

## ‘SHERLOCK IS ACTUALLY A GIRL’S NAME’: CHALLENGING GENDER NORMATIVITY THROUGH *SHERLOCK* FANFICTION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper looks at fanfiction that focusses on transgender characters by rewriting canonically cis-gender characters as trans, using stories based on the TV series *Sherlock* as examples. Such fanfictions, called transfic, are positioned as an emerging sub-genre of fanfiction and analysed in their relation to other fanfiction genres as well as to other online trans (self-) representations. A comparison is made between transfic and other genderbending fan practices, and a connection drawn between transfic and slash fanfiction. In addition to this intra-fandom perspective on transfic, this paper takes into consideration other online creative practices by trans people and argues for transfic as a means to create such (self-) representations, thinking together trans and digital culture as ‘digital trans’, to use Jay Prosser’s expression (2014). With its focus on relationships and on the representation of diverse trans bodies, transfic can be viewed as a fruitful ground for creating more nuanced and varied trans narratives.

**KEY WORDS:** FANFICTION – CREATIVE PRACTICES – TRANSGENDER – TRANSFIC – SHERLOCK

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article, qui prend pour exemple les histoires basées sur la série télévisée *Sherlock*, s’intéresse à la fanfiction lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur les personnages transgenres, c’est-à-dire quand des personnages canoniques cisgenres sont réécrits en personnages trans. De telles fanfictions, appelées transfics, se positionnent comme un sous-genre émergent de la fanfiction : l’analyse les met en relation avec d’autres genres de fanfictions ainsi qu’avec d’autres formes de représentations (de soi) trans. Les transfics sont comparées à d’autres pratiques de fans qui « perturbent » le genre (« genderbending »), et les liens entre transfic et la fanfiction *slash* sont établis. Au-delà de cette perspective à l’échelle du fandom, cet article prend en considération d’autres pratiques créatives en ligne des personnes transgenres et défend l’idée que les transfics sont un moyen de créer de telles représentations (de soi), en pensant conjointement culture trans et culture numérique comme « trans numérique », pour reprendre l’expression de Jay Prosser (2014). En mettant l’accent sur les relations et sur la représentation des divers corps trans, les transfics peuvent être considérées comme un terrain fertile pour créer des récits trans plus nuancés et plus variés.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** FANFICTION – CREATIONS DERIVEES – TRANSGENRE – TRANSFIC – SHERLOCK

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Marginalised and non-normative genders beyond the male-female binary have become more visible in contemporary culture. Popular media sees an increase in representations of trans<sup>1</sup> characters, with TV series such as *Transparent* (2014-) that bring trans experiences to the forefront, or *Elementary* (2012-) that include trans characters without making them (or the fact that they are trans) the focus of the narrative. Despite this increased visibility and awareness, there are still lacunae in representation. The majority of popular media texts, such as the BBC’s *Sherlock* (2010-)<sup>2</sup>, which will serve as the focus of the following analysis, offer no trans representation at all.

One way in which trans representations may be added to popular media contents is through the fan community and its creative output. Fans regularly create alternative, more diverse and multi-faceted gender narratives by adding transgender characters to the storyworld or rewriting cisgender<sup>3</sup> (main) characters as trans. Meaning is “produced whenever [fans] express [them]selves, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural ‘things’” (Hall, 2013: 3), “when [they] weave narratives, stories – and fantasies – around [texts]” (*ibid*: 4). Abigail Derecho (2006: 65) refers to fanfiction as “archontic literature”, as “works that generate variation that explicitly announce themselves as variations. This creates an archive that as “a virtual construct [surrounds a] text, including it and all texts related to it” (*ibid*). This type of writing, according to her, “has been often used by minority

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<sup>1</sup> The term “trans” is used here as an umbrella term that encompasses the whole range of transgender, transsexual, genderqueer and non-binary identities.

<sup>2</sup> The TV series is based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories and moves the characters from the late 19th and early 20th century to the present day. While the basic premise of the Sherlock Holmes storyworld remains the same – John Watson (played by Martin Freeman) meets Sherlock Holmes (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) through a common acquaintance, starts to share a flat with him and begins to accompany the consulting detective when he works on his criminal cases –, the episodes of the TV series do not retell Doyle’s stories but rather reassemble them in a collage-like fashion, providing intertextual links to a variety of cases within any one episode of the series. It currently comprises four series with three episodes each, plus an additional mini-episode and a full-length special episode broadcast before series three and four, respectively. Unlike the US TV series *Elementary* with its female Watson, this Sherlock Holmes adaptation remains faithful to the predominantly male genders presented in Doyle’s stories, despite additional female characters like the doctor Molly Hooper.

