Wordplay, mindplay: Fan fiction and postclassical narratology

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[0.1] Abstract—Recent narrative theories on story worlds, or the worlds evoked by narratives, call attention to the process of fan reading and the role which the canon plays in that process. This paper posits that such theories can help us understand literary techniques that make a difference on the level of the reading experience that is implied by fan fiction texts. This is illustrated with a close reading of Naguabo's "The Mother of All Marriage Proposals," a Jane Austen fic.

[0.2] Keywords—Jane Austen; Narrative; Story world


1. Introduction

[1.1] In recent years, several scholars have argued that it is worthwhile to examine fan fiction through the lens of literary studies (Pugh 2005; Kaplan 2006; Stasi 2006; Thomas 2011). This lens brings research topics into focus that are not prioritized by other approaches, such as those inspired by cultural studies, sociology, psychology, law, or media studies. Literary studies of fan fiction have called attention to such issues as the narrative form of fan fiction, the interpretation of individual fics, and their aesthetic value. I will home in on a topic that is thrown into relief by cognitive narrative theories on story worlds, or the worlds evoked by narratives. These postclassical narrative theories highlight the process of fan reading, and draw attention to the fact that fan readers use the fan fiction text to build up a mental image of a world. Using Catherine Emmott's concept of "contextual frame" as a point of departure, I will develop a heuristic tool that makes it easier to discuss the process of fan reading in a literary analysis. This is important, because some of the literary techniques used in fan fiction texts make a difference on the level of the reading experience that is implied by the text. As I will demonstrate, this is particularly relevant in the case of literary fandoms, where quotes from the source text can be used in creative ways. I will illustrate this with Naguabo's "The Mother of All Marriage Proposals" (2008), a short fic based on Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice.

2. From canon formation to fan reading

[2.1] In previous studies, the storytelling practices of fans have typically been discussed with the concept of canon. In The Democratic Genre (2005), for instance, Sheenagh Pugh remarks that fan writers can use a lot of shorthand, allusion, and irony because their audience is
familiar with "the canon" (32). This means that fan fiction texts have a very specific implied reader. This term is used in narratology to refer to "the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs" (Smid 2013, 1; my emphasis). The shorthand, allusion, and irony that Pugh mentions are such indexical textual features, which indicate that the implied fan reader is a reader who is able to bring the canon to bear on the fan fiction text. "Transfictional" texts, or texts that take the world of an antecedent text as a point of departure, assume that the reader has a thorough and detailed knowledge of the text on which they are based (Ryan 2008, 391). This makes them different from texts that simply allude to other texts. Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1818), for instance, is tailored to a reader who is familiar with the Gothic novel but this reader does not need to know, say, Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) to appreciate that Austen's novel is a parody of the genre. The specific relation between the fan fiction text and the canon is not usually discussed in depth. Indeed, scholarly discussions of the concept of canon tend to focus on fannish canon formation, the process by which fan communities select source texts and invest them with authority (Jenkins 1992, 331, 94–8; Busse and Hellekson 2006, 7; Derecho 2006, 65–7). This is worth mentioning, because several discussions of Jane Austen fan fiction fit into this framework. In "Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online" (2007), for instance, Bronwen Thomas supports her discussion of canon formation with a study of the Republic of Pemberley, an online community that is devoted to all things Austen. Thomas notes that, while the Republic's critical apparatus resembles that of most other fan fiction sites, its contributor guidelines are remarkably protective of Austen's "legacy" (cf. Pugh 2005, 37–9). Considering this "respect for the source texts and their author," and the "almost Leavisite tone" of the guidelines in question, Thomas concludes that the notion of literary canon, "not just as some kind of badge of quality, but also as guarantor of moral improvement and education," still holds sway in the Austen fandom. This tension between the fannish canonization and literary canonization of Jane Austen and her work has also been discussed by other scholars (Van Steenhuyse 2011; Xu 2011).

