Chocolate Frogs for My Betas!: Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website

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Abstract

In the past decade, digital technologies have become more and more ubiquitous and accessible, making them seem seductively "democratic." This cultural moment evokes Yancey's (2004) call for a re-evaluation of the work of rhetoric and composition, because "this moment *right* now... is like none other" (p. 297) as it marks a major shift in reading, writing, and participation in new, digitized economies. I argue that online fanfiction practices demonstrate to us, as literacy scholars and teachers, how digital tools have affected one writing community. These tools have allowed fans to develop an alternative to the "commodity culture" that we live in, a "gift economy," where affect and emotion play integral roles. In this article, I explore "good writing" and community features at one Harry Potter fanfiction website, *Sycophant Hex*. In addition, I explore some tensions of *Sycophant Hex*'s literacy practices in depth through a case study of one prolific fanwriter, *Chivalric*. I argue that investigation of these kinds of online writing spaces is especially valuable for literacy scholars and compositionists because they highlight how writing is a deeply embodied and emotional, life-long process.

> A young man shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He was slightly podgy, slightly bald although obviously not much older than twenty years old, and he chewed his lower lip out of sheer nervousness. "Mrs. Snape," he began, but Hermione interrupted him angrily.
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> "Granger," she snapped. "I kept my maiden name. I saw no reason to take the name of the man I was forced to marry. You are here to divorce us?"
>
> He nodded.
>
> "Get inside so we can finish this farce. Kitchen. Second door on the left."
> (Chivalric, 2008)

These few lines appear in the one-shot fanfiction story, "Divorce," by writer Chivalric (2008), and can be found at the *Harry Potter* fanfiction website—*SycophantHex.com*. In it, Hermione Granger has been forcibly married to Severus Snape in the wake of Harry Potter's defeat of Voldemort. The Ministry of Magic was eager to join magical couples that would produce what they considered to be "strong magical stock." Several years later, however, the Ministry of Magic passes a new law that will forcibly dissolve all Marriage Law unions. This story focuses on Hermione Granger's and

Severus Snape's reactions to the rescinded law. The story is a top-rated fiction within the *Sycophant Hex* community, and resides within the *Ashwinder* archive, which is geared toward "SS/HG shipper fics," or stories dealing with a romantic and/or sexual relationship between Severus Snape and Hermione Granger.

Fanfiction is a literacy practice whereby a fan takes the plot features, characters, and settings from a favored text—which can be anything from the *Harry Potter* books and movies to the popular television series *WWE RAW* (wrestling)—and the fan uses those features to write original stories about that text. Multiple websites exist to host online fanfiction, including *Fanfiction.net*, *Live Journal*, and *Archive of Our Own*. The much smaller *Sycophant Hex* presents itself as "a site for quality Harry Potter fanfiction," and contains five fanfiction archives: *Ashwinder* [1] ("SS/HG shipper fics"), *Occlumency* (Severus Snape-centric stories), *Lumos* ("general" *Harry Potter* stories), *Eros & Sappho* ("slash" and "femmeslash" fics[2]), and *Chaos* (a general archive). *Ashwinder* is by far the most popular archive on the website[3], making Severus Snape the most popular character and "SS/HG" one of the most popular pairings on this site. The initial question, at this point, is what do these practices have to tell us, as literacy scholars and teachers?

In the past decade, digital technologies have become more ubiquitous and accessible. These digital technologies seem to carry with them the very seductive dream of the democratic—where "democratic" seems to mean "agency," "self-determination," and "cooperation." In fact, "digital citizenship" became *the* phrase of future promise at the Conference on College Composition and Communication 2014. This cultural moment evoked Yancey's (2004) call for a re-evaluation of the work of rhetoric and composition. In "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," Yancey famously stated: "Sometimes, you know, you have a moment" (2004, p. 297), and that, "for compositionists, of this time and of this place, this moment—this moment *right now*—is like none other" (Yancey, 2004, p. 297). It is a moment of a major shift in reading, writing, and participation in new, digitized economies. With the rising ubiquity of digital technologies, I would argue that "this moment right now" is raising important questions about what it means to be, to read, and to write in our current, highly digitized world. A great deal of recent work in rhetoric and composition has focused on how digital technologies can advance classroom practices (see for example Black, 2005; Black, 2009; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). And while it is true that many studies have explored online writing—such as blogs and discussion forums—not many, besides Black (2005), Black (2009) have looked into the writing practices of online fanfiction communities. However, I argue that online fanfiction practices demonstrate to us, as literacy scholars and teachers, how digital tools have affected one writing community. Specifically, the affordances of digital technology have allowed fan communities to develop an alternative to the "commodity culture" in which we live—a "gift economy" in which affect and emotion play integral roles.

In this article, I investigate the literacy and community practices of online fanfiction. I choose fanfiction because, upon first glance, it appears to maintain a "democratizing dream" of the digital frontier. However, upon further inspection, the literacy practices of online fanfiction are much more complex. I explore Harry Potter fanfiction, specifically, because of *Harry Potter*'s long-standing status among United States educators as being uniquely capable of inspiring literacy in American youth. Online fanfiction practices provide a distinctive space for us to explore how we understand identity, digital technologies, and writing. First, a close inspection of fanfiction practices can demonstrate quite insightfully the complex ways in which identity features are coded and performed into readings of "source texts," and certainly fan texts such as stories, author's notes, administrator "how to" guides, and even writer-editor interactions. In addition, digital technologies have changed the ways in which fans participate in their favored fandoms. Therefore, fanfiction practices can provide us with an insight into how digital technologies interact with literacy practices—especially in terms of how these technologies change the ways in which texts are produced, circulated, and received.

