Affirmational and Transformational Values and Practices in the Tolkien Fanfiction Community

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*"But if we speak of a Cauldron, we must not wholly forget the Cooks. There are
many things in the Cauldron, but the Cooks do not dip in the ladle quite blindly.
Their selection is important." -J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories" (30)*

Through an extended metaphor about the "Cauldron of Story," J.R.R.
Tolkien's 1948 essay "On Fairy-stories" presents a theory of the origin of
traditional stories. Within this Cauldron simmers a bone-broth—the story—
comprised of the varied materials (the bones) that inform it: people, their names
often effaced by time; the events in their lives; the places where these events
transpire, all gathered across the span of human existence, tossed into the soup,
and simmered into story. While Tolkien's theory allows ample space for
invention—he calls it "the most important and fundamental" of the techniques by
which a story is crafted—the theory is notable for its acknowledgement of story
as fundamentally dependent upon the existence of other stories (p. 21). This is not
a surprising view for a scholar of the literature of the Middle Ages, an era when
the bones of a story are more apparent in the broth and it is hard to discuss a text
without touching upon its sources.

What Tolkien describes in his Cauldron of Story, however, could just as
easily describe a relatively new genre of literature, at least in terms of popular
awareness: fanfiction, sometimes called transformative fiction because of its use
and transformation of existing characters and plotlines into a new story. As a
genre, fanfiction is remarkably hard to define, in large part because it is a
relatively recent idea that stories retold and reworked from an existing source
should stand as a separate genre. "On Fairy-stories" itself provides several
examples of medieval texts that, were they similarly constructed today around a
television show or popular novel, would easily qualify as fanfiction.

Further complicating the definition of fanfiction, the modern publishing
industry *does* sanction derivative and transformative works under certain legal
conditions. For example, few would call a sanctioned *Star Trek* spinoff novel
fanfiction. Even though such a novel need not be qualitatively different from a
Star Trek novel written by a fan and published in a fanzine or on a fanfiction
website, that it was solicited and sanctioned by the rights holder disqualifies it as
fanfiction. Other scholars have observed that fanfiction is by necessity a genre
populated by writers who do not hold power within the publishing industry. In
other words, when a published author—usually white, usually male, usually
economically privileged—produces a story based on an existing text, it becomes
pastiche or homage or, as Anne Jamison (2013) puts it, "simply fiction" (pp. 19-
20). The identical text written by a teen girl and published online is fanfiction.

Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, fanfiction is a work of fiction that employs details from and responds to an existing, published text and is produced by an author who is not receiving financial renumeration for their work. Fanfiction is part of the larger category of fanworks, a term which encompasses any creative response to an existing text: poetry, essay or criticism (called *meta* within the fan community), art, film and video, music and audio, costume, and craft, among others. Within this definition of fanfiction, as Megan B. Abrahamson (2013) has noted, much of Tolkien's own work can be read as fanfiction, again not surprisingly given that he was steeped in medieval literature, from which his own theory of the Cauldron of Story derived. Certain posthumously published works—notably the tale of Túrin Turambar, *The Fall of Arthur,* and *Sellic Spell*—explicitly draw narrative elements from and respond to literary texts, the *Kalevala,* Arthurian legends, and *Beowulf,* respectively. Other borrowings—the name *Eärendil,* the Rohirric *ubi sunt* poem, the Dwarves' names in *The Hobbit*—are subtler. However, these borrowings also respond to the texts in which Tolkien the scholar steeped himself and which excited his imagination, leading to the motive given to Milton Waldman of wishing to create—or recover—a series of mythological tales for England, "redolent of our 'air'" and "possessing … the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic" (2000, p. 144). Given this, it is perhaps appropriate that Tolkien's fans respond similarly to his work, writing stories set on Arda that extend, respond to, and embroider details upon his legendarium. To Tolkien's mind, at least as revealed in "On Fairy-stories," this seems to be an essentially human way to respond to the stories that succeed in creating, to borrow another term from Tolkien's essay, a Secondary World.

TOLKIEN-BASED FANFICTION

The Stories

Tolkien-based fanfiction, sometimes shortened to Tolkienfic by its practitioners, has existed for at least sixty years, as of this writing, with the first documented Tolkienfic appearing the 1960 fanzine *I Palantír* (FellowsHub, 2019).[1] Since then, Tolkien fanzines have existed, presumably containing fanfiction and other fanworks, until the early 2000s, when fanfiction activity shifted mostly online (Organization for Transformative Works, 2019). The simultaneous rise of home Internet use and the release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy produced an explosion of online fan—and fanfiction—activity in the early 2000s.

Tolkienfic is tremendously varied. To begin with, it occurs in nearly all literary genres—adventure, romance, horror, humor, and science fiction, among

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[1] Marquette University maintains a large collection of Tolkien fanzines and has begun the process of obtaining the rights to make them available online.

others—and encompasses Tolkien's legendarium from the singing of the *Ainulindalë* to the fate of characters in modern times—and beyond. In addition, fanfiction-specific genres are rife with Tolkienfic. Busse and Hellekson, in 2006, defined three main genres specific to fanfiction. All three genres were common and popular from the outset of online Tolkienfic fandom. Het stories contain a heterosexual relationship as a major component of the story, while slash stories feature a same-sex relationship. Genfic, in contrast, does not focus on romantic or sexual relationships, although they may be present in the background.

These genres remain relevant as of this writing with additional genres added. The subgenre of femslash specifically explores romantic and sexual relationships between two women. Poly stories feature characters in polyamorous relationships. Tolkienfic stories may also be alternate universe or AU—that is, they change a significant detail of the canon and explore how this change alters the story—or crossover stories, which incorporate details from another fandom's text. Tolkienfic stories populate other fanfiction genres as well: crackfic, originating with an absurd or seemingly impossible premise; fluff, with its emphasis on sentimentalized relationships between characters; and hurt/comfort, in which one character is injured and receives comfort and healing from a second character. Another popular genre is the gapfiller: stories that consider what transpired between two plot events in the story. This variety of genres begins to hint at the diversity of stories that coexist under the heading of "Tolkienfic."

Early scholarship about online Tolkienfic tended to emphasize the distinction between movieverse and bookverse stories, or stories that use Jackson's films as their primary text versus those that use the books. Historically, these distinctions were important, but as Jackson's films recede in the rearview mirror of fandom history, they have become less so. However, there is a subgenre of movieverse fanfiction called real-person fiction or RPF. Rather than centering upon Tolkien's world, these stories focus on the film actors. While this paper considers all types and genres of Tolkien-based fictional-person fiction or FPF, RPF will not be considered.

The Community

Until recently, fanfiction existed at the margins of the literary world. In 2019, the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own won the Hugo Award for the Best Related Work, an achievement that some fanfiction writers saw as a sign of legitimacy from the mainstream speculative fiction publishing industry. However, for much of its online existence, Tolkienfic authors have feared legal action from rights holders; others feared personal and professional repercussions, were it discovered that they wrote fanfiction. These anxieties produced a pseudonymous culture where real identities were usually closely guarded and some fanfiction—especially, early in the fandom's online history, the more sexually explicit

stories—were kept behind virtual lock and key. This need for secrecy contributed to a fragmented community that, as community moderators drift away and websites close,[2] is often difficult to access.

The diversity of Tolkienfic, as well as its lack of legitimacy and attendant anxieties for its writers, means that it is impossible to speak of a single monolithic "Tolkienfic community." I have learned the hard way that, as soon as I'm tempted to make a generalization that begins "Tolkienfic is …" I encounter an author, community, or subgenre that subverts my expectations. Instead, Tolkienfic occurs within a multitude of communities, some of them overlapping in unexpected and complex ways. Perhaps the most clearly delimited communities are those determined by the site or subsite where a fan reads and posts. Because these require membership, it is possible to draw slightly firmer boundaries than other Tolkienfic communities. Still, there is a degree of porousness to these boundaries. Fans sometimes join a community, discover it is a poor fit, and do not participate further, although their name remains on the membership rolls. Others may voraciously read a public archive of fanfiction content without becoming an official member. Regardless, most reading, sharing, and discussing of Tolkienfic online occurs on these communities, which could be mailing lists, journal communities, fanfiction archives, and other social media-based groups and communities. Many of these communities exist on sites that are not fanfiction-specific. For example, early Tolkienfic communities were numerous on Yahoo! Group and LiveJournal. Others, especially archives—websites specifically for posting and reading fanfiction—use open-source software or custom code written by the fan archivist. In nearly all cases, the group or archive is owned and maintained by a fan or fans. To complicate the notion of community still further, a fanfiction community might exist on multiple platforms. For example, a Tolkienfic archive may also have a mailing list, a chat server, and a Tumblr blog. While some members will belong to or follow all four, many will not.

Membership in an online community is far from exclusive, and many fans belong to multiple online groups and sites devoted to Tolkienfic. No single group or site includes all Tolkienfic authors or readers—not by a long stretch. Furthermore, communities exist that are not as strictly delimited by the site where one participates. For example, Tolkienfic fans will sometimes refer to the "slash community." There is, however, no single online location much less membership criteria for such a community. It is, instead, an amorphous social coalition of authors who write slash and who share a fandom culture and history. They may

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[2] Illustrative of the threat of website closures to fandom history, as I wrote this paper, Yahoo! Groups announced that they were deleting all web-based content and, less than two months later, made good on that promise, erasing the history of thousands of fanfiction groups. According to the project Save Yahoo Groups, those include more than 1,700 Tolkien fandom groups, many of which were fanfiction-oriented (personal communication).

tend to participate on slash-specific archives or groups but not necessarily and certainly not exclusively. Nor would all authors who have written a slash story see themselves as part of the slash community.