<sup>3</sup> Cisgender denotes the opposite of transgender. A cisgender person’s gender identity corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth, unlike a trans person’s which does not – or not fully – match the birth-assigned gender.

groups [...] as a technique for making social and cultural criticism” (*ibid*: 61). Fanfiction as an expression of fandoms, as a cultural practice as well as a form of literature has now been widely studied (see e.g. Jenkins, 2013 [1992]; Pugh, 2005; Busse and Hellekson, 2006; Jamison, 2013), as have the various connections between fandoms and gender, in particular through works examining fanfiction authorship and/or gender representations in fanfiction, like in homoerotic “slash” fanfiction I also discuss below. Likewise, Sherlock Holmes fans, fandoms and fan practices, including those related to the TV series *Sherlock*, have led to various scholarly engagements (for recent examples, see e.g. Ue and Cranfield, 2014; Stein and Busse, 2012; Rosenblatt and Pearson, 2017). It is therefore my aim with the following exclusive focus on trans representations in fanfiction to continue the study of fandom and gender, by adding a perspective that has so far mainly been treated as an afterthought in studies dealing with genderbending fan practices (see Busse and Lothian, 2009 or McClellan, 2014). Furthermore, by studying fanfiction as a writing practice, my approach contributes to and completes the literature which has started to consider the importance of fan practices for marginalised groups<sup>4</sup>.

In this perspective, this paper looks at fanfiction based on the TV series *Sherlock* featuring and focussing on trans characters. The stories that will form the basis of my analysis, referred to as “transfic” in the fan community<sup>5</sup>, are positioned in relation to other, related phenomena, making a case that such stories need to be regarded as their own (sub)genre of fanfiction. The paper first underlines how this type of fanfiction responds to or develops other fan practices. It then examines the ways in which transfic can be regarded not only as an intra-fandom response but also as a response to popular culture in more general terms. It concludes with an answer to the question why a phenomenon that is marginal even within the fan community matters from a broader cultural perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to Derecho’s above-mentioned archontic literature (Derecho, 2006), see also Sophie Hansal’s work which looks at how fandom and fanfiction can support queer youths who would otherwise have no or poor access to resources (2015), or Diana Anselmo’s which positions queer readings on Tumblr as a form of care work (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the “Transfic” entry on Fanlore, the fan-led wiki and online encyclopaedia project of the Organization for Transformative Works: <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Transfic>

## (TRANS)GENDER AND FANFICTION

The fanfictions analysed here add to a text’s archive in much the same way as other types of fanfiction do, which “can vary from copying and extending the narrative universe of a media product to parodying and subverting it” (Duffett, 2013: 171), thus “allowing writers to play God, have things their way, evolve universes and challenge taboos” (*ibid*). Below are a few examples from the *Sherlock* fandom that illustrate how fanfiction can engage with and make use of its source text. Fanfiction can move characters to other times and places, as in ladyphlogiston’s *Where Two or More Are Gathered*<sup>6</sup>, which imagines a meeting between the Sherlock Holmeses and John Watsons from various source texts, namely *Sherlock*, *Elementary*, Arthur Canon Doyle’s stories and the *Mary Russell* novels by Laurie R. King. Fanfiction can place minor characters at the centre of the narrative, like Sally Donovan, who in yaycoffee’s *Saccharomyces cerevisiae (Baker’s Yeast)*<sup>7</sup> falls pregnant after a drunken night with Sherlock and whose pregnancy and negotiations of parenthood are followed throughout the narrative from her perspective. Fanfiction can also depict characters in – often non-heteronormative – relationships which are not (explicitly) part of the source text (or canon, in fannish terms); the examples discussed in more detail below will give an insight into this aspect of fanfiction. A further scenario explored in fanfiction reimagines popular characters as being another gender. Sherlock Holmes thus becomes the world’s only female consulting detective. However, while fanfiction plays with – or swaps, to use the fannish expression – gender, transgender characters in fanfiction are still the exception. While fests, i.e. prompt-based fanfiction challenges, which thematically centre on LGBTQIA+ issues, garner a number of transfic from various fandoms, the total number of transfic in individual fandoms remains low.

