

"A REAL REFLECTION OF HOW I WRITE":  
YOUNG ADULT FEMALE AUTHORS  
SEIZING AGENCY THROUGH  
FAN FICTION

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THESIS ABSTRACT  
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FAN FICTION

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This research project examines "fan fiction" (stories based upon existing texts such as movies, books, and video games) written by a young adult female and posted online for others to read. The research was conducted in order to determine how this author uses fan fiction to achieve agency, that is to gain power over existing texts which traditionally marginalize people of her gender and age group. The project also speculates on how fan fiction is currently used and might be used more effectively in curricular English composition assignments.

This project analyzes in detail two fan fiction stories about male characters, authored by a young adult female. Besides a close reading of each of these stories-- one

written for a curricular assignment, and one written on the author's own initiative-- the project also includes interviews with the author via email which ask her explicitly about her motivation for writing and other areas on which this project focuses.

The results of the research are that the author gains agency through her fan fiction by manipulating the type of character who is often used to marginalize her age and gender groups; however her agency is limited when she writes fan fiction for assignments in her English courses. The project calls for further research on the fan fiction of young adult females, young adults who write in the same genre of fan fiction as the research subject, and curricular fan fiction. It also calls for instructors to lift or alter restraints to fan fiction assignments, including limitations on word count, plot, title, and content.

Style manual used: Modern Language Association

Computer software used: Microsoft Word 2007

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In the spring of 2002, I was a sophomore in EN 227, the third survey of English literature at the University of Alabama. At the time I had no real understanding of the concepts of "agency" or "voice," and I wasn't aware that my status-- that of a female young adult-- could possibly lead to my being marginalized or silenced by the academy of which I was a part. When as a class we were assigned James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," unlike Mitty himself I held no fantasies of being someone else, someone who held power over a world where she was traditionally powerless.

After we read the short story, the instructor gave our class a writing assignment: we were to create our own adventure for Walter Mitty and write a continuation of Thurber's tale. I was ecstatic because for me this was not work; this was *fun*. This was what I had already been writing in my free time for the past five years: fan fiction. Beginning at the age of fifteen, I had constantly written such stories based upon existing texts of which I was a fan, including books, movies, and video games. I had never before been told to write fan fiction for a curricular assignment, but the prospect of being able to get academic credit for doing something I loved was exhilarating.

In response to the assignment, I wrote a three and a half page story titled "Walter Mitty Planting Flowers." In my continuation of Thurber's story, Mitty is forced to tend his wife's garden, all the while imagining that he is an elite pilot saving the world. As with my extracurricular fan fiction, I worked to incorporate elements used in the original story. In this case such elements included Mitty's fantasies of heroics, his overbearing wife, and the two noises that constantly penetrate his daydreams-- *pocketa-pocketa-pocketa* and *queep*.

However, I integrated elements other than Thurber's into my answer to the assignment. Besides drawing from "The Secret Life," I also incorporated components of *Sonic Wings*, a video game series I was playing at the time. Known as *Aerofighters* in the United States, this series of vertically-scrolling shooter games pits an international team of pilots against a malicious alien race determined to conquer the world's major cities. These games inspired the entire premise of my fan fiction: Mitty's mission, his commander, and the other pilots including his female partner Mao Mao were all drawn from *Sonic Wings*. My instructor likely never recognized the references to this rather obscure series of video games, but including *Sonic Wings* in my story made the assignment more interesting for me. Besides providing me with a ready-made fantasy world in which to drop Walter Mitty, it also gave me the opportunity to use characters and settings I loved to fulfill a writing task I *had* to complete. Without the *Sonic Wings* elements, I might have been less excited about the assignment since while I enjoyed "The Secret Life," I didn't consider myself a "fan" of it. However, getting to write about the *Sonic Wings* characters for school turned the assignment into an adventure.



Years later, I can appreciate what I did not understand at the time: by addressing the assignment in a way that incorporated my own interests as a fan, I made my voice heard in this piece of academic writing. While the original assignment asked me to participate in an activity through which I had defined myself for years, it did not allow me the freedom of choice I found in my extracurricular fan fiction; I was told the text about which I must write and what must happen within the framework of my writing-- Walter Mitty must have a daydream-- although I was allowed to choose the nature of his fantasy. My manipulation of the assignment to include a second text was achieved within these confines; the *Sonic Wings* elements appeared only as a part of Mitty's daydream. Nevertheless, I took some control over the assignment which other students who were not already fan fiction authors could not have seized.

And I was not alone. Countless other teenage women were-- and still are-- posting their own fan fiction online and making their voices heard; Henry Jenkins estimates that in 1988 ninety percent of fan fiction authors were female (*Fans* 43). It is evident that fan fiction has an appeal for women that is both wide-reaching and long lasting; six years after "Walter Mitty Planting Flowers," I am still writing fan fiction on a daily basis. The knowledge that other girls are constantly and continuously exercising the power granted by fan fiction has led me to consider just what about the genre leads them to such strong voices and how English instructors might incorporate these qualities into their assignments in order to give female students greater power in the academy. This research project answers these questions through a close reading of two fan fiction stories by a female teenage author, one story written on her own and one composed in response to a school assignment. I argue that through her fan fiction, this author seizes

the agency or power usually denied to her marginalized demographic by masculinist texts. Through her fan fiction, she makes her voice heard.

### Defining the Genre of Fan Fiction and Its Terminology

The term "fan fiction" is meaningless to many; however, the concept it describes is often quite familiar to those who have taught or taken a literature class. Fan fiction is simply a story written using someone else's characters. High school writing assignments such as "Write a story about what happened to Scout Finch after *To Kill a Mockingbird* ended" or college core literature assignments such as the Walter Mitty assignment above ask students to create fan fiction, even though neither instructor nor student may realize that such a term exists to define the assignment.

Those outside the fan fiction community may also have had a brush with the genre through the publication of popular books in which authors write or rewrite stories using others' characters, plots, and settings. Such novels differ from the majority of amateur fan fiction in that they are sanctioned by the producers of the canon texts from which they draw, and their authors receive payment for their work. However, such books as *Wicked* (inspired by *The Wizard of Oz*) and *Scarlett* (the sequel to *Gone With the Wind*), are still fan fiction, still stories composed using the ideas of others. Even novels retelling the stories of classic, canonized literature such as *Grendel* (a retelling of *Beowulf*) are fan fiction. In these cases, fan fiction may be taught in a literature class alongside the text on which it was based, as in an undergraduate literature class in which I was assigned *Wide Sargasso Sea* immediately after *Jane Eyre*. Thus, most people have had some experience with fan fiction even if they have never heard of the genre.

Scholars have defined fan fiction in similar ways. Anne Kustritz describes it as "the practice of using characters from a professionally published text (a source product) in an original story" (371). Angela Thomas likewise explains the process of fan writing:

Borrowing settings, plots, characters and ideas from all forms of media and popular culture, fans weave together new tales, sometimes within the accepted canon (the real works from which they are borrowing), sometimes blending several ideas from different sources (e.g., *Star Wars* meets *Middle Earth*) together in a type of fiction called "Crossovers," and sometimes imagining new possibilities for additional characters, different histories or different settings to build on existing stories, called "Alternative Universe" fiction. (Thomas 226)

As Thomas notes, fan fiction is not based only on books, stories, and other written-word texts; authors have composed fan fiction for "fandoms" such as video games, movies, television and cartoon series, comics and graphic novels, musicals, professional wrestling, and celebrities. The archive site FanFiction.Net even includes a category for stories about marching bands.

It is impossible to pinpoint the true beginning of fan fiction or to identify the first fan fiction story. One might begin with Plato, whose dialogues were fictional stories featuring Socrates and other real people. While many would cringe at the thought of comparing *Gorgias* to a teenage girl's story about her favorite Japanese rock band, similarities do exist. Both Plato and modern authors of celebrity fan fiction manipulate and repurpose famous figures in order to empower themselves. Plato used Socrates to discredit the Sophists and disseminate his own beliefs concerning philosophy and rhetoric.

Likewise, I argue that the fan fiction author seizes agency through her stories by propagating her opinions and convictions.

It is likely that even Plato was not the first to compose fan fiction in one form or another; as long as language and narratives have existed, there have probably been those who used both to retell stories to suit their own views. Thomas, however, claims that "[t]he origins of fan fiction can be traced back to the 1930s pulp magazine *Fanzines*" and she cites Henry Jenkins as attributing its "surge" in popularity to *Star Trek* in the 1960s (Thomas 226). Kustritz describes the publication of early *Star Trek* fan fiction in fan magazines known as "zines" (371), although now with sites such as FanFiction.Net, FicWad.Com, and AdultFanFiction.Net, the Internet is the publication medium of choice for most authors.

Wherever fan fiction began, it now brings with it an array of terminology, both repurposed and newly created. One such term is "slash," which dates back to the *Star Trek* era. Kustritz describes slash as "stories, written by amateur authors (who are almost solely heterosexual women), that involve placing two television or film characters of the same gender, usually male, into noncanonical<sup>1</sup> romantic relationships with each other." The term slash itself originates from the phrase "Kirk/Spock," which indicated that a story featured a pairing between the two characters (Kustritz 371-72). Although today the "/" character may be used to designate a heterosexual pairing (i.e., Hannibal/Clarice) or may be replaced by an "x" (i.e., Kirk x Spock), the term "slash" is now widely known and used throughout the fan fiction community.

