

The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest

Stasi, M.

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<pn>Part 2

<pt>Characters, Style, Text

<ps>Fan Fiction as Literature

<cn>Chapter 4

<ct>The Toy Soldiers from Leeds

<cs>The Slash Palimpsest

<ca>Mafalda Stasi

<abs>ABSTRACT.—I examine slash fan fiction texts from a novel perspective by moving beyond the view of a static, uniform, and self-contained corpus. To this end, I propose a new metaphor for slash: that of a rich intertextual *palimpsest*. By viewing the vast slash corpus as a diverse and dynamic one, and considering each individual text in its own terms, a richer, more in-depth connection among genre and style is permitted. I examine how intertextual links between the slash text and its canon deeply influence the shape the text takes, allowing writers to use compression and allusion techniques reminiscent of medieval allegory; and I analyze how the collective, shared authorship of slash blurs the modernly established boundaries of individual author and discrete text, harkening back to classical mythological discourse. I then look at how intertextuality is even more pervasive in slash: most texts refer not only to their canonical source, but also to a variety of other texts. I conclude with an indication for possible further analysis into the material conditions of production of slash texts, and how these affect the text itself. As even the most cursory look to the history of literature shows, intertextuality is prevalent and pervasive, and slash is no exception: far from being a freakish oddity, slash is no different from any other literary text.

<h1>Introduction

<epi>Papa bought Branwell some wooden soldiers at Leeds . . . I snatched up one and exclaimed: “This is the Duke of Wellington! This shall be the Duke!” When I had said this, Emily likewise took one up and said it should be hers; when Anne came down, she said one should be hers. . . . Branwell chose his, and called him “Buonaparte.”

<episig>—Charlotte Brontë, “History of the Year 1829”

<txt>In the last fifteen years or so, a number of scholarly texts studying slash fiction have appeared, but these texts, with very few exceptions, have dealt with it as a primarily sociological or anthropological phenomenon. Early critics such as Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) focus on the quirkiest facets of the fannish community, contributing the popular view of fans as freakish people devoted to weird activities disconnected from and unrelated to “real life.” Similarly, Henry Jenkins’s articulate and in-depth study *Textual Poachers* (1992) focuses mainly on the fan population and on reception issues: how fans see and interpret the original text they are interested in, how the fan community functions, and so forth. Most authors also classify and analyze the slash corpus according to narrow thematic criteria, often in view of extracting sociological or psychological meaning. Even when slash is being considered from the textual point of view, most analyses suffer both from oversimplification and from a judgmental approach, where the vast, diverse corpus of slash texts is lumped together as a monolithic and self-contained whole, usually to be dismissed summarily. As Green et al. (1998) note, “academic accounts of slash tend to deal with it in isolation from the larger framework of genres [and they] often consider slash to be a static genre, making generalizations that assume a consistent subject matter and thematics over time and across all slash stories” (11). Thus we

have patronizing value judgments such as this remark about a literary corpus whose magnitude is probably in the order of millions of texts: “Considered strictly as fiction, I found [slash stories] pretty tedious (although some were very well written). Considered as clues to women’s mating psychology, however, I found them riveting” (Salmon and Symons 2001, 3).

Slash texts are dismissed on the assumption that “they’re just trashy romance novels.” What is more, even when the critique is favorable, we do not really move away from a traditional, prescriptive classification of “good, literary” texts versus “bad, nonliterary” ones. Lamb and Veith (1986) pronounce slash texts “surprising[ly] . . . of good literary quality” (237) and draw parallels with several canonical literary works. For example, they view the relationship between Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek* as representative of Leslie Fiedler’s “mythic quality imbu[ing] the male-male bonding often found in American literature, especially between men of different races” (236). Ultimately, Lamb and Veith’s (laudable) main concern with exploring the revolutionary and utopian dimension of slash’s gender politics takes them back to the usual comparison between slash and romance novels (254). Although the parallels are undeniable, they can be restrictive and limiting: not only are the conditions of production of slash and romance fiction different, but slash texts encompass more than one genre and have a wide range of themes, voices, registers, and moods. As other essays in this volume show (Woledge; Driscoll), there are ways in which slash and romance can be profitably compared and contrasted. What I disagree with is the undiscerning and dismissive reduction operated by equating slash as a whole with romance (with the term often used to generically mean hackneyed, saccharine prose). The romance fiction genre should not be so easily dismissed, as Radway (1984) has shown us in her reevaluation and problematizing of the reception of romances.

Driscoll (this volume) draws her parallels by going back to the origins of romance and by comparing its modes of consumption in relationship to slash; however, when it comes to conditions of production and distribution today, romance novels are a commercially lucrative business. Big publishing houses such as Harlequin or Mills & Boon adopt a mass-production approach, forcing authors into a template with stringent rules about what can and cannot be written. In contrast, the slash community does not have a single, centralized controlling and gatekeeping structure, and it is not run as a for-profit endeavor. This is not to say that there are no rules as to what is writeable and what is not, or that the slash community has no power structure or social rules, but simply that they are not structured the way those of a commercial enterprise are. Moreover, as Kustritz points out, the developmental history of fan fiction is “radically different from standard romance traditions” (2003, 371). This is why privileging and absolutizing the parallel between slash and romance can lead us down the wrong path; ultimately, most critics who introduce the “slash as romance” discourse tend to eventually move back toward a view of slash limited to the anthropological perspective, or confined to the reader’s or writer’s psychology.

