feel her JUDGEMENT like whoa excuse u but he gay. anywho that’s my story for the day thanks for reblogging the gay r+j fix-it post’. Likewise, another tumblr user described Mercutio as ‘just basically me in fancier tights’ – a response that is a common response to Mercutio, and whether it be true, or aspirational, is irrelevant. What matters is that readers, or users, are not only finding Shakespeare and processing life

---

36 ‘af’ is common fan parlance and stands for ‘as fuck’.
experience through his creations but up-ending
the gender expectations of “heteronormative main-
stream media texts”, by foregrounding
Mercutio’s emotional and homoerotic life as
a source of potency and authority. This is, of
course, not to say that we ought to ground aca-
demic work in such solipsistic perspectives, but an
honest reassessment of our own reading practices
might well engender a new literary criticism that
more vigorously asserts its place in the 21st-century
world and more aggressively seeks out a discourse
network that makes use of Shakespeare’s capacity
to speak with both the dead and the living.
Although fans are under no obligation to provide
a context for their readings, scholarship bears some
broader responsibility for sustained close reading
practices, even if the delivery of such critical
thought alters its methodologies and form.

The obvious concern about orienting scholar-
ship in affect is its potential for solipsistic reading,
a risk of losing one’s self-awareness and ultimately
losing sight of Shakespeare in the critique. A critical
approach led by fandom’s acknowledgement of
fannish object differs from appropriative theories,
such as the rhizome and presentist literary
approaches, in that it recognizes the gravitational
call of the fan object at the heart of the reading
practice. For that reason, a fan-oriented speculative
criticism makes more sense than an approach that
offers undue weight to the cultural processes, often
at the expense of what has attracted the reader-
participant in the first place. Moreover, speculative
criticism, rooted in a conflation of sentient experi-
ence and weird reading that is in this case filtered
through fan communities, is a meta-critical act that
recognizes the transformable and networked text at
the core of the intellectual process. It affirms erra-
tically constructed interpretive groups and com-
munal readings that disrupt the forward-moving
trajectory of the more explicitly Marxist present-
isim. Moreover, speculative critical methodologies
are informed by the active collapse of temporal–spatial and geopolitical notions of culture
that our digital environment has engendered. That
is to say, speculative reading rejects the need to
approach the past ontologically, undercutting the
universality implicit in many presentist readings in
favour of an affirmation of difference. These prac-
tices do not imagine a future that progresses out of
a disrupted continuum of past and present, but
instead participate in ongoing acts of future crea-
tion and re-creation, recognizing the play itself as
a site of participation. In pushing back at the
boundaries of perceived authority (even when it
is complementary, fandom challenges the author/
creator’s decision to say ‘this ends here’), fan cul-
tures are utopian in practice, pledging multiple
allegiances simultaneously and enacting the future
identities of a text that are galvanized through read-
ing. Fannish practices and speculative criticism’s
resistance to linear history are both textual exegesis
and a moment of archival inclusion, affirming the
intellectual resonance of Shakespeare in our con-
temporary world.

Such critical practices are as aesthetic as they are
socio-political. John Drakakis suggests that one of
the limits of a presentist approach is that it affirms
the value of theme at the expense of form, and,
again, this offers the opportunity to think through
the differences between presentism and fan-
inspired speculative criticism. Fanon is rooted in
canon — it has to be, as fanon emerges from the
universal agreement of a diverse body of readers.
Unlike, say, a rhizomatic approach, a critical net-
work that integrates affective experience neces-
sarily orients itself back towards the fan object,
moving in a field of gravity around it. Speculative
reading, as literary criticism, must represent ‘an exchange that involves both sharing and
contested ownership’, by understanding that

37 Booth, Close, p. 7.
Jonathan C. Gray, Lee Harrington, and Cornel Sandvoss, eds., Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World
(New York, 2007), pp. 19–33.
40 Christy Desmet, ‘Recognizing Shakespeare, rethinking fidelity: a rhetoric and ethics of appropriation’, in Alexa Huang
fan passion builds its iterations around an enthusiasm for Shakespeare, even as it expands the definition of what Shakespeare is. Erik Didriksen’s Tumblr-born pop sonnets are an example of form-based fandom that positions text as an agential network in its own right. Pop sonnets are metrical experiments that re-imagine classic rock, rap, pop songs, and other popular cultural ephemera as Shakespearian sonnets, such as the R&B singer Drake’s 2016 hit ‘Hotline bling’:

In the dead of night, thou would me missives send – sweet words of love thy sleepless envoys bore. Those late-night calls have lately met their end, for now thou dost a manner new explore. E’er since I left the city, thou hast rous’d coarse rumors ’round thy honor, once pristine. ’Tis said thou champagne quaffed and long carous’d with womanfolk I had ne’er before seen. O dost thou seek out countries far and strange or merely to attract thy new beau? Thou dost not need thy character to change; I beg thee, stay the woman that I know. –A new dispatch could only mean one thing: ‘Tis only love late couriers can bring.

