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Revising Hegemonic Masculinity: Homosexuality, Masculinity, and Youth-Authored Harry Potter Fanfiction

Jennifer Duggan

Youth participation in the production and consumption of *slash* fanfiction (fanfiction that queers texts by depicting homosexual relationships) can be considered revolutionary for a number of reasons, but particularly because it elucidates what youth determine to be appropriate content for themselves and because it strategically shifts focus from the discourse of non-heteronormativity to the pleasure and romance of non-heteronormative relationships. Indeed, in a study in Sweden, youth respondents to a questionnaire about their interest in slash fanfiction cited both the lack of books about gay teenagers whose relationships are accepted as normal and the opportunity to explore varying sexualities as part of the appeal of slash (Wikström and Olin-Scheller 92). However, most studies of sexuality and slash fanfiction published to date examine the sexualities of those who produce and consume it rather than the fan-authored texts themselves. This article will seek to begin to fill this gap in research by exploring the conjunction of masculinity and sexuality in Maya's *Underwater Light*, a Harry Potter-inspired slash fanfiction published online in installments between the release of *Goblet of Fire* (2000) and *Order of the Phoenix* (2003).

Introduction

Children's and young adult (YA) literature is typically viewed as a literature that both constructs and regulates its intended audience because adults create and regulate this literature for youth audiences, policing the material to which youth have access by eliding certain content (see, for example, Rose). However, the spread of the internet and other digital media has allowed youth to create and share their own texts outside of the realm of adult supervision as never before. Pornography is no longer the realm of tattered magazines eagerly passed around the locker room but is now instantaneously accessible, for example, and young fans are able to interact with and revise beloved texts to suit their own desires within purpose-created fan sites online. This allows them both to circumvent the control of adults and to retroactively imbue commercially created texts with censored content through fanfiction, photo manipulation, fan videos, and other media. Many of the changes they make relate to gender and sexuality.

The Harry Potter fandom, in particular, is noteworthy as an example of an online space in which youth authors explore issues of gender and sexuality, not only because a great number of teenagers participate in this fandom but also because, as Catherine Tosenberger asserts, *slash* fanfiction—or fanfiction that actively queers one or more characters—is extremely popular within the Harry Potter online fan community (“Homosexuality” 186). This group of fans remains one of the most productive online, with the largest fanfiction website, *fanfiction.net*, hosting over 750,000 fan-authored texts, and numerous other websites hosting more.

Because of the popularity of texts that queer characters amongst this online group, and because many slash texts reference issues of gender performativity through their depiction of queer characters, this paper examines the masculinities and homosexual relationships presented in a popular fan-authored slash text inspired by the Harry Potter series. It seeks to show, through the analysis of this fan-authored text, how one youth author reinterprets the hegemonic masculinities presented in the original series to create a narrative that defies the stereotypes of homosexual masculinities and focuses on the pleasurable and physical aspects of homosexual desire rather than on the stereotypical discourse of homosexuality. Furthermore, it is here suggested that fan-

fiction ought to be considered part of the umbrella term “YA fiction” and thus a serious subject of study; as such, this paper considers a specific example of Harry Potter slash fanfiction in relation to literary criticism regarding gender and sexuality. This consideration exposes youth authors' points of departure from accepted practices within the commercial publishing industry and thus provides important insight into youths' textual desires. Their nuanced, varied, and transformative approaches to same-sex desire make glaringly visible the lack of varied LGBTQ representation in commercially published YA texts.

Background

In his preface to *Ways of Being Male*, John Stephens argues that “critical and analytical discourses relating to children's literature have seemed surprisingly slow to generate a body of discussion ... [about] masculinities,” but admits this may be because “the question of how the ... patriarchal ideology structured representations of male bodies and behaviors ... has only recently emerged as an issue” in any area of study (x). Indeed, in YA fiction, the male hero figure more often than not reaffirms hegemonic masculine traits, including unproblematized heterosexuality. As a result, non-heteronormative masculinities tend to be noticeably absent from most YA media: “While series like *Glee* mark a sea change in the gradual acceptance and representation of gay characters ... , historically it was relatively rare to see homosexual characters represented ... outside of marginal, comical or occasionally tragic roles” (Duffett 176).

