



**Donata MENEGHELLI**

Around the Metadata Wall

Some Functions and Effects of Paratext in Fan Fiction

**Abstracts**

The essay tackles some of the specific functions and effects of paratext in fan fiction. Taking as a reference corpus the *Pride and Prejudice* fandom in the website FanFiction.net, the essay especially focuses on the peritext (everything that is located within the borders of the fan fiction website), considered in terms of a “metadata wall”, that is, a set of thresholds, made up of paratextual signals working as classifying, identifying and especially searching categories in the net of derivative texts that constitute the fan fiction archive. The analysis goes into the detail of such paratextual signals in order to emphasize the huge amount of information the reader acquires prior to any reading of the story itself, and the resulting singular dialectics between suspense and predictability which is typical of fan fiction. Bringing the argument one step further, the essay then proposes a hierarchization of the paratextual signals, discussing the importance (and the complexity) of genre issues, rating, and pairing within the fan environment, drawing on works by Anne Kustritz, Catherine Driscoll, and Elizabeth Woledge. Finally, the analysis shifts to two other major paratextual elements, Author/ Notes and readers’ comments, connecting them to, on the one hand, the serialized character of fan fiction, the problem of gaining reader attention and keeping it over time, and, on the other, again to the dialectics between uncertainty and foreknowledge. On the whole, everything points to the capital though multifaceted role played by paratext in the writing/reading experience of fan fiction.

Il saggio si concentra sulle funzioni e sugli effetti del paratesto nella fan fiction. Prendendo come corpus di riferimento il fandom di *Pride and Prejudice* nel sito Fan Fiction.net, il saggio si focalizza in particolare sul peritesto (ossia tutto ciò che si trova entro i confini del sito stesso), considerato in termini di un “metadata wall”, in altre parole, di un insieme di soglie, costituito di segnali paratestuali i quali operano come categorie di classificazione, identificazione e ricerca per muoversi nel fitto intrico di testi derivati che forma l’archivio della fan fiction. L’analisi censisce in dettaglio tali segnali paratestuali allo scopo di sottolineare la grande quantità di informazioni di cui il lettore dispone prima della effettiva lettura di una qualunque storia, e la singolare dialettica tra suspense e prevedibilità che ne consegue. Approfondendo l’indagine, il saggio propone una gerarchizzazione dei segnali paratestuali, i quali non hanno tutti lo stesso impatto, discutendo la funzione strategica (e la complessità) delle questioni inerenti al genere, al rating e al tipo di coppia nell’ambito della fan fiction, attingendo in particolare ai lavori di Anne Kustritz, Catherine Driscoll e Elizabeth Woledge. Infine, l’attenzione si sposta su due ulteriori elementi paratestuali, di grande importanza in questo contesto, le Note dell’Autore e i commenti dei lettori. Questi elementi hanno molto a che fare sia con il carattere seriale (nel senso di pubblicazione del testo a puntate, a blocchi) della fan fiction, quindi con la necessità di catturare l’interesse dei lettori e conservarlo nel tempo, sia, ancora una volta, con la dialettica tra incertezza e anticipazione. Nel complesso, tutto indica il ruolo capitale svolto dal paratesto nella ricezione e circolazione, come nella produzione, della fan fiction.

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## AROUND THE METADATA WALL Some Functions and Effects of Paratext in Fan Fiction

Over the last two decades, works on paratext in film and television shows, in the so called “new media” or new delivery systems, and in the digital and transmedia environments have multiplied, with a sharp focus on fictional transmedia universes.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of this impressive scholarly endeavour – which partly corresponds to dramatic changes in the media landscape – have been manifold. Firstly, an unprecedented extension of what constitutes the paratext in terms of Genette’s original concept; an extension which is not simply a result of the shift from Genette’s focus on literature, writing and verbal-based phenomena to a multimedia perspective, but amounts to a reconceptualization of paratext itself. To give a single example of this, under the label paratext Jonathan Grey lists “fan and viewer creations”, “opening credit sequences, trailers, toys, spinoff videogames, prequels and sequels, podcast, bonus material, interviews, reviews, alternate reality games, spoilers, audience discussion, vids, posters or billboards, and promotional campaigns”.<sup>2</sup> This in turn leads to challenging the boundaries between text and paratext, as well as the very notion of text itself, as a film, a videogame or a book becomes “but one part of the text, the text always being a contingent entity, either in the process of forming and transforming or vulnerable to further formation and transformation”.<sup>3</sup> It also leads to questioning some of the assumptions which underlie Genette’s perspective: to name but two, the authorial intention as the main criterion for identifying paratext and distinguishing it from other discourses,<sup>4</sup> and the very notion of function, which is crucial to Genette’s analysis but, at the same time, formulated in perhaps overly narrow terms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Veronica INNOCENTI and Valentina RE (eds.), *Limina: le soglie del film/film’s thresholds*, Forum, Udine, 2004; Lisa KERNAN, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2004; Georg STANITZECK, “Text and Paratext in Media”, trans. Ellen Klein, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 2005, 32, 27-42; Valentina RE, *Ai margini del film: incipit e titoli di testa*, Pasian di Prato, Campanotto, 2006; Jonathan GRAY, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York University Press, New York, 2010; Valentina RE, *Cominciare dalla fine: studi su Genette e il cinema*, Mimesis, Milano/Udine, 2012; Dorothee BIRKE and Birte CHRIST, “Paratext in Digitized Narrative: Mapping the Field”, in: *Narrative*, 2013, 21.1, 65-87; Ellen MCCracken, “Expanding Genette’s Epitext/Peritext Model for Transitional Electronic Literature: Centrifugal and Centripetal Vectors on Kindles and iPads”, in: *Narrative*, 2013, 21.1, 105-124; Raúl RODRIGUEZ-FERRANDIZ, “Paratextual Activity: Updating the Genettian approach within the transmedia turn”, in: *Communication & Society*, 2017, 30.1, 165-182.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan GRAY, *Show Sold Separately*, 6, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> According to Genette, the paratext “is a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)”. Gérard GENETTE, *Paratext. Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, 2.

