

“Don’t be alarmed. It’s to do with sex.”

Sherlock Holmes Fanfiction and Freedom of the Imaginary Domain

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Doctor of Philosophy in Literary Studies in English.

by

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that, for the individual fan, reading and writing fanfiction texts, and engaging with the online fandom communities within which these texts are produced, is a potentially valuable experience. This is because the kind of social and creative spaces found in these communities allow for, and celebrate, the free imaginative play with romantic and sexual desires, identities, and relationships. To articulate the importance of these spaces, I draw on Drucilla Cornell's concept of the *imaginary domain*, defined as the psychic space each individual uses to explore different sexual desires and personae, which exploration is necessary for the development of full personhood. I also argue that the growing visibility and influence of fandom in modern society means that it could serve as a mechanism for social change, particularly in the acceptance and support of multiple sexual identities and forms of love. Selected texts, drawn from the *Sherlock* fandom, are discussed as representative of the approach taken within fanfiction communities towards various aspects of sexuality and sexual ethics. This approach combines the enthusiastic exploration of sexual desires without shame or fear of judgment with an ongoing, critical interrogation of sexual ethics.

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No one writes of Sherlock Holmes without love.

John le Carré

To bind anew: this is an act of love.

Jacques Derrida

Introduction

There's a time and place for everything, and I believe it's called 'fan fiction'.

Joss Whedon

The study of fandom is a relatively new academic discipline, still limited to a fairly small community of academics. As fandom and fanfiction become more visible in modern popular culture, so the field of fan studies is expanding. Within the discipline there has been a theoretical shift from the study of fans as a kind of ethnographic curiosity to the study of fan artefacts – the works of art and fiction produced by fans. At the same time, influential fan scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills have highlighted the need to bridge the gap between the academic and the fan, pioneering in their work a hybrid space that combines academic discipline with “fannish” knowledge and experience. It is a common practice in more recent fan scholarship to begin with a discussion of the scholar’s own subjectivity; their identification as fan or academic or, more commonly now, some particular combination of the two. My own position is a combination, although my identity as a fan was established long before I ever thought of approaching fandom as an academic. While this thesis takes an academic approach towards the study of fandom, it is rooted in my own deep love of fanfiction – as a literary genre, and as an experience.

Every fan has their own story of how they first encountered fandom. I was sixteen years old when, searching the internet for information about the upcoming film release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, I came across a discussion forum that included some fanfiction posts. I read voraciously for days and finally, unable to contain my excitement about this discovery, told an older friend about it. She laughed and said, “Oh, so you’ve been reading bad fanfiction, huh?” Something in her tone implied that this was not a topic that one discussed in polite conversation. I didn’t question her, but I also didn’t stop reading. Two years later, I encountered my first slash fanfiction; a rather dark romance

between Remus Lupin and Sirius Black. I had never read anything that struck me as so illicit, or so exciting. The story is saved on my computer, still hidden in the password protected document that I learned to create that day (despite the rather extensive collection of far more explicit texts that I now openly discuss with anyone who will listen). I didn't know it at the time, but that text was the beginning of this thesis project.

South Africa was then, and still is now, a conservative country. Although I received 'sex education' at school, this education was extremely limited, clinical, and entirely heteronormative. (Working as a primary school teacher now, I can attest that this remains the case.) Through fanfiction, however, I received an extensive, detailed, and liberal sexual education, and I pursued it with determination, although I never dared to mention this pursuit to anyone else despite its entirely theoretical nature. Fanfiction revealed a sense of possibility to me, something which I desperately needed. Growing up, I was often accused by my peers – and it was an *accusation* – of being a lesbian. By the time I was in high school I had stopped denying it; not because it was true, but because denying it felt like agreeing that there was something wrong with the possibility. I couldn't have articulated it so clearly then, of course, but I think I knew that, although I wasn't a lesbian, I wasn't exactly what could be called 'straight' either. I knew they were wrong about me, but I didn't know *how* they were wrong. Neither they nor I had the vocabulary to express *how* I was different, and there was nothing in our education or society that was likely to remedy that lack. Fanfiction changed that for me. It was through fanfiction that I first encountered the concept of queerness, and later, asexuality, and thus learned to understand and define my own sexual identity.

This thesis is therefore motivated by a passionate belief in the *value* of fanfiction and fandom; the importance of having access to these spaces filled with possibilities. Within fanfiction communities fans are free to express and explore sexual fantasies and identities, and will vehemently defend their right to do so without shame. At the same time, fans engage

in an ongoing interrogation of sexual ethics, as a theme within fanfiction texts and as a topic of metatextual discussions. To articulate the importance of these spaces I draw on feminist theories of sexuality and identity, and specifically on Drucilla Cornell's concept of the imaginary domain. The imaginary domain is a psychic space that each of us uses to imagine and to play with sexual fantasies and personae and, through this imagining, establish an individual sexual identity. Given the centrality of sexuality to personal identity, Cornell argues that for the development of full personhood to be possible, this psychic space cannot be curtailed in any way. Cornell makes an argument for the legal protection of the imaginary domain, and presents an outline of what a legal system based on this protection might look like. This thesis takes a different approach, and argues that fandom and fanfiction communities have created a space where freedom of the imaginary domain is *already* possible and protected, because it is recognised in those communities as essential. Engagement with these communities, and the fanfiction texts that they produce, is therefore a potentially valuable experience for the individual fan. The growing visibility and influence of fandom also means that it could serve as a mechanism for social change, contributing to a social imaginary that embraces and supports multiple sexual identities and forms of love.

The study of fandom and fanfiction requires an inter-disciplinary approach, as it involves the analysis of both literary texts and of the behaviours and beliefs found in the communities in which those texts are produced. In this thesis I have drawn on theoretical work from several fields, including literary studies, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. In addition to formal scholarship, I have drawn on informal internet resources such as blogs and comment thread discussions about fandom and fanfiction, as well as the paratexts that surround fanfiction texts. This thesis is not engaged in literary analysis of fanfiction texts - although it will include discussions of some literary elements, such as genre, form, and character - but rather in a philosophical discussion of the ideas and concepts explored

through the medium of fanfiction texts. I make use of selected fanfiction texts, considered both as literary texts and as a form of anthropological or sociological data, to support this philosophical discussion with the aim of demonstrating the potential impact that engagement with the *content* of these texts, as well as with the communities in which they are produced, could have on the individual fan.