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<sup>1</sup> In this otherwise accurate definition, I take issue with the qualifier "noncanonical." As FanFiction.Net's category for stories based on *Brokeback Mountain* testifies, relationships in slash fan fiction are not necessarily noncanonical.

Perhaps in direct opposition to "slash" is the term "Mary Sue." Henry Jenkins places this term's beginnings within the *Star Trek* fandom as well; he describes many authors' first fan fiction stories as "romantic fantasies about the series' characters [that] frequently involve inserting glorified versions of themselves into the world of Star Fleet." Such stories are often rejected by other fans due to "their self-indulgence, their often hackneyed writing styles, their formulaic plots, and their violations of the established characterizations" (*Fans* 51). Thus, a Mary Sue or "self-insertion" is an idealized version of the author and an object of scorn to many in the fan fiction community. Mary Sues are typically original characters who are exceptionally beautiful, often with unique (but always attractive) features such as mismatched eyes, who possess brilliant personalities, and who usually end up captivating the canon text's<sup>2</sup> male characters. However, the disdain held for Mary Sue has been expanded to include similar male characters as well. In reference to one of my own male original characters, I recently received a review that stated something along the lines of "Thank God he's not a Marty Stu."

#### Literature Review: Research on the Fan Fiction of Young Adults and Women

While a brief overview of fan fiction is useful, one may gain a deeper understanding through an exploration of some of the existing research on the genre. There is little existing work on fan fiction used as a curricular assignment designed to empower students by allowing them to interrupt canon texts as I did by mixing Thurber with a Japanese video game in "Walter Mitty Planting Flowers," or as my research subject does below by weaving two Kafka stories together with a hint of slash. However,

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout, I will refer to the original text or media upon which a fan fiction story is based as the "canon text."

much valuable work has already been accomplished in the field of the fan fiction of both young adults and women.<sup>3</sup>

Henry Jenkins' chapter "Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the *Harry Potter Wars*" follows the struggle of Heather, a home-schooled teenager fighting for the right of herself and other young fans to "participate" in the fandom of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels. After reading the first *Harry Potter* novel Heather, then thirteen, began a web site called *The Daily Prophet* "to do her part to promote literacy." The web site is a form of fan fiction for it serves as a school newspaper for Hogwarts, the fictional school for wizards attended by Harry Potter in Rowling's novels. Jenkins describes how Heather "mimick[ed] teacherly language" in her attempts to teach issues of literacy to her contributors and in her open letter meant to reassure their parents and teachers that *The Daily Prophet* is a worthwhile forum (*Culture* 171-72). This appropriation of academic language constitutes a seizure of power or agency in that Heather makes her voice heard and recognized among adults by mimicking their own language.

Heather also founded an organization, "Defense Against the Dark Arts," to counter Warner Brothers' attempts to shut down fan sites which it felt infringed on its holding of the rights to *Harry Potter*-- what Heather saw as "attacks" by Warner Brothers on her friends who had their own fan sites. Again, she uses language to empower herself and other young fans; in her group's petition against Warner Brothers and other "studios that fail to appreciate their supporters," she describes the studio's actions in the language

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<sup>3</sup> *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse is useful for those who wish to further explore the genre of fan fiction beyond this project's scope of young adult females. Hellekson and Busse provide a range of articles covering many aspects of the community, as well as a detailed bibliography of works available on fan fiction. Besides offering a "brief history of media fandom," it includes work on areas as diverse as theory, slash, heterosexual romance, Mary Sues, peer editors known as "beta readers," and fan fiction's effect on new media.

of *Harry Potter*: "these dark forces are daring to take away something so basic, so human, that it's close to murder" (*Culture* 186-87). While the description of Warner Brothers as a "dark force" and its protection of its intellectual rights as akin to murder is rather excessive, Heather's use of language-- quite a different language than the mature "teacherly" assurances to the parents of other fans-- did lead to results. Warner Brothers backed down, and fans "praised Warner for admitting its mistakes and fixing the problems in their relations with fans" (*Culture* 187-88).

Heather's use of language to gain power occurred outside of her fan writing and the fictional world of *Harry Potter*. Her open letter to parents broke the "fourth wall" of the Hogwarts school newspaper by describing *The Daily Prophet* as fictional, and while she mimicked Rowling's language in her call to action against Warner Brothers, her words were certainly set in the real world. However, other young authors find their voices through their fan fiction itself. Angela Thomas' "Fan Fiction Online: Engagement, Critical Response and Affective Play through Writing" describes Tiana and Jandalf, two female adolescent founders of a *Lord of the Rings* fan fiction community whose stories feature original female characters. Their community, *Middle Earth Insanity*, focuses on what they felt was not supported by other general archive sites such as FanFiction.Net: crossovers, in which the author mixes material from two or more different canon texts, and collaborative writing (Thomas 227-28).

By founding their own community to remedy what they felt was lacking in other online spaces, Tiana and Jandalf gained power not over the "real world" as Heather did, but over the world of online fan fiction; they struck out on their own and took for themselves what other communities would not give them. In addition, they also continue

to empower themselves through their use of characters in their fan fiction. Thomas explains that a benefit of fan fiction is "that fans of the text can take it and write in characters and plots that are relevant to their own identities and lives, giving them a voice in a text in which they might otherwise be marginalised." As an example, she cites Tiana and Jandalf's creation of "their own strong and fully developed female characters that take on the hero role." The girls "counter this marginalisation by creating the action chicks they expect to see, reflections of both themselves and their female icons" (Thomas 234-35).

However, while this creation of original characters may allow girls such as Tiana and Jandalf a voice, it smacks of Mary-Sueism to those who are a part of the fan fiction community, as Thomas does not seem to be. Not all strong female original characters are Mary Sues of course, but the fan fiction veteran is wary of such a character who is a "reflection" of the author and who takes on the role of the hero. The failing and danger of Mary Sue is that she usually caters to the masculinist discourse put forth by many canon texts, a fact emphasized by Thomas' description of Tiana and Jandalf's original characters as "action chicks." Unlike the Mary Sues described by Jenkins (*Fans* 51) or Kustritz (380), Tiana and Jandalf's original characters may not be sexually involved with the canon text's heroes. Nevertheless, they can still enforce the masculinist agenda of the canon text if they appear in fan fiction as idealized, unrealistically perfect "action chicks" who impose on readers society's unattainable standards for desirable women. As discussed below I contend that slash, which Thomas discusses only as a way for young authors to explore their sexuality (236), is used more effectively for this purpose.



Research on adult women who write fan fiction provides a more inclusive view of the ways females resist marginalization through fan fiction. In "Star Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," the basis for his seminal work *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins notes that as of 1988 an estimated ninety percent of "fan writers" were women. In attempting to identify the reason why women were the primary producers of fan fiction, he cites David Bleich's study on the response of college students of both genders to canon literature. Bleich concluded "that women were more willing to enjoy free play with the story content, making inferences about character relationships that took them well beyond the information explicitly contained within the text." Jenkins views this conclusion as proof that fan fiction, which is focused almost solely on speculation and inferences about characters, relies upon a feminine method of interpretation more than a masculine method (*Fans* 43-44).

Jenkins also moves beyond Bleich's conclusions to affirm that masculine texts-- "[t]exts written by and for men" such as *Star Trek* and other canon texts upon which much fan fiction is based-- require women to work harder than men must in their reading and interpretation:

To fully enjoy the text, women are often forced to perform a kind of intellectual transvestism-- identifying with male characters in opposition to their own cultural experiences, or constructing unwritten countertexts through their daydreams or through their oral interaction with other women-- that allows them to explore their own narrative concerns. (*Fans* 44)

By constructing these "countertexts" to the masculine canon texts of which they are fans, women claim the canon texts for their own and become what Jenkins terms "textual producers."

*Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* expands from "Star Trek Rerun" to look at a variety of television fan works by mostly female adults, including fan fiction, music videos, and songs; it offers reasons for authors' involvement in the genre of fan production. Jenkins speculates that for fan fiction authors, "writing becomes a social activity. . . , functioning simultaneously as a form of personal expression and as a source of collective identity (part of what it means to be a 'fan')." (*Poachers* 154). Fans of original texts read fan fiction "to explore the range of different uses writers can make of the same materials [as the original texts use], to see how familiar stories will be retold and what new elements will be introduced." Fan fiction can even affect how a fan views the original text itself, creating a "greatly expanded narrative and a more fully elaborated world" (*Poachers* 177).

"Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking": Selections from the *Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows*" by Shoshanna Green, Cynthia Jenkins, and Henry Jenkins explores a particular aspect of these female fan fiction authors' world: slash. In his introduction, Henry Jenkins discusses his discomfort with "the imbalance of power between scholars and the audiences they wrote about," and he describes this article as an attempt to correct the "increasingly inaccurate depictions of fan practices and perspectives" (*Fans* 61), inaccuracies I have noticed in some of my own research. To provide more truthful insights into the slash fan community, the authors collected excerpts from an online discussion forum pertaining to slash. The quotes include slash

authors' thoughts on the composition of slash, masculinity, misogyny, and homosexuality. While the article's authors do not investigate actual fan fiction, they take a broad step towards their goal of rebalancing the power between scholars and fans by composing most of their article from quotes by fans-- although the article's authors quote their own posts several times.