In this article, I first address previous scholarship on fanfiction practices, and I focus particularly on the distinctive economies of operation within fanfiction. Then, I will explore "good writing" and community features at one *Harry Potter* fanfiction website, *Sycophant Hex*. Within this exploration of "good writing," I will argue that, while online fanfiction practices include both gatekeeping practices and a strong position towards plagiarism—they deeply support an individual fan's "right" over fanfiction stories—these practices are more accurately defined by the affective economy

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[1] It is interesting to note that this archive takes its name from the Ashwinder egg, a Potions ingredient from the Harry Potter Universe (Severus Snape is the Potions Master and professor at Hogwarts school). Importantly, too, according to the *Harry Potter Lexicon*, these eggs are typically used in love potions. The name, therefore, is a sign of a widely-accepted fan interpretation of the source text, or "fanon."

[2] Stories focusing exclusively on LGBTQ relationships.

[3] Ashwinder boasts 3,878 stories, compared to: Lumos, 1,874; Occlumency, 1,144; Eros & Sappho, 650; and Chaos, 325 (as of 11 July 2015).

they seek to maintain. Finally, I will explore the tensions of *Sycophant Hex*'s literacy practices in depth through a case study of one prolific fanwriter, *Chivalric*, the author of the above excerpt.

1. Fandom enters academia: Spaces for fans as sophisticated, critical, and resistant

Enduring scholarship on fan practices has focused largely on the potential for resistance. Scholars such as Jenkins (1992), Bacon-Smith (1992), Penley (1997), and Scodari and Felder (2000) strove to demonstrate that fan work was not a "nothing" activity, but rather, a space for fans to engage their real-life worlds with their preferred popular culture worlds in ways that could address gaps and redress injustices. In the foundational fan studies work, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins (1992) argued that media fans[4] are not escaping from everyday life through their fan activities, nor are they endlessly reliving their emotional experiences of watching their favorite films or TV shows when they create fanart, fan music, and fanfiction. Rather, Jenkins (1992) argued that they are engaging in a sophisticated, interpretive community, in which they "rewrite" the source text in order to comment upon the social and political limitations of both its world and the larger, contemporary world that it reflects. For example, *Star Trek* fanwriters not only "rewrite" *Star Trek* to address issues of gender inequality in the "Trek universe," but also to address similar issues as they existed in the 1960s and 1970s, and, in fact, continue to exist today. From a Bakhtinian perspective, I argue that fan texts are *always* shaped by (and shaping) dominant ideas, even though they might resist these dominant ideas by suggesting new possibilities for fan universes.

Furthermore, I argue that not all fan practices are equally resistant. Fan scholar Matt Hills (2002) would refer to this resistant fan/complicit fan dichotomy as a "moral dualism," born, in scholarship at least, out of a desire to legitimate our sites of study *and* our appropriately distanced, critical, and cognitive "academic subjectivities." Hills (2002) argued that academics have tended to pit fans as totally resistant to the capitalist, consumerist economy in which we live. But this "resistant" positioning is, in many ways, a result of turning fans into "mini academics." Hills (2002) argued—and I would agree—that these fan versus academic categories are much more liminal than they have often been represented within scholarship[5]. Furthermore, Hills (2002) argued that we openly recognize the place of "affect" and even emotion in fan practices (2002, pp. 9–10). I argue here that any exploration of fan practices must include emotion. It must acknowledge that fan practices include hierarchical communities, where some are "in" and others are "out." And this exploration must acknowledge that fanfiction, in particular, is not always, and does not always *need* to be doing resistant work. In the next section, I explore both the hierarchical elements of the writing community at *Sycophant Hex*, as well as its distinctive exchange economy, which I ultimately describe as "gift-centered."

2. Affective writing economies, gatekeeping, and the curious case of plagiarism at *Sycophant Hex*

What is particularly striking about *SycophantHex.com* are the ways in which so-called "good" writing is defined, as well as the ways in which it is presumed to be achieved. It becomes clear, even just from a cursory inspection of the writing resources presented on the main website page, that there is a preoccupation with "grammar" and "appropriate" canon—or "getting canon right." As *Valis2*, an administrator, wrote in regard to grammar, in "Avoiding Mistakes in Fanfiction Writing: A Beginner's Guide" (n.d.), "You can break the *rules* after you know them.. . Not knowing the difference between *its* and *it's*, tenses, grammar, and all of the other mechanics of writing will bring your work down a notch in the eyes of those that care" (Valis2, n.d.). It is also notable that the website contains two articles regarding grammar (comma rules and punctuating dialogue), as well as links to the *Purdue Online Writing Lab* (*OWL*), a webpage entitled *Common Errors in English*, and one dealing with proper British English. Moreover, in the "*Sycophant Hex* Submission Rules," half of the webpage is concerned with grammar, punctuating dialogue, spelling, and "canon" spelling (in fact, the website includes a list of all proper *Harry Potter* canon spellings). The submission rules describe the importance of grammar errors much less forcefully than Valis2 (n.d.), but they make it clear that stories with "major

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[4] Which Jenkins (1992) defined as fans of television shows and movies.

[5] The tension between "academic" and "fan" is outside of the scope of this article. However, I will note that the ways in which fans tend to describe "good fan writing" often do reflect very school-like expectations of "academic" writing.

errors" will be rejected outright. However, they also urge the use of a beta[6] reader, suggesting that writing is understood as a process inasmuch as it is viewed as a product.