<sup>5</sup> In the “Introduction”, Genette states: “These comments on illocutionary force, then, have brought us imperceptibly to the main point, which is the *functional* aspect of the paratext. It is the main point because, clearly and except for isolated exceptions [...], the paratext in all its forms is a discourse that is fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its *raison d’être*. [...] the paratextual element is always subordinate to ‘its’ text, and this functionality determines the essence of its appeal and its existence”. Gérard GENETTE, *Paratext*, 12.

In this renewed field, which is still in the process of being explored and mapped, one might rightfully ask: Where does fan fiction stand exactly? This is a question worth posing even before *starting* to talk about the paratext of fan fiction, because fan fiction is a hybrid phenomenon in many respects. It is undoubtedly writing, as it is *written* in the first place and (generally considered) literature, and to draw on another well-known category of Genette, more specifically “second degree literature” which is literature derived from already existing materials (texts, characters, stories, fictional worlds). This material, however, is not necessarily literary but more often audiovisual or of an heterogeneous nature.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, fan fiction can be classified (as Gray does) as one of the paratexts of its ever transforming source text(s). Hence it is important to distinguish, at least in principle, between fan fiction *as* paratext (of something else) and fan fiction’s own paratext. Moreover, although it has not always been so, at least since the late 1990s fan fiction is a web-based practice, published, circulated, stored, received, discussed and commented on through the web. However, fan fiction is not by default digital-born narrative, as this is defined by scholars such as Ryan, Hayles and others, meaning “electronic literature”, “hypertextual”, or “new media narrative”.<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, fan fiction is more basically, and simply, written using an electronic device (as most texts produced in this era are) and then uploaded on a fan fiction website. Drawing on Dorothee Birke and Birte Christ’s analysis, as well as on Ellen McCracken’s, fan fiction seems much closer to what they describe as “digitized narrative”:

a text written for print [which] is encountered in digital form, as displayed on a Kindle or iPad. The paratext [...] negotiates between old reading habits and new medial developments and may serve to focus a reader’s attention “centripetally” on the text or to “centrifugally” draw it away.<sup>8</sup>

This, of course, doesn’t mean that the technological dimension is secondary or unimportant. Rather, as Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson highlight, “The history of fan fiction makes clear that technology is complicit in the generation of fan texts. Perhaps the most important technological advance, the one with the farthest-reaching implications, is the advent of the Internet”.<sup>9</sup>

To summarize this brief (and perforce incomplete) introduction for a discussion of some of the paratextual elements in fan fiction nowadays, at least two features are crucial and should be taken into account: i) fan fiction is transformative literature; ii) it is not only uploaded on a website but accessed through the web. To such defining features, a third should be added: fan fiction is produced and

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<sup>6</sup> On “second degree literature” see of course Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsests. Literature in the second degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1997. Originally published in 1987, it is a groundbreaking study of the transformative drive in literary practice.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Marie-Laure RYAN, “Narrative and Digitality: Learning to Think with the Medium”, in: James PHELAN and Peter J. RABINOVITZ (eds.), *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, 515-528, and Katherine N. HAYLES, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothee BIRKE and Birte CHRIST, “Paratext and Digitized Narrative”, 66. For Ellen McCracken’s article, see note 1.

<sup>9</sup> Kristina BUSSE and Karen HELLEKSON, “Introduction: Work in Progress”, in Kristina BUSSE and Karen HELLEKSON (eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of Internet. New Essays*, McFarland and Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, 2006, updated and enlarged Kindle edition, 2016, loc. 172.

circulated within a virtual community, which is in most cases a specialized community, made up of people who know and love the sources and share affective fluxes revolving around them: in short, a fandom.

Fan fiction has become a widespread form of contemporary creativity, producing millions of texts spreading from the most diverse sources, that is, related to different fandoms, a form of creativity which is studied, celebrated and valued (one might even say, overvalued) by an increasing number of scholars. Hence, some specification is in order. Firstly, since fandoms differ, at least up to a certain point, it is always important to stress one's corpus so as not to illegitimately generalize. My case study is that of the *Pride and Prejudice* fandom. In some respects, it is a peculiar fandom: it revolves around or stems from a canonical work of literature (Jane Austen's novel), which is not often the case, and it is only moderately transmedial, at least when compared with other fandoms such as Harry Potter, Star Trek or the Marvel universe. Secondly, to further fine tune the chosen corpus, I have taken as reference point the website FanFiction.net. The last is a point not to be overlooked, because the choice of publication venue, that is, the website itself, has far-reaching paratextual effects. To put it roughly (and briefly), FanFiction.net is a generalist website (different, for instance, from The Republic of Pemberley, exclusively dedicated to Austen), and holds less cultural capital than, let's say, Archive of Our Own, which was created by the OTW (Organization for Transformative Work), has no advertising and is a non profit endeavour. Thirdly, I will mainly focus on what Genette calls the "peritext", which is not always easy to neatly circumscribe in fan fiction and, more generally, on the Internet, where almost any material can be easily accessed via one click, therefore becoming peritext *de facto*.<sup>10</sup> Let's say – tentatively – that I will consider as peritext everything that is *located within the borders of the (fan fiction) website*.