[2.2] I want to characterize the reader or the reading experience that is implied by fan fiction texts with the help of what David Herman calls postclassical narrative theories (2009, 30). The classical approach to narratology, which was taken by the early Roland Barthes, A.J. Greimas, and other scholars, is heavily indebted to the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. De Saussure famously argued that linguists should not study the utterances that speakers create to express unique ideas (parole), but the language (langue) (1959, 9, 14–5). By this, he means the system of constituents and combination rules that is accepted by a community of speakers, and cannot be created, used, or modified without the cooperation of other members (1959, 14–5). Classical narratologists typically posit that narratives are underpinned by an analogous system (Herman 2009, 28). Postclassical narratologists, in contrast, no longer use de Saussure's structuralist linguistics as a pilot science. They enrich the insights of classical narratology with ideas from other disciplines, such as the cognitive sciences, and bring new kinds of stories and media under scrutiny (30–2).
Among other things, this has resulted in a reexamination of the process of narrative comprehension. Over the past few decades, scholars like Umberto Eco, David Herman, and Marco Caracciolo have begun to characterize this process with concepts from the cognitive sciences, such as "frame," "script," "mental model" and several others. The heuristic tool I will use, and which I will call the narrative frame for easy reference, is based on Catherine Emmott's concept of contextual frame. Emmott has hypothesized that readers construct mental representations of fictional situations when they work to comprehend stretches of narrative text (1998, 186). These contextual frames help readers to remember which characters are present in the immediate environment, where the action is located, and when the action is taking place (Emmott 2004, 103). This information, which is either provided by the text or inferred from it, is needed to understand subsequent sentences (1998, 186; 2004, 121). When readers of *Pride and Prejudice* begin to read the passage that recounts Mr. Darcy's first proposal, for instance, their contextual frame will, at the very least, include a rough idea of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, of the room they are in, and of the situation's place in the time line of the story. For one thing, this contextual frame helps them to make sense of the pronouns in the opening lines of Mr. Darcy's proposal:

> After a silence of several minutes he came towards her in an agitated manner, and thus began,

> "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you." (Austen [1813] 2003, 185)

My heuristic tool, which I call the narrative frame, is a contextual frame that is constructed to make sense of a fan fiction text. Unlike regular contextual frames, however, a narrative frame is also partly based on the canon, or qualified by it. I illustrate this with an excerpt from Wendi's "A Lesson Hard Learned" (2011). One of the opening lines of this fic reads:

> The gentleman was, as usual, lost in imagining a pair of fine eyes and the conversation that perhaps would have taken place if the owner of those eyes had been present to share his meal with him.

The phrase "a pair of fine eyes" is lifted from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where Mr. Darcy meditates "on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow" (Austen [1813] 2003, 27). The pretty woman in question is Elizabeth Bennet. Because this phrase is used in a *Pride and Prejudice* fic, readers are invited to draw parallels between the context that is described here and the context in which "a pair of fine eyes" occurs in Austen's novel. The text invites readers, in other words, to equate the "gentleman" with Mr. Darcy and the object of his thoughts with Elizabeth Bennet. This gives the reader's contextual frame a wider meaning. As I will demonstrate in a moment, the meaning that is added may also be a qualification of the contextual frame, rather than an expansion.
I believe the narrative frame concept helps to better understand the implied reader of fan fiction texts. I am not using the concept to make claims about individual readers. Without a proper survey, it is impossible to say, for example, whether every reader recognizes Wendi's quote, just as it is impossible to say how a specific reader envisions Elizabeth's eyes. I am interested in the reading that is fixed and objectified in the text. More specifically, I believe that some literary techniques work on the level of this implied reading experience. This is particularly striking in the case of literary fandoms, where words from the source text can be used to great effect.