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<sup>6</sup> ladyphlogiston, *Where Two or More Are Gathered*, available on AO3 (see below for more details on this fanfiction archive): <http://archiveofourown.org/works/817748/chapters/1548139>

<sup>7</sup> yaycoffee, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae (Baker’s Yeast)*, available on AO3: <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1147544/chapters/2357034>

Using the multi-fandom archive Archive of Our Own (AO3)<sup>8</sup> as one possible example, the following figures provide a better idea of the position of transfic within fandom in general and within the *Sherlock* fandom specifically: the AO3 hosts almost 3 million fanworks from a good 24,000 fandoms<sup>9</sup>, while *Sherlock*, being one of the larger fandoms present on the AO3, accumulates around 94,000 works. Works tagged with “Trans Character” add up to over 13,000 in total, of which a good 200 refer to the *Sherlock* fandom. The AO3 is certainly not the only place to find transfic, nor should the numbers presented be used to make generalising statements about transfic, but what is noticeable across platforms, however, is that, like trans representation in popular culture, transfic constitutes a small and marginal genre.

It was not until the 2000s that trans fanworks were systematically collected and grouped. Transfic gained more visibility in fandom when in 2008, a fan with the username kyuuketsukirui initiated on a LiveJournal webpage the compilation of a master list of “trans stories”, featuring only stories “that are explicitly about trans people” (kyuuketsukirui) – thus distinguishing transfic from other genderbending writings, which will be discussed in more detail below. kyuuketsukirui can also be seen as responsible for coining the term transfic as they created the above-mentioned wiki entry on Fanlore, thus giving the genre its name<sup>10</sup>.

In the following, exemplary *Sherlock* fanfictions from the Archive of Our Own as well as Tumblr posts featuring trans headcanons, i.e. “a fan’s personal, idiosyncratic interpretation of canon, such as the backstory of a character, or the nature of relationships between characters”<sup>11</sup>, are used to illustrate how transfic positions itself as archontic addition to the *Sherlock* and other textual archives, as well as an addition to the genre of trans narratives

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<sup>8</sup> The Archive of Our Own is a “fan-created, fan-run, non-profit, non-commercial” multi-fandom archive, which belongs to the project portfolio of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), whose aim it is “to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms”: <https://archiveofourown.org/>

<sup>9</sup> These and the following numbers as of 13 April 2017.

<sup>10</sup> For kyuuketsukirui’s involvement in these early developments, see Beazley, 2014: 60ff. As of 18 April 2017, the master list, which is now hosted on Pinboard, seemed no longer updated, but had collected almost 600 entries from 186 fandoms: <http://pinboard.in/u:transfic>

<sup>11</sup> “Headcanon” entry, Fanlore: <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Headcanon>

in a broader sense. Rather than providing an overview of transfic as a genre in formation, which would go beyond the scope of this article, the following analysis will foreground transfic’s relation to other genres and its importance to and functions for its writers and readers.

## POSITIONING TRANSFIC

### *Fanfiction*

Fanfiction can be said to “broaden the narrow [...] representations of engaging themes like love, power and gender” (Isaksson, 2014: 353) by allowing for non-hegemonic readings that provide alternative ways of looking at popular characters, which are imbued with meaning for readers by providing a connection “to their own lives, experiences, needs and desires” (Grossberg, 1992: 52). In this way, trans readings and interpretations take texts “into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people [to rework them] into an [...] intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more ‘normal’ popular audiences” (Fiske, 1992: 30). The following looks at three fanfiction examples, how they relate to (normative) gender discourses and what they mean for their audiences.

Red’s fanfiction *Brilliant and Commonplace*<sup>12</sup>, an early example of *Sherlock* transfic posted only a couple of months after the first episode of the series aired, features a transmale John Watson and relates his first sexual encounter with his flatmate Sherlock Holmes. Except for the fact that John is trans, this scenario is common for *Sherlock* fanfiction. John passes as a cisgender and heterosexual man and keeps his trans identity a secret from Sherlock, though not without fear that “his body [would] likely still [betray] him” (Red). Being identified as non-normatively masculine is something that John evades: “As long as he could remember, discovery was something best avoided. His body [...] was something best hidden” (Red).