Anne Kustritz also examines slash and adult female authors in "Slashing the Romance Narrative." Kustritz too focuses on an online community of slash writers in her exploration of why authors, particularly women, write fan fiction. Kustritz concludes that the primary reason is to improve upon the canon texts from which the authors draw. Fan fiction authors "come to the conclusion that the concept and the characters [of the canon text] are not being fully exploited by the source product." Since canon texts can never fully explore every character and setting, fan fiction authors "fill in gaps, replace hurried narratives, and extrapolate beyond the bounds of the published text" (Kustritz 374). Fan fiction allows fans to focus only on their favorite characters and provides them the opportunity to more fully develop these characters beyond the lives and histories given to them by the canon texts.

However, the female slash authors Kustritz studies have an additional reason for writing: they seek to subvert the traditional dominant-male/submissive-female romance, and replace it with a romance between two equal partners. According to Kustritz, slash authors

tear down the traditional formula of romance novels and films that negotiate the submission of a heroine to a hero by instead negotiating the complicated power balance between two equally dominant, independent,

and masculine characters. This friendship-based love narrative, along with an equality-centered relationship dynamic, is the overwhelming preoccupation of slash narratives. (Kustritz 377)

In "Slashing the Romance Narrative," slash is shown as a greater source of power than Mary Sue for female authors. Kustritz describes Mary Sue as "a reproduction of the romance system that is already in place in our culture. . . . Mary Sue characters tell readers, the majority of whom are female, that the attainment of the desired partner is to be found only through perfection" (380). While Mary Sues may be strong, even powerful female characters, they still exist only to achieve the masculinist goal of getting the guy.

Slash, according to Kustritz, does the opposite of Mary Sue in that it attempts to rewrite the masculinist discourse of romance. The male characters who become the subjects of slash are, in their canon texts, "often wonderfully suited to this endeavor because they are so poorly filled out within the professionally published narrative, but they are also suited to rescription because they embody many of the things that are wrong with the patriarchal system of traditional romance" (Kustritz 376). Thus with slash fan fiction, authors can not only "fill in the gaps" of the canon texts but can also rewrite the discourse of traditional romance that aims to marginalize them and make them submissive to male partners. Instead of the highly unbalanced power dynamic of Mary Sue-- although she has men worshipping at her feet, she still sacrifices herself for them (Kustritz 380)-- slash often involves equality that is rarely found in traditional heterosexual romance narratives.

The above research suggests that by writing fan fiction, slash in particular, young adult and female authors can gain the agency they lack in the "real world." However, the

opportunity exists for much more research of female authors in their upper teens, the intersection where the young author and woman author meet. There is also little extant research on young adults who write slash. Thomas dismisses slash as an exploration of sexuality (236); while this may be the case for some young authors, for others slash serves much the same purpose as it does for adult women: it empowers and rewrites unsatisfactory narratives of masculinity.

More exploration of fan fiction used in the curriculum is called for as well. As evidenced through my own Walter Mitty assignment and the Kafka assignment detailed below, some instructors use fan fiction in their English curricula; however, current research is mostly concerned with stories written outside-- or even in defiance of, in the case of the women Kustritz describes-- official sanctions. Many references to curricular learning depict it as hostile to fan fiction (i.e., Thomas 229). However, as discussed at greater length below, some authors such as Jenkins do note the benefits of using fan fiction in the academy (*Convergence* 177).

Finally, there should be consideration of Jenkins' call in his introduction to "Normal Interest": the imbalance of power between scholars and fans needs to be corrected by the inclusion of fans in the research. Inaccuracies exist in some of the works surveyed here, usually stemming from assumptions or incomplete research on the part of scholars who are not members of the communities about which they write. As a member of the community of online fan fiction authors, I seek to supplement existing research by exploring the work of a young adult female author who composes fan fiction for both extracurricular and curricular purposes. I conduct this exploration through the framework of interruption as a form of agency.

## Theoretical Framework: Interruption, Disruption, and the Agentive Self

In "Interrupting Our Way to Agency: Feminist Cultural Studies and Composition"

Nedra Reynolds asks, "How can we help [women students] 'come to voice,' both in a classroom setting, where they will feel comfortable enough to speak, and in their reading and writing, where they will not be silenced by the masculinist codes of academic discourse?" (58). Her answer lies in the concept of interruption, in which women interpose into masculinist discourse with their own voices. While Reynolds focuses on interruptions in male-dominated conversations relating to composition studies (66), interruption is also an activity which comes naturally to fan fiction authors.

For Reynolds, agency "includes the poststructuralist concept of multiple and competing subjectivities" (58). Such "competing subjectivities" are at the forefront of fan fiction, the authors of which deviate from the perspective of the canon text in order to present their own subjectivity, often including actions or a point of view that would not have been allowed in the canon text. The perspective of the young female fan fiction author who slashes two male characters competes with the official perspective of the canon text, often successfully in the eyes of other fans who enjoy the fan fiction and prefer its reality to that of the canon. Fan fiction authors thus serve as agents:

Agents are those who "[speak] as an equal to an authority figure," "[dare] to disagree" (hooks, *Talking* 5), and are bold and defiant in their speech (9). Agency is not simply about finding one's own voice but also about intervening in discourses of the everyday and cultivating rhetorical tactics

that make interruption and resistance an important part of any conversation. (Reynolds 59)

Like the agents described by Reynolds, fan fiction authors disagree with the authority of the canon text, intervening to rewrite it "bold[ly] and defiant[ly]" to suit their own preferences of how the text's story should be told.

Reynolds encourages such interruption of official texts as "part of a tactical rhetoric for marginalized speakers and writers" who are themselves often interrupted (59). Fan fiction authors who are young and female are both discouraged from interrupting others and more susceptible to being interrupted themselves; as Reynolds points out, interruption is considered especially rude behavior in women and children (59). The female teenager who writes fan fiction is at once both a woman and a child, a double strike against her being allowed to speak.

However, while she promotes interruption, Reynolds also recognizes the risks involved: "Women who interrupt may be hit, lose their jobs, or be punished in a number of insidious ways" (70). The fear of negative consequences to their interruption can thus affect young female fan fiction authors, particularly those who write fan fiction for academic purposes. As discussed in greater detail below, my own research subject expressed a worry that she would be sanctioned for expressing her own interpretation of a canon text in fan fiction-based school assignments; she was concerned that if she wrote slash for such an assignment, she would receive a lower grade for "'seeing things where there's nothing to see.'" While she articulated no concerns about negative consequences for writing slash fan fiction outside of a curricular setting, the subject did fear

repercussions for what Reynolds terms "interrupting patriarchal discourses" when "the masculinist codes of academic discourse" are involved.

Reynolds ends with the question of "How? How can women and other marginalized speakers and writers interrupt the very discourses and practices that exclude or diminish them?" Her suggested answer includes a restructuring of the forms of writing deemed acceptable for academic assignments. As shown by my own Walter Mitty assignment and my research subject's Kafka assignment described below, fan fiction is one form of writing that breaks away from the "thesis-driven essay" with "rigidly structured paragraphing" Reynolds describes (71). I charge that fan fiction assignments can achieve the restructuring Reynolds wants interruption to bring.

Margaret Daisley and Susan Romano's article "Thirteen Ways of Looking at an M-Word" also speaks to women's interruption, particularly in online spaces such as those where many authors "publish" their fan fiction. Daisley and Romano conclude that many women do not want to be considered marginalized; describing women as such "place[s] them outside a system which they can never enter, which is 'demoralising'" (328). Fan fiction supports this conclusion, for through it women-- particularly young adult women-- do enter the "system" by appropriating and rewriting masculine texts to fit their own world view. The authors' description of feminist "computer literacy narratives" could describe female fan fiction as well: "we not only tell our stories in ways that disrupt popular hegemonic narratives, but we disrupt our own stories as well in order to clarify larger themes and questions" (Daisley 346). Young female authors "disrupt"-- or interrupt-- both canon texts through their fan fiction (particularly slash, which redefines



what are considered to be standard roles in romantic relationships) and their own stories through devices such as "author's notes," discussed below.

Daisley and Romano even include fan fiction of their own as part of their article, creating an imaginary online conversation among "[f]eminist heroes Thelma and Louise," such icons as Cynthia Selfe and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Daisley and Romano themselves (341-344). They describe this conversation as "approach[ing] our stories with fresh perspectives-- sometimes purposefully using literary devices, stepping into the third-person-singular voice of an omniscient narrator, trying on the voices of 'Thelma' and 'Louise,' and engaging in a dialogue with real and imagined others" (Daisley 346). As it does for Daisley and Romano within "Thirteen Ways," fan fiction allows female authors a chance to "try on" other voices (and genders) and enter into and interrupt dialogues with other fans and the canon texts themselves.

A final concept useful to an understanding of fan fiction is that of the agentive self, put forth by Glynda A. Hull and Mira-Lisa Katz's article "Crafting an Agentive Self: Case Studies of Digital Storytelling." Hull and Katz research the way two young adults, one female and one male, at a California community technology center create "agentive senses of self" (44). Specifically, the young adults compose "digital stories" which combine text, images, and sound in "multimedia, multimodal" compositions (Hull 52). Hull and Katz conclude that "digital stories reposition both authors and the texts (words, images, music, voices) they appropriate and recontextualize or recenter during performance" (69). These young authors use their writing to create new, agentive selves, then they place both these selves and their texts in positions of greater power. While the digital stories Hull and Katz describe are somewhat different from fan fiction, which is

usually word-based without directly incorporating images or other media, fan fiction authors also create agentive selves with their stories when they interrupt canon texts to rewrite the texts' narratives in ways that better reflect themselves.