In the last few years, scholarship has paid more attention to textual matters in fan fiction and has resolved to look “closely at the language” and at “the [fannish] group’s linguistic play” (Wakefield 2001); yet even recent studies such as Smol’s (2004) still echo Lamb and Veith’s surprised attitude at finding “good” slash, with complex intertextuality and writerly authors masterfully manipulating literary language. Jenkins’s continued contributions to fandom studies have pointed out how the impulse to write fan fiction is part of a basic drive toward storytelling as the preserve of a “shared cultural tradition” from Homer onward, and how this “process of circulation and retelling improved the fit between story and culture, making these

stories central to the way a people thought of themselves . . . Contemporary web culture is the traditional folk process working at lightning speed on a global scale” (2000). However, this still takes a cultural studies perspective rather than a literary criticism one; textual considerations come after discussions of cultural reception, and production issues still focus on the “primary” media text.¹ For example, Scodari and Felder (2000) dismiss fannish text as secondary—as texts that even fans consider to be less important than the original ones. Hills (2002), who discusses fannish “texts” as diverse as costuming and cult geography, is still more interested in the larger cultural context and its relationship with the original text, rather than in specific instances of fan fiction. Essays such as Russo (2002) are almost alone in critiquing the standard reading where “fan fiction is always subordinate to its father text,” and in stating that “it is equally possible to read the interpenetration of TV and fan texts as a sign that fans are appropriating the signifiers of mass culture in the service of their independent narrative and social needs—or to avoid rankings altogether, and begin by thinking of TV shows and fan writing as related manifestations of equally legitimate forms of desire” (12).

In short, slash has not been adequately studied as a textual artifact, with the possible exception of Pugh’s (2004) essay, programmatically subtitled “Fan Fiction in a Literary Context,” where she baldly states, “My primary interest in fan fiction is literary rather than sociological.” So is mine—with the proviso that the narrow literary/textual dimension should not displace or eliminate the important larger cultural perspective: Driscoll (this volume) rightly points out that fanfic texts and communities are inseparable; performing textual analysis in isolation is impossible. Rather, what I am advocating here is a bracketing of textual/literary consideration to ensure that fan texts receive focused attention *as text*, thus balancing a field skewed to

psychological and sociological analyses and contributing to a rich, multiperspective, and well-rounded analysis. Here, in addition to moving away from the psychological and sociological slant of so much published work on fan texts, I also strive to move away from a traditional, judgmental attitude whereby slash is substandard because it fails to measure up to some sort of literary standard. Such an attitude has been so largely discredited in contemporary textual studies that it is puzzling to find it still lingering around slash. What I aim to provide is a more in-depth study of the slash text as valuable, strong text by focusing on its intrinsic characteristics, which are related both to its conditions of production and its formal features: “‘fanfiction’ as a valid literacy practice” (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003).² Once individual slash texts are analyzed on their own terms and merits, we can overcome aprioristic, limiting value judgments, and we can move beyond a binary, hierarchical view of texts toward a systemic, intertextual one.

To signify this reframing of slash, I would like to use a different metaphor from the one made famous by Jenkins: that of fan text as poaching. His use of the De Certeau’s metaphor of poaching is incomplete and misleading: poaching is an illegal appropriation, a theft—granted, in the case of slash, it is a Robin Hood type of theft, where fans are (at least potentially) countercultural activists, who problematize and turn on their heads the production and distribution system of mass culture, and then reappropriate some of those cultural messages and meanings through poaching. I am not denying the potentially oppositional nature and political relevance of slash, but I fear that the notion of theft may be misconstrued to indicate an inherent disparity between original text and slash rewriting—or at least to obscure the key point that there is no “legitimate” text (as opposed to “pirated” ones). De Certeau talks about writing in the margins, which implies a hierarchy where some texts are indeed

“marginalized,” and where fan writers are glossists rather than authors in their own right (see Derecho, this volume, for a discussion of literal marginalia). Moreover, the poaching metaphor focuses on the fans’ actions rather than on the text, which is seen as object of an action, rather than the subject of a process. Poaching is only the beginning of what happens with a slash text. It’s not just a question of “take the text and run”: the initial text, once taken, is reworked in a postmodern, multivocal, and intertextual fashion. The movement away is followed by a complex shifting across different axes and dimensions, through genres, techniques, and writing conventions.