The most troubling views of grammar, however, are communicated within the website discussion forum, "The Daily Prophet," which is limited to website administrators. In a post entitled, "Reminder Regarding Forum Posting Rules!" administrator *Diana* (a head moderator) forcefully told members that they "are *not* an exception [sic] the rules" (2005, March 7). Regarding grammar, she said, "Correct English. This includes proper capitalization, grammar, and spelling if at all possible. Again, we realize that not all of our posters are native English speakers, but you should know where the shift and the punctuation buttons are on your keyboard: *use them!*" (Diana, 2005, March 7). While this particular administrator may have felt that by recognizing that some website users were not native speakers of English, she was invoking a spirit of open access, given her comment, "but you should know where the shift and punctuation buttons are on your keyboard!" *Diana* (2005, March 7) was likely responding to previous user complaints. In stark contrast to the more general view that online communities are more democratic, as well as to the website's seemingly friendly welcome—"We are delighted to provide this service to you free of charge.. . Now sit back, relax, choose your poison—and enjoy!"—this vehement directive concerning "correct" English suggests that, while most members are subject to a standard of perfection, the website administrators, as the "inner circle," are not[7].

The case of *Harry Potter* canon is often stated just as vehemently, though it is sometimes unclear *who* is judging what "counts" as "canon." For example, Valis2 (n.d.) wrote: "The rules of the fandom universe are what makes the universe that particular universe. If you obliterate the *rules*, you may as well write 'Quacky McDuck Sings the Blues' and do something entirely original instead of forcing someone else's characters to do odd things" (Valis2, n.d.) This hints at *audience*—how to appeal to readers, something valued very highly in rhetoric and composition. On the other hand, this audience appears to care *more* about surface features and common knowledge than on creative, new possibilities for *Harry Potter* characters and settings. Given this evidence, one might believe that fanwriting communities are better defined by their gatekeeping practices than by their seemingly democratic views of access, accessibility, and their exchange of largely symbolic and cultural capital.

While it is certainly true that these websites maintain some gatekeeping practices, it is interesting to note that, even within the essay urging new community members away from "the pitfalls of novice fanfiction writers" (Valis2, n.d.), writing is also framed as a learning experience, a chance to develop, stating, "We're all here to improve, right?" It is interesting, too, that while this essay was clearly written by a website administrator (ostensibly, an individual who has advanced to the "inner circle," as it were, of this fanwriting community), the author self-locates on an equal level to incoming fanwriters, saying, "Being a novice fanfiction writer myself, and having made all of these mistakes and more, I feel fairly confident about prattling on about them." Of course, this example alone is not enough to show that website participants all appear to feel as if the fanwriting process at the website is nurturing to them. However, it becomes very clear in reading authors' notes that authors cherish their relationships with their beta readers, and that they feel these relationships have encouraged them to become better writers, even when those relationships meant strict corrections of authors' writing. *Chivalric*'s (2009) notes preceding another of her top-rated stories, "At the Beach," for example, read like this within the first chapter: "This story is for *notsosaintly*. Thank you—for everything! / *Dreamy_Dragon* has done the main work on this story *hugs you tightly* / Additionally, I had help *from Sampdoria, CharmedForce, Arabella Bloodgood*, and *sunny33*. That only proves that betaing for me is not an easy job. Thank you, ladies!" (Chivalric, 2009). That is to say, while posts concerning website submission rules appear to privilege gatekeeping above any teaching role the site might play, that is clearly not the full story.

Ironically, this can best be seen by examining the curious treatment of plagiarism on the website. It is difficult to find a definition of plagiarism on the website, even in the submission rules and "Terms of Service;" it is not particularly difficult to find vehement directives against plagiarism. In fact, it is defined only once on the website, deeply embedded in the "Writers' Resources—The Enchanted Quill" pages in the discussion forums. azazello (2004), the author of the definition, as well as a website administrator, explained:

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[6] The website term for editor or proofreader.

[7] In fact, when *azazello* (2005, April 12), an administrator, addressed user complaints about website standards, she expressed bewilderment at the complaint, but, nonetheless, came to argue that "correct" English and "correct" canon are paramount and, furthermore, apolitical and unproblematic—they just are.

What's yours? What do you, the writer of the fanfic, own? Essentially, everything that is not JKR's. The characters you the ficcer made up, the plot, the settings. The dialogue. It's yours but you have no legal recourse if someone nicks your characters, plot, settings. That's because you are operating in the world of fanfic and therefore do not hold intellectual copyright on your stuff. Technically, JK Rowling does. (2004, Dec. 28)

In many ways, this is exactly what we might expect to find[8]: a vague but vehement distinction between "one's own original" work and the work of another. Moreover, the definition goes on to explain that writers should always acknowledge all uses of other fanwriters' concepts, characters, or features (e.g. original spells); regarding fellow fanwriters, authors should always ask before making use of ideas they may have read elsewhere. However, it is unclear, even within this post, where the line should be drawn between concepts that must be borrowed and those that are "common knowledge" to the *Sycophant Hex* community. Of course, that is the difficulty in any definition of plagiarism—website users will only learn this through deeply engaged participation[9].