As detailed below, my research subject "Madam Luna" gains agency and empowers herself through her fan fiction via the methods described by Reynolds, Daisley and Romano, and Hull and Katz. Luna's slash fan fiction disrupts and interrupts the masculinist narratives of the canon texts about which she writes, narratives which include the adventures of pirates and the works of Franz Kafka. In addition, Luna creates an agentive self through her work, repositioning herself to a place where she can control the male characters of these canon texts. Through a close reading of two of her fan fiction stories, one written for her own enjoyment and one composed to address a school assignment, I will investigate Luna's methods for disrupting, interrupting, and seizing agency.

#### Data: Madam Luna's Fan Fiction

I met Luna, a seventeen-year-old high school senior at the time of my research, online in 2004 when I visited her now-defunct fan website containing fan fiction and art for Antonio Prohias' comic strip *Spy vs. Spy*, which has appeared for decades in *MAD Magazine*. I contacted Luna via email expressing praise for her web site; since then we have remained in contact through email, instant messaging, message systems on websites such as DeviantArt and Facebook, and occasionally through postal mail. I also continue to read her fan fiction on the archive site FanFiction.Net. Luna agreed to participate in

my study by allowing me to read and analyze some of her fan fiction and to ask her specific questions about her writing.

Luna has been writing fan fiction from a young age. Although she does write original fiction featuring her own characters and settings, Luna focuses most of her energy on fan fiction, and she rarely uses original characters in her fan stories. When asked why she writes fan fiction, Luna responds, "It's a hobby. It's something fun to do that doesn't require very much obligation on my part, and I can pick up and leave off my stories whenever I please." She also cites feedback as the primary benefit when asked what she gains from writing fan fiction: "Benefits from fanfiction, for me, are purely in the form of reviews and feedback. I love getting reviews and comments, it's a definite ego boost. It is a major role, but then again, I've never been very torn up over the distinct lack of feedback I get from stories I write about more obscure fandoms. I just shrug and keep on writing" [*sic*].

There is something of a contradiction in Luna's statements: she writes that the benefits she receives from writing fan fiction are "purely in the form of reviews and feedback," yet she also notes that she is not distressed when she does not receive any feedback on her work. She "keep[s] on writing" whether or not her work is noticed by readers. She also does not mention garnering of feedback when asked why she writes fan fiction; instead she responds that fan fiction is "something fun to do" not because of the feedback she receives for her work but because writing fan fiction "doesn't require very much obligation." Therefore, despite her comment that her benefit from writing fan fiction is "purely" feedback, reader response is not the only reason fan fiction is enjoyable for Luna.

I suspected that much of the satisfaction Luna receives from writing fan fiction comes from the agency she gains in composing her stories and publishing them online for others to read. In her responses to my questions, Luna herself did not consciously identify any sense of empowerment as a benefit of fan fiction; however, when viewed in light of the research and theories detailed above, Luna's fan fiction does exhibit ways in which she seizes agency over canonical texts whether she is aware of or concerned with it or not.

I chose to analyze two stories by Luna, one written for her own enjoyment and one composed in response to an assignment for her senior AP English course. The extracurricular fan fiction is based on a video game series titled *Pop'n Music* which Luna describes as an "abstract' rhythm game" lacking a well-developed plot. In the series, the player must hit certain buttons on the game system controller in time to music. Each "genre" of music is represented by an animated character that dances along with the button presses; especially skillful playing is rewarded with special animations. Luna points out that

[t]he characters themselves have no backstory in the game, but in descriptions given on the web sites and in the accompanying manuals and art books, which is where most of the information regarding character relations and backstories come from. . . . Although there are recurring characters, none of them have any effect on the game's structure or events: they all exist in their own vacuum, being lent contextual meaning only from sources outside the game itself.

This lack of interaction among characters within the game could make the composition of fan fiction particularly challenging. However, Luna's *Pop'n Music* fan fiction does involve two characters who never interact within the series; in fact, they do not even appear in the same games.

One of these characters is a pirate named Warudoc who according to Luna appears in *Pop'n Music 7, 9, and 11*. He makes and sells robots which he uses to battle a character whom Luna describes as "the stereotypical anime hero." In developing her *Pop'n Music* fan fiction and artwork, Luna relies upon a canon text besides the games: a Japanese "art book" which provides fans with pictures and descriptions of each of the games' characters. While the book was only printed in Japanese, bilingual *Pop'n Music* fans have translated the Japanese text into English. Luna quoted this fan translation of Warudoc's profile when I asked her to describe him:

If you were to rank evil by looks, he's be the number one in the world. No, he's the most stylish pirate captain in the *universe!* His name is Warudoc. All the gold, silver, treasure and beautiful women in the world are his property. . . . Although if you try to talk to him, all you'll get out of it is bragging.

Home: ?

♥: Getting hold of a treasure map; making and selling Warudoc Robos

[sic]

Likes: Mischief

Dislikes: Heroes and good guys, every man Jack of 'em (lit. "Allies of justice, every ship.")

The second character in Luna's fan fiction is Captain Jolly, who only appears in *Pop'n Music 13*. Luna describes the song which plays during Jolly's appearance in the game as "very violent and destructive-sounding," describing him as the "king of the sea" to whom all others-- including God and Satan-- should kneel. However, his art book description portrays him as liking "accounts of dreams" and "pretty flowers" and disliking "land." Luna comments that this "makes him a really weird character, on the whole. He loves dreams and pretty flowers, but has such a strong-sounding song! It sounds like he's hiding something."

Luna's *Pop'n Music* fan fiction story, titled "Married to the Sea," is told in third person from Warudoc's point of view and features Jolly as its other main character. It begins with an "author's note" in which Luna directly addresses her readers to explain some of the minor changes she made to the setting of *Pop'n Music*. The story proper starts with a windless night during which Warudoc's mechanized ship the *Mariner Z*, which is staffed by the robots he builds in the game, comes across Jolly's ship which is stranded at sea because it is wind-powered. Warudoc boards the ship with the intent to either loot it or make a trade with its desperate crew. Jolly offers half of his spoils in exchange for being towed back to shore; in addition, he buys dinner for Warudoc to show his gratitude.

After dinner, Jolly intends to return to his ship since he hates land as the *Pop'n Music* art book claims, but Warudoc tries to convince him to remain on shore for the rest of the night, ostensibly because he doesn't want to have to tow Jolly a second time if he gets stranded again. Jolly finally agrees when Warudoc offers to pay for a visit to a nearby hot spring, where Warudoc has difficulty bathing due to having a hook replacing

one hand. Jolly assists him, and Warudoc nearly falls asleep in his arms before suggesting that they spend the rest of the night at an inn. Jolly offers to let Warudoc sleep on his ship with the caveat that he, Jolly, will be shipping out early in the morning. Warudoc protests that Jolly will get "lost" if he sails off again; when Jolly is offended at the perceived attack to his navigational skills, Warudoc clarifies that he means lost "somewhere on the other side of the world where I can't find you." Warudoc declares that he'll follow Jolly in his own ship, and the story ends with them going to Jolly's cabin together.

As Reynolds sees feminists interrupting the masculinist discourse of composition studies, throughout "Married to the Sea" Luna seizes agency by interrupting the canon text of *Pop'n Music* and its contention that all the "beautiful women in the world are [Warudoc's] property." Luna's interruptions are particularly visible in three areas of "Married to the Sea": (1) her author's note, (2) her use of plot devices to shape her narrative into one that can be categorized as slash, and (3) the role reversal she brings about between the characters of Warudoc and Jolly.

Luna's seizure of agency begins at the very start of the story with her author's note to her readers. The author's note is a fairly common device which allows fan fiction authors to address their readers directly in order to explain elements of their stories, to offer thanks for support or feedback, or to give credit to those who helped with the construction of the story. In Daisley and Romano's words, through author's notes fan fiction authors "disrupt our own stories as well in order to clarify larger themes and questions" (346). In this manner, Luna uses her author's note to explain the changes she made to the *Pop'n Music* canon:

Author's Note: AU,<sup>4</sup> if pop'n music fanfiction can be said to be "AU" at all. Maybe in the fact that beautiful women aren't one of Warudoc's interests here? And I just made up the *Mariner Z*, and did away with the concept of Earth for consistency with the White Land/Hige Land/Fairytale Kingdom countries. [sic]

In this note, Luna interrupts the narrative of the *Pop'n Music* games by changing several things: (1) she invents a ship for Warudoc to sail, (2) she relocates the games' characters and setting to another planet, and (3) most importantly she alters one of Warudoc's characteristics described in an official part of the *Pop'n Music* canon, the art book. The creation of the *Mariner Z* and relocation of games' setting are both moves designed to make "Married to the Sea" function as a narrative: Warudoc could not have come upon Jolly at sea without a ship, and such fictional countries as "the White Land" and "the Fairytale Kingdom" preclude the possibility that Luna could have easily set her story on Earth. Yet while both of these changes were intended to make Luna's job as an author less complicated, they still exhibit her agency in this fan fiction: she has the power to disrupt the canon text to make the creation of her story easier for herself.