Like any other text, a slash text is a node in a web, a part of an often complex intertextual sequence, and it bears a close and running relationship with (at least) one other text. This is why I use the term *palimpsest* to indicate a nonhierarchical, rich layering of genres, more or less partially erased and resurfacing, and a rich and complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods, and registers. With this new metaphor, I also want to emphasize the dynamic aspect of textual production in slash. The process of creating the slash palimpsest is no different from that through which any other branch of literature unfolds; it has a set of characteristics of its own, an internal variety and wealth beyond conventional formulas, and it also points back to other genres and traditions in the intricate, complex continuum that links all texts ever written. Far from being a monolithic, repetitive set of substandard texts created by a naive set of scribbling women whose bizarre hobby stands apart from any self-respecting body of literature, slash is a legitimate part of the literary discursive field. Equipped with the new perspective the palimpsest metaphor affords, it becomes possible to give due attention to the slash text itself, to look more closely at its complex relationship with other texts and genres. Thus, the bulk of this essay is

dedicated to the discussion of various types of intertextuality in slash, and how they compare to other textual strategies in different genres, styles, and periods.³

<h1>Intertextuality and the Slash Canon

<txt>The constitutive characteristic of slash (indeed, any fan text), inherent in all its definitions, is that it is based on shared, preexisting characters and settings: each TV series, film, or book being slashed provides a base for authors to work with.

Authors and readers have a thorough knowledge of the initial setting and characters, the *canon*. The use of such a word to signify the pervasively intertextual and self-referential nature of the slash text has some potentially unfortunate consequences: it can reinforce the superficial but still prevalent notion that slash is a second-rate, marginal product. The notion of both slash and the “canonical” source text as product, as static object, are particularly misleading because it can result in a narrow view of a binary set of the “good” (official and original) text and the “bad” (amateurish and derivative) one. It is much more productive to use the metaphor of the medieval palimpsest to illuminate the complex intertextual relation between the initial text and its slash retelling. A single sheet of vellum would be variously used for different texts: an early text would be more or less thoroughly erased to make space for a newer one, but more than one text could coexist in a close relationship on the page. Sometimes the older text was only partially erased, or a glossed commentary could expand to take most of the space available, or two or more different texts could end up bound and shuffled together.

This approach not only dispenses with the notion of an inbuilt and inherent hierarchy between different texts, but it also gives a more accurate and less reified view of the slash canon. Indeed, beyond the bare factual minimum, canon constitution and interpretation are a highly debated and controversial critical activity in the fannish

milieu. Far from being a fixed and unproblematically shared set of references, the slash canon is based on a collective interpretive process. It is not monolithic, even within a given fandom. It is possible to outline a continuum going from quite basic, hard-to-dispute “facts” such as the occupations of the main characters, to highly debatable points of characterization.

For example, when it comes to the slash canon for the British TV series *The Professionals* (1977–1983), there is relatively little to discuss over main character Bodie’s eye color, because the actor portraying him sports decidedly blue eyes; but fans manage to endlessly discuss the eye color of his coprotagonist Doyle: the actor’s eyes are a less easily definable murky green. Even the apparently self-evident fact of Bodie’s eyes being blue is not always to be taken for granted. When the TV series first aired in 1978, the quality of videotaped reproductions of the episodes was so poor that some early fans wrote stories featuring a brown-eyed Bodie. If eye color is already harder to determine than expected, it becomes impossible to agree with any finality whether Doyle is a sincere liberal trapped in a dirty but necessary job, or a hypocrite who moans about his violent job while enjoying the adrenaline rush. Between these two extremes, there is fanon: a series of details and characteristics that are shared by most slash stories, but that have no factual basis in the original media text.⁴ Fanon is developed by the fan community as an integral part of the process of interpretation of the original text: as early or prominent slash authors start writing, they introduce their own perspective on the source text. The influence of these early authors leads to their choices being in turn appropriated by later writers, either because they share the interpretation or because they are not yet completely steeped in the original text and thus take the fanonical elements as canon. Again using *The Professionals* fandom as an example, in fanon, Ray Doyle is a vegetarian; he is

sensual; and he is much smaller and younger than his partner Bodie—but all of this is contradicted or left unsaid by the original TV series.

If we look at other fandoms whose canon is less stable or simple to define, the situation becomes even more complicated. For example, fans of *The Lord of the Rings* have to somehow reconcile book and film canon, so that most stories are prefaced by an explanation of the choices the slash author made in matters ranging from important plot and ideology points to whether Boromir has blond or black hair, and which side one decides to be on has not unnegligible consequences for the social structure and dynamics of the fandom. A more extreme example of polarization could be found in the fandom for the TV show *Highlander* (1992–1998). This fandom developed well before the TV series was over, so that eventual developments in the series were either accepted or vehemently denied, sometimes creating very visible controversy, as in the case of character Richie's death. This process of negotiation of shared meaning via the molding of the original text into canon and fanon represents one of the main constitutive elements of the slash discursive field. The slash canon is constructed through a repeated collective fruition and interpretation of the initial text. Despite canon being a construct, it is regarded as normative by most authors and readers: even when it is turned on its head or flouted, it is hardly escapable.