### In front of the metadata wall: watch out!

This being a discussion of paratext, perhaps a few words on the title of my essay are not out of place. In August 2018, one of the most prolific writers of the *Pride and Prejudice* fandom posted a short text (both a "one-shot", consisting of a single entry, and a "meta", that is, a reflection on fan fiction itself, in fan vernacular), titled *Behind the Metadata Wall*.<sup>11</sup> In this short piece, all the main characters of *Pride and Prejudice* are assembled in "the Jane Austen originals rooms". A yellow light flashes over the story door, and Fitzwilliam Darcy exclaims: "Not another one!". The characters head over to the storyboard "to see how bad the upcoming experience would be", and discover that it is a crossover starting at the assembly in Meryton. "Well, Bingley, it looks like I get to steal Jane from you", a character says.

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<sup>10</sup> According to Genette, the peritext is defined spatially in the first place, as the set of signals which materially surround or intersect the text as book. Gérard GENETTE, *Paratext*, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> LadyJaeza, *Behind the Metadata Wall*, August 10, 2018 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13030227/1/Behind-the-Metadata-Wall>>. Last accessed: September 22, 2018.

Bingley shook his head. “I wonder what they have planned for me this time?”

“It looks like we are about to find out,” Darcy said. “The story metadata has all been saved and she [the author] just put in a title for chapter one. It looks like she is about to hit the publish button and put the chapter out there”. [...]

Fitzwilliam Darcy shook his head sadly. There was nothing to do but go out and play the part written for them. Another *Pride and Prejudice* variation was now available on FanFiction.

The idea is simple, naive, if you like, and at the same time ingenuous. Given the increasing number of *Pride and Prejudice* variations posted every day (no sequel, no prequel but reimaginings, paraquels, “what ifs”, generally based on a series of plot-twists, changes in point of view and/or narrative focus), it is funny to think of the (original) characters as actors waiting to be set on stage for still another new performance.<sup>12</sup> However, what interests me most in this short piece, is the notion of a metadata wall somehow conflating different thresholds: between the fictional and the counterfactual<sup>13</sup>, between the original and the derivative/appropriative works, between writing and reading. Better still, the interest lies in the conception of the thresholds in terms of a metadata wall. It speaks of, for one thing, the pivotal role played by such a wall in fan fiction circulation, production and reception. And this wall is nothing but a set of paratextual signals.<sup>14</sup>

Let’s focus on reception. In their discussion of paratext in digitized narrative, Birke and Christ advocate for a more fine-tuned and differentiated understanding of functionality, which Genette describes as “the most essential of the paratext’s properties”.<sup>15</sup> As is well known, according to Genette this function is essentially interpretive: the paratext guides reading and is a set of signals constructed to guarantee an interpretation of the text coherent with the author’s intention.<sup>16</sup> Birke and Christ first question the authorization as the dividing criterion between paratext and metatext, that is, commentary, or context, and then propose two more functions in addition to the interpretive one. The *commercial function*, aimed at promoting sales of the text, and the *navigational function*:

Paratextual elements also have a *navigational function* in that they guide the reader’s reception in a more mechanical sense, both when approaching the text and when orienting herself within the text. [...] The underlying reason why Genette bypasses the navigational function is probably that he does not perceive the book as a technology.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I have tackled more extensively the *Pride and Prejudice* variations and the “what if” in Donata MENEGHELLI, *Senza fine. Sequel, prequel, altre continuazioni: il testo espanso*, Morellini, Milano, 2018, especially pp. 134-187.

<sup>13</sup> On “counterfactual”, see Richard SAINT-GELAIS, “How to Do Things with Worlds: from Counterfactuality to Counterfictionality”, and Robin WHAROL, “What Might Have Been Is Not What Is: Dicken’s Narrative Refusal”, both in Dorothee BIRKE, Michael BUTTER and Tilmann KÖPPE (eds.), *Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Boston, 2011, 240-252 and 220-231.

<sup>14</sup> The metaphorization of this set of thresholds as a *wall* may account for what Maria Lindgren Leavenworth writes about the paratext in web-based fan fiction: “[...] the mediation of the text through a computer or electronic reading device entails thresholds which are, in fact, considerably more concrete”. Maria LINDGREN LEAVENWORTH, “The Paratext of Fan Fiction”, in: *Narrative*, 2015, 23.1, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Gérard GENETTE, *Paratext*, 407.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, especially. 2 (see note 4 in this same essay).

<sup>17</sup> Dorothee BIRKE and Birte CHRIST, “Paratext and Digitized Narrative”, 68.

This is a key function in web-based fan fiction, because any fan fiction website is an archive – a net of texts “that span across single or multiple communicative acts”, “a *field of gravity*”,<sup>18</sup> a rizomatic space – and the reader finds herself facing this archive in the first place. Birke and Christ highlight the navigational function in the context of the DVD and the e-book. In other words, they mainly focus on the single text, even if they make reference to the list of titles stored on Kindle, as well as to the various sections accessible in the Kindle store, which are of course part of the e-reading experience and cannot be equated to browsing in an actual book-store or library.

However, despite all appearances, the situation in the fan fiction archive is very different, because, after browsing the general menu in order to reach a specific fandom (in our case, via the option “books”, and then the option “Pride and Prejudice”), the reader finds herself faced with a list – sometimes a very long one – of texts that are at the same time very similar to and different from one another. Every fandom is not only a specialized community/group of texts, but (for this very reason), an archive based on a tight interplay between difference and repetition. Everybody knows that the story will be a reworking of *Pride and Prejudice*, that’s the pre-condition. The point is, what *kind* of reworking? How different from the others? That’s why the metadata wall, made up of paratextual signals working as classifying, identifying and especially *searching categories*, is so important. Before moving on, it is perhaps time to describe, though rapidly, the wall, focusing on its most significant bricks, at least in the context of this essay, and once again taking FanFiction.net as a point of reference.