An unfortunate truth of the YA publishing industry is that homosexual protagonists very often express their sexuality in stereotypical ways (Crisp) or engage in relationships in which one partner is suggested to be effeminate and the other masculine (Crisp). Homosexual male protagonists depicted in commercially published YA books are often stereotypical: verbally or physically bullied, artistic rather than sporty,¹ these boys embody what Judith Butler might term “foreclosed” or “disavowed” masculinities (3). Although not all sensitive boys in YA fiction are homosexual, those who are homosexual are almost always depicted as sensitive, artistic outsiders who spend the majority of their time worrying about masculine performance and societal acceptance. A common plot device in novels in which non-heteronormativity is a central theme is the inclusion of

an antagonistic, homophobic foil to allow the protagonist to symbolically overcome societal prejudice by overcoming a single character or group who represents those prejudices (Crisp; Wickens). This has led Thomas Crisp to argue that

any book that seeks to educate readers about homophobia and intolerance by presenting a world in which homophobia and intolerance are “the norm” on some level ... reinforces these as inevitabilities. (344)

It is, in fact, only recently that mainstream YA fiction has begun to depict physical tenderness and sexual encounters between homosexual boys, such as the masturbation scene in Jandy Nelson’s *I’ll Give You the Sun* (2014). Kimberly Reynolds argues that explicitly sexual YA narratives usually elide depictions of same-sex relationships (127), echoing Roberta Seelinger Trites’s suggestion that the stereotypical gay male’s “sex acts are rarely described with any kind of detail” in YA fiction (“All of a Sudden” 104), even in books with homosexual protagonists. Indeed, Trites argues that YA novels depicting gay relationships “privilege the discourse of homosexuality over the physical acts of gay men, defining sexuality more rhetorically than physically” (“Queer” 143). Furthermore, as Victoria Flanagan argues, “gay sex is either invisible in most YA fiction or associated with physical pain rather than pleasure” (31), while Lydia Kokkola argues that

after experiencing same-sex carnal desire, teenagers [in books] tend to focus on what it means to be gay or lesbian rather than upon the specifics of their relationship... Even texts that purport to be positive about same-sex desire ... [shy] away from allowing characters to experience *jouissance*. (96–7)

Kokkola does not define *jouissance* in her text, perhaps because *jouissance* is an elusive term dealing with that which defies definition and comprehension. However, *jouissance* can be defined as an ephemeral “unsettling and destabilizing” bliss (Baldick) or overwhelming overflow of emotions linked to desire resulting from amatory connection—and usually associated in physicoanalysis with sexual union—that fragments, dislocates, and allows individuals to

transgress their bounds as subjects. Kokkola posits that “queer novels are set within realistic settings in which homophobia undermines the possibility of pleasure” (97); her argument suggests that queer characters in YA are prevented from experiencing this transcendent amatory connection in full due both to the characters’ internalization of a constant threat of violence from society and to authors’ hesitation to depict disavowed populations experiencing transcendence through carnal delight.

However, while this elision of homosexual pleasure may be prevalent in adult-authored YA texts depicting homosexual relationships, it is not necessarily true of youth-authored fan texts (hereafter “fanfiction” or “fics”) that explore homosexuality. Although, of course, there exists youth-authored fanfiction that focuses on the rhetoric of homosexuality, many fics avoid such a focus, detailing instead the embodiedness and physicality of attraction. Both slash (fanfiction depicting male-male relationships) and femslash (fanfiction depicting female-female relationships) tend to be explicit in their focus on sensuality, sexual attraction, and *jouissance*. This focus demonstrates the desire of youth fans who compose slash to enjoy depictions of “the physical acts of gay men” rather than to agonize over the “discourse of homosexuality,” subverting the structure of commercially published homosexual YA narratives like those discussed by Trites.