It is thus not surprising that the strong frame of reference created by the intertextual relationship between the slash narrative and its canon heavily shapes the discourse at all levels, and it lends some peculiar characteristics to the slash text. All texts contain intertextual references, but some do so “more centrally than others. . . . As a form, fanfictions make intertextuality visible because they rely on readers' ability to see relationships between the fan-writer's stories and the original media sources” (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003). Indeed, having much of the setting and

basic characterization already filled in and an audience utterly familiar with them provides the author with a powerful shorthand device. For example, let us consider the following sentence, culled from a story first circulated on a fannish mailing list and then posted online: “Klaus opened his eyes and promptly closed them again. It didn’t help. Even though he could no longer see the mane of golden curls on the pillow beside his, he could still smell the scent of roses” (Kadorienne, untitled short fanfic, <http://belladonna.org/snippet01.html>, accessed October 22, 2005). This sentence might not mean much to a nonslash reader, but a slash audience will gasp in horror and delight. This audience will have instantly gathered, by the name of the character and by the sketchy physical description of the other person in bed with him, a whole wealth of meaning. In fact, this is a sentence taken from a slash story in the *Eroica* Japanese manga fandom (Aoike 1978–ongoing), where Klaus is a violent, macho and homophobic character. He is vainly pursued by openly and flamboyantly gay Dorian (canon), who has blond curly hair, wears a rose scent (fanon), and bears Klaus a persistent and unrequited love. The reader is now holding her breath: how and why Klaus is in bed with Dorian? What happened? How will Klaus react?

The extreme compression that the tight intertextual coupling of slash text and canon allows is unparalleled in most modern prose genres, and it points back to techniques more commonly used in poetry, or in genres such as folktales or mythological cycles. Thrupkaew (2003) traces the connection between writing slash and writing poetry in the way constraints are reworked into affordances: writing slash “would be like crafting a sonnet, a villanelle, something with meter, method, and my own madness. . . . the room for both allegiance to and independence from the original material.” Both Kaplan and Stein (this volume) similarly point out how constraints

such as canon/fanon or genre discourse can paradoxically afford a richer freedom through rules.

Most poetry works through and with a series of formal constraints such as meter or rhyme, and it often uses a system of shared significants such as the classic symbolism of the rose, or the complex, precise medieval system of allegory. Such techniques help achieve economy the same way slash does with canon. Here is another example of how slash uses canonic symbolism to achieve economy and power of expression: “*Blue eyes* looked at the *scar on the other man’s chest*, and clouded, briefly remembering how the whiteness of *milk mixed with swirls of red*, patterns and gradations of pink like an embroidered arabesque” (“Discovered in a Memory,” 2005, circuit story [hard-copy fanfic in mail circulation]). This is another anonymously authored story, this time from *The Professionals* fandom. The phrases I have italicized are all canonical images pointing to precise events in the TV series: Bodie has blue eyes; he is remembering how his partner Doyle was shot in the chest and almost killed in the episode “Discovered in a Graveyard.” Bodie found Doyle sprawled and unconscious in a puddle of blood and milk from spilled grocery bags, and he is now remembering the event by looking at the scar which resulted from the delicate operation to save Doyle’s life after the shooting.

This strategy parallels the way poetry uses symbolism, relying on a set of known associations to maximize effect synthetically: thus, for example, the image of the rose typically stands for life and youth and love in medieval poems such as the *Roman de la rose*. If the reader is not aware of the associations between the flower and all those other concepts, she can only read those passages describing a rose garden at a superficial, factual level. Obviously, for the technique to work its full effect, it is necessary that all the readers of a given text have a good knowledge of its

structure of symbolisms and of allegory, the way slash fans have of canon. Even the most cursory look at different literary schools through the ages easily shows the difference a shared canon (or the absence thereof) makes in the way the process of textual creation and elaboration is played out. In the middle ages, for example, cultured people were expected to have a knowledge of a shared allegorical code, which then allowed a compressed, multilayered reading, such as the four levels of textual fruition (literal, moral, allegoric, and anagogic) famously detailed by Dante in the second book of his *Convivio*.

Once such shared knowledge is lost, subsequent readers have to perform interpretive feats, and much scholarship has sought to clarify the lost layers of allegorical meanings. In later times, poets wishing to exploit this technique have had considerably more trouble than their medieval colleagues because they were confronted with the lack of a common cultural frame of reference that was congruent with their message. William Blake, for example, tried to recreate his own special system of symbols by making up a complex mythology inspired by the Bible, English folklore, and contemporary sociopolitics. The results were almost incomprehensible to the noninitiated: a fadism of one. W. B. Yeats similarly used the occultist tradition of mysticism and spiritism, mixed with Celtic mythology. These authors used these techniques to write poetry that was very thick with referential and symbolic elements; however, unlike slash fans, they could not be sure that their readers had enough knowledge of the symbolism to understand their meaning. T. S. Eliot, who did the same by referring to a plethora of other texts in *The Waste Land* (1922) tried to solve the problem by writing the footnotes to his own poem himself—footnotes that ended up being longer than the poem itself.⁵