There are, to begin with, the basic paratextual pieces of information that usually no published text can dispense with:

- title of the story (link to the story’s first chapter);
- author’s pseudonym (link to the author’s profile page, where an author’s biographical outline can be displayed, and where all her stories published on FanFiction.net are listed);
- small icon, often using shots from some audiovisual adaptation of the novel, which can refer to the author – being then the same for every story by the author – or to the particular story in question, in the latter case working as a miniaturized cover (the link is to the story, not to the author’s profile).

However, added to this basic set of elements, there are others that are, as we will see, more relevant in many respects. Indeed, as meagre and basic as the web page design is on FanFiction.net, it is dense with tightly packaged information. If we proceed with our survey, we find:

- number of reviews (link to reader’s comments pages);
- number of followers (those who have asked to be notified when the story is updated);

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<sup>18</sup> Cornel SANDVOSS, “The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture”, in: Jonathan GRAY, Cornel SANDVOSS and C. Lee HARRINGTON (eds.), *Fandom. Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, New York University Press, New York and London, 2007, 22, 23.

- number of readers who have added the story to their favourite's list.

The latter elements – related as they are to the reception of the text – have great relevance, because they speak of the popularity (or the contended/controversial status, sometimes the two amount to the same thing) of both the text and/or the author within the community, while at the same time operating a kind of “pre-reading” of the text, which plays a major role – as we will see – in the emotional and rhetorical context of fan fiction. Besides, still more important are:

- rating (in terms of explicit sexual content, violence, language: from K, “content suitable for most ages”, to M, “mature audience”);
- language;
- genre (romance, drama, fantasy, supernatural..., or specific fan fiction genres such as “angst” and “hurt/comfort”);
- status (complete, in progress);
- editorial pieces of information: number of chapters, number of words, dates of both original publication and last update;
- fictional characters involved in the story;
- brief summary or description of the story (two to four lines long).

Finally, the brief summary/description, in turn, may optionally include:

- an explicit warning (for instance: “major character death”, “this is a dark version...”, “Jane [Bennet] is not angelic in this story”);
- a mention of the specific fictional world and/or period: Regency, modern, AU (alternate universe, that generally means a major twist in the plot or the insertion of magic, the supernatural, and so forth);
- mention of the kind of rewriting: variation, sequel, prequel, what if...;
- further specifications about the characters (for instance, whether they are OOC, Out Of Character, that is, very different from how they are depicted in the source text);
- a mention of the specific source(s): for instance, instead of or together with Austen's novel, the 1995 BBC adaptation, or the 2005 Joe Wright film, or the 2012 youtube series *The Lizzy Bennet Diaries*, set in contemporary USA;
- a mention of the ending, and especially of a happy ending (or the lack thereof, which is very rare);
- information on the pairing (which character will end up with which);
- information on the nature of the relationship(s), whether heterosexual or homosexual (the famous slash fan fiction, that for many is equivalent to fan fiction tout court).

A large part of the paratextual signals that I have listed mirror the entries that can be selected in the Filters search engine: genres, rating, status, etc. On the other hand, the Filters search engine – the *real*, the *material* metadata wall, which blocks and at the same time allows and directs fluxes, which sieves and groups together – systematizes and schematizes some of the contents of the brief summary /description. In the menu “Worlds” readers are given both the period and the different



sources. In addition, there are four lists of characters and the function “Pairing”, which allows readers to select the coveted relationship(s).

My survey is a boring exercise, no doubt. However, I have intentionally gone into such detail to illustrate how much information the reader can acquire *prior to any reading of the story itself*. This appears perfectly coherent with the capital role of paratext in the contemporary culture industry and intermedia landscape that Gray has claimed, stressing how “by the time we actually encounter ‘the show itself’, we have already begun to decode it and to preview its meanings and effects”.<sup>19</sup> The filters are not only a search engine but a frame through which we interpret the text in advance and get ready for the actual meeting with it. However, there seems to be something more here. All these paratextual signals, that roughly correspond to what Genette terms the “editorial peritext” in the printed book, give a lot away as far as the story’s content is concerned: which characters, which kind of relationship, which plot twist, which main events, which level of violence is depicted, which spatio-temporal frame, and so on and so forth, often up to disclosing the very ending. In other words, readers are *(over)warned*. This results in a very singular dialectics between both suspense and predictability, expectations and surprise, which is typical of fan fiction.

From Barthes and Hitchcock, to psychologists Leavitt and Christenfeld, we have been repeatedly told that foreknowledge of a story’s outcome enhances our pleasure and enjoyment rather than spoiling it; that prolepses and anticipations are indeed fundamental components of suspense.<sup>20</sup> But in fan fiction, as we have just seen, foreknowledge is *paratextually* (or better still, *peritextually*) *conveyed*, not intertwined with the text as is usually the case in narrative fiction. Moreover, it is *certain* foreknowledge, institutionalized, one might say, whereas in narrative fiction prolepses are usually formulated in more uncertain and evocatory terms, so as to keep the reader tipped off, not plainly informed. Not to mention that peritextually-conveyed foreknowledge encompasses much more than simply the outcome(s). Readers, it seems, want to know in advance, as precisely as possible, what they are going to read, or at least the paratext of fan fiction suggests that they do. However, one should not assimilate the intended readers and the real readers: the paratext shapes the experience of the latter in such a way that they cannot escape all the infor-