The pop sonnet enacts the potentiality of form, returning the reader to the intricacies of metre and verse by a very carefully networked juxtaposition. Both the sonnet and Drake’s song are picked apart, parsed, and reassembled, becoming transformative through this process of reassemblage. A speculative approach would position form as object, recognizing that M. J. Kidnie’s missive on the adaptive process is also applicable to other forms of consumption, such as reading. The sonnet ‘Hotline bling’ stands as a self-referential network – it deconstructs the authority of Elizabethan form as distanced by creating a network that draws in, via the R&B connection, electric blues, gospel and dance. The sonnet deliberately invokes musicality by its use of an extremely popular song, encouraging an affective reading that prioritizes scansion and an emphasis on the metre and rhyme. Moreover, the choice of Drake’s lamentation over a disinterested woman evokes the Sonnets’ own Dark Lady and a stricken poet-lover, struggling to process the disinterest of his beloved. Didriksen’s choice to use this particular song activates the form through its invocation of the context that sonnets are traditionally read in, offering us the choice to read Drake through Shakespeare, or Shakespeare through Drake. Drake’s own deconstructed blazon of what constitutes a ‘good girl’ in his song is an opportunity to explore the ways in which the sonnet’s form plays with male-authored constructions of femininity. Didriksen’s own decision to elide the more problematic gender assumptions that underpin the R&B song – ameliorating Drake’s own definitions of female behaviour as ‘good’, or ‘nasty’ – to ‘the woman I know’, not only offers an opportunity to discuss the tropes of gender and sexuality in the Sonnets, or the larger early modern canon of erotic verse, but also to build a discourse network that intersects formal early modern poetry with contemporary music culture.

Likewise, Mercutio fanon is predicated on a careful character study, drawing heavily on his penchant for lightness in the face of the seriousness of Benvolio or Tybalt, or his mockery of Romeo’s ‘too great oppression’ (Romeo and Juliet, 1.4.24). Perhaps fanon might take a little too literally Mercutio’s recommendation to ‘be rough with love’ (Romeo and Juliet, 1.4.27), but, nonetheless, it makes careful note of the formal stylistic elements that construct character and relationships. Moreover, social media interweave memes, gifs, and Shakespeare jokes alongside more formally structured inquiries, such as Fandomsandfeminism’s blog post that uses a close reading to speculate on the colour of Hermia’s skin, or Goodreads’s 2,000-member-strong

---

50 I am tentatively citing this discussion as located at http://fandomsandfeminism.tumblr.com/post/151981707749/so-can-we-talk-about-how-maybe-hermia-in-a. It may have originated with another Tumblr user, Ineffable Hufflepuff, but the clarity of origin points for Tumblr notes is obscure, at best, which again insists on a careful citational methodology.
Shakespeare Fan Group, which hosts monthly synchronous online reading groups to discuss various plays. The point at issue is that these discussions parallel academic output, and offer microcosms of the close reading that Shakespeare scholarship values, which is why we would do well not to dismiss fandom’s more radical or flippant reading practices out of hand.

Fan-inspired or weird readings, speculative and creative criticisms are democratizing practices, but not because they adhere to the fallacy of universal access that digital culture promises, but rarely delivers. Fan activism stems from a desire to use the subjective experience of literary reading and channel the enthusiasm for knowledge acquisition and the circulation of ideas into a public, ‘real life’ sphere. Digital culture has already reorganized the parameters of fan activism to include academic discourse, and Shakespeare studies would benefit from networking scholarly work with the more explicitly subjective practices of fandom. A speculative critical practice that unlearns the ‘traditional frames of critical-historical reference’ generates new processes of meaning that are shaped less by the ‘slit-eyed armchair interpreter’ and more by the complex interplay of human and non-human agencies that shape what we call ‘text’.

45 Joy, Weird, 32.