The focus the trans body receives draws attention to the “material specificity that marks it as different from a normatively gendered body”

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<sup>12</sup> Red, *Brilliant and Commonplace*, available on AO3: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/203724>

(Salamon, 2010: 1), showing “genders beyond the binary of male and female [as] neither fictive nor futural, but [as] presently embodied and lived” (Salamon, 2010: 6). *Brilliant and Commonplace* e.g. shows how this embodiment influences meaning-making processes:

John had been pretty comfortably heterosexual for years – unless, he supposed, one counted the three he’d spent figuring he was Lesbian Daughter Number 2 – and wrapping his brain around what was rapidly becoming an obsession with Holmes’ ridiculously elegant hands and pale eyes was a bit disconcerting. It wasn’t that he was having one of those crisis-of-threatened-masculinity issues. It was just that John didn’t know the first thing to do with another man. (Red)

The above quote highlights the ways in which discourses of gender and sexuality are intertwined, “recognizing that sexuality intersects and complicates our understanding of gender” (Alexander, 2005: 50) as well as showing “how the representation of the sexual body in all its forms is always entwined with larger questions of social norms” (Bauer, 2015: 111). John, identifying as male, is “comfortably heterosexual”, although there was a time when he identified as a lesbian because he and others read his body, and by extension his gender, as female. Finding that he is attracted to Sherlock Holmes may not result in a gender crisis for John, but he certainly begins to question his sexuality. The fanfiction also addresses the gender expectations and gender roles that inform the character’s (intimate) interactions with others. In his (hetero)sexual relationships, the fact that John enjoys being penetrated is met with incomprehension by his female partners: “[John]’d spent more than a few nights trying to explain that being a man didn’t mean he always had to wear the harness [i.e. be the penetrating partner] in the relationship” (Red). Just like the trans body draws attention to the constructedness of gender, the above quote highlights how gender influences expectations of behaviours. The equation between masculinity and assertiveness/dominance is revealed as a construction, relying on a specific and normative understanding of masculinity and femininity, of men and women.

Red’s fanfiction also provides a good example of how the trans body is talked about. In the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that John’s body is medically altered through hormone treatment and chest

reconstruction surgery. John has not had phalloplasty, i.e. his genitals have not been reconstructed to appear more normatively male. He does, however, refer to his clitoris as “prick”, while avoiding directly naming of his vagina, even though vaginal penetration is part of the sexual encounter with Sherlock. Both John and Sherlock are unable to refer to John’s vagina as such and avoid naming it at all, thus upholding normative ideas of gender through a discursive practice that performs and perpetuates the link between gender identity and embodiment/genitals.

While the John in Red’s text is comfortable with his body, other fanfiction stories highlight the issue of body dysphoria that many trans people experience. Schattengestalt’s *Everything I am*<sup>13</sup> follows a trans Sherlock on a day when he keenly feels his body dysphoria. Sherlock talks about his body and the ways in which he relates to it as follows:

The body he had liked as a kid, had hated in his adolescence – and finally ignored – and had come to accept in his twenties. Still, only recently Sherlock had come to not only accept but actually like his body, just the way it was – at least, most of the time. (Schattengestalt)

Sherlock’s body gains and changes meaning by the ways in which it is oriented, or in Ahmed’s words: “what matters is shaped by the directions taken that allow things to appear in a certain way” (2006: 165). Sherlock’s experiences after his coming out as trans in his youth shape the way in which he relates to his body: “It wasn’t easy and I... there were a lot of kids that... used to make fun of... they didn’t believe me that I was a boy, because I didn’t have... a penis. [...] I felt... incomplete without a penis and I wanted to...” (Schattengestalt). Others’ “orientations [toward Sherlock and his body] shape what becomes socially as well as bodily given” (Ahmed, 2006: 158) and influence the way in which Sherlock is able to make sense of his body.