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan GRAY, *Show Sold Separately*, 2. But see also ch. 2 and ch. 5, especially 147-153, where Gray tackles the question of spoilers. In the 1970s, Hans Robert Jauss had already stressed the importance of the cultural codes and previous information and knowledge that define what he termed the “horizon of expectation” through which readers receive, decode (and even pre-decode) any literary text. However, it should be emphasized that Jauss’s reception theory, and his key notion of “horizon of expectation”, are especially focused on the historical dimension of the literary/aesthetic experience: “The analysis of the literary experience of the reader avoids the threatening pitfalls of psychology if it describes the response and the impact of a work within the definable frame of reference of the reader’s expectations: this frame of reference for each work develops in the historical moment of its appearance from a previous understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the contrast between poetic and practical language”. Hans Robert JAUSS, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory”, trans. Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History*, 1970, 2.1, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Roland BARTHES, “Masculin, féminin, neutre”, in: Roland BARTHES., *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Eric Marty, Seuil, Paris, 2002, vol. V, 1027-1043; François TRUFFAUT, *Hitchcock*, new revised edition, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1983, especially 210-215; Jonathan D. LEAVITT and Nicholas J.S. CHRISTENFELD, “Story Spoilers Don’t Spoil Stories”, in: *Psychological Science*, 2011, 2, 1152-1154. On the importance of prolepsis, see also Mark CURRIE, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007.

mation they are provided with. Whether they wish it or not, they have no choice but to be told in advance<sup>21</sup>.

Perhaps this has to do with what Sandvoss identifies as a characteristic feature of fan fiction. That if a long critical tradition has seen aesthetic value as mainly lying in defamiliarization, transgression and estrangement, we must acknowledge that “the reading of fan texts strives for the opposite: familiarity and the fulfilment of expectations”.<sup>22</sup> In any case, the dialectics that we have observed opens up interesting questions as to what fan fiction readers read for, and why, and how, which I cannot tackle here for lack of space. Suffice it to say that in the fan fiction environment, a fourth function of the paratext (and particularly the peritext) should be added to the three identified by Birke and Christ, which is perhaps the paramount one in this context: the *cautional* or *forewarning function*. However, perhaps we can get some more insight as to what fan fiction readers read for if we take the analysis one step further.

### A peep into the metadata wall: on genres, rating, pairing, and hierarchy

The synoptic, list-like character of both the web page layout and the different menus in the Filters search engine, fosters a synchronic take and seems to equate all the parameters to one another. In fact, this is not the case. There is a hierarchy – not explicit but very clear, known by anybody who is familiar with fan fiction, and widely shared by and through the (different) communities – underlying the multifarious peritextual elements. According to this hierarchy, types of relationship (homoerotic, that is slash, or heterosexual), rating, genres, and pairings are the issues that really matter to fans. They stand on an altogether different level as compared with length, language, status, fictional world(s), or even sources. These issues, in turn, can – and must – be hierarchically analysed.

Among both scholars and fans there is no agreement on such a hierarchy, or on the differences and intertwinings between each one of these elements/labels and the others. Busse and Hellekson, for instance, write in an influential essay:

Within the field of fan fiction, the three main genres are *gen*, *het*, and *slash*. *Gen* denotes a general story that posits no imposed romantic relationships among the characters. *Het* stories revolve around a heterosexual relationship, either one invented by the author or one presented in the primary source text. *Slash* stories posit a same-sex relationship, usually one imposed by the author and based on perceived homoerotic subtext. Archives of fan fiction, or online libraries that categorize and house fan fiction, use these three genres as organizing principles, with slash often housed in separate archives.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to the reviewer of this essay for drawing my attention to this significant point.

<sup>22</sup> Cornel SANDVOSS, “The Death of the Reader?”, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Kristina BUSSE and Karen HELLEKSON, “Introduction: Work in Progress”, loc. 123.

According to Busse and Hellekson, the main genres of fan fiction are gen, het and slash.<sup>24</sup> Other labels, such as romance, comedy, drama etc., fall under the category of “subgenre(s)”. However, the passage just quoted implicitly suggests that one of the pivotal issues in fan fiction is pairing, since at least two of the three genres mentioned by the authors are defined on the basis of this criterion (and the third one, on the basis of the lack thereof). In other words, it is no exaggeration to say that fan fiction – no matter which fandom, which community or subcommunity – is principally concerned with pairing, that is, with the development of personal, emotional relationships between the characters: love and/or erotic desire more often than not, but also friendship or family bonds. And even when personal relationships are not the main focus, such a dimension plays an important role anyway.

If this is true, a different conceptualization of the genre question is possible. The stress on emotional and erotic relationships is the reason why a large part of fan fiction could in fact be traced back to two main “meta-genres” or architextual narrative/literary models, in Genette’s vocabulary: pornography and romance.<sup>25</sup> As Catherine Driscoll rightly argues, “paring and rating function as more important generic markers than terms like *comedy* or *angst*, and are more usual search categories for fan fiction archives”.<sup>26</sup> She goes even further and – also by tracing the historical intersections between romance and pornography since the eighteenth century – highlights the manifold connections between romance and pornography in fan fiction, claiming the interpenetration of the two rather than a radical polarization:

Porn and romance are often dramatically opposed in the internal discourse of fanfic communities, as if they were at opposite ends of a spectrum of choices. General-access archives like FanFiction.net exclude explicit sexual representations and are overwhelmingly dominated by romance, whereas communities centered on the production of self-designated porn rarely include extended romance narratives or the inflated romantic happiness sometimes called fluff. Given the dominance of pairings in fan fiction, this means the opposition between romance and sex can look like a sliding scale of visibility between G-rated stories, in which romance itself is only implied, and NC-17 stories, in which sex is explicitly represented. This emphasis on the visibility of sexual content through the use of the ratings system reveals the extent to which this assessment is drawn from the generic conventions of pornography. However, very explicit stories may also be very romantic, and the most popular romance stories may focus explicitly on sex. The genres are not poles at either end of a scale but axes between which every story can be plotted as more or less romance and more or less porn. [...] I

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<sup>24</sup> The authors more or less follow the Archive of Our Own website, where the entries listed in the menu “Categories” are: M/M (male/male), F/M (female/male), F/F (female/female), Gen, Multi, and Other.