What is more striking about the view of plagiarism on the website, however, is the way in which it is seen not necessarily as a lack of authenticity—"First off, in a sense, we are all plagiarizing. That's to some extent what fanfiction is about" (azazello, 2004, Dec. 28)—but rather that it is a direct offense against the affective economy of the website. Just as shoplifting "steals" items from a store and money from the pockets of its employees[10], plagiarism, here, appears to "steal" sincere and affective engagement, not to mention cultural capital (credibility) within the website's knowledge-making, interpretive community. As azazello (2004, Dec. 28) put it: "Plagiarism is hurtful, it's offensive to writers and readers alike. It's insulting.. . to those who work hard on their own stuff (even if it is not exactly brilliant, but honest work) only to see *the work of a copyist*[11] *get better reviews and more attention*" (my emphasis). Chivalric55 (2012) bore out a similar interpretation when she discussed plagiarism of her fanfiction on *Fanfiction.net*[12]: "*kittylefish* informed me today that one of my stories has been stolen and posted to FF.net.. . In case you want to check if one of your stories has been stolen by the same person, go check here" (Chivalric55, 2012, Jan. 28).

What is emerging here is a complex view of what it means to be a fanwriter at *Sycophant Hex*. More prominent in this community than its gatekeeping practices are, what I would call, its "goodwill" ethics of exchange. Looking closely at the ways in which "good writing" is assumed to be defined and achieved on this website, it has become clear to me that it is highly important in this treatment of fan culture to discuss how these texts are produced, circulated, and received. I argue that online fan culture exists within a particular system of exchange—not only of dialogue but of authority, meaning, and friendship. Perhaps to account for these complex exchanges in fan communities is to appeal to Gee's (2004) theory of "affinity spaces." To a certain extent, "affinity space" is a useful term in fan scholarship because it highlights the choices that fans can and do make, as well as the importance of the deeply affective, deeply emotional ties among fanwriters (especially in the case of the fanwriter-beta reader[13] relationship). However, as scholars such as Williams (2009) have argued, the "affinity space" is problematic because, while it highlights choice, it fails to account for larger ideological structures that are still at work in fans' performances of identity, and certainly in their engagements with each other. Nonetheless, I argue that "affinity" and friendly exchange are very central aspects to fan practices.

Similarly, Jenkins' (1992) work highlighted the features of friendly exchange and goodwill that tended to define fanwriting practices in earlier fanzine communities. He argued that "fan reception *cannot and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans and motivated*, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction

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[8] For an in-depth treatment of fanwriting's relationship to copyright laws, see Tushnet (2007).

[9] For a discussion of how plagiarism might be better taught in the classroom, see Price (2002). It is possible that fanfiction *could* be brought into the classroom to discuss the concept of plagiarism, though I believe, in general, in careful circumscription when transferring features of out-of-school sites into classrooms.

[10] I am aware of the irony of the comparison between the treatment of plagiarism on *Sycophant Hex* and "stealing" within a capitalist economy. This irony, or *tension*, is particularly the point here.

[11] It is notable, here, the parallels between this representation of plagiarism and the fuzzy boundaries of intellectual property as they were discussed regarding copyright in the 19th Century. For an in-depth discussion of reprinting and copyright in 19th Century book culture, see McGill, 2003. It seems likely that we will face many of the same issues with copyright laws in relation to online authorship.

[12] When I discuss *Chivalric* in more depth, I will not deal with her presence on *Fanfiction.net*, because *Sycophant Hex* and *The Petulant Poetess* seem to be her main bases of operation.

[13] A beta reader, as I stated above, is an editor within the fanfiction community. These editors cover a range from commenting upon content, to organization, and to sentence-level features such as spelling and punctuation. Some of these editors, in *Harry Potter* fanfiction at least, will also comment on British English.

with a larger *social and cultural community*" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 76, original emphasis). Online fanfiction communities function in very similar ways. It is commonplace in these forums for fans to not only help each other with their writing, free of charge, but to also give each other challenges, to write stories for each other, and to support each other through positive reader reviews; not to mention the lively discussions that take place on these websites' writing forums (spaces where writers can discuss story ideas with those other than their beta readers). In this sense we might see fanwriting culture as existing within a system of exchange different from the system of commodity exchange in larger society. What is exchanged at these websites is not profit. Rather, stories are exchanged for friendship (symbolic capital) and authority (social capital). The exchange on these websites is best described as *affective*, and fits best within what we might call a "gift economy" rather than a "commodity culture," terms I borrow from Jenkins, Ford, & Green (2013)[14]. However, I must stress that the economy of fanwriting is not entirely separate from a capitalist "commodity culture." This culture allows fans access to their loved, fan objects. Even within online fan communities, there exists the potential for the social, symbolic, and even cultural capitals writers gain through their participation to eventually be transferred into a system of financial capital. After all, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, E. L. James, got her start in *Twilight* fanfiction communities, and Cassandra Clare, author of the *Mortal Instruments* series, got her start in *Harry Potter* fanfiction communities.

In addition to this affective, "gift" exchange economy, it is particularly striking how "authorship" is represented at *Sycophant Hex*. While today, dominant stereotypes of authorship tend to depict the lone author, brilliantly spouting new and "original" ideas from her/his head from the isolation of a cramped, dank office[15], fanfiction communities more often depict an author who is never fully singular—always existing within complex, personally-engaged communities. It is this particular view of authorship that I argue is at work in the *Sycophant Hex* community. I would add to this that these communities also exist in deeply heteroglossic environments (Bakhtin, 1981). In order to see this fanfiction community's view of authorship and goodwill exchange more clearly, let's look at how they function in the work of one particular author's fanfiction journey—*Chivalric*.