Finally, viklikesfic’s *Fucking like Falling like Flying*<sup>14</sup> features, according to the story’s summary, “Sherlock as a deeply closeted trans woman” (viklikesfic), i.e. Sherlock identifies as female, regardless of how her body

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<sup>13</sup> Schattengestalt, *Everything I am*, available on AO3: <http://archiveofourown.org/works/5670589>

<sup>14</sup> viklikesfic, *Fucking Like Falling Like Flying*, available on AO3: <http://archiveofourown.org/works/5641588>

may be read by others and how she commonly presents herself. From time to time, Sherlock visits a BDSM club “to feel comfortable in her own skin” without the need to “play at male” (viklikesfic):

She doesn’t do anything different to her hair, but her makeup is subtly femimizing [sic], smoothing out the strong jaw and deepening her eyes. The navy corset adjusts her figure somewhat, even with a blazer over top, and her low heels aren’t meant to draw attention. There’s no need for Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective, to be in a BDSM club in Bethnal Green on a Friday night, and so he isn’t. (viklikesfic)

This routine is disrupted when Sherlock’s flatmate John happens to also be at the club one night, which results in the following dialogue:

[John asks: ] You think I want you to leave because you like to... or because you’re...’

‘A woman,’ Sherlock pronounces crisply, interrupting his fumbling. ‘Obviously. This complicates things.’ (viklikesfic)

John proves to be an ally and eventually also a sex partner. By way of intimacy and attraction, the fanfiction showcases how sexuality and gender are not easily divided and how the body plays into these intersections:

‘The attraction isn’t one-sided.’

Sherlock considers. ‘I didn’t think it was,’ she agrees. She knew, but she was afraid to know. ‘It confused you, though.’

‘I’m not really bicurious,’ John admits. ‘I thought about it. I couldn’t think of a way it would work, physically. But I don’t want you to feel ashamed, either, if what you want changes. I might have some flexibility.’

‘It wouldn’t make you bicurious if I *wanted* you to touch my penis,’ Sherlock argues. ‘You do know that.’ (viklikesfic)

John’s sexual orientation is “disoriented”, to use Ahmed’s term, by Sherlock’s body. Contrary to the naming practices in *Brilliant and Commonplace*, here Sherlock refers to her genitals by name, which does not seem to carry a gendered meaning for her, similar to how the fact that she has a penis does not have an influence on her gender identity. This stance of Sherlock’s can also be found in her following statement: “‘I’m not interested in a gender change. This is the gender I’ve always been. I just don’t feel a need to discuss it,’ she [Sherlock] corrects tightly [...]” (viklikesfic). To John,

in contrast, her body has a normatively gendered meaning. Thus, such fanfictions manage to highlight the tensions surrounding trans identities and bodies. Transfic not only lays bare normative discourses surrounding gendered bodies, it also “highlight[s] multidimensional intersections between sex, gender, desire, and embodiment” (Busse and Lothian, 2009: 106).

### *Genderswap and slash*

The above examples give an impression of the diversity of narratives included in the genre transfic. It has also been shown how these narratives relate to and negotiate gender discourses. Another aspect of transfic that I want to highlight here is precisely its relationship to other fan writings that are concerned with gender. Transfic can be seen as a subgenre among the genre of “genderbending” fanworks which includes all manner of fanfiction “that plays with sex and/or gender [and presents an] inherent challenge to static sex/gender identity”<sup>15</sup>. Genderbending fanfiction presents alternative universes (AUs)<sup>16</sup>, in which “canon” characters are reimagined as another gender, either as always having been another gender (e.g. a female Sherlock Holmes) or as suddenly finding themselves with bodily attributes that are commonly assigned to another gender, e.g. a male John Watson finds himself waking up with breasts, vulva and vagina. While AUs of the always-having-been-another-gender type, especially when reimagining the canonically male character as female, can provide a space where gender discourses and inequalities are explored through fiction, genderbending fanfiction that uses sudden gender transformations – commonly referred to as “genderswap” – as a genre can result in more problematic gender narratives. As the Fanlore wiki article rightly states, genderswap should rather be called “sexswap”<sup>17</sup> as the characters in question find themselves in a situation where they suddenly have a differently sexed body while their gender remains stable or adjusts in consequence of the bodily changes.

Indeed, one of the more problematic genderswap themes reiterates biologically essentialist notions of sex/gender, with the changed character

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<sup>15</sup> “Genderfuck” entry, Fanlore: <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Genderfuck>

<sup>16</sup> For more details about AUs, see Pugh (2005: 242) or Hellekson and Busse (2006: 11).