<sup>25</sup> “By architextuality I mean the entire set of general or transcendent categories – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text”. Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsests*, 1. See also Gérard GENETTE, *The Architext. An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles & Oxford, 1992. If the architext is not (only) the genre, Genette often tends to conflate the two or to equate architext to genre.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine DRISCOLL, “On true Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and The Pornography of Romance”, in: Kristina BUSSE and Karen HELLEKSON (eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities*, loc. 1183.

would argue that while much fan fiction is explicitly romance and/or porn, all fan fiction is implicitly both.<sup>27</sup>

So, slash is conceptualized as a form of romance, in the end.<sup>28</sup> Along these lines, we could conceive of fan fiction as a process or roman(ti)cization and eroticization of the whole field of popular culture, and even beyond, if we think of the Jane Austen fandom(s). Elizabeth Woledge, for her part, has proposed the term “intimatopia” to designate a new genre of literature in both slash and mainstream fan fiction communities, where the stress is neither put simply on sex or the erotic, nor on romantic relationships alone, but on intimacy, that is, the representation of interpersonal intimacy at various levels, always implying an osmosis between the physical and the emotional-affective spheres.<sup>29</sup>

The multifaceted relationships between romance, pornography, and slash – all the more so considering that fan fiction is *mostly written by women* – cannot be resolved in the space of this essay, and this is not my intent anyway. More modestly, I want to emphasize the complexities and contentions underlying the genre issue in fan fiction, (re)affirming its relevance. As Genette himself states, “generic perception is known to guide and determine to a considerable degree the readers’ expectations, and thus their reception of the work”. And generic issues involve paratext, since the generic status of a text is primarily claimed via paratextual signals.<sup>30</sup>

According to Genette, in the field of literature the relation of a text to its architext is “the most abstract and most implicit of all”, “completely silent” and often “inarticulated”, “because of a refusal to underscore the obvious or, conversely, an intent to reject or elude any kind of classification”: “the text itself is not supposed to know, and consequently not meant to declare, its generic quality”, which is rather “the business [...] of the reader, or the critic, or the public”.<sup>31</sup> This is not the case in the fan fiction environment, where readers, writers and even the text itself are supposed to know the generic quality of the text very well (although, as we have seen, such quality *does* remain highly disputable and problematic). On the one hand, mention of the generic quality, of the rating and pairings, is expected, being mandatory, as the text needs to be indexed and searchable in the archive. On the other hand, it is openly declared, even shouted out, as part of the forewarning function discussed above, and it is frequently hotly debated in reviews, author’s notes and forums. And as we have just touched upon author’s notes, reviews, comments and the conversations within the community, it is time to move to the next paratextual zone.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 1287 and loc. 1294.

<sup>28</sup> On slash and romance in fan fiction, see the influential essay by Anne KUSTRITZ, “Slashing the Romance Narrative”, in: *The Journal of American Culture*, 2003, 26.3, 371-384.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth WOLEDGE, “Intimatopia: Genre Intersections Between Slash and the Mainstream”, in Kristina BUSSE and Karen HELLEKSON (eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities*.

<sup>30</sup> Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsests*, 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

## Beyond the metadata wall: wait!

Whatever one may think about fan fiction, one thing is certain. Fandom is a highly interactive environment, much more so than a kindle e-reader, let alone a traditional book, or even than a blog. It is an environment where not only do readers and writers continually trade places with one another (this time reader may be – or already is – next time writer), but where each story is surrounded by multiple extra-narrative, extra-fictional voices, and an ongoing dialogue. The interactive, dialogic dimension takes many forms: from the betareaders who proofread, revise and check someone's else work, to private emailing between one particular reader and one writer. However, two of these forms have a relevant paratextual bearing: author's notes (A/Ns) and readers' reviews. Let's begin with the author's notes: short messages, announcements, statements addressed directly by the author to the readers, *interspersed within the very body of the text*. Not much has been specifically written on this feature. Alexandra Herzog interprets author's notes in the light of issues of authority and power, authorial control over the text and negotiations with both the media industry and the community:

[...] A/Ns are ultimately about authority and control—both in asserting a position of fannish power in regard to the creators of the source text and in demonstrating the influence of the writer on the reading processes of their audience. Owing a debt to Gérard Genette's extensive study of paratexts (1997), I am thus concerned with the essential importance of A/Ns in fannish negotiations of ownership and agency within the community and—symbolically—with the media industry, discussing distinct subtypes of paratextual comments that express the different approaches fans employ in constructing their role as fan author to ensure that their voices are heard.<sup>32</sup>

Issues of authorship (especially of collective authorship in fandom) are also at the heart of Maria Lindgreen Leavenworth's analysis, according to which “[A/Ns] subtly but actively undermine the notion of the single author working in solitude and with complete authority over the text”.<sup>33</sup> If this is certainly true, and if such issues are surely crucial in fandom and fan fiction paratext, it should not be overlooked that in A/Ns one finds everything, that is, *anything*: from trivial information about the author's daily life to meta comment on fandom and the functioning of fan fiction; from intertextual hints to references to further historical/contextual sources about the fictional world; from disclaimers (“I don't own the characters”...) to apologies for delay in updating; from autobiographical insights which connect the story's content with traumatic events in the author's personal life to pleas for fighting world hunger or requests to donate to Doctors Without Borders and make the world a better place. Not to mention that disparate topics can be, and often are, intermingled in one single A/N. Therefore, on the one hand, A/Ns perform multiple functions and/or have multiple effects. On the other, any interpretation of such statements is always based on a prior act of selection, on an implicit or explicit hierarchy imposed on the material. In other words, it is, and can only be, programmatically biased.