However, the greatest interruption by the author's note is its reshaping of the character of Warudoc. According to the fan translation of the art book upon which Luna relies for her fan fiction, the "official" canon description of Warudoc includes the phrase "All the gold, silver, treasure and beautiful women in the world are his property." However, the idea of Warudoc wishing to possess "beautiful women" clashes with Luna's desire to write slash about him; therefore she makes her fan fiction "AU" and points out

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<sup>4</sup> AU stands for "alternate universe," which as described above denotes a story which could not logically take place within the canon text due to the fan fiction author's changes to the characters or setting.



that "beautiful women aren't one of Warudoc's interests here." Again, Luna demonstrates that she can interrupt the canon narrative of *Pop'n Music* as she wishes, simply eliminating any details that conflict with what she wishes to write. In this case, Luna's alterations also eliminate Warudoc's most masculinist characteristic.

The author's note also begins to establish for Luna an agentive self similar to those described by Hull and Katz above. By setting off the note from the rest of the story with the qualifier "Author's Note," Luna declares a new identity for herself, that of the author of "Married to the Sea" who is now in control of the world of *Pop'n Music* and able to change it at will. Luna is obviously very comfortable with the agentive self of author as the casualness of her phrasing in the description of her changes indicates: "*And I just made up the Mariner Z, and did away with the concept of Earth for consistency*" [emphasis mine]. Luna begins the sentence with "And" as if it is an afterthought, and her descriptions of "just" making up ships and "doing away" with Earth communicate how simple it is for her to realign Warudoc and Jolly's world. In her agentive self as a fan fiction author, Luna has the power to alter characters' lives from something as minor as creating ships for them to sail to as great a change as transplanting them to an entirely new planet.

This agentive self is not only a fan fiction author; she is a *slash* fan fiction author. While in the author's note Luna describes the change she made to Warudoc's character, she also disrupts her own narrative in other ways in order to shape it into a slash story. One such way involves the inclusion of plot devices designed to move the story towards a "slashy" situation conducive to an encounter, whether physical or emotional, between the two characters the author wishes to pair. Kustritz describes some such plot devices as

being so common, they comprise part of a "fan cannon [*sic*]." She offers examples of "the single-bed hotel room in *The X-Files*, and alien aphrodisiacs and bizarre undercover assignments in *Star Wars*" (Kustritz 381). Such devices constitute an interruption of the canon text because, to continue Kustritz' example, the writers of *The X-Files* would not put two male characters in a hotel room with one bed. However, the slash plot devices also can also disrupt the flow of the fan fiction author's own narrative if the devices are dropped into the story *deus ex machina* style.

While Luna does not resort to the trite hotel bed device, she does use the pirates' shared dinner and their visit to the hot spring as devices to bring the characters to the encounter she wishes them to experience. She describes the restaurant where Warudoc and Jolly dine as "a dark little place in the heart of the city, which was open all night long and which had reserved a certain table for [Jolly] upstairs for his frequent visits." The smallness and darkness of the restaurant, its staying open at a late hour, and the privacy of Jolly's reserved table all serve to place the characters in a romantic setting.

This setting is drawn out by the pirates' subsequent trip to a hot spring, which exhibits the same features as the restaurant:

Warudoc decided to head up the road to a small business right outside the town gates. It was still open at that hour and would remain so until around five o'clock, so they went out through the back to a small spring set in the ground, hidden from the view of the road by lush vegetation. It looked quite charming with the moonlight accenting the steam, though neither of them dwelled on it.

Again, the location is small, open late, and private. Luna thus interrupts the simple rescue plot of the story by including the dinner and hot spring scenes, both situations that would not appear in the canon text of *Pop'n Music* or most other video games. Through these two plot devices, Luna leads her characters to the climax of the story in which Warudoc admits his affection for Jolly, and she makes such an admission believable. She demonstrates agency in her ability to do so.

Besides altering the setting of *Pop'n Music* through both the changes she describes in the author's note and the slash plot devices she employs, Luna interrupts the canon text's portrayal of the characters of Warudoc and Jolly. The character of Warudoc as he appears in *Pop'n Music* corresponds to Kustritz' portrayal of masculinist characters; she describes "[t]he men captured and rewritten by slashers" as "wonderfully suited to this endeavor because they are so poorly filled out within the professionally published narrative, but they are also suited to rescription because they embody many of the things that are wrong with the patriarchal system of traditional romance" (376). Warudoc's possession of "all the beautiful women in the world" as described in the art book marks him as one of the figures Kustritz discusses, embodying the problems of traditional, patriarchal romance in which women are possessed and controlled by men. Luna's "rescription" of Warudoc, which occurs both explicitly in her author's note and implicitly throughout her narrative, removes this troubling masculinist characteristic by disrupting the canon text. However, Luna also interrupts her *own* portrayal of Warudoc and Jolly, changing them throughout the narrative from how they appeared at the beginning of "Married to the Sea." She effectively reverses their roles by

the end of the story, leaving the initially dominant Warudoc as the subordinate party in the relationship.

Luna establishes Warudoc's dominance at the beginning of "Married to the Sea" through both her physical description of the character and the situation in which he finds himself. In the rescue operation which occupies the first third of the story, Warudoc exhibits traditionally masculine (and piratical) characteristics. Early in the story, Luna gives a detailed description of Warudoc:

The captain was a leathery old seaman at the ripe age of fifty-three, though he never hesitated to knock it down a few notches, depending on the company he found himself in. Like any self-respecting pirate, he'd been in enough battles to lose an eye and a hand, which he'd replaced with a patch and a golden hook respectively.

The depiction of Warudoc as "leathery," his mature age (and the implication that he will lie about it for the purposes of flirtation), and the parts missing to "any self-respecting pirate" all work to establish him as a tough, strong, stereotypically masculine character.

In contrast, Jolly is a mix of a few traditionally masculine characteristics with other more feminine features: "He was rather broad, dressed in a bright cloak of red and yellow draped over his shoulders and he had a remarkably long goatee, though his eyes were hidden under the large wooden hat he wore." Later Warudoc realizes "that [Jolly's] black hair was what was hiding his eyes, not his hat. It gave him a decidedly shady look, either way." Although Jolly is broad-shouldered with facial hair, the masculinity of these features is tempered with the facts that he wears bright colors and that this facial hair is a "remarkably long goatee." In addition his eyes, hidden by his hair, provide a traditionally

feminine air of seduction which Warudoc registers as "shady." These descriptions given early in the story help to establish Warudoc as the more masculine and therefore traditionally dominant party-- a role which Luna will subvert by the end of "Married to the Sea."

The opening events of "Married to the Sea" also conspire to illustrate Warudoc's dominance. His mechanical ship does not rely on wind power as Jolly's ship does; thus Jolly is stranded, enabling Warudoc to come to his rescue by towing his ship in to shore. Warudoc is obviously the active party in this endeavor, whereas Jolly is passive. Warudoc also exhibits his dominance by taking advantage of the situation and demanding half of Jolly's treasure in exchange for the towing. Jolly willingly submits and hands over the gold without complaint, despite the protests of his crewmen. As with the characters' appearances, their actions in this opening part of the story present Warudoc as the traditionally masculine, dominant character and Jolly as the traditionally feminine, subordinate character.

Yet, by the end of the story, the characters' roles have been changed; Jolly is in control of the situation and Warudoc is made vulnerable. Luna begins to effect this change about halfway through the story, when Jolly offers to buy dinner for Warudoc:

"Come to the city with me tonight and I'll see that ye get the finest seafood dinner that gold can buy, ahaha!" He clapped Warudoc on the back powerfully, almost making him stumble. "Nary a pirate around who hates seafood, even if ye don't have the smarts to carry it around!"

"I-- what?" Warudoc said shakily, getting to his feet again. "Well, er--"

"Then it's settled!" Jolly laughed. "I'll tell ye. . . pirates with sympathy, we're a dying breed!"

In this short passage, there are three indications that Warudoc is losing his dominance and Jolly is gaining it: (1) Jolly offers to pay for dinner, a traditionally masculine role; (2) he physically nearly knocks Warudoc over when clapping him on the back, again a traditionally masculine gesture; and (3) Warudoc falters in his response to Jolly's offer, leading Jolly to assume acceptance. With this passage, Luna begins to interrupt both the traditional roles she set up for the characters at the beginning of the story and Warudoc's role as presented in the canon text of *Pop'n Music*.

Luna's interruption of these roles continues throughout the narrative, culminating in the hot spring scene at the end. The hook replacing Warudoc's missing hand makes it difficult for him to bathe, leading to Jolly's offer to do it for him:

"Ye need an extra hand?" Jolly said, grabbing the soap. "Don't want to see yer skin all cut up from this." He grabbed a washcloth and lathered it up, then began to briskly work on Warudoc's upper back.

"I'm not incapable, you know!" Warudoc looked back at him over his shoulder, flustered. "It just takes some getting used to!"

"If yer anything like me, you only get a decent shower a few times a year," Jolly chuckled, "so they ought to count, don't ye think?"

"All right, all right. . ." though he put a grudging tone in his voice for it, he inwardly appreciated the help. [*sic*] Jolly was right, even if it made Warudoc blanch a little at the idea of lending that trust to anyone else. "Though that's another thing I owe you for, apparently."