<sup>17</sup> “Genderswap” entry, Fanlore: <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Genderswap>

buying into stereotypical notions of gender, for instance when a newly female-bodied Sherlock Holmes tries to walk on high heels or to learn how to do his makeup. Transfic can be read therefore as a critique of such narratives that not only erase trans experiences but also perpetuate (cis)sexist gender stereotypes. By taking a different approach to the body that does not correspond to normative notions of a character’s gender identity, transfic not only creates representation for trans people. It also writes against fan practices that are perceived as perpetuating harmful understandings of transness. Genderswap “often minimizes the importance of the physical body in determining gender identity” (McClellan, 2014: [0.1]) and “risks reinforcing and potentially limiting common cultural understandings of the differences between the two concepts [sex and gender]” (*ibid*: [1.1]). By “appropriating not only mainstream texts, but texts within fandom itself” (Beazley, 2014: iii), transfic “[intervenes] in popular fan tropes [i.e. themes or plot devices] that present problematic views of gender” (*ibid*).

Most *Sherlock* transfic is not genderswap in the sense that characters do not change their canonical gender. For instance, canonically male Sherlock Holmes is portrayed much more frequently as (trans)male, i.e. a female-to-male trans person, than as a male-to-female trans person. In other words, trans characters in *Sherlock* transfics tend to portray non-normative but unchanged genders in that the characters continue to be read (and identify) as their canonical gender (or something close to it).

As in the above examples, the two main characters, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, are the ones most often portrayed as trans. About half of the *Sherlock* fanfiction on the AO3 is slash fanfiction, i.e. “a prominent fanfic genre that usually puts the two main male characters from the series into a homoerotic relationship” (Duffett, 2013: 172), in the present case Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. This relationship is also frequently explored in transfic, which is why it makes sense to not only look at *Sherlock* transfic in relation to genderbending fanfiction but also in how it relates to slash. Slash stories are “about same-sex trust, intimacy and eroticism” (*ibid*: 170) and “explicit intimacy” (*ibid*: 172). As the examples above indicate, *Sherlock* transfic, in the majority of cases, is also slash, depicting the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Slash has been said to “[rewrite]

*manhood*” (*ibid*: 173; emphasis in original), to not express gender but to “*enact* and (*re*)*make* it in one and the same process” (*ibid*: 205; emphasis in original). Positioning transfic, at least in the case of *Sherlock*, as a subgenre of slash allows for a broadening of the genre to include diverse and multiple understandings of masculinity. Slash is not necessarily an unproblematic genre, by potentially perpetuating hetero- and homonormative discourses, and transfic as slash thus allows for the inclusion of non-normative masculinities in these stories of male intimacy.

The importance of such inclusion or alternatives can clearly appear in the fanfictions’ paratexts. The comments to both *Brilliant and Commonplace* and *Everything I am* hint at a readership that is, in large parts, made up of trans people because many commenters share this information about themselves. The fact that the fanfiction in question is meaningful to readers as trans people is stressed in the comments, as the following post following *Brilliant and Commonplace* shows: “you have done a service not only to this fandom, but to (i bet) a lot of people in real life. thank you.” (jabez\_dawez, 2013) As such, these narratives speak to people who can relate to the experiences shown. They are, in other words, not primarily educational in nature, although they can also fulfil this function for interested readers, as can be seen in the following comment to *Everything I am*: “I love reading trans Sherlock fics because they helped me understand what being transgender means” (IreneAdlvr, 2016). Transfic is geared towards an audience that is familiar, or willing to familiarise itself, with trans experiences. It can also be read as a practice of self-narration in which trans people tell of their own experiences through the fictional characters they love. Furthermore, transfic provides the opportunity for trans fans to get together within their online fandoms.

### *Headcanons*

This aspect of community is even more pronounced on Tumblr, where one type of transfic takes the form of “headcanons”, which make visible reader interpretations of and interventions to a source text, for instance by providing ideas for a possible trans Sherlock’s backstory. In the following case, a Sherlock is thus assigned female at birth but identifies as male:

translock doing online research and realising that there’s a term for the way he feels and that he isn’t a freak  
translock thinking on it some more and asking mycroft to borrow his old clothes/take him for a haircut (wllco)<sup>18</sup>

This short collection of ideas about trans Sherlock’s childhood or youth transposes contemporary trans experiences to a fictional storyworld.

Other headcanons come in the form of very short narratives that capture moments in the trans character’s life, e.g. in the following writing which also features a transmasculine Sherlock Holmes: “john will trace his fingers lightly over sherlocks [sic] top scars in the dimness of their bedroom, and sherlock will smile sleepily at him, and john will tell him how beautiful he is” (discosherlock)<sup>19</sup>. As in the first example and the fanfictions discussed above, this headcanon provides an affirmative depiction of trans experiences in the way it positions the medically altered trans body as beautiful and lovable.