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<sup>32</sup> Alexandra HERZOG, “But this is my story and this is how I wanted to write it: Author's Notes as a Fannish Claim to Power in Fan Fiction Writing”, in: *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2012, n. 11, sec. 1.5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0406>. Last accessed: October 20, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Maria LINDGREEN LEAVENWORTH, “The Paratext of Fan Fiction”, 50.

Be it as it may, I want to interpret A/Ns in a different framework here. Fan fiction is, more often than not, *serialized* fiction. It mostly comes in instalments, whether or not the writing and the publishing run in parallel, which is often the case, and even a complete text, if/when republished, will generally come in instalments anyway. Hence – although a fanfic, complete, in progress or interrupted, can certainly be read all at once, and such mode of reception exists within the community, otherwise the archive wouldn't make any sense – many readers follow the writing of the story in real time, as the function “Followers” testifies, impatiently waiting for the upcoming chapter or group of chapters.<sup>34</sup> Not by chance, A/Ns are usually placed at the beginning and/or at the end of chapters, the division in chapters being a main organizational textual strategy, and the beginning and ending of each chapter being potential strategic internal thresholds. Put differently, A/Ns cadence the serialized and somehow fragmented development of the story.

Many A/Ns have much to do with the mode of publication. Fan fiction is both a very collaborative environment and a competitive one, where hundreds and hundreds of *similar* stories are available within each fandom, and where each story fights to gain reader attention, and most of all *to keep it over time*, possibly till the end. As Laina Lee writes at the beginning of chapter 22 of *A Wonderful Carol: Wickham Wins*:

I try not to take the lack of a lot of reviews for this story personally and console myself with the fact that people are reading and I am not getting many negative reviews. I am convinced that any story that doesn't make ODC [Our Dear Couple, Elizabeth and Darcy]'s romance the central focus of the story at least at first, *has an upward battle in gaining readers and reviewers* [...].<sup>35</sup>

The A/Ns play a decisive role in this dynamic. Through the A/Ns, the author tries to capture the reader using different means such as explicit appeals (e.g.: “stay with me”, “keep reading”, etc.), flattery and blandishing (e.g.: “your comments and appreciation keep me writing”, “you guys are wonderful”...), excuses (“this has already been done, but what hasn't?”), which are basic and widespread rhetorical moves. But the main strategy, following the tradition of serial fiction, is the involvement of the readers in the development of the story itself: a strategy which is not only rhetorical but narrative in the strictest sense of the word. As Frank Kelleter has noted,

[...] the reception of serial forms, in its initial manifestation, does not distinctly “follow” the production and publication of a finished text. Rather, serial reception first happens in interaction with the ongoing story itself. A series is being watched or read while it is developing, that is, while certain narrative options are still open or have not yet materialized as options.

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<sup>34</sup> This may be less evident on Archive of Our Own, where a text, in progress or completed, can also be received as a single long document (“full text”), and even downloaded as an HTML document or a pdf. On the other hand, the serialized character of fan fiction comes to the forefront on FanFiction.net, where reading by instalments, chapter by chapter, switching to a new page at the beginning of each new chapter, is the only option available.

<sup>35</sup> Laina Lee, *A Wonderful Carol: Wickham Wins*, November 1, 2018 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13109249/22/A-Wonderful-Carol-Wickham-Wins>>. Last accessed: November 27, 2018. My emphasis.

As production and reception are entangled and not temporally distinct areas of practice, “both activities are intertwined in a feed-back loop”.

Repeated temporal overlap between ongoing publication and ongoing reception allows serial audiences to become involved in a narrative’s progress. In more general terms, seriality can extend – and normally *does* extend – the sphere of storytelling onto the sphere of story consumption. Hence popular series have a special ability to generate affective bonds and to stimulate creative activities on the part of their recipients, who, for all practical purposes, operate as *agents of narrative continuation*.<sup>36</sup>

The function of many A/Ns is exactly to increase such affective bonds and to keep readers alert, activating participation again and again. For this reason, readers are regularly called on for their suggestions and opinions about story outcomes, plot twists, character outlines and the like. “I’m excited for the next chapter, so stick with me! How crazy do you like your Caroline?”, writes Sweetarts9824 at the end of chapter 4 of *Resentful Temper*.<sup>37</sup> In chapter 24 of a *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Haunting* crossover, rampantwolfhound writes that the chapter “is dedicated to all of my [Archive of Our Own] commenters who clamoured for a Darcy haunting. Thank you for making such a suggestion as my initial outline had not planned for him to truly experience Netherfield until the final showdown [...]”.<sup>38</sup> And at the end of chapter 7 of *Dancing on Hedgerows*, mrnon titillates her readers as follows: “Well those who guessed that Collins will be the sick guest at Netherfield are correct. But who will come to care for him and what may happen there may surprise you. I love hearing your thoughts! Keep them coming, and thanks for reading.”<sup>39</sup> If on the one hand similar peritextual statements bear witness to fan fiction’s collective authorship and/or shared communality, on the other they exhibit the extension of “the sphere of storytelling onto the sphere of story consumption” and the desire to hook the readers that is typical of serial narrative. Indeed, as fan fiction is supposed to be participatory by default, one might wonder at the frequency of such reminders, which may seem somehow redundant or reaffirming the obvious.