Despite this, and while gender identities and sexualities are central to slash in a number of ways, academic discussions of the phenomenon of slash are often strangely dismissive of fan-authored texts, as well as dismissive of the masculinities and the relationships depicted therein, judging them to be inferior to commercially published texts. Indeed, in her recent monograph on female interest in gay male romances, Carola Katharina Bauer critiques the ways in which academics have discussed the men depicted in slash as “only nominally male” (Russ qtd. in Bauer 52), thereby criticizing the assumption that men who are not presented in a way consistent with hegemonic masculinity must necessarily be gender bending or “gender blending” (Woledge 52–3) rather than embodying “authentic” masculinities.

This suggests an assumption that “real men” cannot embody traits typically coded feminine. Furthermore, it implies that any queering of a male character within these fan-produced texts is not only

untrue to the characterization of that male in original text (hereafter referred to as *canon*),² but moreover that reading a male character as queer automatically makes him effeminate or somehow less-than-entirely male. Woledge's argument therefore implies that the act of reading and presenting a character as gay somehow makes his expression of masculinity less legitimate. In contrast, Catherine Tosenberger asserts that academics' "insistence that slash must transgress the existing canon rather troublingly assigns to the canon a heteronormativity it may not necessarily possess [and] ... reinforces the assumption that queer readings are always ... 'imposed' from the outside" ("Homosexuality" 187). Indeed, J.K. Rowling herself has affirmed at least one queer interpretation of Harry Potter characters by publicly declaring Dumbledore had a romantic attachment to Grindelwald when they were both young. She defends this interpretation as in line with the *canon*, stating that adults who are "sensitive" to such relationships will be able to see it between the lines (Tosenberger, "Oh My God" 187). We can see, then, that despite the progress that has been made in gender and queer studies towards authenticating and affirming alternative masculinities, there is much contradiction in academic discussions of the gender identities and performances of those who create and consume slash. It is perhaps for these reasons that slash continues to be of central interest to fanfiction studies, despite its being only one of many subgenres of fanfiction (Bauer; Busse and Hellekson).

Homosexuality, Masculinities, and Underwater Light

Problematically for studies of youth authorship in the online community, a number of sites on which one can post Harry Potter slash are administered from the United States and require that members of the community be eighteen or older in order to participate because of the sexually explicit nature of many of the fics. This means that fans younger than eighteen who write and read slash must lie about their age in order to participate in the online community. If they are discovered in their lie, they may be expelled from the website by administrators. However, because most youths who wrote *Harry Potter* fanfiction in the beginning of the twenty-first century are now adults, they can safely confirm that they were teenagers when they wrote and posted

their texts. It is partially for this reason that I have chosen to examine the text *Underwater Light* by Sarah Rees Brennan, who wrote and posted the fic under the pseudonym Maya when she was a teenager—a fact she has verified on *Tumblr* ("bornonthebattleground asked").³ *Underwater Light* is also listed as an influential fic on *fanlore.org* ("Harry/Draco") and was listed as one of four must-read fics by *Time* magazine (Grossman; "Underwater Light").⁴

Because the story was posted on numerous sites and because the author has since removed it from several sites, it is hard to verify when and where this story was first published. However, Brennan states that she was seventeen when she began writing fanfiction, and the *fanlore.org* entry for the story states that its online publication began in 2002 ("Underwater Light") when the author was eighteen, meaning she began writing after the publication of *The Goblet of Fire* (2000), as the plot of *Underwater Light*, which begins with a second Triwizard Tournament, suggests.