I illustrate this with Naguabo's "The Mother of All Marriage Proposals." This short fic was posted on the Derbyshire Writers' Guild, an Internet forum that houses an archive for Jane Austen fan fiction. "The Mother of All Marriage Proposals" uses quotes from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to set up a contrast between what happens in the fic and what happens in canon, during Mr. Darcy's first proposal. This contrast adds a dimension to what is explicitly stated in the fan fiction text. "The Mother of All Marriage Proposals" engages with an important gap in the story world of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In Austen's novel, Elizabeth Bennet declines Mr. Darcy's offer of marriage, accusing him of, among other things, a lack of "gentleman-like" manners and of "arrogance," "conceit," and a "selfish disdain of the feelings of others" ([1813] 2003, 188). In the remainder of the novel, Mr. Darcy is remarkably civil, respectful, and humble (244, 308, 346). In the final chapters, he explains that this is due to Elizabeth's reproofs, which forced him to acknowledge that he was "selfish," "overbearing," and condescending (346–51, 359–61). This explanation is very brief, however, and much of Mr. Darcy's reasoning remains implicit. "The Mother of All Marriage Proposals" remedies this. Naguabo argues that Mr. Darcy began to take Elizabeth's reproofs to heart because he had a nightmare shortly after Elizabeth's refusal. In this nightmare, the horrid Caroline Bingley made him an offer of marriage, and he saw Elizabeth kissing Mr. Wickham, his archenemy. When he wakes up and thinks about his dream, he realizes that there is some truth to Elizabeth's reproofs.

The first paragraph of this humorous short story seems to recount the opening events of *Pride and Prejudice*: Mr. Darcy is staying at Netherfield, and his friend Mr. Bingley has developed an interest in Jane Bennet. As the story progresses, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the events of the fic within the interpretive frame that is set up by the fic’s opening lines. Naguabo’s Mr. Darcy is cheered by Mr. Bingley's growing attachment to Jane Bennet, and by his own attachment to Elizabeth. He even notes that the improper behavior of the Bennet family is no worse than that of his own aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. This is hard to reconcile with the attitude of Austen's Mr. Darcy at that point in *Pride and Prejudice*. During his proposal, Mr. Darcy plainly tells Elizabeth that he did everything in his power to separate his friend from Jane Bennet (Austen [1813] 2003, 187), and he says, at one point:
"Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?" (188)

"The Mother of All Marriage Proposals" emphasizes this contrast by reassigning the speaker of canonical quotes. In Naguabo's story, Caroline Bingley enters and exclaims:

"In vain have I struggled! It will not do! My feelings will not be repressed! You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

This quote clearly invites readers to consider Caroline Bingley's proposal against the background of Mr. Darcy's first proposal. This narrative frame adds an important layer of meaning to the story. The dialogue that follows Caroline's exclamation is based on Mr. Darcy's proposal and Elizabeth's rejection in *Pride and Prejudice*, although the exchange also contains snippets from other dialogues. Notably, Mr. Darcy's words tend to echo Elizabeth's words at Hunsford; and even when he uses his own words, he repeats Elizabeth's reproofs. Consider, for example, the following turn:

"Do you expect me to rejoice in the pretentious displays in which you engage in every gathering or your disdain of all your neighbors and acquaintances before they have the opportunity to show themselves worthy of it? And how could I possibly attach myself to a lady who is determined to thwart the happiness of my best friend, her own brother?"

By establishing a link between Mr. Darcy's refusal and Elizabeth's refusal, between the events of the fic and the events in canon, the narrator adds a dimension to what has been stated in the text up to this point. When Mr. Darcy rejects Caroline Bingley, he also rejects the man he is at the time of his proposal, in *Pride and Prejudice*. This is made explicit after Mr. Darcy wakes up in screaming horror:

He struggled to remember the words spoken in his nightmare. They were familiar, in fact, they were markedly similar to parts of his own proposal to Miss Bennet at Hunsford and her rejection of his offer. Could it be that she was correct in her observations, and his character and behavior truly fell short of the manner of a gentleman?

This epiphany only makes sense to readers who know enough about Mr. Darcy's proposal and Elizabeth's rejection to realize that this fic has staged a role-reversal. After all, if you look at the fic alone, Mr. Darcy defends gentleman-like values in his dream. The implied reader, then, is an integral part of the design of this fic.

4. Conclusion
I do not believe it is useful to replace the concept of canon with concepts from postclassical narratology. Yet I do believe these theories invite us to look at the concept from a new vantage point, and that they place different dimensions in the spotlight. It is only by shifting our perspective in this way that we can fully appreciate how the resources of language and form are used in fan fiction texts.

5. Works Cited