This scenario of a pervasive and indeed constitutive intertextuality is not simply a bizarre literary quirk—on the contrary, it has a long and diverse list of antecedents not only at the level of textual techniques, but also at the level of entire genres. We can thus look at a parallel situation in mythological discourses and genres, such as the Homeric epics or the Arthurian legends. In the case of Homer, the parallel is especially intriguing, as it is quite apparent at various levels. On one hand, slash canonical/fanonical elements sometimes assume the form of descriptive epithet: some authors are especially noted for this technique, and it is possible to think of it as a rough equivalent of the Homeric “fleet-footed Achilles” or “blue-eyed Athena.” But whereas Homeric poetry used epithets as aids to compose, improvise, and remember metrical oral narrations, epithets in slash can be used as shortcuts to compress and layer meaning, even if sometimes they are regarded by the community as a sign of clichéd writing. As an example, here is an epithetic description by Jane of Australia’s epic *The Hunting*: “Green, slanted eyes looked down at him out of a face that was beautiful in a savage way, fine-boned, cat-like, dangerous. A riot of copper curls haloed the warrior’s head . . . a beautiful, fey, little creature, . . . whose thin body seemed to weigh like that of a child” (4). Here canon and fanon freely mesh: on the one hand, we have canonical elements such as “green, slanted eyes” and “thin body,” and on the other, we have fanonical elements built on canonical ones, such as “fine-boned, cat-like,” “beautiful, fey, little . . . child.”

But the most interesting similarities are at the level of collective authorship: the setting and the characters are shared by all authors, who thus collaborate in the creation of a large collective repository of interrelated stories, which together create a mythological discourse (see Derecho, this volume). This is the way in which mythology is formed: variant retellings of common legends accumulate to build a

shared repertoire from which classical authors borrowed characters, events, and plots, each giving it his own twist, often while referring to each other. Myth making, or mythopoeia, is a way of making and transmitting meaning through collective narrative creation. Although this model of authorship and textual production was taken for granted in premodern times, the deep changes in the way individual authorship and “originality” are regarded in the modern age have by and large marginalized anonymous collective authorship, writing in a shared universe and using a common repository of legends and myths. The influence of modern conditions of textual production, and of Romantic (with a capital R) poetics stressing the primacy of individual author and original text have gone a long way toward influencing current thinking, which is why the first wave of academic studies of slash have seen it as an atypical, quasi-pathological phenomenon.⁶ Pugh (2004) concisely describes such conceptual changes in authorship modes, authorial control/ownership of text, and their relationship to the rise of copyright legislations in the eighteenth century:

<ext>the idea that there is some intrinsic virtue in using an “original” character or story would have puzzled most ancient or mediaeval writers . . . they plundered the vast resources of myth and history just as happily . . . However individualised by each successive poet who used them, they were still . . . part of a resource that belonged to all. . . . But nowadays this form of dialogue attracts the notice of lawyers.

<txt/tab>It’s not that intertextuality went on a long holiday from the eighteenth century to today, of course, as a closer look reveals. Indeed, Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) showcases the power of the weight of tradition for Romantic poets—but the zeitgeist of the period tended to hide or condemn extensive intertextuality as “unoriginal” and “derivative.” Not “content to play as

passive a role” (Pugh 2004), readers would always play with the characters in the toy chest of literature the way the Brontë sisters did with their wooden soldiers: witness, for example, such diverse types of intertextuality as the massive corpus of Sherlock Holmes apocrypha pouring in almost since Conan Doyle started to write, or Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), or Shelley’s revisitations of the Prometheus myth. Even if the advent of postmodernism in literature has ushered a change back to a renewed appreciation of texts featuring strong intertextual characteristics and devices, the acceptance of writing in a shared universe is by no means smooth or taken for granted, however, especially when it comes to mainstream literature. Still, today, some books end up getting away with writing in a shared universe; others do not. Jean Rhys’s 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which, as a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, can be legitimately called fan fiction, was published commercially as any other book and has received critical acclaim. However, Alice Randall’s 2001 novel *The Wind Done Gone*, which retells the story of *Gone With The Wind* from the point of view of Scarlett’s half-sister Cynara, was the object of a lawsuit that nearly prevented its publication. All the names in the book are allusively changed, and the book’s perspective, ideology, and form (the text is a fictional first-person diary by Cynara) are vastly different from Margaret Mitchell’s work; yet its publisher ended in court accused of infringing the Mitchell estate copyright. The dispute was eventually settled, and *The Wind Done Gone* is now in print; still, most of its reviews damn it for its derivativeness, accusing it of not standing on its own literary merit. Such reviews entirely miss the point that, as with slash, it is exactly the intertextual dialogue and commentary on another text that create the strength and powerful impact of *The Wind Done Gone*.