Tolkienfic's fragmented nature supports the enormous diversity that one finds within the fandom. While there are a handful of archives that take most or all Tolkienfic, most specialize in some way around genre, character, group of characters, pairing, book or text, or canonical interpretation. In addition, even the most broadminded archive is constrained in some ways by community values that are more difficult to pinpoint but that influence what authors post and where. The result, for a Tolkienfic fan, usually involves participation in multiple communities that provide access to the content the fan wants to read and discuss within a social milieu that the fan finds comfortable (or at least tolerable).

Fanfiction Studies

Finally, Tolkienfic is part of the larger—*much* larger—practice of fanfiction and its myriad communities. While fanfiction exists for every kind of text imaginable, most fanfiction is about media fandoms or, like Tolkienfic, fandoms that involve literary and media fandom elements. Likewise, within fan studies—including fanfiction studies specifically—media fandoms receive the most attention from scholars. Given its size and longevity, Tolkienfic fandom has received relatively little specific study: another complication when trying to locate Tolkienfic cultures and practices within scholarship that is largely media fandom-based.

To start, most fan studies scholarship is qualitative in nature and does not attempt to provide quantified evidence. Often, these studies look at a few exemplars which, naturally, support the scholar's theory or which are exceptional examples within their fandom, either in terms of interpretation of the original text or craft. Behind this handful of stories, though, are hundreds, thousands, even millions more that do not rise to a level worthy of study (or remain in a part of the fandom unknown or inaccessible to the researcher) and go uncounted. While qualitative approaches unquestionably have value, they also have the potential to inflate the fanworks produced by a small handful of authors or communities to the level of a theory for fanfiction as a whole. My hope is to offer a broader view using quantitative evidence and consider how it corroborates or challenges these theories.

Additionally, and using mostly qualitative methodologies, fan studies scholarship has largely focused on fanfiction as a genre of resistance against and reparation of media products written by, for, and about heterosexual, cisgender, white, able-bodied males. The idea of "resistant reading" and an emphasis on female readers as the resisters has been present since the outset of fandom studies (Busse, 2017). Foundational fan studies work by Henry Jenkins (2013) and

Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) identified fanfiction as a practice of mostly women, observations that have since been quantified by demographic research, discussed below, including mine. An influential 2009 theory, proposed by Dreamwidth user obsession_inc, merges the concepts of fanfiction as a genre of resistance and of female fandom. It delineates two types of fannish participation: affirmational and transformational. Affirmational fandom focuses on establishing the rules and details of the canon. Participation tends to be heavily authority-oriented, welcoming input from the original creator in an attempt to further explicate the canon. Obsession_inc calls these the "sanctioned fans" for their association with the original creator and their willingness to participate within the canonical boundaries that creator sets. At the other extreme stands transformational fandom, which is "all about laying hands upon the source and twisting it to the fans' own purposes." This type of fandom is non-sanctioned and democratic, recognizing multiple interpretations and locating authority to interpret, evaluate, and alter the canon texts within the fans, not just the original creator. Fanfiction is typically placed within transformational fandom. Furthermore, the two types of fandom are gendered, with affirmational fandom practiced mostly by men, while transformational fandom remains the province of women.

Although obsession_inc is clear in her original post that there is crossover between the two types of fandom, fanfiction studies have tended to emphasize the transformational elements: reading against the grain of a text, creating fanworks that challenge and subvert the canon, and defying or directly conflicting with the original creator's authority. Furthermore, because fanfiction is produced mostly by women, the idea of fanfiction as both resistant and women's writing has sometimes been collapsed into *fanfiction as resistant women's writing*. Again, qualitative evidence has produced supporting evidence for this—including examples from Tolkienfic—but I question whether the theory applies as universally or broadly as is often assumed.

In a 2009 article, Robin Anne Reid challenges the assumption of early fan studies scholars of separate masculine and feminine reading practices and cultures. Similar to what Reid describes, the entanglement in fan studies of the (transformational) practice and culture of fanfiction as a female mode of engagement is likewise oversimplified, and female fanfiction writers can and do maneuver affirmational—i.e., male—values and practices. As I hope to show using quantitative evidence, Tolkien-based fanfiction is one fandom where fan writers must navigate and negotiate both affirmational and transformational fandom elements, a practice that shapes both the communities they build and the stories they write.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Data in this paper comes primarily from the Tolkien Fan Fiction Survey,[3] which ran from December 2014 through November 2015. Many of the survey items were based around responses to a pilot study question, posed on my LiveJournal and crossposted to Dreamwidth and Tumblr, that asked simply, "Why do you write Tolkien fanfic?" Participants in the pilot study had the option of sharing their answers publicly or contacting me privately via email or private message. By the close of the survey, I had collected 1,052 valid responses, which included information on demographics and the views and habits of both authors and readers of Tolkien-based fanfiction. Most of the survey consisted of statements with five Likert-scale choices: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and No Opinion/Not Sure. Participants could also skip questions they did not want to answer. In this paper, when I state that participants agreed with a survey item, I mean that they selected Agree or Strongly Agree; when I state that they disagreed, they chose Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

Limitations of the survey primarily include the challenges of reaching all parts of the Tolkienfic fandom equally. As discussed above, Tolkien fanfiction writers and readers use dozens of sites and communities, and none belong to all. These communities differ in the ease with which their members could be reached for input on the survey. For example, the reblog feature on Tumblr made it easy to disseminate the call for participants there. It was almost impossible, however, to reach authors and readers who exclusively use Fanfiction.net. However, as Table 1 below shows, I was able to solicit responses from users of a variety of fandom platforms. Fans who had left the fandom, however, and who may have reported attitudes, values, and practices associated with early fandom cultures, were inaccessible. Although fans from pre-Internet fandom and the early Internet fandom remained active and participated in the survey, there is the possibility that these fans had stayed in the fandom because they found cultural shifts to be preferable or at least tolerable. As such, backward extrapolations to earlier eras of fandom history may not provide a complete picture.

The survey was also liable to self-selection by the most dedicated fans, who were not only more likely to see the call for participants but more likely to be willing to devote the approximately fifteen minutes needed to complete the survey. As a result, survey data cannot be regarded as representative of the fandom as a whole, and specific communities may be over- or underrepresented in the results. There is also the inherent risk of exaggeration or dishonesty when asking participants to self-report behaviors. Although the survey was anonymous,

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[3] This survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board of American Public University on 23 December 2014.

some items inquired about matters that might be perceived as embarrassing or uncomfortable.

Finally, my own position within the Tolkienfic fandom community could potentially impact how I designed and interpret the survey. I began as a fan. For the past fifteen years, I have read and written fanfiction based on Tolkien's *The Silmarillion.* Additionally, I am the founder and owner of the archive the Silmarillion Writers' Guild, and I built and for several years helped to moderate the archive Many Paths to Tread; both of these websites form a part of my study here.

TOLKIENFIC FANDOM DEMOGRAPHICS

The notion of fanfiction as a female practice is certainly not groundless, and the assertion that 90% of fanfiction writers are women has been long-enduring. As far as I've been able to find, it was first mentioned by Johana Cantor in a meta piece in a 1980 *Star Trek* fanzine (qtd. in Bacon-Smith 110). Fast-forward three decades and, in a 2013 survey of users of an Archive of Our Own, a multifandom fiction archive, CentrumLumina found that 90% of participants identified as female, while only 4% identified as male. Demographically, the Tolkienfic fandom is the same: About 89% of survey participants identified as female; less than 4% identified as male. Affirmational tendencies, therefore—which I hope to show are an essential component of Tolkienfic fandom—are not due to gender demographics that differ from the wider fanfiction fandom.

Survey participants also reported their age, with a mean age of twenty-four years. Participants were asked if they wrote Tolkien-based fanfiction, read it, or both. Sixty-one percent were authors or had been in the past. All but two participants who provided a response—more than 99%—were readers. Among the authors, participants had been writing for a median of four years, with a range of three months to forty-two years.

Participants were also asked to identify social media sites and archives where they posted and read Tolkien fanfiction. They were provided with a checklist of all fanfiction archives and social media sites used to share fanfiction of which I was aware (including sites that were no longer active or online); the list included the option to add additional sites that were missing from the list. Table 1 below shows archives and social media sites used by 5% or more of authors who participated in the survey. I will focus on these fifteen sites throughout my study. Most authors used multifandom archives (Archive of Our Own and Fanfiction.net) or social media platforms (e.g., Tumblr and LiveJournal) for sharing fanfiction. While authors used a range of Tolkien-specific archives—43.5% of authors used at least one Tolkien-specific archive—no single Tolkien-specific archive was widely used. It is also worth noting that no single site or platform was used by nearly all—or even three out of four—authors. Archive of

Our Own (AO3) was used most often, and even so, nearly one in three authors did not post their work there, corroborating the diffuse and sometimes fragmentary nature of the Tolkienfic fandom discussed above.

Site/Archive	n	%
Archive of Our Own	405	69.1
Fanfiction.net	336	57.3
Tumblr	211	36.0
LiveJournal	200	34.1
Henneth-Annûn Story Archive	109	18.6
Silmarillion Writers' Guild	91	15.5
Stories of Arda	61	10.4
Many Paths to Tread	52	8.9
Dreamwidth	51	8.7
Faerie	48	8.2
Yahoo! Groups	46	7.9
Library of Moria	42	7.2
LOTRFanfiction.com	42	7.2
Tolkien Fan Fiction	37	6.3
Adult-Fanfiction.org	36	6.1

Table 1. Use of social media platforms and fanfiction archives by authors.

TOLKIENFIC AND AUTHORITY

Fanfiction, by necessity, is written within the boundaries of canon. In the context of fanfiction, the term *canon* carries a different meaning than it does in the wider literary world, referring to the body of facts from the source texts that a fan or fandom accept as incontrovertible. Given the complex, sometimes contradictory, nature of Tolkien's texts there is not a single canon that is universally accepted by all participants in the fandom.