This thesis is not an exhaustive study of fandom. The sheer volume of fanfiction texts available makes this impossible: *Archive of Our Own*, which is one of the largest but by no means the *only* online fanfiction archive, currently hosts 4,678,000 works spread over 31,790 different fandoms (as of March 2019). I chose to limit my selection of texts to those from the *Sherlock* fandom (the fan community surrounding the BBC's modern television interpretation of Sherlock Holmes)¹. This fandom was particularly active and visible at the time I began my research for this thesis, making it a natural starting point, but also has the advantage of an arguably queer central character. Each chapter of this thesis engages with a different aspect of sexuality and sexual ethics², and in selecting texts for analysis I attempted to choose examples that are representative of the overall approach of fandom to each of those aspects.

Chapter One defines fandom and fanfiction terms, and introduces the field of fan studies and Cornell's theory of the imaginary domain. The potential role of fandom in creating a new social imaginary is explored.

Chapter Two discusses asexuality, and how fanfiction communities approach the question of defining sexual and romantic identities. Fanfiction texts depicting Sherlock Holmes as asexual are examined in conjunction with recent theoretical research on asexuality, sexuality, and identity.

¹ The title of this thesis quotes an episode from the second season of *Sherlock*, "A Scandal in Belgravia".

² This thesis does not address the representation of race and disability in fandom, as these are outside of the ambit of this thesis. Also, as an able-bodied, white woman, I did not feel qualified to address these issues.

Chapter Three discusses slash fanfiction and the ethos in fanfiction communities that celebrates sexual exploration without shame. Fanfiction texts in which characters struggle to overcome sexual shame are discussed in conjunction with theoretical work on sexual perversion and the concept and impact of sexual shame.

Chapter Four discusses the science fiction genre of Omegaverse fanfiction; which is predicated on an unequal, biologically determined social hierarchy. Key Omegaverse texts are examined to show how fans make use of the genre to draw attention to gender-based oppression and problematic consent norms.

Chapter Five discusses depictions of rape and sexual assault in fanfiction texts. The moral status of reading and enjoying depictions of rape fantasies is questioned, and the chapter engages with the metatextual discussions about sexual ethics and consent that take place within fanfiction communities.

Chapter One

Sherlock Holmes, Fanfiction, and Freedom of the Imaginary Domain

We have to defend the widest possible space for expression, precisely because without it, we legitimate foreclosures on what can be said, written, or imagined, and thus undermine and reshelve the project of each of us representing her sexual being in all its fluidity and incessant opening to new possibilities.

(Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom*)

Drucilla Cornell defines the imaginary domain as the psychic space that we use to imagine and to play with sexual fantasies and personae and, through this imagining, establish an individual sexual identity. This space, she argues, is essential to the development of full personhood. This thesis argues that fanfiction communities – within which multiple sexual desires and forms of sexuality are openly explored, discussed, and celebrated without shame – provide the kind of social and creative space that is necessary for freedom of the imaginary domain. Engaging with fanfiction texts, and with the communities within which those texts are produced, is therefore an experience that is of great potential value to the individual reader, contributing to the development of full personhood. Fanfiction and fandom communities could also play a positive role in creating a modern society in which multiple sexual identities and forms of love are accepted and supported.

1.1 Defining Fandom and Fanfiction

Fanfiction is polythetic in nature, meaning that while fanfiction texts have certain shared characteristics, not every text will possess all of those characteristics. The term *fanfiction*, often abbreviated to *fanfic* or just *fic*, refers to a work of fiction about, or based on, characters and settings from an already existing work, such as a book or television series, and written by a fan of that existing work. The term *fan* is used in this thesis to refer to both the fan as author and the fan as reader, as many fans both read and write fanfiction texts. Crucially, fans tend to engage critically with the cultural object around which their fandom and fan creations are

based. Existing works of fiction, their fictional worlds, and their characters, are what Michel de Certeau refers to as “cultural objects”; representations of a culture that form part of that culture’s shared experience of itself (xiii³). Fanfiction texts originate in this shared experience, but fan authors make use of these cultural objects to create new works of fiction, imagining new stories for the existing characters, exploring the fictional world from new perspectives, extending, altering, celebrating, and criticising. Fanfiction is written for enjoyment and not for profit, and usually without the permission of the author or creator of the existing work. Most modern fanfiction is published on the internet and it is a generally accepted practice to include a disclaimer at the beginning of the work stating that the author of the fanfiction does not own the characters or settings taken from the original text, and is making no profit from the publication of the fanfiction. Within fanfiction communities, the act of writing fanfiction is often referred to as “playing in someone else’s sandbox”, a term which demonstrates not only the acknowledgement that the fictional worlds and characters are someone else’s creation, but also that “the creator no longer has the final say over their creation” (“Playing”). This term also emphasises the playful nature of fanfiction, which is often a celebration of the authors’ love of the original work. This sense of playfulness and celebration however, does not preclude the more serious and critical edge that can be found in many fanfiction texts. Modern fanfiction is also defined as such partly by the context in which it is written. It is produced deliberately and consciously *as* fanfiction, by fans who identify themselves as belonging to a fandom. The first fan community to do this was the Sherlock Holmes fandom in the late 1800s, writing what were known then as Sherlock Holmes “pastiches” (Busse and Hellekson 6; Harrington), although the term fanfiction was first widely used in the 1960s among science fiction fans (Busse and Hellekson 6).

³ This thesis makes use of the MLA system of referencing, as set out in the MLA Handbook (8th Edition).

The term *fandom* refers to the fan community and fan artefacts surrounding a particular cultural object, such as an existing work of fiction or a character, like Sherlock Holmes, as well as to the entirety of all these individual fandoms. An individual fandom usually consists of a network of fans who create, share, and consume fan artefacts. *Fan artefacts* include scholarly articles, works of fanfiction, fan artworks, digital manipulations of film media, and informal ‘meta’ discussions about the canon text. These various fan artefacts are highly intertextual, often drawing on both the canon text and other fan artefacts.