Warudoc leans back against Jolly, which leads to his observation that he "had realized how large [Jolly] was before, but now he seemed to just tower over him." Eventually Warudoc nearly falls asleep, giving Jolly the opportunity to kiss him. Throughout the scene, Luna emphasizes Warudoc's lack of control over the situation; he is the passive party while Jolly performs the actions of bathing, towering over, and kissing him.

Luna's description of how the two pirates leave the hot springs sums up the direction their relationship has taken: "Warudoc was having a hard time getting the words out as Jolly pulled him along, like Warudoc had barely any weight to him." Warudoc doesn't give up his agency without question; he constantly wonders "if he should be making himself so vulnerable around anyone, let alone another man." However, he does nothing to stop this vulnerability, as explained by Luna below. At the end of the story, Warudoc continues to relinquish his dominance by being the first to admit affection as Jolly prepares to return to his ship:

Jolly turned away from him and began to walk with long, ponderous strides along the pier. Warudoc ran after him, arresting him by grabbing a sleeve of his bright cloak with with [*sic*] a harsh, quick movement. "I won't have it," he added. "If you sail out to sea without any idea where you're going, you'll-- you'll just get lost again, you idiot!"

"Lost?" Jolly suddenly growled, whipping around. "Ye think I'll get *lost*? Why, ye don't even know--"

"Lost," he repeated, "somewhere on the other side of the world where I can't find you." Warudoc looked up at him, not wanting to realize that what he had just said was the heart of the whole thing, the idea that he

could lose Jolly just as quickly and permanently as he'd met him, and that the whole thing would have been nothing but an instant of a dream. "Do that and I'll never see you again, and we'll see which one of us forgets about all this first."

Warudoc's admission of his feelings serves as the climax of the story-- and somewhat ironically, he begins to regain agency if not his canon masculinity immediately afterwards. Warudoc decides abruptly that he will accompany Jolly on his next voyage without leaving Jolly much say in the matter: "'I'm coming with you,' he said decisively. 'I . . . I wasn't sure where to go next, and the Fairytale Kingdom's as good as any other.' He swept past Jolly as he walked over to his galleon, leaving the other captain on the pier, looking after him in astonishment." Jolly acquiesces and follows Warudoc into his, Jolly's, cabin. The story ends at this point, with Jolly once more being led by Warudoc.

This ending is at first jolting; after expending so much effort to interrupt Warudoc's masculinist character and establish his loss of agency, Luna seems to be undermining her own message by suddenly reversing the characters' roles once more and leaving them in the same positions as at the beginning of "Married to the Sea." However, it is crucial to realize that Warudoc only gained the agency he exhibits at the end of the story because he relinquished his masculinity earlier; if he had not submitted to Jolly's wishes either at dinner or in the hot spring, he would not have been in a position to stay with Jolly at the end of the story. Luna's unconscious message in "Married to the Sea" is thus that interruption of Warudoc's traditional masculinity is necessary to gain agency where it matters, in the ability to stay with the one he loves.



Kustritz discusses such rewriting of canon texts' masculinist characters as a key feature of slash fan fiction: "Fan writers 'repair the damage' done to these characters at the hand of the writers and producers of the source product by making them into real people with personalities, faults, needs, illogical desires, and weaknesses" (375). When I asked Luna why Warudoc protested inwardly against his feelings for Jolly but didn't actively resist them, she describes this process of making the character of Warudoc into a "real person":

I see Warudoc as being-- not really a "softie on the inside," but he tries so hard to play the "evil villain and nothing else" note that he really dislikes doing anything to the contrary, even when he wants to. It's a reputation thing. So him protesting to himself and not really doing anything about it is sort of a way to acknowledge that yes, he shouldn't be doing this if he wants to be the stone cold science-pirate that everyone thinks he is, but also yes, he should be doing this if he really does want the companionship and also affection that he's never let himself have.

In the canon text of *Pop'n Music*, Warudoc is a character whose personality is defined only by his actions in three short game sequences and a few lines of description in the art book. However, Luna sees or imagines him as having a personality underneath the exterior of a two-dimensional villain; her fan fiction allows her to bring this personality to light, thus interrupting the portrayal of Warudoc given in *Pop'n Music* with her own.

After identifying Luna's interruption of the characters through the reversal of their roles, I was interested to know why she chose to include this role reversal in her story

rather than have Jolly continue to play the subordinate role. However, when I pointed out the role reversal to Luna, she indicated that she was not even conscious of it:

That's a pretty good point you make-- I didn't really think of it like that, to be honest. Maybe I just have a thing for big tough guys' shell cracking and breaking down? XD<sup>5</sup> Although I think that, if Jolly had been the one to play that part, Warudoc (if his feelings hadn't changed) would have been annoyed and think "I have to babysit this weird pirate?" Maybe I should try a story like that sometime, though.

Although Luna did not consider that she was creating a role reversal for Warudoc and Jolly, I still believe that her unconscious inclusion of such a plot point is significant. Through it, Luna gains agency by interrupting and thus subverting the masculine role of Warudoc in the canon text and the feminine role for Jolly she herself established at the beginning of the story. She proves that she has power over both the canon text of *Pop'n Music* and such masculine figures as "science-pirates," for she is able to manipulate them at will to suit her own purpose: to make Warudoc's admission of affection for Jolly believable.

Luna thus exhibits agency in "Married to the Sea" through various strategies of interruption-- her author's note, her manipulation of plot devices to create a slash narrative, and the role reversal she creates between Warudoc and Jolly. Through this interruption, she demonstrates her agency over the canon text of *Pop'n Music*; she is able to rescript the masculinist character of Warudoc into a character with vulnerabilities, one who does not reinforce the patriarchal stereotype she is resisting. However, much of the

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<sup>5</sup> "XD" is an emoticon for laughter.

agency Luna gains through "Married to the Sea" is unique to her extracurricular fan fiction; when she composes fan fiction for a school assignment, certain constraints prevent her from taking the control she does when writing on her own.

To identify these constraints and to speculate how to overcome them, I explored a fan fiction-based composition assignment Luna wrote for her high school senior English class, English AP/GT. Luna indicates that although essays were the most common form of writing assignments in this class, she also often received fan fiction-based assignments:

Letter-writing assignments are common, as well as those requiring the students to put themselves into the minds of the characters (one assignment required us to write letters to the protagonists of *Waiting for Godot* advising them on how to better their lives). Short story assignments are common, too, based on prompts given to us by the teacher.

Luna enjoys the latter form of fan fiction assignments, commenting that they are "my strong suit and I usually have a lot of fun with those assignments, though it can get very tricky when we have to work on summaries and titles given to us instead of being able to come up with our own."

However despite her enjoyment of short story assignments, Luna does not view them as fan fiction to be shared with the online community as she does her extracurricular fan fiction. While many students post their school assignments on fan fiction archives (see for instance the category for *To Kill a Mockingbird* on FanFiction.Net), Luna usually does not. Her reasoning for not sharing her curricular fan fiction is that "[m]ost of the time, though, if I compose something fanfic-esque for a class,

it's restrained by the requirements of the assignment that demands it, like word count and content appropriateness, so I don't feel comfortable sharing something that isn't a real reflection of how I naturally write."

Besides feeling that her curricular fan fiction is not "a real reflection" of her writing style, Luna also indicates that she has more difficulty writing fan fiction for school assignments than for her own enjoyment, particularly if she is not a "fan" of the material about which she is assigned to write: "I remember that I had to write a letter from a character's point of view for an assignment, except that it was for Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening.' I really dislike that book, so having to write that was grueling."

Nevertheless, Luna does enjoy some of the canon texts she is assigned in her English classes. When I asked if she liked the Franz Kafka short stories about which she was assigned to write fan fiction (discussed below), she replied, "I enjoyed both of those stories (more so 'The Metamorphosis' than 'The Judgment) before I wrote my fanfic about them. I didn't necessarily like them better afterwards, although I will say that, if The Judgment were about the main character seducing Gregor Samsa, it'd be greatly improved" [*sic*]. While she has never written fan fiction of her own volition for a text she read for school, she has produced other fan work for curricular texts: "I did draw some fanart for Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, which my teacher put up in the room, though."

This initial look at Luna's curricular fan fiction suggests that she may gain less agency from it than from her extracurricular work, despite the fact that her curricular stories interrupt such academic canon texts as *The Awakening* and Kafka's short stories as opposed to non-academic texts such as *Pop'n Music*. Luna is less confident about and satisfied with the fan fiction she produces for school, as she indicates by preferring not to

post her curricular work online. Her lack of satisfaction with her curricular fan fiction seems to emanate from its inability to truly reflect her as a writer, to be "a real reflection of how I naturally write." Luna's responses to my questions indicate that she feels curricular fan fiction is not a true reflection of her writing style due to her instructor's restraints on assignments: requirements for the story's word count, content, title, and/or plot. In some cases such as the assignment on *The Awakening*, the assigned canon text restrains Luna as well in that she is forced to write fan fiction for a text of which she is hardly a fan. Such constraints limit Luna's work to the point where it doesn't even reflect what she sees as her inherent writing style.