Canon is inextricably entwined with authority, namely the authority of the original creator—and in the case of Tolkienfic, the concomitant authorities of Christopher Tolkien, Guy Kay, Humphrey Carpenter, Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and other (predominantly male) arbiters who select, edit, and interpret the texts that will become the canon. Within affirmational fandom, these arbiters are assigned the authority to determine the facts of the canon, which become the focus of fannish activity: Mastering the canon is the point in affirmational fandom; what *doesn't* happen in the canon is not of interest.

As Kristina Busse notes, fandoms vary widely as to how tightly they circumscribe the boundaries of that canon, with most "canon" including the characters and plot as constructed by the original creator, binding canon to that

creator's authority to declare the factual basis of his imagined world. Canon compliance operates on a continuum, with some fandoms taking all texts by the original creator as canon, while others choose more selectively. Two recent volumes on fanfiction studies, by Kristina Busse and Anne Jamison, consider one extreme on the continuum of canon compliance, where authors reject canon based solely on preference or write fanfiction without any firsthand knowledge of the canon at all. That fan practice that moves *away* from the canon would receive emphasis isn't surprising, as it aligns with the definition of transformational fandom with its emphasis on altering the canon to suit the fan's purposes or preferences (obsession_inc). This leads Busse to end her essay on authority with the statement that fanfiction authors "generate an ever-expanding body of texts that chart potential variations rather than foreclosing interpretations with a voice of authority," a conclusion that ignores fan cultures and practices that do lean heavily on authority and where authority interacts with canon to curtail possible interpretations and writings (p. 120).

In contrast, there has been comparatively little scholarly interest in how authority and canon might be used to circumscribe what is permissible in a fanwork, much less in the ways by which extratextual considerations can be woven into the "canon" as constraining factors. These fanfiction practices are generally associated with literary fandoms.[4] Sheenagh Pugh (2004) introduced the idea that fanfiction writers wanted either "more of" or "more from" the canon, a distinction that anticipates the affirmational/transformational binary (p. 19). Pugh identifies the literary Jane Austen fandom as one that stands "[a]t the extreme of faithfulness" to the canon, which extends to consideration of Jane Austen's values and writing style as marks of canonicity—and regards deviation from this tightly circumscribed canon as disrespectful (pp. 37-39). Brownen Thomas (2007) echoes Pugh's findings about Austen fandom and extends these observations to bookverse *Harry Potter* fanfiction, looking specifically at the archive The Sugar Quill as one that, rejecting the movieverse, highly values canonical accuracy and the self-appointed role as "custodians of the fictional world created by Rowling." These bookverse fanfiction fandoms, in other words, heed the authority—or at least the perceived authority—of the original creator in a way that much of fanfiction studies, with its emphasis on the "more from"/transformational extreme of the continuum, fails to acknowledge. Canon detail, the author's values, and the

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[4] While Tolkien and Jane Austen fandoms use both literary and media texts, I'd argue that Tolkienfic fandom is, like Austen, more of a literary than media fandom. While the films have influenced fanfiction, few Tolkienfic authors are film-only fans: Despite the survey's release in the midst of the *Hobbit* film trilogy, less than a half-percent of authors who participated in the survey wrote using only the films as sources, although many used the films in addition to the books. (See Amy H. Sturgis, 2004, for a discussion of how Tolkienfic authors use the films in *Lord of the Rings* bookverse stories.)

author's style all become inviolable components, standing in for the author's authority, that demand adherence in order for a fanwork to be an effective, respectful treatment of the canon.

In some Tolkienfic fandom spaces, authority is similarly construed. Like Jane Austen fanfiction, Tolkienfic—especially early in the Internet fandom's history—often aimed for a "Tolkienesque style."[5] Additionally, thanks to an edited sampling of Tolkien's personal letters compiled by Humphrey Carpenter, fans have access to lengthy musings by Tolkien on morality and religion. A devout Catholic, Tolkien leaves no doubt in his letters—which he almost certainly never envisioned being read much less employed by his readers to understand his work—of his traditional values, his hatred of modernity, and the centrality of the Christian faith to his identity. Some fanfiction writers not only shape their own stories to conform to Tolkien's personal morality but have advocated for the use of Tolkien's religious or moral beliefs to evaluate interpretations of questions Tolkien never directly addressed.

Perhaps no issue illustrates this better than the debate over slash fanfiction. Although Tolkien never discussed homosexuality in his published books or letters, some fans have used his Christianity to infer what his views might have been and have assigned these conjectures the force of canon. These inferences-turned-canon were widespread enough in 2000s fandom to not only shape fanfiction archive policy but to lead some fans to stridently impose their view of canon upon slash writers, even to the level of threatening violence.[6]

Canon and authority in the Tolkienfic fandom, therefore, are complicated and historically fraught concepts that subcommunities have negotiated in different ways. While fanfiction studies tend to emphasize transformational readings of the text that ignore the authority of the original creator, Tolkien's authority—and the authority of other sanctioned arbiters—plays a key role in the canon of several large fanfiction subcommunities.

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[5] Comments on brancher's 2000 Legolas/Gimli slash short story "They Say of the Elves," considered a fandom classic, reveal how part of the story's appeal to readers was its "Tolkienesque style" and serve as an example of the value placed on stylistic imitation (Organization for Transformative Works, 2017).

[6] A 2004 post on The One Ring (not to be confused with TheOneRing.net) provides a typical example of how Tolkien's religious beliefs were used to forcefully object to slash (Jonathan). Comments on a 2003 post by Tyellas on the LiveJournal community Slash Philosophy acknowledge that "slash flamers" wielded Tolkien's Christianity as a favored weapon in their opposition to slash stories. Reflecting on the violent tone opposition to slash took in the early to mid-2000s, heartofoshun (2019) reblogs a post about fandom history to note, "I am reblogging to brag about … a death threat I got for writing sweet, optimistic Maedhros/Fingon fanfiction–maybe fairly explicit by today's standards, but still more tender than raunchy. (The resentment was based in blatant homophobia on the part of the wankers.)" The incident she alludes to occurred in 2007.

Several Tolkien fandom studies scholars have observed how Tolkienfic authors navigate Tolkien's authority to produce fanworks. Robin Anne Reid (2007) and Megan Abrahamson both observe the penchant of Tolkien fanworks creators to selectively quote from a letter Tolkien wrote to publisher Milton Waldman, claiming a desire for "other minds and hands" to expand his work. Reid notes how the use of this quote—which is widespread among Tolkienfic authors—serves as an appeal to authority, a sort of declaration of permission from Tolkien to build upon his world. Maria Alberto (2016) shows how makers of Tolkien-based fan films appeal to their audience's knowledge of canon minutia to earn "kudos" in lieu of the cash that rewards commercial, sanctioned productions. In a 2016 article, I show that Tolkienfic writers often use pseudohistorical elements Tolkien created—which are themselves part of the canon—as an entry point for stories that challenge and subvert the canon. In other words, the canon provides the pretense by which an author can safely ignore parts of the canon. Nor is this deference limited to Tolkien. In his analysis of a discussion board thread on a slash archive, Allington (2007) observes how participants often leaned heavily on authorities—the filmmakers, in this case, or academics—when discussing the plausibility of a specific slash pairing. He concludes that "resistant or oppositional reading/viewing is not valued" (p. 52).

Survey data likewise support the fandom's general deference toward Tolkien's authority and high estimation of canon while also showing that attitudes toward authority and canon can vary widely depending on fandom subcultures and that fans employ canon and negotiate authority in complex, nuanced ways. As noted above, Tolkien-specific archives have played and continue to play a central role in the fandom, following on the heels of mailing lists and journal communities where members shared and discussed fanfiction. The fan history wiki Fanlore lists more than sixty multiauthor Tolkien-specific archives, varying in size from hosting a few dozen stories to a few thousand; several of these archives remain active as of this writing (Organization for Transformative Works, 2015). The number and diversity of archives from which fans could choose often fragmented the fandom, with values, attitudes, and practices evident in the different archive subcultures. In her study of two of these archives, aptly titled "Breaking of the Fellowship," Reid (2007) describes Tolkienfic archive culture as factional, with fans aligning with an archive not only based on the genre or characters they write about but also around questions of canon and authority.