3. Case study: Who is "*Chivalric*," Sam C. Leonhard?

One of the most striking features of online fanfiction forums is the degree to which the identities of the authors are obscured. Often, the markings of identity work differently in the online environment than they would have in earlier fanzine communities. Features of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and language are not as readily apparent in the online environment. Nonetheless, it is sometimes possible to find more information about the authors than their chosen pennames and associated stories. One such case is that of *Chivalric. Chivalric* participates in many fanfiction communities in addition to *Sycophant Hex*—including *The Petulant Poetess* and *Live Journal*[16]. We learn from her profile at *The Petulant Poetess* that her "real" name is Sam C. Leonhard[17], that she is from Germany, and that she is around forty years old with a son and a dog. It becomes clear immediately that *Chivalric* is also bilingual—German and English. This information is borne out in her *Live Journal* profile as well: "I will be soon at the wrong side of forty, I have a six year old son and a nine year old dog" (Chivalric55, 2012, Jan. 28). We learn from her *Live Journal* account that she is a freelance journalist, that she is not only bilingual but that, as she says, "I raise my boy bilingual and prefer to write in English, too. Strange, that. It sounds wrong when I write fanfic in German. Occasionally, I translate a story.. . and that, too, feels odd" (Chivalric55, 2012, Jan. 28). Both *The Petulant Poetess* and *Sycophant Hex* show that *Chivalric* is a prolific writer, with 62 and 20 stories respectively. In addition, *Chivalric* has published at least six

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[14] In their groundbreaking study, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) focused on how fan activities are always operating within two intersecting systems of value, stating specifically that, "It's crucial to realize that audiences and producers often follow different logics and operate within different economies (if, by 'economies,' we mean different systems of appraising and allocating value). Painting in broad strokes, we might describe these two worlds as 'commodity culture' and 'the gift economy.' One (commodity culture) places greater emphasis on economic motives, the other (the gift economy) on social motives" (p. 63).

[15] This is the way in which J.K. Rowling is generally represented by the media. An example is Smith's (2003) biography.

[16] *Live Journal* is a personal blogging website and it appears to host a great deal of activity by *Sycophant Hex* members—including the sharing of stories and story challenges.

[17] Through personal communication with Leonhard, it has become clear that "Sam C. Leonhard" is a nom-de-plume. Nonetheless, due to ethical reasons, I will treat "Sam C. Leonhard" as *Chivalric's* "real" name.

original novels through Dreamspinner Press, including her first two original publications, *Tainted Blood* (2010) and *Tainted Soul* (2011), both of which are available through Amazon Kindle.

As I suggested above when I discussed "good writing" on *Sycophant Hex*, writing on this website incorporates a different kind of exchange system, an affective "gift economy," which was best seen in the examples of the writer and beta reader relationships above, as well as website participants' particular view on plagiarism. I discussed how all the stories at this website are heteroglossic—that there is a sort of collective authorship[18]. These two phenomena are not causally related or separate from each other. Rather, they happen simultaneously and they reinforce each other. In this section, then, I will first demonstrate how *Chivalric's* writing, namely in her 2008 story, "Divorce," is heteroglossic. Then I will demonstrate how the complex multivoicedness of her writing intersects with *Sycophant Hex's* "gift" economy by examining how *Chivalric* acknowledges her beta readers in both her online fanfiction and her original works.

"Divorce" was published on *Sycophant Hex* on January 10, 2008, and it is a particularly intriguing fiction, in light of the cultural practices of the *Sycophant Hex* fanwriting community. It is a short, "one-shot" fiction, and, in it, Hermione and Severus have been forced to marry due to a law passed by the Ministry of Magic, ostensibly, after Harry Potter defeated Voldemort. A hapless ministry employee, per a more recent Ministry of Magic law (the "Divorce Decree") forcibly reversing earlier "marriage law" unions, attempts to persuade Hermione and Severus to sign divorce papers and divide their possessions. At first, it seems that Hermione and Severus are only too happy at the news as the story begins with them viciously bickering. However it becomes clear, unfortunately for the young Ministry employee, that they are, in fact, quite happily married and expecting a child. They chase the employee away, maintaining the legality of their marriage for at least one more year.

It appears to have been written for an "Anything Goes" challenge, which allows the writer to, literally, do anything (pair any characters, set them in any universe, etc.)—"This was initially written for the Anything Goes Challenge and, surprisingly, won in the Category 'Short Story'" (Chivalric, 2008, Jan. 10). But it is unclear which "Anything Goes" challenge it responded to, as it can sometimes be difficult to track old challenges in the online fanfiction environment. As we will come to see, *Chivalric's* "Divorce" acts not merely as a reproduction of the *Harry Potter* books and films or as a reproduction of previous fan texts, but as a transformative moving *beyond* yet incorporating both. It is "a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272). That *Chivalric* responded to the challenge in this story not only shows her deep engagement within *Sycophant Hex*, but also that her *appropriation*[19] of "Anything Goes" led to the creation of a story that not only matched the expectations of other website members as to what that should mean (centripetal forces of language) but also expanded these expectations (centrifugal forces of language).