The examples above are more loosely connected to their canon, featuring characters and relationships between them that may be familiar to other fans, but without referring to specific canon occurrences (and without necessarily distinguishing these headcanons as belonging to a specific storyworld other than by the names used). These types of headcanons are more generic and could easily apply to a variety of fandoms, or indeed work as trans writings without any fandom connection whatsoever. Again, these writings address trans people specifically, suggesting that they function, at least partially, as forms of self-representation and/or means of community building.

But even headcanons that have a more pronounced connection to their canon, seems to primarily address trans people (and allies). Dialogues between fans, in a similar way to the comments mentioned above, become apparent in Tumblr interactions. rogueofspades, for example, shares a quote by bi-meme in which they interpret Sherlock’s assertion that his name is actually a girl’s name (*Sherlock* [S03xE03]) as meaning that Sherlock is a

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<sup>18</sup> wllco’s headcanon on Tumblr: <http://wllco.tumblr.com/post/108105999628/translock-doing-online-research-and-realising-that>

<sup>19</sup> discosherlock’s headcanon on Tumblr: <http://discosherlock.tumblr.com/post/140943674364/john-will-trace-his-fingers-lightly-over-sherlocks>

transwoman: “trans woman sherlock. ‘sherlock is actually a girls [sic] name’ she is a girl, therefore sherlock is a name that belongs to a girl” (bi-meme quoted by rogueofspades)<sup>20</sup>. rogueofspades comments on this by saying that “this is literally the only context in which [they] will accept Sherlock being heterosexual”.

This brief Tumblr conversation shows how headcanons can provide a reading of canon that challenges the “discursively maintained cisgender bias” (Beazley, 2014: 24) of the source text. Headcanons are a practice that allows fans to put their particular reading of and engagement with a source text in writing, which they are then able to share and circulate online. Tumblr obviously has many more examples of headcanons to offer, including what could be regarded as more traditional forms of fan writing, like in the following ficlet (i.e. a short fiction) by askboxficlets<sup>21</sup>:

Mycroft has always known his brother would face strife at some point, but he’d never have expected it from Mummy. She is currently trying to force little Sherlock into a dress, and lamenting the curls Mycroft sheared off yesterday, at Sherlock’s request. Sherlock is scowling, his round face creased irritably.

Eventually, Mummy decides it might be better for Sherlock to wear trousers like his brother. (askboxficlets)

With a relative of the trans person in question as the narrator—in this case, Sherlock’s brother Mycroft—the ficlet provides an outside perspective, but again is an affirmative one that does not question or deny Sherlock’s being trans. At the same time, the narrative points to the ways in which gender is coded into the everyday, through e.g. types of clothing or hairstyles. It refers to the lived reality of trans people, who often need to deal with a lack of understanding from those closest to them as they perpetuate harmful gender discourses, even if they do not mean to do so.

Many *Sherlock* trans headcanons also relate the experiences of young trans people, frequently as coming-out narratives, in which the character comes to terms with their being trans and begins to openly identify as such

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<sup>20</sup> rogueofspades’ headcanon on Tumblr: <http://roqueofspades.tumblr.com/post/96453750979/trans-woman-sherlock-sherlock-is-actually-a>

<sup>21</sup> askboxficlets’ post on Tumblr: <http://askboxficlets.tumblr.com/post/105303763533/sorry-its-been-a-few-days-ive-had-a-bit-of>

(*cf.* willco and askboxficlets above). What is striking is that transfic tends to place importance on the embodied experience of being trans as discoshlock’s headcanon shows. The narratives are ultimately affirmative and supportive even if they do not erase the negative sides of the trans experience. They showcase a variety of aspects of being trans. As different as these examples are, all become a part of Sherlock’s archive and thus fulfil, following Derecho (2006), an archontic function, just like the AO3 fanfiction discussed above. Due to their shortness and their lack of exposition, the intended audience, considered as familiar with the theme and able to relate to the experiences that form the basis of such headcanons, is even more pronounced than in the fanfiction examples. Sharing headcanons is a way for fans to come together as a group, and sometimes to build and maintain a community, regardless of how diffuse it may be on platforms like Tumblr.