In *Underwater Light*, the war between dark and light wizards has become much more serious, and light wizards have been disappearing. In order to boost morale, Hogwarts hosts another Triwizard Tournament, and Harry is once again the Hogwarts champion. However, when he dives into the lake to save the person he will most miss, he is surprised to find his nemesis, Draco Malfoy, instead of Ron Weasley, his best friend. This event sparks a friendship and, eventually, romance between Harry and Draco, and their evolving relationship is the main focus of the fic, although the story also follows the war between dark and light.

Although a great deal of slash follows a similar narrative to the texts discussed by Crisp (mentioned above)—boy falls in love with boy, someone or several people dislike that they are together, there is conflict, boy and boy triumph in their love—some Harry Potter slash, like *Underwater Light*, has attempted to overcome these problems by presenting wizarding society as a queer space.⁵ For example, in *Underwater Light*, it seems that most of Harry's friends give no thought to his being interested in a boy, although they are upset that he is first friends with, and later in a romantic relationship with, Draco Malfoy, whom they hate with passion; Ginny Weasley, for example, accuses him of "sleeping with the enemy" and states, "You're supposed to be something good—something great—why would you choose a power-hungry

bully?” (ch. 19). For Harry, however, this attraction “wasn’t a choice.... No-one else was even a possibility” (ch. 19), echoing the idea that love “never happens ... it has *always already happened*”: “we never fall in love in the present time[:] ... we all of a sudden become aware that we (already) *are* in love” (Žižek n.p., emphasis in original).

In order to communicate to readers the abruptness of love, Maya, the author of *Underwater Light*, has made clever use of focalization. In slash, focalizing characters often differ from the main focalizing character in the *canon*, privileging alternative voices as well as masculinities that are liminal in the original texts rather than the central hero figure. Moreover, sometimes these fan texts include the perspectives of those outside the central romance to add nuance or to provide insight into the feelings the protagonists are unwilling to explore or of which they are unaware. This is the case in *Underwater Light*, in which Harry is the main focalizing character, as in Rowling’s published Harry Potter texts; however, focalization sometimes switches to the perspective of Hermione or Ginny to provide alternative perspectives. Harry is sometimes depicted as being out of touch with or unable to decipher his own or others’ feelings in the *canon*—such as when Hermione has to decipher Cho Chang’s behavior for him in *Order of the Phoenix*, looking at him and Ron “with an almost pitying expression on her face” as she does (405) and “restraining herself from rolling her eyes with extreme difficulty” upon hearing how he handled Cho’s tears (406). It is likely for this reason that Maya chooses to include perspectives that allow readers to understand what Harry is feeling without being blinkered by his own inability to understand or interpret those feelings. She replicates Rowling’s characterization of Harry as “an oblivious git,” as her version of Draco puts it (ch. 16), in *Underwater Light* and uses Hermione as a focalizing character to clarify for readers that Harry is indeed falling in love with Draco. For example, Chapter Nine, perceptively titled “The Onlooker Sees Most of the Game,” privileges not only Hermione’s worry over Harry’s blindness to his own feelings but also confirms the reader’s suspicions about Harry’s unacknowledged feelings for Draco. According to Hermione-as-focalizer,

Everybody knew that Harry was absolutely dizzy for Draco Malfoy.... Harry, of course, had no idea.... Malfoy was [either] quite aware of the situation, and setting Harry up for a fall, or he was blissfully unconscious of the whole mess.