The term *canon*, as it is used in fandom, refers to “the official authorized storyline” (Jamison 11). In its broader sense it refers not only to plot and character, but to every aspect of the fictional universe in which the story takes place, including as much of its history, geography, and culture as can be gleaned from the canon texts (Busse and Hellekson 9). The question of what can and cannot be considered canon in the broader sense is often a matter of debate among fans, who may disagree about the implications of events, actions, and dialogue in the canon text. This is particularly true when the canon text is not a written one, but rather a movie or television series that gives visual information to be interpreted. Despite this lack of agreement, an understanding of canon is crucial for creators of fan artefacts, because the works they produce are judged by how, and how well, they make use of the canon (Busse and Hellekson 10), and often the fanon as well.

The term *fanon*, an abbreviation of *fan canon*, refers to events and interpretations of characters that are “created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively” (Busse and Hellekson 9) throughout the fan artefacts created by that community. Details in fanon, particularly character interpretations, are often not fully supported by the canon and may even directly contradict it (Busse and Hellekson 9). The aspects of a character interpretation that are the focus of fanon often include the definition of a character’s sexual and romantic identity, especially when that interpretation differs from the assumption that a

character is heterosexual. A fanon interpretation of a character as anything other than heterosexual is often either a direct contradiction of canon, or not fully supported by it. A great deal of effort therefore goes into making fanon plausible, by means of the creative interpretation and reinterpretation of often minute details in the canon text. This creative reinterpretation is a part of the kind of free play with possibilities, and especially sexual possibilities, that this thesis argues is so valuable for the individual fan. In a fandom such as that surrounding Sherlock Holmes, there are also variations on what is considered the canon text. The many published Sherlock Holmes pastiches, as well as the various movies and television series about the character, could also be considered works of fanfiction. However, many fans consider at least the well-known adaptations to be a part of the Sherlock Holmes canon, because these adaptations have often contributed details that have been assimilated into the character of Sherlock Holmes as the fandom understands him.

This thesis will distinguish between the original canon of the Conan Doyle texts, and the new canon created by the BBC's modern television adaptation, *Sherlock*. To avoid confusion, the character from the original texts will be referred to as Holmes, and the character from the modern adaptation as Sherlock. Although *Sherlock* draws on the original canon texts, that canon is reinterpreted for a modern setting, and often subverted by the show's creators, Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss. In its opening episode, for example, "A Study in Pink", which title is a reference to the first Conan Doyle novel, "A Study in Scarlet", a crucial plot detail is given the opposite to its original meaning. In "A Study in Scarlet", Holmes is called to investigate a murder scene, where the murderer has written the word "RACHE" on the wall in blood. Detective Lestrade assumes that the word is intended to be "Rachel", and remarks to Holmes, "when this case comes to be cleared up, you will find that a woman named Rachel has something to do with it" (Doyle, "Scarlet" 31). Holmes dismisses his theory, stating, "'Rache' is the German for 'revenge'; so don't lose your time looking for

Miss Rachel” (Doyle, “Scarlet” 32). In “A Study in Pink”, this plot point is reversed and it is the victim who scratches “Rache” into the floor next to herself. A police officer points out that the victim must be German, having already searched for a translation on Google. Sherlock points out that a dying woman is unlikely to waste her time writing “an angry note in German” (Sherlock, “Study”), and that the word is more likely to be the name ‘Rachel’. This subversion of the original canon text creates a new canon for the modern show. In doing so, Moffat and Gatiss have also blurred the lines between canon and fanon, making it even more difficult to distinguish between the two. The iconic deerstalker hat, for example, was originally a *fanon* detail, created not by Conan Doyle but by the illustrator Sidney Paget (Harrington). In the modern *Sherlock* however, the hat becomes a *canon* detail when Sherlock grabs it from a props cabinet in a theatre to hide his face from the press, and is photographed wearing it (Sherlock, “Banker”).

An additional definition: this thesis refers to the social imaginary of *modern society*. This is not a reference to the society of any particular country, but to a more nebulous global society. This society is an international society of persons who share access, often through the internet, to a common popular media, mostly American or British in origin. This society is therefore largely ‘Western’ in its characteristics, as it shares elements of a common social imaginary – an underlying narrative or representation of the life of that society (Gatens viii) - that is expressed by ‘Western’ media and supported by similar, though not identical, social and legal systems. The modern fandom community is similarly nebulous. Studies have shown that although media consumption is the most common form of connection between the local and the global, and the most pervasive way in which people experience a sense of “globality”, it is not possible to define a “global” fandom community in any but the most general terms (Murphy and Kraidy; Harrington and Bielby). The only requirement for joining the global fandom community is an internet connection, which allows fans to form

communities based on shared interests rather than shared geographical and cultural origins. These shared interests are often cultural objects, such as a work of literature or a television series drawn from popular culture, which become “global media texts [appreciated by] internationally dispersed audiences” (Harrington and Bielby 180). Many of these global media texts express, but also often criticise, the social imaginary of the society within which they are created. Through these cultural objects fans are able to engage with these social imaginaries, and that engagement is complicated and enriched by perspectives from many different countries and cultures, each individual fan bringing their own particular perspective to that engagement. These perspectives, often expressed and discussed online, are in turn added to the engagement with popular culture that takes place within the fan communities, with the effect of deepening that engagement.