To further explore how these limitations influence Luna's curricular fan fiction, I asked her to send me a fan fiction story she had written for a school assignment. She chose to send me a "Franz Kafka crossover fan fiction we were told to write, describing how Gregor Samsa from 'The Metamorphosis' and the main character (forgot his name) from 'The Judgment' might meet and interact with one another."<sup>6</sup> Luna did not provide any of her instructor's comments on her work, but she indicated that she made an A on the assignment.

In response to the assignment, Luna created an untitled two-and-one-half page, single-spaced short story in which Gregor Samsa and Georg Bendemann meet on a Sunday train; it is told in the third person from Samsa's point of view. When Samsa

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<sup>6</sup>In "The Metamorphosis," a salesman named Gregor Samsa is inexplicably transformed into a giant insect overnight. At first his family cares for him, but they grow less and less concerned with him, and he eventually dies. The main character of "The Judgment" is Georg Bendemann, who has taken over the family business from his elderly father. His possibly insane father levels a series of accusations of selfishness at Bendemann, including that he is misleading his friends about the status of the business and that he wishes his father dead. The old man declares that he sentences Bendemann to death by drowning; immediately afterwards Bendemann is compelled to run to a bridge from which he commits suicide by jumping into the river (Kafka 77-139).

introduces himself as a salesman, Bendemann warms to him and gives him a paper with his address, seizing the opportunity to offer Samsa a job working in Munich for his merchant business. When Samsa politely refuses on account of his parents and sister, Bendemann responds coldly. Distressed at the change in Bendemann's demeanor, Samsa changes his mind and promises to take Bendemann up on the offer the next day as long as his family approves. However, once he leaves the train and Bendemann, Samsa decides that he cannot expect his family to relocate to Munich "on his whims," and he throws Bendemann's address away. The story ends with the paper "spirited away by a small, inquisitive bug."

The Kafka assignment differs from "Married to the Sea" primarily in two ways: it contains "fairly veiled" slash as Luna classifies it rather than an overtly homoerotic relationship, and while Luna establishes a dominate/subordinate relationship between the main characters as she does in "Married to the Sea," the characters' positions are never reversed.

The Kafka piece's "fairly veiled" references to slash mentioned by Luna include a sentence pointing out that "Herr Bendemann had certainly taken an interest in [Samsa] that could be considered odd." A reader familiar with the genre might pick up on the "slashy" implications of Bendemann's "interest" in Samsa; however most readers would likely construe Bendemann's interest as simple concern for a business deal.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Luna chose not to add overt homoerotic subtexts to the Kafka piece is significant when considered in light of her fondness for slash and her preference to write it as opposed to

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<sup>7</sup> Luna feels that readers who are interested in slash are more likely to notice such suggestive undercurrents. When asked if slash fans pick up on homoerotic subtexts that others do not, whether they are really there or not, she responded "Definitely! My real life friend, who picked up on slash tendencies from me, calls it the 'slash goggles.'"

other genres. When I asked what form her fan fiction usually took, she responded, "My fanfiction [*sic*] usually falls at least partially in the 'romance' category, because I am a big fan of slash (male/male romantic couplings, many of which are not present in the original source material) and love writing it." If Luna is such a fan of slash, why did she write the Kafka piece in such a way that most readers would not pick up on her "fairly veiled" references?

I believe that Luna's decision to write the piece without overt slash was influenced by the fact that the story was written for a curricular assignment. When I asked Luna if her instructor considered slash to be acceptable, she responded

It's actually sort of a running gag in my class that I will slash anything (which is pretty much true) and see undertones everywhere, so I threatened to write my Kafka fic along those lines. Everyone was like "I bet you could actually do that," and I asked the teacher if I could and she was all "sure, I'd like to see it" XD *I obviously assured her it wasn't going to be all that spicy (and I think I actually said "it's going to be fairly veiled"), but I got a full grade on the assignment so she didn't take off any points for just that subject matter. (emphasis added)*

Despite the instructor's assurance that she would accept a slash story for the assignment, Luna's response here indicates that she had some anxiety over fulfilling the assignment in this way. She felt the need to reassure her instructor that she would not make the slash content overt, and she seems to expect that her instructor might "take off points" for the inclusion of slash.

This slight apprehension over writing slash for school is also reflected in her response to a question in which I asked if she would write slash to fulfill an assignment for an instructor who had specifically neither encouraged nor discouraged slash:

If I hypothetically would have had no prior communication with the teacher regarding slash, though, I would stray away from it because I wouldn't want points taken off for "seeing things where there's nothing to see," as they might put it, or thinking that I just wrote it that way because guys kissing is hot.

I was intrigued by this response and questioned Luna further on it, asking why she thought she would get a lower grade for "seeing things where there's nothing to see." I also asked if she thought she would be "counted off" for reading heterosexual romance or attraction in a place where the instructor didn't. Luna answered

Probably not heterosexual romance, although I bet I'd get a few confused comments about it. But homosexuality is a much touchier subject, so if I had a very conservative instructor, I might get a point or two taken off on the basis of "a story being unrealistic" or something (assuming the story is fanfic of something discussed in class; if I wrote an original slash story I don't think they'd be able to do anything about it!).

Luna's anxiety about receiving a lower grade and her comment that "homosexuality is a much touchier subject" than heterosexuality show that she recognizes the stigma placed upon homosexual relationships by the dominant forces of society, in this case the academy. Her final decision to make the slash in the Kafka piece "fairly veiled" rather than overt is not made of her own artistic judgment but out of apprehension of censure in



the form of a lower grade. It seems likely that Luna would have made her Kafka fan fiction "slashier" if she had not written it for school based on her observation that "if *The Judgment* were about the main character seducing Gregor Samsa, it'd be greatly improved" [*sic*]. A good grade on the assignment takes precedence over self-expression; Luna stifles her preference for writing slash and produces a text that "isn't a real reflection of how I naturally write." In Hull and Katz' terms, she does not create as strong an agentive self in her curricular fan fiction as her extracurricular; her agentive self is limited and constrained by what she feels the instructor wants.

Thus, while Luna's curricular fan fiction does add to texts such as Kafka's that are part of the academic canon, it does not interrupt them. Bendemann does not seduce Samsa as Luna would like; he simply offers him a job, Samsa refuses, and they go their separate ways. Luna even indicates that "I consider my Kafka fanfic to be a prequel-- the character from 'The Judgment' hasn't killed himself yet, and Gregor Samsa hasn't turned into a bug yet, but is about to very soon afterwards." Her fan fiction does not at all disrupt Kafka's own stories; "The Judgment" and "The Metamorphosis" take place as before. Although the assignment gives Luna the agency to interact with Kafka's works, she does not have the power to interrupt or alter them due to her concern for her grades. The instructor's (possibly imagined) constraints regarding homosexuality prevent Luna from writing what she would like even though the instructor indicated that she would allow Luna to address the assignment with a slash story. In addition, the fact that the assignment and instructor *allow* Luna the power to write about Kafka in a "slashy" way raises another question: is agency really empowerment if someone in authority "allows" an author to take it, or must agency be seized?

Luna's Kafka piece does share one similarity with "Married to the Sea" in that its characters exist in a definite dominant/subordinate dynamic; the establishment of this dynamic is all the more impressive in that the piece is much shorter than "Married to the Sea" and thus affords fewer opportunities for character development. Luna in part establishes their roles in this relationship via physical descriptions of each character and his actions; these descriptions are completely her own, as Kafka does not provide details on the physical appearance of either man. Gregor Samsa is "a bespectacled and somewhat mousy-looking man" whose hand motions are "wishy-washy." He is constantly making nervous gestures such as "drumming his fingers on the table" and "running his fingertips over the metal clasps of his suitcase." His obvious discomfort emphasizes that he is in a subordinate position to Georg Bendemann, "a tall, clean-shaven man in a dark suit, looking much more well-to-do than Gregor was himself." Throughout the story, Bendemann exudes confidence in his control over the situation: he gives Samsa "a condescending smile," "lean[s] back in his chair," and "laces his fingers together in his lap, clearly feeling comfortable espousing to Gregor the way he was." As in "Married to the Sea," Luna clearly establishes that one of her two main characters is dominant over the other.

However, again the difference between the two texts lies in the lack of interruption in the Kafka piece. Whereas Luna disrupts the established dominant/subordinate relationship in "Married to the Sea" by having Jolly lose more and more agency, in the Kafka story Bendemann remains in control until his last appearance in the story. When Bendemann prepares to leave the train, he treats Samsa coldly for his rejection of the offer of employment. In response to this attitude, Samsa finally accepts

the address Bendemann gives him, and he promises that he will discuss the offer with his family and give Bendemann an answer the next day. Bendemann thus receives the acquiescence he wants from Samsa through emotional bullying of the other man; it is only when he gets what he wants that he gives Samsa "the most genuine [smile] Gregor had seen from him." Although Samsa does throw away Bendemann's address later, it is not through any seizure of agency that he rejects the offer; instead it is through submission to his equally bullying family. Thinking of them, "Gregor's determination began to slowly leak away" and "the whole thing seemed like a pursuit of selfishness." Samsa's action only reestablishes his weakness and lack of empowerment. Thus the roles of the two men are never reversed; Luna never interrupts her own narrative to do so. Her agentive self is again constrained, perhaps by the unconscious belief that her instructor would not approve of Luna's alteration of Kafka's portrayal of Samsa as weak and Bendemann as strong.