Superimposed upon the fandom's infrastructural history are two blockbuster film trilogies. The release of these trilogies coincides with technological shifts within the fandom: The *Lord of the Rings* films hit theaters as Internet Tolkienfic was getting its start, and the *Hobbit* trilogy corresponded with the fandom's migration from LiveJournal to Tumblr, the first major platform shift since the fandom had adopted LiveJournal a decade prior. The film trilogies

resulted in the injection of new fans at key points in the fandom's history, when technological changes opened unplowed soil ready to be planted with ideas and values brought by new fans. Instead of having to shoehorn themselves into existing fandom spaces and practices, new fans and new technology had the potential to bring values and practices disruptive to existing fandom cultures. Figure 1 shows when authors reported on the survey that they began writing Tolkienfic with clear spikes in fandom activity around film releases.
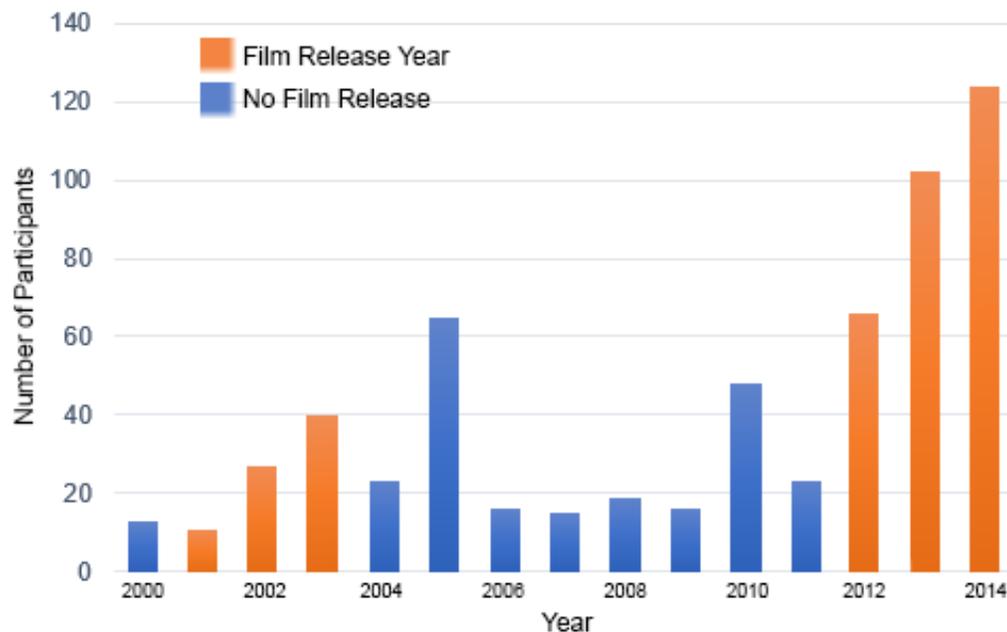

Figure 1. Initiation into writing Tolkien fanfiction by year.

Several survey items directly assessed authors' views on canon and authority. These three items escalate in the authoritative reach they permit. The first item, "It is important to me to write stories that I think Tolkien would have approved of," is a direct appeal to the hypothetical authority of Tolkien and precludes any stories or interpretations the fanfiction author infers he would not have sanctioned. Next, "It is important to keep my stories consistent with Tolkien's moral beliefs" again foregrounds Tolkien's authority. These authors aren't merely adhering to the morality expressed in the canon but also take into account *Tolkien's* moral beliefs, a consideration that eclipses and draws tighter the usual boundaries of the canon. Finally, an item stating, "When writing fan fiction, it is important to me to stick to the facts that Tolkien gave in his books," surveys authors' beliefs around a typical definition of *canon* as facts or details from the text. Table 2 below shows author responses to these three items.

	It is important to me to write stories that I think Tolkien would have approved of. (n = 635)	It is important to keep my stories consistent with Tolkien's moral beliefs. (n = 640)	When writing fan fiction, it is important to me to stick to the facts that Tolkien gave in his books. (n = 636)
Strongly Agree/ Agree	15.1%	21.5%	47.9%
Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	65.5%	62.2%	35.8%
No Opinion/Not Sure	19.4%	16.4%	14.3%

Table 2. Author responses to survey items about canon and authority.

As the data show, fanfiction authors who consider Tolkien's personal beliefs are in a minority. Nonetheless, when considering the extremity of this position, I believe that even these relatively small numbers are significant. However, when considering authors' values and practices in the historical context of platform shifts, film releases, and subsequent influxes of new fans, I considered that attitudes around canon and authority might have shifted, particularly with the arrival of *Hobbit* film fans on Tumblr, a platform that, based on survey items discussed below, shows strong transformational leanings. Table 3 below shows how participants responded to the two most authority-centered survey items based on the number of years they had been writing Tolkien fanfiction. Breakdowns by years roughly correspond to authors who entered the fandom during the *Hobbit* trilogy (≤2 years), those who entered the fandom in the lull between film trilogies (2.5-5 years), those who started writing in the few years following the *Lord of the Rings* films when fandom activity remained high (6-10.5 years), those who began during or shortly before the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy release (11-15 years), and fans who were most likely involved in pre-Internet (or very rudimentary Internet) fandom (16+ years).

It is important to me to write stories that I think Tolkien would have approved of.						
	Agree		**Strongly Agree**		**Total**	
Years Writing	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
0.25-2.0 (Hobbit films)	20	8.8	7	3.1	27	11.9
2.5-5	19	13.9	5	3.6	24	17.5
6-10.5	16	12.2	10	7.6	26	19.8
11-15 (LotR films)	10	9.2	6	5.5	16	14.7
16+	1	8.3	1	8.3	2	16.6
It is important to keep my stories consistent with Tolkien's moral beliefs.						
	Agree		**Strongly Agree**		**Total**	
Years Writing	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
0.25-2.0 (Hobbit films)	29	12.8	13	5.7	42	18.5
2.5-5	24	17.1	13	9.3	37	26.4
6-10.5	20	14.2	14	9.9	34	24.1
11-15 (LotR films)	9	8.3	8	7.3	17	15.6
16+	4	33.3	1	8.3	5	41.6

Table 3. Authors who consider Tolkien's beliefs when writing their stories, by years writing.

The data do not show a clear trend based on when an author began writing Tolkienfic. Among fans who entered at all points in the fandom's history, there are contingents who value Tolkien's authority to the extent that they shape their stories not only around the facts in the texts but also what they infer of his personal morality. Two observations do emerge, however. First, among the pre-Internet fans (16+ years writing), while Tolkien's approval of their stories does not matter significantly more than it does to the fandom as a whole, they do consider his moral beliefs far more often than fans in any other group. Secondly, the fans who are least comfortable with enveloping Tolkien's personal beliefs into the canon are those who began writing during either of the film trilogies. In a 2004 article about the impacts of the *Lord of the Rings* films on Tolkien fanfiction, Amy H. Sturgis speculates that the films might liberate fans to take similar artistic licenses with the canon as Peter Jackson, and these data certainly suggest that Sturgis's theory might be true. As with Allington's analysis of a slash discussion thread about the *Lord of the Rings* films, if Sturgis's theory indeed

explains the relative comfort of film-era fans with discarding the most extreme impositions of Tolkien's authority onto the canon, authors are in fact supplanting Tolkien's authority with that of Peter Jackson to sanction readings that they might not otherwise consider. Overall, however, these data suggest that high valuation of Tolkien's authority is not merely a remnant of veteran, conservative fans but has been and is an omnipresent and ongoing feature of some subcommunities within Tolkienfic fandom culture, even among the newest fans.

As noted above, given the breadth and diversity of online Tolkienfic communities and archives, variation might also be expected based on where an author shares their fanfiction. Table 4 below shows the three questions broken down by the fifteen most popular archives and social media sites used by survey participants to share their fanfiction. All sites were used by at least 5% of participants.

Similar to the data organized around years writing, the age of an archive matters little as to whether its members adhere closely to canon and strongly regard Tolkien's authority. The two newest Tolkien-specific archives—Many Paths to Tread (2009) and Faerie (2011)—generally stand at opposing poles: Many Paths to Tread is one of the sites that most esteems Tolkien's canon and authority, while Faerie occupies the position of lowest regard for canon and authority for two survey items and the second lowest for the third.

Nor are sites necessarily consistent across all three survey items, illustrating how Tolkienfic authors maintain a complex, nuanced understanding of canon and authority that accepts some forms of authority while rejecting others. Perhaps the best example is the Library of Moria (LoM), a large and prominent slash archive that opened in 2002. The use of the tongue-in-cheek "Flame us! Yay!" as the contact link—present at the site's inception in 2002 through to this writing—implies that the site's creators were (and remain) highly cognizant that the site's celebration of slash stories opposed mainstream Tolkienfic fandom to a controversial degree. This might lead to the assumption that users of LoM disregard Tolkien's canon and authority. The data are more complex, however. LoM authors place little regard on Tolkien's approval—not surprisingly, since the assumption for much of the fandom's history has been that Tolkien would disapprove of slash fanfiction—and agreed with the item about Tolkien's approval least often of the users of the archives studied. When considering Tolkien's morality, though, LoM authors begin to shift toward a greater acceptance of authority, and when considering adherence to the canon—the factual details of the text—LoM authors are among the archive users most likely to agree that this matters to them.

It is important to me to write stories that I think Tolkien would have approved of. (n = 635)

Strongly Agree/Agree: 15.1%   Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 65.5%

Strongly Agree/Agree				Strongly Disagree/Disagree		
Archive	n	%		Archive	n	%
Tolkien Fan Fiction	13	36.1		Many Paths to Tread	27	51.9
Many Paths to Tread	15	29.0		Stories of Arda	34	56.6
HASA	20	18.8		Tolkien Fan Fiction	21	58.3
Fanfiction.net	61	18.4		LotRFanfiction.com	26	61.9
Stories of Arda	10	16.6		Fanfiction.net	210	63.4
LiveJournal	28	14.1		Faerie	33	68.7
Dreamwidth	7	13.7		HASA	73	68.9
SWG	11	12.2		Tumblr	148	70.2
LotRFanfiction.com	5	11.8		Dreamwidth	36	70.6
Tumblr	24	11.4		Archive of Our Own	283	70.8
AdultFanFiction.org	4	11.1		SWG	64	71.2
Yahoo! Groups	5	10.9		LiveJournal	142	71.4
Archive of Our Own	42	10.5		Yahoo! Groups	34	74.0
Faerie	5	10.3		AdultFanFiction.org	27	75.0
Library of Moria	3	7.14		Library of Moria	35	83.4

It is important to keep my stories consistent with Tolkien's moral beliefs. (n = 640)

Strongly Agree/Agree: 21.5%   Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 62.2%