<h1>Intertextuality Extended

<txt>So far, I have shown how intertextuality is constitutive of slash, allowing authors to construct texts based on a shared universe; how this peculiarity shapes their writing at several levels; and how writing in a shared universe is by no means an atypical or marginal phenomenon in literature. I now extend my consideration of slash intertextuality to examine the relation of slash to other texts in addition to the canon/fanon of the original media series. If the relation between slash and its canon/fanon from the original media text can be called intertextuality in the first degree, intertextuality in the second degree is when the text refers not just to its canonical roots, but also to other texts.

“Simple” intertextuality most often follows the textual mechanism of the “what if?” Teresa De Lauretis (1987, 1994) has pointed out the intensity of the human urge to fill narrative blanks: we want to know what Medusa was thinking when she saw herself in Perseus’ mirror, or what happened to Oedipus’ sphinx. Slash is born from the same mechanism: fans watch the TV series and start wondering, “what if . . .” Derecho (this volume) quotes Deleuze’s equating the reality of the potential and the actual: all possibilities exist at the same time, and archontic texts work toward actuating all possible variations. To paraphrase Todorov, if curiosity is wanting to find out about the past, the “what if” narrative impulse is wanting to find out about something never happened—in Hills’s (2002) terms, the “endlessly deferred narrative.” “What if” is a particularly common narrative impulse in fandoms based on shows that were canceled prematurely or ended with a cliffhanger: for example, much of *Blake’s 7* (1978–1981) slash belongs to the PGP, or Post–Gauda Prime, category, named after the planet Gauda Prime, where the TV series tragically ended with the death—or apparent death—of all protagonists but one. The “what if” mechanism, however, can be used to different purposes and effects: from the creation of action-

oriented stories that stay close to the original media text, to the referencing not only of the media text, but also of another genre or a specific text. For example, *Sand Castle* (1997), by Elizabeth Holden, stays close to the original media text. This novel is made up of three shorter sections, each retelling the events of *The Professionals* TV episode “Wild Justice” from the point of view of the three main characters. The shifting of point of view from the omniscient TV camera to the intimate first person helps the author comment on and interpret a controversial episode in the series, and of course there are many other examples of stories that tell events directly taken from the episodes—using snippets of dialogue, extending scenes, and so on. This type of extremely close intertextual relationships has a strong component of textual playfulness and craftsmanship, a desire to work in pastiche mode. To put it again in classical terms, it is worth referring to the Latin concept of *imitatio* (“imitation”). A popular way of creating poetic anthologies or collections of verses was to gather together in one volume a series of poets who retell a similar story or vignette, or who use a similar theme. For example, a volume might be a gathering of poems describing a rose garden, or a retelling the story of Achilles and Patroclus.

If many slash texts stay relatively close to the original media text, others deviate more sharply from the fandom canon, to the point that they are specifically labeled as AU (alternative universe) stories. In AUs, the characters are taken out of their original setting and put into another one, be it specifically made up by the author or drawn from some other source. Some AUs thus effect a generic change of setting. For example, it is possible to find *Lord of the Rings* Web sites where hobbits are vampires (Anklebiters, <http://www.rosiesamfrodo.com/~anklebiters/fiction.html>, accessed October 22, 2005). In *The Professionals*, we find the example of *The Hunting*, a long and complicated adventure tale by Jane of Australia, where CI5’s

tough guys Bodie and Doyle find themselves in a sword-and-sorcery universe, where Doyle is an elf. The AU may also be crossover—that is, elements from two or more different fandoms may be brought together: Madelein Lee’s 1995 novel *Revolution* manages to put together four different fandoms—*The Professionals*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Star Trek*, and *Tris/Alex*—in a dystopian science fictional setting. An author can also refer more or less explicitly to a specific text, be it slash or nonslash, in addition to the original one. Sequels, prequels, and alternative versions of slash stories abound, especially for stories that are deemed controversial or outstanding by the community. For example, the controversial and anonymously authored *The Professionals* story *Consequences* (n.d.; an early story, perhaps the very first, it is circulated in the circuit library), where Bodie rapes his mate Doyle, has spawned dozens of alternate versions, sequels, and prequels, which variously attempt to explain, justify, or negate the perceived problematic nature of *Consequences* itself. In *Lord of the Rings*, Mary Borsellino’s sequence of AU stories *Pretty Good Year* (<http://muse.inkstigmata.net/pgy.html>, accessed October 22, 2005) has become the hub of a whole subset of the fandom, complete with its own canon, art, songs, and AUs.

All the examples I have made are of course instances of squared intertextuality. A particularly interesting example of this category in view of my discussion of romance novels is Meg Lewtan’s undated *The Luck of the Draw*. The author prefaces her novel with a “Health Warning,” saying, “be sure you have replenished your supply of brown paper bags” and “checked your box of Kleenex.” This is because “the plot has again been cheerfully purloined from the assembly line of Barbara Cartland. The author apologises for not being able to properly acknowledge her source but, quite frankly she can’t remember the name of the

particular dose of Cartland syrup . . . which inspired her to write it” (1). In this case, the ties between slash and romance, so often taken very seriously by critics, who mistake the part for the whole, is actually ironic, tongue in cheek, and postmodernly playful: Lewtan’s text is a shameless, energetic romp in and out of the loops of romance novel clichés.