"Divorce" (2008) fits within a popular fanon theme at *Sycophant Hex*, the "marriage law fic." It is important to understand that the site includes not only space for writers to post their stories, but with "challenges" to help inspire them (which are frequently posted in the discussion forums under *Writers' Resources*). The "marriage law fic" is apparently one of these writing prompts or challenges[20]. The basic idea is the same across all "marriage law fics": sometime after the defeat of Voldemort by Harry Potter, the wizarding government (Ministry of Magic) passes a law not only requiring marriage, but severely constraining who will be allowed to marry whom. In many cases, the argument for this is threefold: first, to address the decimation of the wizarding population during the Voldemort wars (often, these wars are cast as even bloodier in fanfiction than they were in the original series); second, to avoid the negative effects of inbreeding, which is often presented as rife among the pureblood families (generally, these are also the families that allied themselves with Voldemort, so the law is highly political as well); and third (though this is highly variable), to achieve eventual peace between pureblood and Muggle-born wizards (albeit in an extreme fashion). Often, within the *Ashwinder* archive, Hermione is courted by "dangerous," Death Eater suitors, and marries Severus Snape for protection

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[18] Borrowing from Pierre Lévy, Williams (2009) referred to this phenomenon as "collective intelligence" (p. 43).

[19] I am using "appropriation" in the Bakhtinian sense here, a process that is deeply heteroglossic, requires social interaction and fluency in social milieux, and is, furthermore, very messy and, at times, never fully achieved – "Not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). I would argue, regarding *Sycophant Hex*, that it is unclear to what extent *any* "word" is ever "private property."

[20] The original challenge appears to have been set by *Chelleybean* in 2009, but another user argued it was first posted as early as 2004. So many iterations of the challenge apparently exist, making it impossible to trace its origins.

from these suitors, ostensibly because he understands how they operate, is familiar with "dark" magic, and has cachet as a spy.

"Divorce" (2008) abided by many of those specifications, though the exact reason for the union between Severus and Hermione was fuzzy. Given that this story is very short, and that *Chivalric* spent very little time establishing the background for her particular marriage law, we can assume that, like features of canon (the source texts), this particular theme has become a commonly-shared, acceptable starting place—"fanon." That is, just as fanfiction in general allows writers to explore multiple inter-relational and political themes without having to spend a great deal of time building readers' knowledge of characters and settings, writers of new marriage law fics no longer have to establish what, exactly, is meant by "marriage law." In that way, then, we can certainly see *Chivalric's (2008)* story as deeply informed by community language, as deeply heteroglossic, given that it was published in 2008, years after the alleged initial challenge. The story is deeply informed by previous challenges and responses, as well as previous discussions between writers and betas (which eventually produced what was visible to all *Sycophant Hex* members) *and* reader reviews and authors' notes (and responses).

I argue that this fanon theme represents what Bakhtin (1981) would have referred to as "centripetal forces of language" or "unitary language" on the one hand because, as we have seen above, "marriage law" has come to represent a clear set of possible tropes that all fanwriters, especially those who have spent a great deal of time reading and writing within the community, come to understand tacitly. The only caveat I would offer is that, while certainly such a theme is centralizing, it is not as strictly top-down as the way Bakhtin represented centripetal forces—"The victory of one reigning language (dialect) over the others" (1981, p. 271). Nonetheless, as was noted by Johnson (2007) and Hartwell (1984) in their studies of fan communities, there was and is likely disagreement about the exact fanon features of the marriage law fic. Importantly, there will have been struggle (a key theme in Bakhtin's view of language as a deeply politicized, living entity). Chivalric (2008) presented in "Divorce" a unique twist on the well-known marriage law trope; not only were marriages legally enforced in this particular version of the *Harry Potter* universe, but were being dissolved by legal force as well. She entered the canon/fanon struggle and, given that she apparently won the challenge, her balanced appropriation of these "languages" allowed her to achieve credible status as knowledge-maker within the *Sycophant Hex* community.

Chivalric achieved this status through other features of "Divorce" (2008) as well. For instance, a crucial moment in the story occured when "Carlyle," the Ministry employee, referred to Hermione as "Mrs. Snape," causing Hermione to caustically respond: "'Granger,' she snapped. 'I kept my maiden name. I saw no reason to take the name of the man I was *forced* to marry'" (Chivalric, 2008). There is disagreement about this particular theme within the *Ashwinder* archive, whether Hermione Granger would adopt Severus Snape's name if they married. It depends entirely upon how the writer chooses to characterize Hermione. Some will choose to characterize her as particularly submissive, while others will choose to characterize her as a true intellectual (and magical) equal to Severus. The ultimate choice a writer makes is important in how she or he identifies herself or himself within this particular forum, because any pairing of Severus Snape and Hermione Granger is in extreme tension with the original text.

As was mentioned above, in the original *Harry Potter* series, Severus was 19 years older than Hermione[21]. Moreover, Severus was Hermione's professor for six years, and he spent the majority of his life obsessed with Harry Potter's mother. Importantly, Rowling intended him to be a legitimately nasty human being, and has said of him: "Who on earth would want Snape in love with them? That is a very horrible idea" (Interview with Christopher Lydon, WBUR Radio, Oct., 1999). Finally, in the original series, Hermione married Ron Weasley. Because of this very different conception of these characters, fanfiction writers have had to create different avenues for fanon. Typically, while the writer might address the age differences, it is usually avoided. In a similar manner, the power relationship between the two is either ignored, made up for in an exaggerated manner (Hermione becomes more powerful than Severus), or is capitalized upon (especially in stories wherein their relationship is supposed to begin at the end of Hermione's Hogwarts years, at 17 years of age, or in stories dealing with BDSM, or "bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism"). All of these avenues appear to be equally respected within the archive as a whole, but it is important for an author to identify which of these avenues is found most compelling, because that identification is important in relation to audience. Therefore, even that seemingly tiny moment—"'Granger,' she snapped"—is deeply heteroglossic, including the voices of J.K.

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[21] Calculated using figures from the *Harry Potter Lexicon*, which were culled from the books as well as interviews with J.K. Rowling and her personal website.