Tolkien Fan Fiction	17	45.9		Tolkien Fan Fiction	20	54.0
Many Paths to Tread	16	30.8		Many Paths to Tread	31	59.6
Stories of Arda	15	25.1		Stories of Arda	36	60.0
LotRFanfiction.com	10	23.8		FanFiction.net	204	61.0
Fanfiction.net	79	23.7		LotRFanfiction.com	27	64.3
HASA	23	21.3		AdultFanFiction.org	24	66.6
LiveJournal	40	20.0		Tumblr	142	67.3
Yahoo! Groups	9	19.6		Yahoo! Groups	31	67.4
Library of Moria	7	18.7		Archive of Our Own	272	67.7
SWG	16	17.6		SWG	62	68.2
Tumblr	33	15.6		Library of Moria	29	69.0
Archive of Our Own	61	15.2		LiveJournal	138	69.0
AdultFanFiction.org	5	13.9		HASA	76	70.4
Dreamwidth	6	11.8		Faerie	37	77.1
Faerie	5	10.3		Dreamwidth	40	78.4

When writing fan fiction, it is important to me to stick to the facts that Tolkien gave in his books. (n = 636)

Strongly Agree/Agree: 49.9%   Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 35.8%

Strongly Agree/Agree				Strongly Disagree/Disagree		
Archive	**n**	**%**		**Archive**	**n**	**%**
Tolkien Fan Fiction	23	63.9		Stories of Arda	15	24.9
Stories of Arda	38	63.4		Tolkien Fan Fiction	9	25.0
Library of Moria	23	54.8		Many Paths to Tread	22	28.8
FanFiction.net	168	50.6		AdultFanFiction.org	12	33.4
Yahoo! Groups	23	50.0		FanFiction.net	115	34.6
HASA	53	49.6		Library of Moria	15	35.7
AdultFanFiction.org	17	47.2		HASA	39	36.5
Tumblr	97	46.4		Yahoo! Groups	17	36.9
LotRFanfiction.com	19	46.3		LiveJournal	74	37.0
Archive of Our Own	284	45.9		Tumblr	81	38.7
SWG	41	45.5		Archive or Our Own	159	39.7
LiveJournal	90	45.0		SWG	36	39.9
Many Paths to Tread	22	42.3		LotRFanfiction.com	17	40.4
Dreamwidth	21	41.2		Dreamwidth	23	45.1
Faerie	17	35.4		Faerie	23	48.0

Table 4. Authors who consider Tolkien's beliefs and canon facts when writing their stories, by archive. HASA is the Henneth-Annûn Story Archive; SWG is the Silmarillion Writers' Guild.

The Library of Moria illustrates how complicated the concept of authority—and with it, transformational and affirmational elements—is in the Tolkienfic fandom. Tolkien fanfiction authors and readers are capable of compartmentalizing different forms of authority, as the authors from the Library of Moria illustrate. These authors, in many ways, exemplify the transformational fan, writing based on how they prefer to imagine relationships between the characters, while simultaneously valuing Tolkien's authority in other ways.

FANFICTION, CRITICAL READINGS, AND AUTHORITY

Tolkien's authority surfaces again when considering why fans of Tolkien's books elect to write stories about them. Scholars have assumed fanfiction serves as a vehicle of criticism since the advent of fan studies. Jenkins opens a chapter titled "Fan Critics" with the assertion: "Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured

space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated" (p. 86). Since then, with Busse's work providing a prominent example, fan studies have tended to focus upon the critical, subversive role of fanfiction rather than other functions. Transformational fandom, likewise, assumes a critical, resistant engagement with the canon text, often inverting authority to supplant the perspective and experience of the fan for that of the original creator.

As such, fanfiction as a critical genre intersects with authority because, when a fanfiction text becomes critical, it challenges the original creator's authority to establish a fictional world however the creator chooses and minimizes the power differential between "creator" and "fan." In speaking on affirmational fandom, on the other hand, obsession_inc labels the original creator as "Because I'm The Only One Who Really Knows, That's Why," an allusion to a dismissive quip offered to a defiant child by the parent or adult with ample authority to dictate without reason or explanation. Given the coexistence of affirmational and transformational elements within the Tolkienfic fandom, especially where authority is concerned, it is unsurprising that its authors do not universally regard their work as critical and, when such motives do exist, authors negotiate these transformational critical elements with affirmational values surrounding canon and authority.

Three survey items directly addressed the use of critical motives in participants' fanfiction. Responses to those items are shown in Table 5 below. For the first two items, roughly half of authors agreed that they used their stories to "criticize Tolkien's world" or "challenge Tolkien's worldview." The third item, which escalates into asserting that the author uses their work to "fix parts of the story I think Tolkien did wrong" receives less support, with only 41% of authors agreeing, an inverse of the items on authority, where confirming Tolkien's authority received less agreement. Likewise, the most extreme statement on flouting that authority provokes the most disagreement, suggesting that most Tolkienfic fans seek a "Goldilocks" approach—not to strict and not too soft—where authority is concerned.

As a longtime member of the online Tolkienfic fandom myself, these numbers—especially for the first two survey items—are somewhat shocking in that roughly half of authors do not believe that their fanfiction functions as criticism of the canon. Part of this is my own dual role as a fan and an independent scholar of fan studies. The notion of "fanfic as criticism" is something I've taken as a given for most of my time in the fandom, partly because it describes the stories I write and prefer to read, and a theory that drew me to fanfiction studies. My first engagement with fan studies, for example, came in the

	Writing fan fiction lets me criticize Tolkien's world. (n = 634)	Writing fan fiction lets me challenge Tolkien's worldview. (n = 636)	Writing fan fiction lets me fix parts of the story that I think Tolkien did wrong. (n = 638)
Strongly Agree/ Agree	50.1%	52.1%	40.9%
Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	29.4%	25.0%	41.2%
No Opinion/Not Sure	20.3%	23.0%	17.9%

Table 5. Author responses to survey items about critical motives for writing fanfiction.

form of a conference paper titled "Transformative Works as a Means to Develop Critical Perspectives in the Tolkien Fan Community." However, I do not believe my bias is the predominant reason for what I perceive as a disparity between reported and actual fan practice. Tolkienfic, especially in recent years, has moved away from preferring the imitative "Tolkienesque" style of the early 2000s, and most fans *do* engage in critical readings of the text that they express in their fanfiction: humanizing characters elevated unrealistically by Tolkien's heroic style, rescuing characters from the margins, and complicating the readings of antiheroic characters like Fëanor and Denethor (or outright villainous characters like Sauron and Melkor), to name just three common strategies. Where I believe the disparity occurs is in how the wording of the survey items activates connotations concerning authority.

For two of the items concerning critical motives, similar items exist that do not evoke the same connotations of criticizing and subverting Tolkien's authority. Comparing participant responses to these items is illustrative. Table 6 below shows responses to these comparable items side by side.

These items are not identical and, during the survey's design, were not intended to be paired. However, they do describe very similar interpretive practices, and comparing responses to them yields potentially interesting results. "Writing fan fiction lets me criticize Tolkien's world" centers on the word *criticize,* with the negative, judgmental connotations it carries from its use outside literary analysis. In contrast, "Writing fan fiction lets me express my views or interpretations of Tolkien's world" also involves the process of a reader

	Writing fan fiction lets me criticize Tolkien's world. (n = 634)	Writing fan fiction lets me express my views or interpretations of Tolkien's world. (n = 629)
Strongly Agree/ Agree	50.1%	95.2%
Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	29.4%	0.6%
No Opinion/Not Sure	20.3%	4.1%
	Writing fan fiction lets me fix parts of the story that I think Tolkien did wrong. (n = 638)	Writing fan fiction lets me tell the story how I wish it had been told. (n = 628)
Strongly Agree/ Agree	40.9%	57.4%
Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	41.2%	27.1%
No Opinion/Not Sure	17.9%	15.6%

Table 6. Varying the language of survey items results in different responses for similar interpretive practices.

interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating a text—made clear with the possessive *my views*—but uses the milder verb *express,* which carries a connotation more closely tied to the defanged *express an opinion* or to the nonthreatening *creative expression*. When presented with the more neutrally worded item, 95% of authors agree (and less than 1% *dis*agree), which is not surprising: Even within the most canonical fanfiction, authors use the canon to make choices that extend beyond and therefore comment upon Tolkien's canon, even if only slightly.

Similarly, the item, "Writing fan fiction lets me fix parts of the story I think Tolkien did wrong," includes the negatively connoted, judgmental word *wrong,* as well as the verb *fix* that suggests the fanfiction writer possesses superior skills or knowledge than Tolkien about his invented world. It is, in other words, an overt challenge to his authority. In comparison, the item, "Writing fan fiction lets me tell the story how I wish it had been told," involves a similar process by which the fanfiction writer identifies a shortcoming in the story and uses fanfiction to create a different outcome. This item, though, uses the neutral *tell* instead of *fix* and, more importantly, includes the gently aspirational *wish* to

describe how the author sees the shortcoming in the text: not as a mistake, per se, but a nonconfrontational desire for something different centered within the fanfiction author rather than directed at Tolkien. Once again, more participants agreed with the more gently worded item, with 57% agreeing compared to the 41% willing to "fix" the text. Comparison of these items show that Tolkienfic authors aren't necessarily outliers in how they respond to the canon. Like most fanfiction writers, their stories become the mode through which they interpret and evaluate the texts; however, because of the value the fandom places upon Tolkien's authority, authors are sometimes sensitive that their stories are not perceived as transgressional.

Finally, as seen with respect to authority, disparities exist in how participants responded to these items depending on where they posted their stories. Table 7 shows the breakdown of the data by archive for the three items concerned with critical motives. As with authority, critical motives seem to define fandom subcultures to a significant degree, with differences in how participants from different communities responded to the various items.