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<sup>36</sup> Frank KELLETER, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in: Frank KELLETER (ed.), *Media of Serial Narrative*, The Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 2017, Kindle edition, loc. 377 and loc. 391.

<sup>37</sup> Sweetarts9824, *Resentful temper*, August 24, 2018 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13045170/4/Resentful-Temper>>. Last accessed: October 27, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> rampantwolfhound, *The Haunting of Netherfield*, October 17, 2018 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13095397/24/The-Haunting-of-Netherfield>>. She is even more explicit in chapter 29: “This is Part I of the epilogue, so if you find yourselves wondering, “But what about such-and-such?”, I will hopefully answer your questions tomorrow with Part II. Pretty much everyone’s questions should be answered after tomorrow’s chapter, but if you have questions, feel free to ask them so I can make sure to write them into the epilogue” [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13095397/29/The-Haunting-of-Netherfield>>. Last accessed: November 5, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> mrnon, *Dancing on Hedgerows*, May 11, 2016 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11941415/8/Dancing-On-Hedgerows>>. Last accessed: October 31, 2018.

In other examples of A/Ns we encounter – often even more dramatically staged – the same strange dialectics between foreknowledge and surprise, suspense and (pre)fulfilled expectations. timunderwood9 opens chapter 24 of *The Trials* as follows:

Guys, I am really, really loving those guessing reviews. Also, a rather too late, to be honest, excessive angst warning. It is one of those things, figuring out the balance for these stories, and while awesome and dramatic, I perhaps made things a little too rough for ODC here near the end - or at least a lot of the Amazon reviews thought so when I first published it... but have heart, *there is only a couple more chapters before we are through the darkest part.*<sup>40</sup>

If the suspense is highlighted by the interplay between text and paratext (I will go back to this in a moment), at the same time it is controlled, *regulated via the paratext*, through constant reassurances. Not by chance, one reader comments, after the mentioned chapter: “Angst is fine by me, especially when the HEA [Happily Ever After] is assured”.<sup>41</sup> Still more illustrative is the end of chapter 8 of *Dancing on Hedgerows*. The chapter closes on a cliffhanger: a character has had a stroke and we don’t know what will become of him. However, the same cliffhanger is immediately weakened, if not denied or solved, by the A/N:

Before anyone gets too excited, this episode is NOT heralding the death of our villain. We're about half way through this story, and Collins Sr has a lot more to answer for than being an abusive father and husband, especially considering that during the time in which he lived, a man was within his rights to beat his wife.<sup>42</sup>

Apparently, not all readers share the pleasure of such dialectics, as nanciellen writes in her review: “I don’t like to be told what will be happening in the story. Just a note. I don’t understand why people do this. Just wanted to let you know how I feel. Thank you”.<sup>43</sup>

I feel bound to add: me neither! However, from what we have seen, it is clear that A/Ns need to be read on the background of the readers’ reviews, which they mirror, echo and answer to. In turn it is important to stress that readers’ reviews react not only to the “text itself” but to the A/Ns as well. In both the A/Ns and the reviews, in any case, the paratext needs to be analysed not only spatially, along Genette’s main lines, but temporally and, in particular, diachronically, in the evolving temporal frame of serialized narrative.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly to A/Ns, readers’ reviews perform a variety of functions and/or produce a variety of effects: from the more traditional interpretive function of paratext, though complicated by the tension between collective and individual auth-

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<sup>40</sup> timunderwood9, *The Trials*, June 4, 2017 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12516346/24/The-Trials>>. Last accessed: October 31, 2018. My emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> AussieFicReader, October 16, 2018 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/r/12516346/0/3/>>. Last accessed: October 31, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> mrnon, *Dancing on Hedgerows* [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11941415/9/Dancing-On-Hedgerows>>. Last accessed: October 31, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Nanciellen, October 29, 2018 [online], <<https://www.fanfiction.net/r/11941415/0/4/>>. Last accessed: October 31, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> See Robert ALLEN, “Perpetually beginning until the end of the fair: The paratextual poetics of serialised novels”, in: *Neobelicon*, 2010, 37, 186.



orship in fan fiction, to what we might call a (*social*) *control* function or effect exerted by the community on the individual writer. In the context of this essay, I am particularly interested in how readers' reviews contribute to negotiating suspense, expectations, time lapses and voids between one instalment and the next, since they are the zone where questions, suggestions, interpretations, guesses, anticipations and hypotheses about the story, surface only to be dismissed or taken up and raised again, in an ongoing conversation which evolves between text and paratext. In close connection with A/Ns, readers' reviews fill the gaps with textuality and bridge diegetic time over real time. They keep the story *alive* (in the sense of not forgotten, still present in the readers' actual "horizon") and moving on, in anticipation of what will come next, maintaining the perception of a work in progress. This is especially true in fan fiction, where the rhythm of publication varies a lot and the time lapse is unpredictable. Therefore, all the elements accumulated so far point, once again, to the paramount, if not overpowering role of paratext in fan fiction, and to the border-blurring with the text itself: "While the show is absent from the scene, the text nevertheless lives on through the paratext".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan GRAY, *Show Sold Separately*, 152-153.