Rowling (in her books as well as on her website and in interviews), of multiple *Sycophant Hex* members making assertions and debating canon interpretations, of the film representations versus the book representations, etc.

However, while the themes of "Divorce" (2008), in particular, show the complex, heteroglossic features of fanfiction at *Sycophant Hex*, its acknowledgements more strongly present this community's heteroglossic nature—not to mention its highly affective exchange economy. For example, in "Divorce," (2008) *Chivalric's* authors' notes read:

> Many thanks to my wonderful betas. . .. They pointed out the little inconsistencies in the story; I owe each of them a big box of chocolate frogs!

> In addition, I want to thank [another fanwriter] for her effort turning this into an MP3. It is currently not online, but anyone interested is welcome to get in contact and I'll mail it asap. (Chivalric, 2008)

What is found in this acknowledgement is typical of the fanfiction genre at *Sycophant Hex*. Writers include thanks and dedications at the top of the page (much like a preface), and may include further notes about inspiration, unusual plot and/or characterization choices, and previews of another story or story chapter at the bottom of the page. Betas (as I stated above) are voluntary editors; they read for grammar, punctuation, plot, characterization, etc. There are also beta readers who check for British dialect features, "Britpickers."

What is somewhat unusual about these authors' notes is that they do not include a disclaimer. It is generally typical on this website for writers to include a "disclaimer" note, wherein they assure readers that they are not writing fanfiction for a profit, and that they realize that the original *Harry Potter* plot and characters are the intellectual property of J. K. Rowling. From a Bakhtinian perspective, *Chivalric's* acknowledgement of the beta readers not only marks a sense of solidarity, friendship, and graciousness (affective exchange), but also a recognition of these beta readers' roles as co-authors of "Divorce" (2008), as central voices in this text's heteroglossia. Moreover, *Chivalric's* lack of a disclaimer suggests her unique appropriation of a centripetal cultural feature of *Sycophant Hex*, making it her own (a centrifugal and, therefore, transformative response)—as if to say, "You all already know that this story borrows Rowling's characters and settings, but *this* story is *my* original 'remix[22]' of those features."

What I would especially like to point out about these author's notes is not only that they acknowledge the hard and dedicated work of beta readers but, more so, that they belie a complex system of largely private exchange of *symbolic* capital—i.e. friendship. In fact, it is likely due to this intense exchanging of symbolic capital, of *true fondness*, that many of these relationships are very long-lasting, as is clear from *Chivalric*, or rather, Sam C. Leonhard's acknowledgements within her recent book, *Tainted Blood* (2010):

> Special thanks to my very own petulant poetess, Theresa, not only for editing the manuscript and getting it ready for submission, but for creating and maintaining her fabulous website too. Without the site, I would never have gathered enough motivation to write at all, and without her support and friendship, I would have given up pretty soon. (Leonhard, 2010)

Clearly, this quotation alone shows the importance of the writer-beta reader relationship at *Sycophant Hex* and other fanfiction websites like it. However, it hints at something even deeper than the importance of these relationships—it hints at their *intensity* as well.

The strength of these exchanges, as well as of the affective economy that allows for them to exist, is best seen in their longevity. A long-standing beta reader (and friend) of *Chivalric's* (from fanfiction to original work), *kittylefish* (2014), has described their relationship in the following way:

> She asked me if I would be willing to beta [her work].. . I said sure I would, lol. At that point I didn't know it was *Chivalric* who was asking, but I suspected it might be her. I was already a fan of her work.

> That was in August of 2008—I just looked it up...

> That's a few years ago now, so it's hard to remember what it was like at the time, but my recollection is that we developed a good relationship and friendship pretty quickly as I became her regular beta for her Snape/Lupin stories.. .

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[22] I am using Knobel and Lankshear's (2008) definition of remix here.

And she betas my stories for plot and character, which I immensely appreciate.

(*kittylefish*, personal communication, June 24, 2014).

This quotation, I argue, clearly demonstrates the importance and the strength of long-standing writer-beta reader relationships on *Sycophant Hex* (and other fanfiction websites). It also shows how these deeply affective, deeply emotional exchanges allow not only for future interactions, but, importantly, for transformative work within the *Harry Potter* canon and fanon universes.

Moreover, the importance of these relationships was even further reflected in *Chivalric*'s recollections of her work with her beta readers: "I could not work without beta.. . [There] are my girls who do the hard work, the grammar stuff, the orthography. Without either of them, I could not publish/post a single line" (*Chivalric*, personal communication, June 16, 2014). We can say from this acknowledgement that not only have Leonhard's interactions on *Sycophant Hex* and *The Petulant Poetess* provided, perhaps, an escape from the mundane, they have engaged her in sophisticated interpretive practices, as well as sophisticated learning that has allowed her to develop both confidence and rhetorical effectiveness. They also engaged her in a complex and highly important economy of exchange which appears to have played a major role in inspiring *Chivalric* to continue working towards developing her craft as a writer, especially (and eventually) within her own original works. Put another way, while this website does engage in some gatekeeping practices, it provided an important affective exchange with *Chivalric*. It also engaged with her emotionally, which nurtured her through her development as a writer.