Writing fan fiction lets me criticize Tolkien's world. (n = 634)					
Strongly Agree/Agree: 50.1%			Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 29.4%		
Strongly Agree/Agree			**Strongly Disagree/Disagree**		
Archive	**n**	**%**	**Archive**	**n**	**%**
Yahoo! Groups	29	64.4	SWG	21	23.4
Tumblr	129	61.5	Tumblr	51	24.2
SWG	54	60.0	Faerie	13	27.7
Dreamwidth	28	56.0	Archive of Our Own	111	27.8
HASA	58	54.2	Dreamwidth	14	28.0
Archive of Our Own	214	53.6	Stories of Arda	17	28.3
Stories of Arda	32	53.4	Yahoo! Groups	13	28.9
Tolkien Fan Fiction	18	51.7	HASA	32	29.9
FanFiction.net	165	49.9	Fanfiction.net	104	31.4
LotRFanfiction.com	20	48.5	LiveJournal	64	32.3
LiveJournal	94	47.4	Many Paths to Tread	18	35.3
Library of Moria	28	43.9	LotRFanfiction.com	17	41.5
Faerie	20	42.6	AdultFanFiction.org	16	44.4
AdultFanFiction.org	15	41.7	Tolkien Fan Fiction	16	45.6
Many Paths to Tread	20	39.2	Library of Moria	21	51.2

Writing fan fiction lets me challenge Tolkien's worldview. (n = 636)
Strongly Agree/Agree: 52.1%   Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 25.0%

Strongly Agree/Agree			Strongly Disagree/Disagree		
Archive	**n**	**%**	**Archive**	**n**	**%**
Tumblr	133	63.6	AdultFanFiction.org	7	19.5
SWG	53	58.9	Stories of Arda	12	20.0
Dreamwidth	30	58.8	Archive of Our Own	80	20.1
Archive of Our Own	234	58.7	Faerie	12	25.1
LiveJournal	107	53.5	Fanfiction.net	84	25.2
Stories of Arda	31	51.7	LiveJournal	52	26.0
FanFiction.net	172	51.6	SWG	17	28.9
HASA	55	51.4	Tumblr	40	29.1
AdultFanFiction.org	18	50.0	Dreamwidth	16	31.4
Faerie	24	50.0	Many Paths to Tread	17	32.6
Yahoo! Groups	22	47.8	HASA	35	32.7
Library of Moria	18	42.9	LotRFanfiction.com	15	35.7
Tolkien Fan Fiction	14	38.9	Yahoo! Groups	18	39.2
Many Paths to Tread	20	38.5	Library of Moria	18	42.8
LotRFanfiction.com	16	38.1	Tolkien Fan Fiction	17	47.3

Writing fan fiction lets me fix parts of the story that I think Tolkien did wrong. (n = 638)
Strongly Agree/Agree: 40.9%   Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 41.2%

Archive	n	%	Archive	n	%
SWG	48	53.3	Tumblr	68	32.4
Tumblr	105	50.0	SWG	30	33.4
Archive of Our Own	190	47.4	Faerie	16	33.4
Yahoo! Groups	21	45.7	Yahoo! Groups	18	39.2
AdultFanFiction.org	16	44.4	Archive of Our Own	158	39.4
Stories of Arda	26	43.3	Fanfiction.net	134	40.2
Dreamwidth	22	43.1	Many Paths to Tread	22	42.3
Faerie	20	41.7	HASA	46	42.6
FanFiction.net	137	41.1	LotRFanfiction.com	21	43.0
LotRFanfiction.com	17	40.5	Dreamwidth	22	43.2
LiveJournal	80	40.0	LiveJournal	87	43.5
HASA	43	39.8	AdultFanFiction.org	16	44.5
Library of Moria	15	35.7	Tolkien Fan Fiction	21	56.7
Tolkien Fan Fiction	11	29.7	Stories of Arda	36	60.0
Many Paths to Tread	13	24.9	Library of Moria	26	61.9

Table 7. Critical motives for fanfiction by archive. HASA is the Henneth-Annûn Story Archive; SWG is the Silmarillion Writers' Guild.

Once again, complexities emerge. Faerie—a Tolkienfic archive established in 2011 after a for-profit buyout of LotRFanfiction.com—was the archive where authors reported the least adherence to Tolkien's authority. Given this, one might expect authors on Faerie to embrace criticism also as a purpose for writing—but they do not. Faerie was in the bottom three archives for this survey item. Faerie authors move toward the middle of the list when asked about stories that "challenge Tolkien's worldview," but the item where they agree the most compared to writers on other archives is, once again, a challenge to authority in "fix[ing] parts of the story that I think Tolkien did wrong." For authors on Faerie, the mere ability to substitute their judgment for Tolkien's appears to be valued. Likewise, the Library of Moria—which might be expected, as a slash archive opened at a time when the general fandom was unfriendly to slash, to take a subversive and critical stance—ranks among the bottom four archives for all three of the questions about critical motives. The data for these sites caution against assuming that "resistant" genres (like slash), authority, and critical motives necessarily operate in lockstep with each other. Instead, fans can develop complicated understandings of each independent of each other.

FANFICTION AS REPARATION

In a 2006 article, Abigail Derecho identifies what she terms "archontic literature" as historically and inherently a genre of resistance for marginalized groups. This idea takes the notion of fanfiction as a critical vehicle a step further, proposing that fanfiction becomes a means by which subordinate groups challenge and reconstruct dominant, oppressive systems to make room for marginalized perspectives. Along these lines and within Tolkien fandom scholarship, Una McCormack (2015) offers the concept of reparative reading: the idea that women readers of Tolkien "perform acts of transformation, reparation, and radicalization on *The Lord of the Rings,* establishing female presences, queer presences, and urban working class presences in a text chiefly concerned with the masculine and the heroic" (p. 310). According to McCormack, women fanfiction writers invent female characters or expand the role of minor female characters in order to address the gender imbalance in the text and see characters like themselves written as complex people performing a significant role. (McCormack acknowledges fanfiction that elaborates on the role of the few major female canon characters, such as Èowyn, but does not include these stories as part of her study.) Along those lines, Amy Sturgis (2006) and Karen Viars and Cait Coker (2015) undertook specific studies of female characters—Rose Cotton and Lothíriel, respectively—in fanfiction. Both studies emphasize the ways in which fanwriters elevate the importance of female characters whose roles as wives and homemakers sideline them in a novel concerned with heroism and war. These

approaches align with the values of transformational fandom and its openness to altering the canon to make room for fans' experiences and priorities, often as members of marginalized groups.

McCormack is careful to note that this type of fanfiction is produced only by "*some* women readers … writing fanfiction as a creative-critical response to Tolkien's text" (p. 310, emphasis mine). In fact, the mode of reparative reading that she describes has been highly controversial in the Tolkienfic fandom in the past, often earning the female characters written in such stories blanket condemnation as a Mary Sue.[7] McCormack and Viars and Coker acknowledge the vitriol paid to Mary Sue as an obstacle to writing about women in Tolkien's legendarium. This conflict derives, in part, from the overtly transformational nature of reparative writing and its privileging such alterations above canon compliance. While the examples above show how fan writers integrate both affirmational and transformational elements into their fanfiction, Mary Sue and other reparative writings show how affirmational fandom values sometimes conflict more directly with the transformational.

One such example of the ubiquity and volume of the vitriol directed to female characters exists in the community known as Protectors of the Plot Continuum (PPC). An organization originating in 2002 in the *Lord of the Rings* fanfiction fandom and still operating today, a major purpose of the PPC is to mock characters its members brand a Mary Sue. The group includes a Department of Mary Sues, the largest and one of the oldest subgroups in the community, "that deals with finding, repairing the damage done by, and killing Mary Sues." The language used by this "department," when compared to other subgroups within the community, centers conspicuously upon personal violence, signaling the affective strength of participants' reactions to this trope compared to other "badfic" that the group also addresses. Likewise, the subtitle of the PPC's LiveJournal profile is "Let's hunt some Sue"—a parody of Aragorn's line, "Let's hunt some Orc," in the *Fellowship of the Ring* film—foregrounds the Mary Sue trope as particularly worthy of censure and one where violence, albeit in the fictional sphere, becomes acceptable as a mode of containment. In her study of *Harry Potter* fanfiction, Ika Willis (2006) defends Mary Sue as a trope who makes "space for the reader herself, for her desires, her demands, her politics" (p. 163). McCormack echoes this in her study of "exceptional" female characters created for *Lord of the Rings* fanfiction, where the alteration to the canon text expresses the value of the character thus permitted entry. An author's willingness

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[7] Originating in the *Star Trek* fanfiction community, *Mary Sue* is a term for a female character who forces the focus away from canon characters (usually male), often through an unrealistically vast catalog of perfect characteristics. Mary Sues frequently become the love interest of one or more of the canon male characters and may cause that man to act out-of-character. *Mary Sue* can also refer to a story containing such a character.

to alter the canon to make room for a female character—with its implication that Tolkien's dearth of women does not reflect reality and is therefore a shortcoming of the text and open for fixing—reflects transformational tendencies.

The PPC, however, employs assumptions more closely aligned with affirmational fandom. The word *protector* in the group's name—a sense echoed in the summary on their Department of Mary Sues page about "repairing the damage done by … Mary Sues"—signals discomfort with multiple variants of a text and enshrines the canon as an entity capable of being both preserved and damaged. Furthermore, in their FAQ, the PPC explain their reverence for canon by appealing to both the original creator's authority and the conviction that canon exists as a series of rules: "PPCers believe that if we choose to write about someone else's work, we are obligated to know and respect their rules about it to the best of our ability." That the PPC originated in the *Lord of the Rings* fandom is significant: As seen above, many of its beliefs around canon and authority were and remain fairly commonplace in the Internet Tolkienfic fandom. As the fandom moved toward more transformational concerns and conflicts arose over how to negotiate competing interests in canon/authority and the desire to press into the unwritten spaces in the canon, the overt assertion of affirmational fandom values impacted the kinds of stories authors felt permitted to write.[8]

And affirmational elements did influence the kinds of stories authors felt they could write. In this climate, the kind of writing McCormack describes becomes a political and fraught act. Until relatively recently, the fear of writing a Mary Sue and the community wrath such a character would invite caused many Tolkienfic authors to avoid writing female characters—especially original female characters—or to circumscribe their female characters within tight limitations that signaled to readers avoidance of the Mary Sue trope.[9]

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[8] Attitudes that favor affirmational values are also reflected in early guidelines for the two large general Tolkienfic archives, Henneth-Annûn Story Archive (HASA) and Stories of Arda. The 2003 HASA "Review Criteria" mandate that "the spirit of the canon source [is] present," while Stories of Arda's 2007 "Guidelines for Authors" are even more direct: "Canon. It matters. Stories on this site should reflect a respect for Tolkien's work … . [A]ll authors should make some attempt to research their stories and try to stay within canon. … If you have not read Tolkien, this is not a good place for your stories."