1.2 Fandom Studies

This thesis is situated within the field of fandom studies, which is the study of both fan artefacts (fanfiction texts, fan artworks, etc.) and of the fan communities within which these artefacts are produced. As an academic discipline, fan studies emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and drew from Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “the strategies of the powerful and the tactics of the disempowered” (Gray *et al* 1). De Certeau’s work is focused on the distinction between the representations of a society – which can be found in its laws, its media, and its cultural objects – and modes of behaviour within that society. He argues that these cultural representations, which help to create and maintain the dominant ideology or social imaginary of a society, are usually produced and imposed by the dominant element in a society, over which the consumers of such representations have no control. Despite this lack of control however, consumers often subvert these representations by making use of them in ways that the producers did not intend, creating something new (de Certeau xiii). This creates a gap between a representation or cultural object and its utilisation by those who

did not produce it originally. It is within this gap that fan artefacts emerge to engage, often critically, with cultural representations and, by extension, with the society that created them. This is the space in which fanon is created, often through a reinterpretation of canon details. The focus of de Certeau's work - and the majority of his examples - is on the imposition of a dominant social imaginary rooted in a Christian religious ideology, and on how people belonging to religious minorities subverted Christian rituals to give them new meanings. Within fanfiction communities, it is not religious ritual that is subverted, but rather the dominant social imaginary that is expressed in popular media; the stories that modern society tells about itself. Specifically, and of central interest for this thesis, fanfiction often subverts the heteronormative aspects of these stories by interpreting and depicting characters and relationships as non-heteronormative. Early fan scholars made use of de Certeau's theory to claim that fandom was

more than the mere act of being a fan of something: it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings [of the dominant ideology] represented by popular media (Gray *et al* 2).

Fans, operating from “a position of cultural marginality and social weakness” (Jenkins, *Poachers* 26), use the narratives provided by mainstream media in a way that the creators of that media did not intend, making selective use of the material in order to construct new narratives that better portray their own identities (Jenkins, *Poachers* 24-27). Two of the seminal works in fan studies – Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992) – emphasised the marginalisation of fans in terms of intellectual property rights (fanfiction being viewed by many as an infringement upon copyright) and in terms of demographics, as the fandom community consists in the majority of women or non-binary persons (centrumlumina, 2013a), many of whom identify as belonging to a sexual, gender, or romantic minority (centrumlumina, 2013b). Bacon-Smith's

ethnographic study of female *Star Trek* fans describes the production of fanfiction as a form of “civil disobedience” (3) through which women subvert patriarchal conceptions of gender. This emphasis on marginality received criticism from some fan scholars, who felt that the “assumption of an underlying duality of power” (Gray *et al* 3) between fans and the dominant ideologies expressed in popular media made it too easy and too common for fans to be dismissed or ridiculed. Some early fan scholars kept their distance from fandom, never allowing themselves to view it from the inside, because those on the inside – the fans themselves – were considered to be in some way irrational (Hills xix). Other scholars however, Jenkins prominent among them, openly identified themselves as fans and worked to counter this representation of fans by arguing for the importance of these creative spaces that “gave a voice to otherwise marginalised social groups” (Gray *et al* 2; Sandvoss 3).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a shift in the mainstream perception of fans – whom cultural industries began to recognise as valuable targets for marketing strategies (Gray *et al* 4; Hills 36) – meant that fandom began to be recognised as an ordinary aspect of life, rather than an aberration (Sandvoss 3). Writing in 2005, Cornell Sandvoss noted that fan consumption has become “a generally understood language through which one’s identity is communicated and assessed” (Sandvoss 3), and value or disvalue placed not so much on being a fan in general, but on the object of a fandom. In much the same way as literary scholars valued ‘classic’ literature over popular literature, a higher value was placed on being a fan of certain cultural objects. While the negative stereotypes associated with being a fan of *Star Trek* remained, for example, there were no such negative connotations to being a sports fan (Gray *et al* 4). As a part of this shift, instead of viewing fandom as a homogenous minority group engaged in a power struggle against dominant ideologies, fan scholars began to study fandom as a “contradictory and contentious space” (Busse and Hellekson 21) engaged in its own power struggles, some of which mirrored the status quo rather than

challenging it (Gray et al 6; Hills 27-45). Fan studies began to look at what fans themselves had to say about fandom, and focus on the figure of the individual fan. In their 1998 essay on slash fandom and fanfiction, ““Normal female interest in men bonking: Selections from the *Terra Nostra Underground* and *Strange Bedfellows*,” Shoshanna Green, Cynthia Jenkins, and Henry Jenkins included lengthy quotes from fans, illustrating “the texture of fan discussions” (14) on the topic, rather than offering an academic theory about slash. Rhiannon Bury, in *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (2005) takes a similar approach, drawing extensively on fan quotes and discussions in her analysis of women’s experiences of online fandom. Sheenagh Pugh, in *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (2005) uses fan quotes and discussions as a central element in her analysis of how and why fans create specific genres of fanfiction. Cornel Sandvoss, in *Fans: A Mirror of Consumption* (2005) interviewed fans as part of his study on how their emotional investment in particular fandoms influenced their identities. In *Fan Cultures* (2002), Matt Hills advocates the need to dissolve the “mutual marginalisation” (20) between fans and academics who study fandom, arguing in favour of a more accessible way of writing about fandom. More recently, collections of essays such as *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006) edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, and *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World* (2013) edited by Anne Jamison, have taken up that challenge, and consist largely of essays written by academics who are also fans, or fans who are also academics, thereby combining academic discourse with insider fannish knowledge. This thesis follows in that tradition, as well as that of the earlier scholars such as Jenkins who advocated for the importance of the *space* that fandom provides for marginalised voices.

Concurrently with the study of fans and their motivations, fan studies also examines fanfiction as a literary genre, with a focus on the intertextual nature of fanfiction. Mafalda Stasi (2006) uses the metaphor of the palimpsest to illustrate the particularly close

intertextual relationship that some forms of fanfiction – specifically, slash fanfiction – have with the canon text. A palimpsest is a sheet of vellum that has been scraped clean and reused; an imperfect medieval practice that often resulted in fragments of the first text remaining visible through the later ones, so that the two texts become difficult to separate (Stasi 115). Some fanfiction texts are very similar, with fragments of the original text remaining not only visible but an integral part of the fanfiction. This tight intertextuality allows for the use of techniques that are “more commonly used in poetry or in genres such as folktales or mythological cycles” (Stasi 122). In the same way that poetry uses imagery and symbolism to convey a wealth of meaning in very few words, “relying on a set of known associations to maximise the effect synthetically” (Stasi 123), slash makes use of fragments and imagery from the canon text to achieve both “economy and power of expression” (Stasi 123).