Sometimes the “squared” referentiality is to a well-known nonslash text: in Jane Mailander’s 1998 “I Never Met a Morphosis I Didn’t Like,” Doyle from *The Professionals* stars as a tragic Gregor Samsa—Mailander’s story follows the plot of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” and the story ends equally (and *crushingly*) badly. Other authors have borrowed fairy-tale themes. In some cases the reference is subtle and used to great effect: classically knowledgeable author Sebastian often uses classical Latin quotes and references this way. She writes in her short story “Vivamus, Amemus”:

<ext>There was a scraggy sparrow darting across the grey slate roof. Probably nesting in the eaves. Bodie watched it duck beneath them, twig in beak. Yeah, nesting all right. Making a nice cosy bed for a mate. There was no mate yet, but mate there would surely be: written in its blueprint, that was. Eggs in the spring. Greedy squawking open-beaked kids to feed for a brief furious summer. And then it would probably die in the winter freeze. (1)

<txt/fl>The title of the story comes from Catullus’ verse “let’s live and love, my Lesbia, and let’s not care about the malevolence of evil people” (my translation). The reference in the title, and the favorite Catullian image of the sparrow, resonate with the theme of Sebastian’s story: here, Bodie is suffering unrequited love for a capricious, cruel Doyle, who either obliviously or maliciously taunts and teases him without, of course, ever delivering what he promises.

I will use one last example to illustrate the complex and intriguing ways in which intertextuality is squared and cubed in slash. “Brother’s Keeper” is an anonymous short story in *The Professionals* fandom: its intertextuality is already squared because it takes the main characters and puts them in a sort of Lawrence of Arabia setting. Policeman Doyle is kidnapped by a slave trader in Africa, and undercover CI5 agent Bodie rescues him; they have many adventures in the desert, they fall in love, and they return to England. “Brother’s Keeper” is in turn the referent for *Heat-Trace*, a strongly and skillfully written novel: the author of *Heat-Trace* refers explicitly to “Brother’s Keeper,” continuing the tale where “Brother’s Keeper” left off. However, *Heat-Trace* is not a straightforward sequel, because it purposefully and forcefully changes the setting and situation in important ways. In *Heat-Trace*, Bodie and Doyle are back in England, and their escapist affair in Africa is now confronted with the grim reality of the country and of their own dysfunctional personalities. Both grapple with issues stemming from child abuse, and have to fight internalized and cultural homophobia. Bodie has a complete psychotic episode, and Doyle attempts suicide. They are broken men in a broken society, in the background of an incisive and critical representation of the Brixton Riots of the early 1980s.

Several more changes occur in the transition from one text to the other. Table 4.1 provides a synoptic comparison of interrelated slash texts that hints at the dense intertextuality and play of these texts. Although *The Professionals* can be termed semirealistic (on one hand, it presents gritty settings and current-affairs situations; on the other, it showcases a power fantasy of machismo), “Brother’s Keeper” swings to the extreme escapist and romantic setting of the desert, complete with tents, Bedouins, and white slavery; *Heat-Trace* brings back realism with a vengeance. The London setting is meticulously researched and represented, and social issues and current

affairs are enlarged from the simplistic fight against crime of the TV series to encompass a variety of complex and fascinating issues. This move makes for a text that is definitely ex-centric in the etymological sense: although both the TV series and “Brother’s Keeper” are fairly typical examples of their respective genres, *Heat-Trace* stands apart for its explicit political views, its strong writing, and its psychological depth.

<tbl 4.1>

<h1>Conclusions

<txt>Slash is not just an anthropological or sociological phenomenon whose main interest lies in the fannish community, and whose textual output is a simple, formulaic, and naive bunch of scribbblings. On the contrary, slash fan texts present us with a rich and varied corpus of literature, many of which warrant an in-depth textual and critical analysis. The slash text’s intricate and complex game of references and pastiches, and the presence of peculiarities such as shared authorship, *imitatio*, symbolism, and multiple intertextuality, signals how slash is canny, sophisticated, and resonant with contemporary postmodern textuality. Moreover, slash’s noncommercial conditions of production and distribution make it an intensely innovative, potentially oppositional phenomenon that deserves to be treated like any other literary corpus. Unfortunately, the pressing need to reframe the critical discourse around slash fan fiction left space for only brief glimpses of in-depth textual analysis; I could only work toward close reading, and simply mention in passing many other potential topics for discussion (see Kaplan, this volume, for close readings of fan texts).