[9] An example of the chilling effect groups such as the PPC enacted on the creation of female characters—and the exacting limitations authors felt bound to observe with creating female characters—can be seen in a 2008 post by Tinni on the Silmarillion Writers' Guild mailing list where she relates how a beta-reader advised her to remove mention of a female character's hair color because "'dwelling on hair colour is considered a sign of a Mary-sue.'" She describes such limitations as "creatively stifling"—even as she professes agreement with the beta-reader multiple times—and laments the perception that, had she not followed her beta-reader's advice, "most people" would not have read past the point where she mentions hair color. This post is typical of those Tolkienfic writers in the 2000s who wanted to include more women in their stories in its expression of anxiety and frustration around the limitations placed on female characters.

This historical lack of fanfiction about women—whether predicated by the author's lack of interest or social pressures to avoid female characters—can be seen in data from Tolkien fanfiction archives. The Silmarillion Writers' Guild (SWG)[10] has been a continuously active fanfiction archive from 2007 through the time of this writing. I selected three years from which to gather data: 2008 (the first full year the archive was open), 2013 (the first full year after the release of the first *Hobbit* film), and 2018 (the final full year, as of this writing). The SWG requires a story summary and allows the option of selecting characters from a drop-down list; most authors use this option. As such, I was able to gather data on the number of stories where a female character was listed as included in the story. In addition, using story summaries, I compiled the number of stories where a woman played a major role in the story. Finally, I counted the number of stories where no female character was listed in the character list or the summary. I excluded stories that were used as a collection for unconnected short ficlets, and I excluded nonfiction essays.

Figure 2 below shows, respectively, the proportion of stories that feature a woman as a major character, identify a woman as a supporting character, and list no female characters at all. In short, while writing female characters has become more commonplace, even by the late 2000s, stories about women were a minority. In 2008, only about a third of stories on the SWG included a woman, and only about 21% included a woman in a leading role. By 2018, however, more than half (58%) of the stories added to the archive included women, and 40% of those stories included a woman as a major character. It's also worth noting that, as can be seen in the data above, in Tables 4 and 7 about authority and critical motives for writing fanfiction, that the SWG tends to adhere more closely to the definition of transformational fandom than most other sites and archives, valuing a critical and reparative approach to fanfiction that does not consider Tolkien's authority as a component of the canon. Additionally, the archive's rules forbid the kinds of mocking, derogatory interactions practiced by groups like the PPC (Silmarillion Writers' Guild). In other words, the SWG would have been a relatively safe place to practice the kind of reparative writing that McCormack describes. The dearth of stories about women in the first half of the archive's existence attests to norms within the broader fandom that preferred and privileged stories about male characters and discouraged, often aggressively, stories about women.

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[10] Note that the SWG archives fanfiction based on *The Silmarillion,* which has more canon female characters relative to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.* As a result, female characters may be more common here than on archives where the focus tends to fall on *The Lord of the Rings.*

Inclusion of Female Characters on the Silmarillion Writers' Guild Archive
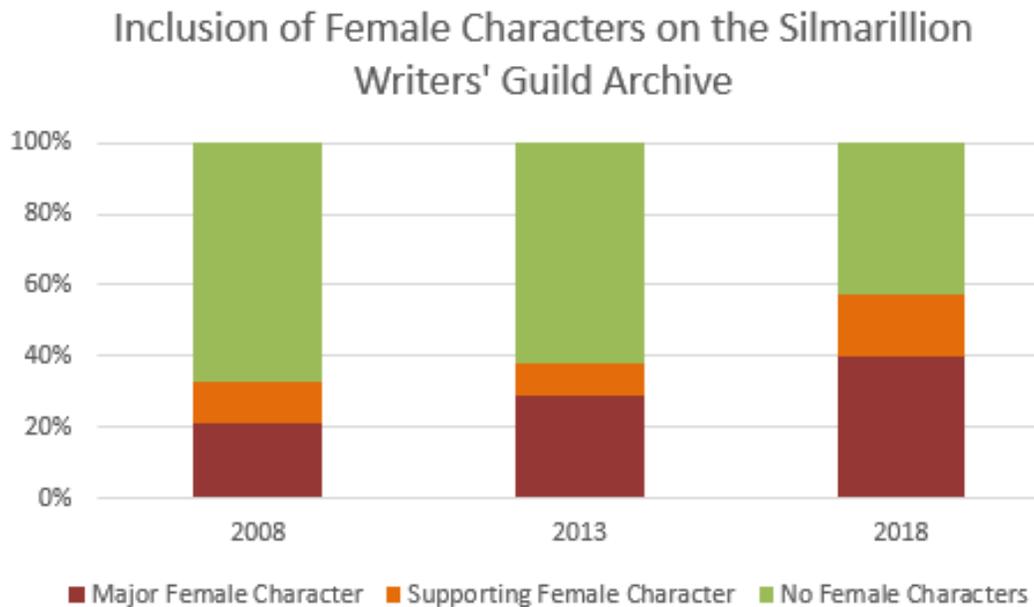

Figure 2. Stories including female characters on the Silmarillion Writers' Guild archive.

Dampening authors' interest in writing about women was not always aggressive, however. Affirmational values manifest in organizations like the PPC, in archive policies that privilege stories strongly rooted in the canon—discouraging stories about women by virtue of their relative absence from the canon[11]—and in bans on Mary Sues. But discouragement of writing women was not always explicit, and it is overly simplistic to claim that Tolkien fanfiction was shaped solely by the enforcement of affirmational values upon it. As will be seen below, affirmational values are an integral part of the fandom and are often chosen by, not imposed upon, authors. Even in spaces where authors are freed of nearly all constraints, communities with strong affirmational values emerge, even as other communities formed under similar conditions embrace more transformational values.

Two survey items capture fanfiction authors' motives around repairing the texts to allow for more diverse representation, particularly for women. A closer look at these two items reveals the complexity of affirmational and transformational values within the predominantly female Tolkienfic fandom. The first asks simply about writing female characters without considering the author's reasons for doing so: "Writing fan fiction allows me to explore the perspectives of

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[11] The Lord of the Rings Project finds that only 18% of named characters in the book are women (Johansson, 2014).

female characters." Among authors who responded to this item (n = 635), 78% agreed with that statement. Table 8 breaks down how authors responded based on the number of years an author has been writing Tolkienfic.

	Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
Years Writing	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
0.25-2.0 (Hobbit films)	103	45.6	74	32.7	177	78.3
2.5-5	60	43.2	56	40.3	116	83.4
6-10.5	57	44.2	40	31.0	97	75.2
11-15 (LotR films)	39	36.1	43	39.8	82	75.9
16+	8	33.3	10	41.7	18	75.0

Table 8. Authors who use fanfiction to "explore the perspective of female characters" by years writing. (n = 635)

One can draw similar conclusions from these data as from the data in Figure 2 that show the increase in stories about women on the Silmarillion Writers' Guild archive. Table 8 shows a moderate increase in interest within the past five years in writing about female characters. The data above suggest that part of that increase might be due to new fans who were not initiated into the fandom at a time when overt disdain for female characters, especially Mary Sues, was commonplace and widespread.

The next item asks directly about reparative motives but broadens those motives to include not only women but queer characters and characters of color: "Writing fan fiction helps me to correct problems with race, gender, and sexuality that I see in Tolkien's books." Unlike the item about writing female characters, this item is overtly transformational, permitting authors to alter the canon to make space for a more diverse cast of characters and to present those characters' experiences using their own as the model, supplanting Tolkien's authority in favor of the fan's. Overall, 62% of authors (n = 637) agreed with the statement. As with authority and critical motives, support for reparative motives varies widely based on where an author posts. Table 9 below shows the data, broken down by site/archive, for this survey item. Table 10 shows the data for this question broken down based on the number of years an author reported writing Tolkienfic.