Abigail Derecho (2006) coins the term “archontic literature”, a term which she derives from Jacques Derrida’s theory of the archive and its function, to describe fanfiction. She argues that ‘archontic’ is a better description of the kind of intertextuality that exists in fanfiction than the more traditional ‘derivative’ or ‘appropriative’ both of which imply a hierarchical relationship between the ‘original’ text and those based on it (Derecho 64). An archive, which is a kind of virtual construct of new material surrounding the original source (or canon text) is constantly expanding and new texts are not “lesser”, but become part of the archive, altering its meaning as a whole. Crucially, archontic texts are self-conscious, “enter[ing] the archive of other works by quoting them consciously” (Derecho 65). Derecho emphasises the relational nature of fanfiction, which is read *in relation to* and *in conversation with* the canon text and other fanfiction texts, so that the meaning of any one text and of the archive as a whole is never stable (75). Anne Kustritz (2003) makes a very similar claim in her study of the fan practice of story prompts or challenges, which can result in multiple stories written on a single theme. Kustritz argues that the combination of these multiple

stories creates something which “cannot be accounted for by any one text” (382); a metatext. This metatext is not something written down, but rather “a way of seeing and understanding the world” (Kustritz 383) that emerges from the similarities and differences of multiple texts read in conjunction with one another. Crucially, this new way of seeing and understanding the world need not, and often does not, conform to the prevailing norms and values of mainstream society. What is created is often an alternative way of thinking, a different set of values; an alternative social imaginary.

Other scholars have emphasised the role of emotion and affect in fanfiction and fandom, partly as a reaction to the perceived necessity of separating academic and fannish discourses. In *The Wow Climax* (2007), Henry Jenkins argues that “popular culture is shaped by a logic of emotional intensification [and] at its best, makes us think by making us feel” (*Wow* 3). On this view, the power of popular culture is its ability to evoke *shared* emotions in its audience: “the most emotional moments are often the ones that hit on the conflicts, anxieties, fantasies, and fears that are central to the culture” (Jenkins, *Wow* 4). Anna Wilson argues that affect is central to the literary function of fanfiction (1.1), which is predicated on a “loving intimacy” (1.1) between fans’ and the object of a fandom. Wilson views fanfiction as a form of literary response where literary allusions evoke not only a shared intellectual community in the audience by also a shared *affective* community (1.3, italics added).

These claims are similar to those made by literary scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, who argues that there is a close connection between the literary imagination and moral perception, both of which necessarily involve an affective dimension (“Finely Aware”). Similarly, Simon Haines notes that our emotional responses are an essential component of knowledge, and that the kind of “affective perception” (32) that is essential to literature can provide us with a far deeper understanding of ethical concepts than any kind of formal instruction. The influence

of popular culture on the emotions of its audience is therefore not only an explanation for *why* it is so powerful, but also of what that power can *do*; it can contribute to, and alter, our moral perceptions.

The concepts of the archive and the metatext also capture something of the potential impact of fanfiction, on the individual fan but also, potentially, on a broader social level, especially when combined with the kind of “affective community” that Wilson describes. Derrida’s concept of the archive is not like a museum archive. Rather, “it is an archive in a more psychoanalytical, more cultural sense, [it is] a public, prosthetic, memory (...) a place where we use technology to improve our memory and make it available to others” (Lubar 13). This shared cultural archive consists of the representations of a culture – its history, its stories, its laws, and its shared modes of behaviour – that de Certeau describes as creating and maintaining the dominant social imaginary of a society. Derrida argues that control of this cultural archive is essential for political power (4). As de Certeau argues, however, control of cultural representations – of the archive – does not prevent others within a society from subverting those representations; from making use of them in ways that were not intended by their creators (xiii).

The use of archives is not unusual in artworks, although the concept is not normally applied to literature. It is, however, particularly well-suited to fanfiction. Hal Foster argues that archival artworks “share a notion of artistic practice as an idiosyncratic probing into particular figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history” (3). Like archival artists, writers of fanfiction are “often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects (...) that might offer points of departure again” (Foster 3). Fanfiction differs only in that, while Foster is referring to figures and events in reality, the figures and events that writers of fanfiction are exploring belong to a fictional world.

The potential impact of these creative archives – of archontic literature – is to alter the meaning of the source text around which the archive is constructed, by altering how the reader approaches it. The work of constructing an archive around a source text “affects the nature of the archived work” (Lubar 13) because, as Derecho argues, each new piece added to the whole affects the meaning of the whole (64-65). This in turn affects how the reader approaches the source text. Roland Barthes challenges the notion of the author as the origin of meaning in a text, arguing that “it is language which speaks, not the author” (280) and that as soon as an author writes something he loses control over it, because any meaning that it carries is thereafter derived by the reader from the language, and from intertextual references. Texts refer to other texts, and it is these references that give the reader room to enter and play a role in constructing the text (Barthes 280). Barthes argues that no matter what the author intends, a text does not have a single message or meaning, but many potential meanings, because every reader will find a different meaning within it.

The creation of an archive, however, means that this intertextuality is not limited to a single reading by a single reader, something that is lost except in the remembered experience of that reader. Instead, as each reader adds her interpretation to the archive – as a fanfiction text, or a comment, or a metatextual essay – each of these potential meanings is preserved in the archive, available to other readers. If, as Barthes suggests, the act of interpretation is partly constitutive of the meaning of a text, then the act of writing fanfiction is not merely that of exploring existing meanings in a source text, but rather that of creating new meanings, or contributing to an overall conglomeration of meaning surrounding the source text: a metatext, to use Kustritz’s term. For the reader of these stories, the archive has an impact on the intended meaning of the source text. Every new text added to the archive changes the meaning of every text that came before it, and the meaning of every new text is partly constituted by what is already in the archive. The archive surrounding a source text will

include both complementary and contradictory interpretations of its intended meaning, which in turn deepens and enriches the experience of the original text for the reader, and prompts a reconsideration of its intended or accepted meaning. The affective dimension of fandom only intensifies this effect, allowing the reader to consider or experience (through the lens of different texts) different ways of *feeling* about that meaning.