Intertextuality makes for a varied and rich meeting point of genres and texts. Concepts such as intellectual property, originality, and individual genius are relative newcomers in literature: they started to develop after the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries as a result of a precise and specific set of historical, social, and cultural circumstances, just as circumstances are now changing, requiring a reassessment of these terms. Yet if we look beyond the Romantic grand narrative praising originality and individual genius, we can see how intertextuality has always been an important part of literature: even at the apex of the Romantic period—albeit in a less overt way and more often in marginal spaces—we can find a great deal of intertextuality. A case in point is the epigraph to this essay, which is taken from Charlotte Brontë’s autobiographical account in “History of the Year 1829.” The passage could be used to describe the way a fandom is born and develops.⁷ Someone sees interesting and topical characters (the Napoleonic Wars had raged only about fifteen years before the events retold by Charlotte and were a topic of debate in the Brontë household), so she snatches up a favorite character and starts playing with it, together with like-minded friends. The four Brontë children soon started to write stories and poems about their toy soldiers, and they filled a huge quantity of tiny notebooks with stories upon stories, often written together, Charlotte and Branwell on one side, Emily and Anne on the other. This literary play went on for many years, when the sisters were well into their twenties. Their little fandom of four developed a progressively stronger and larger fanon: the siblings created a rich, complex universe around the original characters.⁸ Fan fiction and the fan community (including this essay, and the book it appears in) do the same thing, but in a public, shared space rather than a constrained, private one.

<bmh1>Notes

<nt>I acknowledge the help of Tonya Browning, who as far back as 1996 was intriguing me with her work on interfaces as virtual palimpsests. This essay also owes

substantially to all the thought provoked by discussions with fan friends on a myriad of mailing lists, cons, chats, and mad house parties.

1. Throughout this essay, I liberally use quotation marks to problematize widely used terms whose connotations run counter to my argument. So, for example, I put Fiske's terminology of primary, secondary, and tertiary texts in quotes because the terms imply a hierarchy I want to do away with. I introduce my own terminology (intertextuality squared, cubed) to obviate the problem. I am not alone in my concerns: as Derecho (this volume) explains, there is a pressing need to create a terminology for fan fiction without negative connotations, and hence her selection of the term *archontic* over words like *derivative* or *appropriative*.

2. Even if Chandler-Olcott and Mahar's (2003) essay is firm in its definition of fan fiction as a legitimate text spanning diverse styles and genres, I find it problematic in its reduction of fan writing to adolescent practice instrumental to gaining literacy skills.

3. Many contributors to this volume are equally working toward a reframing of fan fiction, some of them in palimpsestual terms: Derecho makes a comparable claim in her designation of fan fiction as an archontic literature that is characterized by a consciously and openly referential intertextuality; Willis points out how fan fiction makes space in the original media text, creating gaps where the fan writer can inscribe their new, reoriented intertext; and the entire final section of this volume goes even further by pointing out the performative nature of fan fiction.

4. I second Kaplan's (this volume) positive acceptance of the term *fanon* as the main affordance of Bakhtinian polyglossia.

5. When it comes to modernism, my analogy is only partially accurate, because modernist poetics were not primarily concerned with a clear understanding of

a univocal meaning, but rather aimed at an almost mystical and subconscious resonance and ambiguity. I am indebted to Michel Hockx for pointing out the limits of my parallel.

6. See Jenson (1992). For a reaction against the reductionistic view of fan fiction, see Coppa, “Writing Bodies in Space” (this volume). My relativization of romantic, authorial high literature in favor of mythopoietic, nonmodern text is comparable to the shift Coppa makes from literary (in the narrow, Ruskinian sense) to performative text, if we consider how semioral, mythopoietic storytelling is indeed a performative textuality.

7. In this light, see Hills’s discussion of fandom as Winnicottian play (2002, 104–12).

8. Although I have not discussed them in my essay, there are important performative implications in describing fan fiction as playing with toy soldiers. For an even more performative example of doll play as fan fiction, I point out Todd Haynes’s *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, a 1987 movie “acted” entirely by Barbie dolls representing the singer and her family. For a discussion of fan fiction as performance, see Coppa (“Writing Bodies in Space,” this volume), Busse (this volume), and Lackner et al. (this volume).

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The Toy Soldiers. On one evening in a decade of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, the innocence of youth and family unravels. Five lives will change forever on this final evening before their hangout, The Toy Soldiers Roller Rink, closes its doors. Genres: Drama. Actor: Najarra Townsend, Constance Brenneman, Chandler Rylko. Director: Erik Peter Carlson. Country: USA. Movie: The Toy Soldiers. Production Co: Duration: 143 min. In textual studies, a palimpsest (/pˈlɪmpˌsɛst/) is a manuscript page, either from a scroll or a book, from which the text has been scraped or washed off so that the page can be reused for another document. Pergamene (now known as parchment) was made of lamb, calf, or goat kid skin (best made in ancient Pergamon) and was expensive and not readily available, so in the interest of economy a pergamene often was re-used by scraping the previous writing. In colloquial usage, the term palimpsest is also