While in the vast majority of YA novels with homosexual protagonists, the examination by the protagonists of their sexuality focuses externally—on how society, including friends and family, will react—in *Underwater Light*, the focus is internal, on Harry’s own sexual identity and whether he likes men or women (ch. 14). No thought appears to be given by either Harry or Maya, the author, to what others may think of his sexuality. The text instead questions how one can understand one’s own sexuality and whether sexuality can be clearly categorized. Harry claims never to have “thought it through” before realizing he is attracted to Draco (ch. 14), and later he decides that his “lifestyle choice ... doesn’t matter” because, as he tells Draco, “I don’t see why I should be wasting time going over my feelings like a twit, when it can be simple.... I want you” (ch. 19). Similarly, any hesitation Draco feels is, first, caused by his desire to have clear boundaries between friendships and romantic attachments and, later, caused by his worry over the possibility that they could ruin their new-found friendship:

I don’t want to mess everything up because you’re confused and I’m weak and excessively hormonal. I don’t want to—I don’t want never to see you again because we did something sentimental when we were schoolboys and you can’t imagine why you did it any more. (ch. 19)

Like Harry, he does not reference any worry over what friends, family, or society more generally will think. Although he cares deeply, like Rowling’s Draco, about blood purity and worries that he cannot live up to his father’s expectations, he connects neither class considerations nor his father’s desires to his sexuality.

Significantly, the speech that he gives to Harry, cited above, also alludes to the school story genre and to the idea that schoolboys might “do something sentimental” with one another. This reminds us of

the intense intertextuality of fanfiction, which overtly references not only the *canon* on which it is based but also other fan texts, commercially published YA texts, film, television, music, art, and common genres of fiction. As Tosenberger has argued, along with Tison Pugh and David Wallace, “the Potter books continuously flirt with disruptions to normativity” (Pugh and Wallace, “Heteronormative” 263) that invite queer interpretations (Tosenberger, “Oh My God”; Tosenberger, “Homosexuality”). This is likely due in part to the tradition of non-normative sexual experimentation or desire in the school story genre more generally (Lyon Clark 215–7), which has traditionally focused on boys’ “see[ing] or engag[ing] in a variety of sexual activities among males” (Sedgwick 176). Indeed, Harry references another central aspect of the school story genre—sport—at another point in *Underwater Light*, when he shares his dreams with some other students in the hope that they will be able to find clues regarding a Death Eater spy in Hogwarts: He states that it was “very unfair ... that he had no idea whether the details of Draco’s body as shown in the dream were accurate” and points out that “Quidditch teams had ... common showers. It was patently unjust that he could have drawn correct pictures of Fred and George’s anatomy ... and remain unsure of the exact curve of Draco’s naked thigh” (ch. 18). Here, as elsewhere, the focus of the story is on the intense physicality of teenage attraction, placing the male-male gaze within the homosocial spaces of the school locker room as a natural occurrence.

Despite some movement towards acceptance and diversity within published YA fiction, many homosexual characters remain stereotypically effeminate. The Harry Potter series is usually seen as having a flimsy “post-feminist façade” that fails to hide “the novels’ rather traditional gender roles and ... erasure of sexual orientation difference” (Pugh and Wallace, “Heteronormative” 260). As Pugh and Wallace argue, in the *canon*, “heteronormative heroism ultimately squelches gender equality and sexual diversity in favor of the ideological status quo” (“Heteronormative” 260). Significantly, Maya’s characterization of Harry remains quite true to the *canon*—he is a sporty, bespectacled incarnation of Campbell’s hero, who protects others, gets in fights with those he considers to be on the wrong side of the wizarding war, and successfully vanquishes

the enemy (Pugh and Wallace, “Heteronormative” 261)—and her Draco, despite caring about his appearance, remains interested in sports and obsessed with power and social status. Indeed, as in the *canon*, the two boys constantly battle each other for the status of alpha male, comparing, for example, how often they need to shave and debating who is the best at fighting or playing Quidditch. Maya’s Harry and Draco take responsibility for other students—as Hermione observes, “Harry was at his best in times of crisis” (ch. 18), although Harry himself feels inadequate, wishing “he could be the simple hero he was sure she [Ginny] saw him as, someone uncomplicated and unafraid who would never desire anything but to save the world” (ch. 19)—and despite their friendship, they continue to allow their frustrations, hormones, and feelings of powerlessness to escalate into fisticuffs (see, for example, ch. 16), mirroring their encounters in Rowling’s series, or, at times, aggressive kissing (see, for example, ch. 18). Indeed, when Draco tries to talk to Harry about his fear that Harry will die, they end up first fighting and then kissing rather than expressing themselves in words (ch. 19). This implies Maya’s belief that homosexual boys need not be depicted as either effeminate or in a relationship reliant on one dominant and one submissive partner in fiction.