The same mechanism can be applied to the broader social picture. If the dominant social imaginary of a society is partly constructed and maintained by its cultural archive – the stories it tells (current news, historical representations, and fictional texts) – then alterations to that cultural archive have the potential to alter that social imaginary. Within this larger cultural archive, fanfiction (along with other art forms) creates smaller archives around the individual stories that comprise the whole. These smaller archives become part of the larger one, altering its meaning in the process. The archive as an art form “proposes new orders of affective association” (Foster 21), new ways of looking at (and feeling about) society both as it is, and as it could be. Fanfiction therefore has the potential to affect the transformation of society into something new.

1.3 Why Sherlock Holmes?

The fanfiction texts analysed in this thesis are all drawn from the BBC *Sherlock* fandom. *Sherlock* is a modern television adaptation, created by Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss, of the original *Sherlock Holmes* stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I chose to focus on the character of Sherlock Holmes for two reasons. First, because the Sherlock Holmes fandom has been active in various forms since 1887 and is one of the longest running and most prolific fandoms in existence. Second, because the character of Sherlock Holmes, particularly as he is depicted in *Sherlock*, is ambiguous both morally and sexually, and therefore well suited for fanfiction texts that explore non-heteronormative sexualities and love relationships.

1.3.1 The First Fandom

When Sherlock Holmes first appeared in “A Study in Scarlet” in 1887, he opened the door to a new kind of imagination that marks the beginning of modern fandom. Almost from the beginning – certainly after the publication of the Sherlock Holmes short stories in *The Strand* magazine, from 1891 onwards (Campbell 31) – he took on a life of his own, separate from that of his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Many readers, believing that Holmes was a real person, sent mail requesting his help with various problems or crimes (Booth 179). Doyle himself attempted to distance himself from Holmes, uncomfortable with the high regard that his readers showed towards the character, and with their tendency to confuse Holmes with his creator (Duane 2012; Booth 180). Doyle wished to be remembered for his more serious writing, and viewed Holmes as a distraction. He wrote to his mother saying, “I think of slaying Holmes ... and winding him up for good and all. He takes my mind from better things” (Weller 129). In December of 1893, he published “The Adventure of the Final Problem”, which chronicled the apparent death of Sherlock Holmes. If Doyle intended this to put an end to the interest in Holmes however, he was disappointed. Fans were so upset by the death of their favourite character that many of them took to wearing black armbands as a sign of mourning (Duane 2012). His death was reported as front page news all over the world (Booth 190). Twenty thousand readers cancelled their subscription to *The Strand*, and both the magazine and Doyle himself received hundreds of angry letters, and hundreds more begging him to resurrect Sherlock Holmes (Booth 190; Siegel 50). Fans signed petitions and several “Keep Holmes Alive” clubs were formed (Duane 2012). Amidst the uproar, with no sign that Doyle might be relenting, other fans took to writing their own Sherlock Holmes stories. Some rewrote the Doyle plot in order to keep Holmes alive; others filled in gaps left in the original stories; still others wrote new adventures for the detective. Soon these stories were being circulated in cheap magazines (Harrington). The production of these fan created

texts was the first literary example of the phenomenon that de Certeau described; fans making use of a creation in ways that its creator did not intend (xiii).

Although Doyle resisted the pleas of fans and editors for several years, in 1897 he decided to write a play about Holmes, partly to appease the fans, and partly for financial reasons (Booth 243). The play was followed by “The Hound of the Baskervilles” in 1901, a prequel set before Holmes’ apparent demise. In 1903, Doyle gave in to the ongoing pressures of fans and finances and resurrected Holmes in “The Adventure of the Empty House” (Booth 248; Duane 2012) in which Holmes reveals to Watson that he is still alive and explains that his ‘death’ was a necessary deception in the pursuit of the villain Moriarty. Doyle was not particularly enthusiastic about the new Sherlock Holmes stories, and inconsistencies began to emerge in the details (Booth 248). By that point however, it hardly mattered. Sherlock Holmes was firmly entrenched in the imaginations of his fans, and any inconsistencies only gave them more material to work with in creating their own stories. Doyle continued to write Sherlock Holmes stories until 1927 (Campbell 105). Simultaneously, and ever since, Sherlock Holmes has appeared in thousands of published ‘pastiche’ novels, short stories, plays, radio dramas, cartoons, games, films, television series, and of course, fanfictions. The original stories have been translated into at least sixty different languages (Rancoma), and the adaptations in almost as many. Sherlock Holmes is a part of our global cultural consciousness, and our image of him owes as much to various adaptations as to the original stories.

More significant than Holmes’ lasting popularity in popular culture and literary scholarship, however, is the kind of imaginative play that arose among his adult fans. Michael Saler notes that “Sherlock Holmes was a first fictional creation that adults openly embraced as ‘real’ while deliberately minimizing or ignoring its creator” (601). The initial belief in Holmes as a real person that led to fans addressing letters to Holmes instead of

Doyle was soon transmuted into what become known as ‘The Great Game’. Those who “play the game” (Baker Street Journal) believe, or *pretend* to believe, that Holmes and Watson were real people, while Doyle is relegated to the position of Watson’s literary agent. In ‘playing the game’, fans apply Holmes’ methods to the detective himself (Knox), “bringing their intellects and imaginations to bear on Doyle’s stories, scrutinizing every particular as if Holmes himself was a mystery that had been presented to them to solve” (Saler 606).

Sherlock Holmes, who described his deductive procedure as “the scientific use of the imagination” (Doyle, “Hound” 201), “expanded the definition of rationality beyond a narrow means-end instrumentalism to include the imagination (Saler 604). In doing so, he opened up the possibility of a kind of rational imaginative play, allowing adults to “immerse themselves in imaginary worlds without relinquishing their practical reason” (Saler 606). Saler describes these “ironic believers” as

not so much suspending their disbelief in a fictional character as willingly believing in him *with the double-minded awareness that they were engaged in pretence* (Saler, 606 italics added).

This kind of imaginative play – a combination of child-like ‘make believe’ and a more adult willing suspension of disbelief – is a distinctive characteristic of modern fandom, and something that modern fans engage in consciously and deliberately.