Writing fan fiction helps me to correct problems with race, gender, and sexuality that I see in Tolkien's books. (n = 637)

Strongly Agree/Agree: 61.9%   Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 21.7%

Strongly Agree/Agree			Strongly Disagree/Disagree		
Site/Archive	**n**	**%**	**Site/Archive**	**n**	**%**
Tumblr	160	76.2	Tumblr	25	11.9
Archive of Our Own	274	68.6	Silmarillion Writers' Guild	14	15.5
Silmarillion Writers' Guild	60	66.6	Archive of Our Own	72	18.1
LotRFanfiction.com	27	64.3	Stories of Arda	13	21.7
Yahoo! Groups	29	63.1	Fanfiction.net	77	23.1
Stories of Arda	37	61.6	Faerie	12	25.0
Dreamwidth	31	60.8	Library of Moria	15	25.7
Faerie	29	60.5	Dreamwidth	14	27.4
FanFiction.net	195	58.5	AdultFanFiction.org	10	27.8
Tolkien Fan Fiction	21	56.7	LiveJournal	57	28.5
AdultFanFiction.org	17	55.6	Tolkien Fan Fiction	11	29.7
Henneth-Annûn Story Archive	70	55.6	Yahoo! Groups	14	30.4
LiveJournal	111	55.5	LotRFanfiction.net	13	30.9
Library of Moria	22	52.4	Henneth-Annûn Story Archive	37	34.3
Many Paths to Tread	25	48.1	Many Paths to Tread	18	34.6

Table 9. Importance of reparative motives, by archive. (n = 637)

	Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
Years Writing	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
0.25-2.0 (Hobbit films)	79	35.3	77	34.4	156	69.6
2.5-5	42	30.0	45	32.1	87	62.1
6-10.5	39	29.8	28	21.4	67	51.1
11-15 (LotR films)	27	24.8	36	33.0	63	57.8
16+	3	25.0	3	25.0	6	50.0

Table 10. Authors who use fanfiction to "correct problems with race, gender, and sexuality" by years writing. (n = 637)

A more granular consideration of the data shows that, while overt pressures to create (or avoid creating) certain types of fanfiction likely influenced

the communities surveyed, this is far from the full picture. Authors were influenced by more subtle forces (such as the films) and, among authors who preferred engagement with reparative ideas, made choices about where to post based on a community's expression of transformational values. Table 10 shows that newer fans ascribed to transformational motives more often, possibly because they were largely insulated from affirmational fandom pressures common in early online Tolkienfic fandom. Considering that more experienced fans had likely made choices—about what to write, who to write about, where to post—based on the more overt policies and pressures that deterred openly transformational fanworks earlier in the fandom's history, it is perhaps not surprising that these fans expressed reparative motives the least often. However, years writing alone do not predict an author's penchant for reparative writing, so overt pressures alone do not explain the data. As with the data on authority discussed above, authors who began writing fanfiction during a film release tend toward more transformational attitudes, specifically viewing fanfiction as a means to repair a problematic aspect of the text. Again, as noted above, this aligns with Sturgis's (2004) theory that the films would pardon a more flexible interpretation and use of the canon. If the films exert this influence, furthermore, the increased prevalence of reparative writing might explain the growing comfort with reparative writing seen among newer fans: a feedback loop in which the increased visibility of this type of fanfiction encourages further examples of reparative writing.

The data also suggest that authors choose where they post based on the values of individual communities. Again, a community's values are not neatly predicted by when in the fandom's history it arose. The two youngest Tolkien-specific archives in the data—Many Paths to Tread and Faerie—are in the bottom half of the data for reparative motives. Nor are these community values driven by archive policy. Instead, fans can bring a strongly affirmational orientation into a setting that is explicitly inclusive of transformational values.

Consider, for example, the Silmarillion Writers' Guild (SWG) and Many Paths to Tread (MPTT): MPTT is the younger site, and its policies are nearly identical to the policies of the SWG, which were written to both welcome a range of fanfiction and curtail harsh or abusive treatment of authors by readers (Silmarillion Writers' Guild; Many Paths to Tread). MPTT authors report significantly less alignment with transformational values, however, a trend that is evident here, as well in the data on authority and canon (Table 4) and critical motives (Table 7). Furthermore, MPTT deliberately positioned itself as a more inclusive alternative to Stories of Arda, permitting slash and other genres that Stories of Arda disallows (thus imposing affirmational values that privilege canon compliance on their authors); nonetheless, Stories of Arda authors, on this item

and others, identify more strongly with transformational values than MPTT authors, who operate with almost no constraint from their archive's leadership.

Reparative fiction, in other words—both the valuation and production thereof—involves an interplay of several factors. There were overt pressures—archive policies, sporking communities, harsh criticisms on stories—across the fandom's history that certainly influenced the production of reparative stories, especially those involving female characters. Anecdotally, authors who posted fanfiction in the early-mid 2000s often recall the chilling influence of such forces. However, these do not provide the complete picture. Authors are also influenced by other transformative works, whether commercial works like the Jackson films or other fanworks. Furthermore, the fragmentary nature of the fandom creates additional complexities, and authors choose where they post, in part, based on how that community values the type of writing they prefer to create. Here, it is very clear that communities are *not* subject to the whims of top-down forces like archive policies, at least not entirely. A site like Many Paths to Tread shows how, given the freedom and safety to produce any type of fanfiction they want, many authors will continue to value canon and Tolkien's authority over a perceived need to address and repair shortcomings in the texts.

CONCLUSION

Tolkienfic writers generally value Tolkien's authority in excess of what fanfiction studies—which tend to emphasize the unmooring of fan-constructed texts from the original creator's authority—describe. Authority is a complicated issue among authors of Tolkienfic, and fans negotiate and compartmentalize Tolkien's authority in complex ways. In general, survey data reveal that most fans prefer a "Goldilocks" application of authority—not too strict and not too soft. However, affirmational valuation of authority are clear features of many Tolkienfic communities and stories. Additionally, a small but significant contingent of the fandom prefers strictures on authority that include extracanonical considerations: not only stylistic imitation of the original text but incorporation of Tolkien's personal morality and beliefs—or what fans infer of those beliefs—into the canon. In some cases, affirmational values around authority are imposed—or at least imposition is attempted—by entities that themselves wield some authority within the community (fanfiction archives and awards, for example) or that use vocal, even aggressive tactics to generate a sense of universality and urgency to their views that may not in fact reflect community consensus. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that the fandom's estimation of Tolkien's authority comes solely from such pressures. Instead, Tolkienfic authors tend to value the canon and a moderate influence of Tolkien's authority on their fanfiction, an observation that holds true even across cohorts of authors who entered the fandom at different times.

Likewise, survey data show that critical motives—widely hailed as a major function of fanfiction—assume a complicated shape in the Tolkienfic fandom, mostly through their entanglement with authority. The vast majority (95%) of fanfic authors concede that they use fanfiction to "express views or interpretations of Tolkien's world"—criticism at its mildest expression—but when the language of survey items gains force and suggests impingement on Tolkien's authority, authors begin to back away, with only about half claiming to write stories that "criticize" or "challenge" Tolkien and his texts. I conclude that practice within the fandom is not necessarily "noncritical" but is cognizant of and often unwilling to be perceived as transgressive of Tolkien's authority. Reparative writing, which is more and intentionally transgressive and overtly transformational, shows less complexity but more change. Following McCormack's example of using fanfiction about women to study this type of writing, I find historically significant pressures on authors to avoid writing women. Similar to the pressures placed on slash writers, disincentives to write about women included archive policies and aggressive policing of fanfiction by communities like the Protectors of the Plot Continuum with a strong affirmational orientation. More so than with slash, however—because slash writers retreated to slash-positive groups and archives they created—these forces *did* constrain authors' production of woman-centered stories, reparative or not, seen in both archive and survey data. Unlike attitudes around authority, however, which have remained fairly consistent across time, survey evidence suggests that newer fans have brought an openness toward reparative writing that, in the relative absence of external pressures against it, has resulted in attitudinal shifts and ultimately influenced the number of these works being produced.

Throughout the survey, a pattern emerged where different communities used for posting and reading Tolkienfic exhibited different values around authority, critical motives, and reparative motives. That Tolkienfic archives exhibit different cultures built around their valuation of authority, criticism, reparation, and various motives or aesthetic considerations not discussed here is not new. Reid's "Breaking the Fellowship" (2007) and my own "Attainable Vistas" (2016) showed how archives fostered different cultures partly as a result of administrative policies and partly because of the values and enthusiasms brought by members. What these data do show, however, is that many of the markers of both affirmational and transformational fandom—authority, canon, criticism, reparation—can coexist in complex ways so that an author producing what appears to be obviously transformational work might harbor surprisingly affirmational views about the importance of canon, or where authors who overtly disavow Tolkien's authority in their work nonetheless do not view that work as critical much less reparative, to name just two examples. Additionally, looking at survey responses by archive or community further emphasizes that affirmational

values are rarely imposed upon a community, and communities (like Stories of Arda) with strict rules around canon may attract authors with strong transformational interests, while communities that allow their authors a freer rein (like Many Paths to Tread) may become the home of writers who cleave closely to Tolkien's canon and authority.

At the outset of this paper, I expressed the frustration that fanfiction has come to be understood as generally resistant, and that resistant mode has also become conflated with the genre's predominantly female authorship and become *resistant women's writing.* Some of this, I believe, is a heavy reliance on qualitative studies that construct theories using exceptional and unorthodox exemplars as their foundation, then use those theories to extrapolate upon the millions of stories that did not clear the bar making them worthy of study. I hope that quantitative data, which while far from comprehensive, certainly sweeps into its scope authors and fans who otherwise do not attract the notice of scholars. The data do not annul the idea of resistant women's writing as important, but they do complicate it. In addition, I understand the attachment that scholars—most of them fanfiction writers themselves—have to this idea. It looms large. It is not only what we ourselves practice but part of the authors and stories we surround ourselves with. As a woman and a fanfiction writer myself who identifies strongly with the resistant classification for my own work, I have had to confront my own hopes and biases for what fanfiction in my own beloved Tolkienfic community is and looks like, coming to the conclusion that, for many of my peers (and myself in many ways as well), their fanfiction isn't fully resistant women's writing. Instead, these authors wield affirmational values and practices—typically coded as masculine—in complex ways to produce fanfiction that often converses with—and, yes, sometimes challenges—the text in a delicate dance enacted upon a stage intentionally circumscribed by their imposition upon themselves of demands of canon and authority. The communities and stories these women have created defy not only the false affirmational/transformational binary but the binary of masculine and feminine practice of writing as well, admitting a range of values and practices that permits authors to pilot their readers both deeper into Middle-earth and further outward into its untouched hinterlands.

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