In fact, all of the sexual encounters in *Underwater Light* focus on the physical expression of emotion rather than its verbal expression. Harry, both in the *canon* and in *Underwater Light*, is uncomfortable with and often incapable of expressing his feelings. When he wants to tell Ron that he cares about him, for example, he hugs Hermione and then turns to Ron, who states, “I don’t think we should hug.... I think we’re too manly,” and punches Harry genially on the shoulder (ch. 16). And when Harry and Draco explore each other’s bodies, they do not speak; instead, Draco looks at Harry in a way that is “almost a question” before his “fingers slipped an inch under Harry’s waistband” (ch. 20). Both instances emphasize a stereotype of hegemonic masculinity—that boys are bad at communicating in words and are intensely physical—but by doing so defy stereotypes regarding homosexual boys.

Conclusions

Youth-authored slash offers an intriguing site of change to depictions of homosexual boys in fiction

aimed at a youth audience. Indeed, a great number of these youth-authored, internet-published texts remain more progressive than commercially published, adult-authored YA texts one decade later, exposing online fan communities as sites of subversion and transformation that ought not only to be studied in light of the historical moments in which they emerged but also considered more seriously as sites of social change (see, for example, Duffett; Jenkins; Hills).

The emergence of the vast online Harry Potter fandom was an important sociocultural event showcasing the ways in which youths are able to circumvent the restrictions to content adults aim to put in place. We can certainly consider youth participation in the Harry Potter fandom and their clear interest, through the cycle of production and consumption they created and enjoyed within that digital space, in non-heteronormative narratives as transformative. Indeed, in a Swedish study, youth respondents to a questionnaire about their interest in slash fanfiction cited both the lack of books about homosexual teenagers whose relationships are accepted as normal and the opportunity to explore varying sexualities as part of the appeal of slash (Wikström and Olin-Scheller 92). These online texts and spaces, then, not only highlight youths' desire to have varied sexualities openly acknowledged in commercially published YA fiction but also, by their very existence, accentuate the lack of such variety in commercial publishing. If nothing else, Maya's complex and defiant depiction of Harry and Draco as non-stereotypical male homosexuals establishing an amatory relationship in a society which does not judge them for their same-sex desires demonstrates that youth-authored fanfiction ought to be seen as a serious object of study rather than being, as it too often is, summarily dismissed as inferior to YA fiction commercially published by adult authors for young readers.

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1. I think here of a number of YA novels with non-heteronormative male protagonists—such as *What I Was* (2007) by Meg Rosoff, *I'll Give You the Sun* (2014) by Jandy Nelson, and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. The boys in these novels, like many others depicting non-hegemonic masculinities, share some, if not all, of the following traits: they are outsiders, introverted, interested in the arts, bullied, or emotionally sensitive.

2. In fandom, *canon* refers to the original work (here, the Harry Potter series written by J.K. Rowling), while *fanon* refers to central or important fan texts. We could say, for example, that while Draco never appears in leather pants in *canon*, this is widely accepted in *fanon*. See "Fanon."

3. Brennan states quite clearly that she regrets having written fanfiction because the stigma attached has negatively affected her career as a professional writer ("bornonthebattleground asks"; "Anonymous asked"). I refer to her as Maya when referring to *Underwater Light*. Future study of her and other former (and current) fanfiction writers' experiences with prejudice may be of interest to the future study of youth authorship.

4. The must-read fics are not listed in the digital version of the story.

5. See Pugh and Wallace for more on the wizarding world as a queer space.



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