1.3.2 “I Believe in Sherlock Holmes”

On January 15th 2012, the BBC’s *Sherlock* aired its season two finale. The episode, entitled “The Reichenbach Fall”, draws its inspiration from “The Adventure of the Final Problem”, in which Holmes meets his apparent end by plunging over the edge of the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. In this modern version, Sherlock Holmes, his work discredited and his name disgraced through the machinations of evil mastermind James Moriarty, is forced to commit

suicide in order to save the lives of the people he cares about by jumping from the roof of a building, while John Watson watches from below.

After the episode aired, fans took to the internet in droves, and a massive outpouring of grief, anger, and frustrated delight flooded the fan sites. Long-time fans of Sherlock Holmes would have been aware of the significance of the episode's title, but for those new to the stories the shock mirrored what the readers of the original stories must have felt in 1893. Later, fans would begin to dissect the episode, searching for clues to explain Sherlock's survival and predicting the manner of his return, but the immediate reactions were emotional and raw. And then the following post went up on Tumblr:

Imagine being a Sherlock fan in the show universe. You've been following John's blog, stalking Sherlock a bit at crime scenes, try[ing] to be within earshot so you can hear him do his deductions. You've got cutouts from the papers. Then the news reach[es] you. What do you do? Some would believe the papers, but not everyone would buy it. And they would do what they could to clear his name.

I would like to propose [a] tribute campaign, to show our love and support.
Yes, in real life.

(earlfoolish)

Whether the author of the above post, or those who responded, knew of the existence of the 'Great Game' is unclear, but the impulse is the same, and the campaign went viral. Within days posters began to appear on the walls of major cities all over the world, with slogans declaring "I believe in Sherlock Holmes", "Moriarty was real", and "I fight John Watson's war" (Asher-Perrin). Fans created art, made posters, signs, T-shirts, and badges, and posted on the internet. The campaign became so visible and widespread that two years later the creators of *Sherlock* incorporated it, and the phrase 'I believe in Sherlock Holmes', into the next episode of the show (Sherlock, "Hearse").

The *Believe in Sherlock* movement had no social or political goals. It was simply an expression of love and appreciation for the characters and show. As such, it was not

drastically different to what happens in other fandoms, except that it became so visible outside of the traditional fan spaces. It is, however, a particularly vivid illustration of the potential power of fandom. These thousands, perhaps even millions, of people who all care passionately about this one character, this one story, are connected to one another through that passion. They talk to one another, they listen to one another, and many of them care about each other as more than just fans of the same work. The generation and exchange of ideas within these communities of fans is powerful, and it has the potential to do a great deal more than simply pass on a meme. Fandom has the power to influence the thoughts, and therefore the actions, of those who engage with it and, intentionally or otherwise, fans make use of that power to advocate for what is important to them.

1.3.3 The ambiguity of Sherlock Holmes

The BBC's modern *Sherlock*, as well as much of its fanfiction, can be read as a "metaphysical detective story", in which "rather than definitively solving a crime ... the sleuth finds himself confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity" (Merivale and Sweeney 2). The central focus of the television series, and especially of the fanfiction, is not so much on the detective work but on the nature of Sherlock's identity, specifically his romantic and sexual identity, the question of how accurate his self-identification as a high-functioning sociopath might be, and how he navigates human relationships.

The ambiguous social, sexual, romantic, and moral identity of this version of Sherlock Holmes means that the *Sherlock* fanfiction community is a particularly good example of fandom as a queer space; a space defined by a radical openness to possibility (Doty 3). The adaptation emphasises and reinterprets for a modern audience the original Holmes's status as a social outsider, portraying him as brilliant but lacking in emotional understanding, morally unconventional, and sexually ambiguous. Amandelin Valentine argues that "Sherlock's

sexuality is completely illegible [which] allows him to exist in a queer space” (3.12). The atypical, outsider’s perspective of the character offers writers the opportunity to approach issues of love and sexuality from unexpected angles, making this fandom very effective in creating a queer space.

1.4 The Imaginary Domain

The theoretical framework of this thesis is drawn from the work of feminist theorist Drucilla Cornell, and is centred on Cornell’s concept of “the imaginary domain”. Although there has been a great amount of research done in the areas of gender and sexuality and their relation to identity, the choice to focus this thesis mainly through the lens of Cornell’s work was made because her concept of the imaginary domain so closely mirrors the activities of fandom - the imaginative play with sexual possibilities and identities. The imaginary domain, as Cornell defines it, is the psychic space that each individual person uses to imagine and to play with sexual personae and, through this imagining, establish an identity as a sexuate being; an identity that encompasses not only gender and sexual orientation but also the way we choose to structure our romantic and sexual relationships. Cornell argues that when freedom of the imaginary domain is curtailed it is damaging because this freedom is a necessary condition for personhood, and that this freedom must therefore be protected (*Imaginary Domain*). In her two books on this topic, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (1995) and *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex and Equality* (1998), Cornell makes an argument for the legal protection of the imaginary domain, and presents an outline of what a legal system based on this protection might look like. This thesis takes a different approach, and argues that fandom and fanfiction communities have created a space where freedom of the imaginary domain is already possible and protected, because it is recognised within those communities as important. As such, engagement with fandom and

fanfiction communities is of value, for the individual project of personhood and on a broader social level.

1.4.1 Social Imaginaries, Recognition, and the Possibility of Personhood

Attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and love relationships within a society are influenced, if not determined, by its dominant social imaginary. The dominant social imaginary of a society is an underlying narrative or representation of the life of that society, which gives symbolic weight and legitimacy to certain values, actions, and ways of living (Gatens, viii). It involves a set of common values, beliefs, and practices which frames and influences how the majority of people within that society think about a range of topics. Among other things, the dominant social imaginary of a society influences how people within that society structure their families and love relationships, how they choose to express their sexual identities, and what forms of sexualities and relationships are viewed as legitimate within that society (Butler 33; Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 64). The dominant social imaginary of a society is expressed and maintained through its education systems, religious structures, and laws, as well as through its language, literature, and popular media (de Certeau 169). Judith Butler argues that the dominant social imaginary of a society determines what is 'real' for that society, and what is not, particularly with regards to sexuality and gender. This 'reality' refers to the forms of sexuality, expressions of gender, and structuring of love relationships that a society is prepared to recognise as legitimate. Problems arise when the scope of what a society is prepared to recognise as valid expressions of gender, sexuality, and love is too limited. Butler argues that

our very sense of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition, and that desire places us outside of ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose, but that provides the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have (33).