In "Married to the Sea," Luna seizes agency by including an author's note which changes several established elements of the *Pop'n Music* canon, using plot devices to create a slash narrative, and reversing the roles of the main characters. These actions empower her by interrupting both the canon text of *Pop'n Music* and her own narrative. However, she does none of these things in the Kafka fan fiction. Instead of disrupting the canon text by "slashing" Kafka's characters as she does those of *Pop'n Music*, she merely includes a "fairly veiled" undertone which would likely be missed by most readers; instead of reversing the power dynamic of Bendemann and Samsa as she does for Warudoc and Jolly, she leaves Kafka's characters in the roles that could be expected from their portrayal in the canon texts.

## Conclusions and Implications for Researchers and Instructors

Through my analysis of Luna's extracurricular and curricular fan fiction, I have determined that while young female authors can seize agency and resist marginalization through their fan fiction, when written for a traditional authority such as an instructor, fan fiction's ability to empower is reduced both by the instructor's explicit restraints and by the author's own worries over receiving a lower grade for writing what she wants to write. The first point is illustrated through the interruption, disruption, and agentive self that Luna effects in her extracurricular *Pop'n Music* fan fiction "Married to the Sea." In Daisley and Romano's words, this fan fiction "disrupts popular hegemonic narratives"-- the narrative of the masculine man, the capitalist, the pirate. It also disrupts itself in the way that Daisley and Romano describe: "we disrupt our own stories as well in order to clarify larger themes and questions, asking for instance: Is a particular instance of marginalization (or silence) natural, or unnatural? And, who is doing the defining?" (346). Luna's disruption of her own story is the author's note in which she addresses the patriarchy inherent in her character-- Warudoc's interest in "beautiful women" as described in the canon *Pop'n Music* art book. This characteristic implies that the nature of the women does not matter, as long as they are beautiful. In turn, Luna decides that this marginalization is "unnatural," and she dismisses it. Luna seizes agency and says, "Now *I* am doing the defining."

However, my second point-- the reduction by curricular restraints of the agency fan fiction affords-- is embodied in Luna's *lack* of interruption and disruption, both of the canon narrative and her own, in her Kafka story. She does not create a slash narrative for

her fan fiction, nor does she change the features that define the characters in either the canon text or her own narrative. This lack of interruption suggests that she feels herself more constrained when writing fan fiction for school; her agentive self is stunted. While it is a vital discovery to recognize that a fan fiction author's agency is diminished when she writes for school, a question still remains: how can female authors like Luna seize greater agency through curricular fan fiction?

Further research on fan fiction can provide the opportunity to uncover some answers to this question. As noted above, while the body of research on fan fiction is steadily growing there are still many areas of the genre to be explored. One area in particular involves authors such as Luna, females in their late teens who are between the young teenagers and adult women whose fan fiction is the subject of most research. This is a particularly crucial age when many fan fiction authors will enter freshman composition courses, making research of their age and gender groups especially useful.

More research is also needed on young adults who write slash, since as explained above slash is especially disruptive to masculinist, patriarchal canon texts and characters. Close studies of other authors who choose to interrupt canon texts through slash may reveal more ways in which they, like Luna, seize agency through the genre and resist marginalization of their age and gender groups by rescripting those who represent the patriarchy.

A final and most useful avenue of study involves research on curricular fan fiction. From my personal experience in school, online, and with Luna, fan fiction is more commonly assigned in high school English courses than in college-level courses, either composition- or literature-based; the Walter Mitty assignment was the only fan fiction-

related assignment I received throughout my entire career as an undergraduate, and Luna has indicated that she has had no opportunities to write fan fiction for the college courses she is now taking: "None of my college classes have allowed me to write what could potentially be fan fiction, sadly! My College Composition I class was all research papers and one literary analysis paper, and none of my other ones were writing-based." It would be helpful to know whether this pattern holds true for other high school and college English courses. As I've found that instructor constraints play a large role in determining how much (or how little) agency Luna gains through her curricular fan fiction, a close look at curricular fan fiction assignments from various courses would reveal what limits other instructors are placing upon students' fan fiction. Are they issuing requirements for story length, title, or plot as Luna indicated her instructor did, and is content-appropriateness regarding subjects like homosexuality an issue?

In addition to the work that remains to be done by researchers, instructors can have a hand in shaping the agency their students seize by interrupting canon texts through curricular fan fiction. Some instructors are resistant to fan fiction in the classroom, and Angela Thomas describes the opposition to fan fiction she witnessed during her education and training as a teacher:

In my own teacher education courses of the mid-1980s, for example, we were taught to value the fostering of children's imaginations, and as far as writing lessons were considered, we went to great lengths to talk about the ways we should stimulate children's imaginations to create their own original characters and stories. The idea of children using existing

characters in their fiction writing was definitely considered bad practice and against teaching philosophies of the time. (Thomas 229)

However, researchers now understand the value of fan fiction in a curricular setting. Thomas goes on to note that instructors as well "are recognising the importance of including the texts of popular culture into the English curriculum as valid and significant texts for study" (229). To this end Henry Jenkins expresses the "powerful opportunities for learning" inherent in the "informal learning cultures" created by fan fiction, which he describes using James Gee's concept of "affinity spaces." Jenkins quotes a sixteen-year-old fan of *Harry Potter* to point out that some students' interests are better held by fan fiction than by literature from the academic canon: "It is one thing to be discussing the theme of a short story you've never heard of before and couldn't care less about. It is another to be discussing the theme of your friend's 50,000-word opus about Harry and Hermione that they've spent three months writing" (*Culture* 177).

Nedra Reynolds' call for the inclusion of feminist interruption in composition courses perhaps best sums up the need for non-traditional assignments such as those based on fan fiction:

Feminists in composition studies might want to investigate the kinds of interruption possible in written texts and the reader-writer relationship. . . . We need to offer students more and greater means of resistance to the thesis-driven essay, rigidly structured paragraphing, and the reductive emphasis on coherence and clarity that still determine so much of academic writing and the service-course ideology of composition

programs. For composition we need to rethink radically the forms of writing we find acceptable. (Reynolds 71)

I believe that this "radical rethinking" should include the decision that fan fiction is an "acceptable form of writing" for English courses. While I do not advocate that students should be *forced* to complete assignments with fan fiction, as mandatory fan fiction would eliminate much of the students' agency in choosing how to address their assignments, I do believe that instructors should offer the *option* of using fan fiction along with other non-traditional genres to fulfill assignments. Instructors should give students, particularly female students, the opportunity to interrupt and disrupt the canon texts they explore and to create an agentive self who seizes the agency typically denied to them by these often masculinist texts. As I have learned through my own experience with *Walter Mitty* and through my investigation of Luna's work, fan fiction is one path to this interruption, disruption, and agentive self.

However, as detailed above I also found that Luna achieved much less agency with her curricular fan fiction than with extracurricular work. Therefore, it is not enough to simply include the option of fan fiction assignments; instructors must also make sure that these assignments are as empowering as possible. The key to this is to impose fewer constraints about students' fan fiction. While I realize that some constraints are necessary, some restrictions could be lifted or altered.

Luna indicated that her instructor imposed three types of limits on fan fiction assignments: word count, plot, and title. I feel that the instructor's length restrictions could be mitigated through widening the range of acceptable word counts. Some word count guidelines are probably necessary-- for instance, it would be highly impractical for



an instructor to grade a 130,000-word fan fiction story such as the one I have composed over the past year-- but the minimum requirement of words could be lowered and the maximum raised. A lower word count minimum would allow for more tightly-written, concise fan fiction, while a higher maximum would give students the opportunity for further character and plot development. As an example, if Luna's Kafka fan fiction were longer, she would have the chance to effect the role reversal she had space to develop in "Married to the Sea."

Plot restrictions, such as requiring that the Kafka fan fiction *must* involve the meeting of Samsa and Bendemann on a train, are particularly limiting. The student has a much smaller opportunity for agency if she is forced to compose a story based on a plot of the instructor's devising. More general assignments, such as my instructor's which dictated only that our fan fiction involve a new adventure for Walter Mitty, afford the student a greater opportunity to tell her own story in the way that interrupts the canon text. Finally, while title requirements are perhaps the least restrictive of the three, they still at least partially dictate what the student's plot must include. In order to seize more agency, the student should be able to determine her own plot entirely, including its title.

Finally, instructors must emphasize to their students that all content is acceptable. Even when Luna got her instructor's permission to write slash for the Kafka assignment, she still feared that she would "get points taken off" for the act, and she indicated that she would be even more concerned for her grade if she had no communication with an instructor about content appropriateness. Instructors should repeatedly indicate to their students that the students do not need permission to write what they wish to write, whether it be slash, heterosexual romance, or any other topic. As Luna shows, students

are leery of interrupting canon texts-- and their instructors' courses-- with their own content. It is vital that instructors express that students have a *right* to this interruption, to disruption and the creation of agentive selves. Most students have been indoctrinated in the patriarchal academy to the point of feeling that expression of these agentive selves is somehow wrong and to be censured, as Luna's apprehension regarding her grades demonstrates. It is our duty as instructors to communicate to our students that they have the freedom to choose when and how they will interrupt the masculinist canon, whether the canon is popular like *Pop'n Music* or academic like Kafka-- and when and how they will interrupt us. Female fan fiction authors like Luna should be able to seize agency wherever they wish, on the Internet *and* in the classroom.

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