4. Conclusion: Beyond the "Democratizing Dream" and toward *emotion*

While early work on fanzine cultures, such as that by Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992), closely investigated the kinds of writing and learning communities that early fanzine writers created, the majority of the focus of these arguments was on the content of the zines, particularly to demonstrate the ways it was resistant to dominant ideologies. Certainly, this was likely in large part (as Hills, 2002, argued) due to these scholars' drive to legitimate academic scholarship on fandom. Nonetheless, much of the scholarship on fandom, even online fandom, has tended to focus on its resistant content. Because of this, it seems that only more recent work (particularly by Hills, 2002) has begun to consider the central importance of emotion and in-group hierarchy in the functioning of online fanfiction writing. My analyses above demonstrate not only that fanwriting can be resistant, but that it is also subject to larger ideologies as well as the constraints of the communities' agreed-upon interpretations. More importantly, my analyses have shown that these complex positions are not only structured *within* but also made possible *by* the differing, highly affective economies of these websites.

In addition, while both public discourse and the field of rhetoric and composition have tended to look toward digital technologies as somehow democratizing and hence liberating, my analyses demonstrate that these spaces are still beset with the tensions of power structures. In fact, even early work, such as that by Scodari and Felder (2000) and Bury (2005), made similar claims. In her work, Bury (2005) sought to problematize and largely to undermine what she called the "dream of disembodiment" (p. 3) of a lot of early theorizing of online practices—namely, that the online environment could "render irrelevant physical markers of race, gender, sexuality, ability and age" (p. 3). Of course, this same "dream of disembodiment" has somehow been retained, to some degree, in current studies of online practices, though I would argue it is not only a "dream of disembodiment" but rather a dream of true democratization. Scodari and Felder's (2000) work undermined this "dream of disembodiment" to some degree, but it also highlighted the possibility for wide and quick distribution of materials. In many ways, the recent focus in digital-new media studies on the potential of the quick and wide distribution made possible by the Internet is also a democratizing dream—it provides the promise of widely shared and discussed knowledge that does not depend upon highly powerful and dominant institutions (like the state, school, or family), but rather on the very public themselves.

Scodari and Felder (2000) complicated this view by pointing out that while wide distribution is possible, it does not necessarily reflect the reality, and, perhaps even more troubling, what will distribute widely in these online spaces are often materials that already neatly fit within dominant narratives. What these analyses of *Sycophant Hex* and *Chivalric* demonstrate are the complexities of online literacy and community practices. These cases undermine our democratizing dream, representing the Internet not as an autonomous, unilateral space that equalizes all who use it by erasing the baggage and limitations of political and cultural markers, replacing them with affinity. Instead these analyses show

that while the Internet does allow for wide circulation, and for communities formed through shared interests, that these communities are still implicated within the larger power structures of race, gender, sex, class, sexuality, etc.

Finally, the relatively small amount of work on fanfiction in rhetoric and composition has tended only to focus on its potential in the classroom. Recent scholarship within rhetoric and composition regarding digital-new media and fan activities, most notably by Black (2005), Black (2009) and Knobel and Lankshear (2008), argued that online fan communities create important spaces for learners to build confidence, rhetorical effectiveness, and multimodal, digital literacy skills necessary for the 21st Century. Knobel and Lankshear (2008) located fan activities within a larger, cultural phenomenon they refer to as "remixing": "Remix means to take cultural artifacts and combine and manipulate them into new kinds of creative blends" (p. 22). They argued that the increasing ubiquity of Web 2.0 and developments within digital technologies provide not only open access to a multitude of cultural materials, but to "smart tools," which allow users to develop digital literacies in ways relevant to their interests "just in time" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, p. 30).

However, while Knobel and Lankshear (2008) argued that out-of-school learning might foster more engaged, more successful in-school learning, they also cautioned teachers that many of these out-of-school sites cannot easily, if at all, be transferred into the classroom (p. 30). Nonetheless, they argued that scholars' examination of "remixing" may help us to develop more effective teaching practices in an increasingly digitized world (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, p. 32). Black (2005), Black (2009), whose work focused on English Language Learners, argued that online fanfiction websites often reflect in-school writing practices: peer review, collaboration, and genre-based exploration. Moreover, the key to online fanwriters' success, according to Black, is not only the deeply supportive communities within these websites, but that learning in these communities is entirely self-directed. Like Knobel and Lankshear (2008), Black (2005), Black (2009) urged scholars to examine fanfiction websites to enhance our understanding of digital literacies, and therefore inform better teaching practices—practices that create similarly supportive communities based largely in teacher-scaffolded but student-centered, self-directed learning.

However, these studies have tended not to conduct an in-depth investigation of the writing practices of these online communities. As my analyses above demonstrate, these communities raise some intriguing questions for us as writers and scholars. Despite their highly rule-bound features, online fanfiction communities appear to achieve many of the same goals that compositionists try to achieve in our own classrooms. And while I reject the reductive fan-to-academic analogue, and I do not intend to suggest possible pedagogical approaches, I cannot help but be seduced by the ways in which this particular fanwriting community appear to both reflect stereotypical assumptions of "good" writing as they exist in public discourse, but also the absolute ideal of the "student-centered," "cooperative," and "engaged" writing classroom. Therefore, I nonetheless believe that future research should continue to delve into the particularities of online fanwriting, particularly the element of emotion. The cases of *Sycophant Hex* and *Chivalric* demonstrate that online fanfiction communities are resistant yet shaped by larger power structures. They are creative. They are emotional. Their largely affective, "gift" economy is not only a central reason why fans continue to participate in online fanfiction, but it is also what makes these fans' work possible. While I would not argue that the writing that takes place on *Sycophant Hex* is representative of all online writing (or even all fanfiction writing), I do argue that this exploration of its complexities does demonstrate the importance and necessity of more studies on out-of-school writing, particularly that which occurs online.

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