Duffett refers to such fan communities as “communities of mutual care” (2013: 204), which can be directly observed through some fans’ interactions. For example, the following Tumblr post was made after trans Sherlock fans were criticised for their interpretation of the source text, which is why katzensprotte shared a fan art showing a trans Sherlock being embraced by John accompanied by the following note:

Trans Sherlock is absolutely canon compliant. There’s nothing that indicates that the gender Sherlock was assigned at birth is the same he identifies with and even if that weren’t the case there would still be nothing wrong with headcanoning him as trans. (katzensprotte)<sup>22</sup>

Given this type of statement and other similar ones, it appears that transfic and headcanons are not only interpretations of a source text; they are also expressions of support of and care for trans fans. As Henry Jenkins pointed out, there is “something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives” (Jenkins, 2013: 284).

Transfic and trans headcanons have thus been shown as responses both to gender discourses pervading culture at large as well as to those perpetuated by other fan practices. Transfic challenges the gender narratives of (popular)

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<sup>22</sup> katzensprotte’s fan art and note on Tumblr: <http://katzensprotte.tumblr.com/post/96559657863/transman-sherlock-for-all-yall-sweet-beebs-out>

culture, allowing us “to think [...] more provocatively about the ‘story’ that we – individually and collectively, in specific cultural spaces [...] – tell about gender” (Alexander, 2005: 46). In this perspective, writing (trans)gender becomes one of the countless “[possibilities] for representing gender, as opposed to a *revealing* of a fundamental gender” (Alexander, 2005: 49), making visible “ideologies [as] the maps of meaning which we take for granted as the obviously true picture of the way the world is[, as] natural and commonsensical” (Grossberg, 1992: 56). Transfic, however, needs to be not only positioned as writing that responds and relates to other writings, which all fanfiction does, but also needs to be analysed in relation to its readers and writers, as the fanfiction paratexts above have shown. While transfic is certainly not a genre of fanfiction written exclusively by and for trans fans, it is true that many fans use their fanfiction or other fannish writings as a means to make sense of or share their own experiences.

### **CONCLUSION: WHY TRANSFIC MATTERS**

As archontic literature, transfic makes use of popular texts by adding or changing meanings, thus remedying representational lacunae of popular culture and making texts more relatable for trans fans. Like all fanfiction, transfic presents an opportunity for making visible alternative or additional readings of the source text. Transfic allows for an analysis of the network of influences on the fan text, be it other fanfiction, fan practices more generally, or cultural discourses that move beyond individual media texts as sources for fan activities. In other words, transfic does not merely respond to its source text but to a variety of others as well, thus providing insights into how fan cultures circulate, criticise and develop their own discourses and practices. It shows how fan texts “are *socially practiced*”: (Duffett, 2013: 203; emphasis in original).

As the above analysis has pointed out, a diverse range of trans experiences is expressed in these narratives, which include non-normative representations of gender to *Sherlock*’s archive, thus diversifying it as “every addition to an archive alters the entire archive” (Derecho, 2006: 70). Considering the discussed fanfiction and headcanons, especially in regard to their paratexts, transfic is certainly important to trans fans and their allies,

“[functioning] communally to create social and cultural bonds” (Duffett, 2013: 171), even if this is not its sole function, as transfic can also matter to fans who will not find representation in and a community through these writings.

The rise of transfic in online fandom has allowed for unprecedented opportunities for fans to connect with each other and form communities. The latter can be linked to what Jay Prosser (2014) has referred to as “digital trans”, which thinks together trans and digital culture to show “how the digital shapes contemporary transgender practices”. Digital culture would lead to “self-representations more prolific, multiform and engaging than those of pre-digital counterparts” (*ibid*). This development has been examined for example by Tobias Raun, who looks at the trans narratives presented in early Youtube vlogs, which “far exceeded the simplified categories and understandings in psycho-medical diagnostic manuals and the mainstream media” (2016: 1). The analysed transfics in this article also suggest that there are many parallels between what Prosser refers to as digital trans and the online fan communities as both predicate on diversity and multiplicity of narratives. Transfic specifically, and fanfiction more generally, seems an ideal genre for contemporary trans narratives. In particular, the way such fanfictions focus on the body as the site where relationships, or orientations towards others, are negotiated and made meaningful, is a fruitful ground from which new, more nuanced and diverse trans representation can continue to grow.

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