If the society in which we live refuses to recognise our individual expressions of gender, sexuality, and love relationships as valid, this places constraints on the possibility for each of us to develop full personhood.

Cornell defines personhood – both in the sense of a legal status (something bestowed on an individual by the state) and in a moral and psychic sense – not as a fixed property of human beings but as an ongoing process; a project that is both difficult and fragile, but which is necessary for the possibility of individual freedom. On this understanding, “a person is not something ‘there’ (...) but a possibility, an aspiration which, because it is that, can never be fulfilled once and for all” (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 5). Genuine equality therefore, in a legal sense, requires the protection of the “minimum conditions of individuation” (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 4) that allow for this possibility. Cornell argues for three basic conditions that are necessary for the project of personhood: first, bodily integrity; second, access to languages and a set of symbolic forms that allows us to differentiate ourselves from others and so to negotiate an individual identity; and third, the protection and freedom of the imaginary domain (*Imaginary Domain* 4). Although theoretically separable, these three conditions are closely interrelated.

The physical aspect of our sense of self identity is rooted in the bodily ego that allows us to view ourselves as an integral whole, and as distinct from other persons. The bodily ego is what “gives us the ability to organise our perceptions of ourselves as our own” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 35). As a result, we are invested in our bodies in a way that is “inseparable from our most basic sense of self” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 35). The bodily ego, however, cannot be developed in isolation. We require the recognition of others in order to develop and maintain our sense of self, and “it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings” (Butler 2). Cornell connects this need for

recognition to Jacques Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage' of development⁴. The 'mirror stage' refers to the moment when a human infant is first able to recognise his/her image in a mirror, and so come to an identification of him/herself as an individual (Lacan 442). Lacan's understanding is that the jubilation displayed in this moment of identification is a result of the infant's first experience of perceiving him/herself as a separate whole, a separate body, distinct from other persons (442). This perception, however, occurs at a time when the infant is still in a state of helplessness, dependent on others, and therefore "situates the agency of the ego, before its social direction, in a *fictional* direction" (Lacan 442, italics added). The image therefore "functions both as a projection and an anticipation of what the infant might become but *is not now*" (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 39, italics added). Thereafter the infant is dependent on others for ongoing "verifications" (Lacan 444) of his or her projected identity, without which the self loses coherence (Leeb 353). Cornell argues that this is not a 'stage' at all, in that it is not something that the infant ever completes, and that this sense of self-identity "continues to involve the projection of bodily integrity and its recognition by others" (*Imaginary Domain* 40) throughout our lives. Likewise, the bodily ego is not neutrally developed. The physical sex that we are designated at birth, as well as to be viewed as either male or female, affects how we are recognised and confirmed as selves by those around us, and our ability to experience ourselves is shaped by that recognition. When we imagine ourselves, sex and gender are always already a part of that imagining. As a result, Cornell argues that "we cannot mark out an identity without implicating who we are through a set of culturally encoded fantasies about what it means to be a creature with a 'sex'"

⁴ The use of psychoanalysis in feminist theory is the subject of some controversy. Luce Irigaray, in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), criticises psychoanalysis for its presentation of the male body as the universal norm, against which measurement a woman is always lacking, "the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value" (Irigaray 23). Elizabeth Grosz, however, defends Cornell's use of Lacan's work by pointing out that Cornell is concerned with the symbolic order, not so much biology as *representations* of biology, the "culturally encoded fantasies about what it means to be a creature with a 'sex'" (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 6) that influence how we are recognised and confirmed as selves by those around us. For this reason, her use of Lacan as the basis of her theory of personhood makes sense, because unlike other psychoanalysts, Lacan distinguishes the biological penis from the symbolic phallus (Grosz, *Identity* 218).

(*Imaginary Domain* 6). In other words, our very sense of identity and the way we relate to our physical bodies is influenced by what forms of that relation our society is willing to recognise.

Cornell argues that the process of marking out an identity is “a project that demands the space for the renewal of the imagination and the concomitant re-imagining of who one is and who one seeks to become” (*Imaginary Domain* 5). It is this space that she defines as the imaginary domain; “the psychic space needed to truly play with imposed and assumed sexual personae (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 9), and it is this space that we use to establish ourselves as individual persons. There is an aspect of the self that is always imaginary, a moment “of fictionality, of imagined anticipation, in and through which the ego is constituted” (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 40). Our sense of self involves the projection of this imagined self into the future, and requires the recognition of that self by others in order to be sustained. Cornell coins the term ‘sexuate being’ to represent “the sexed body of our human being when engaged with a framework by which we orient ourselves; because we are sexuate beings we have to orient ourselves sexually” (*Heart of Freedom* 7). This term encompasses the combination of sexed body, gendered behaviours, and the structuring of romantic and sexual relationships with others that make up our individual sexual and romantic identities, and Cornell uses the term to express the idea that “although we are all sexual creatures, there are as many different possible forms to our sexuate being as there are people” (*Heart of Freedom* 8).

Closely related to freedom of the imaginary domain is freedom of *representation*; the freedom of each person to pursue, in both private and public spaces, his or her own vision of what love, sex, and family mean, without fear of violence or exclusion (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 43, 59). Marking out a sexual identity is a process that is partly an act of imagination, but also partly an act of representation; the expression of our sexuate being

within a society of persons. Any social constraint placed on either the imaginary domain, or on our ability to live out our sexual being in the way that we choose, such as the limitations imposed by heteronormativity, denies the possibility of personhood to anyone who falls outside of those constraints.

1.4.2 Heteronormativity and the need for a new, non-heteronormative social imaginary

The social imaginary of modern society (the nebulous global society defined above) is, for the most part, heteronormative. Heteronormativity involves “the conflation of sex-gender-sexuality which leads to the normalisation of heterosexuality – and the concomitant notion of compulsory heterosexuality” (Atkinson and DePalma, 2009 17), and the normalisation of heterosexual monogamy as “the only appropriate organisation of family life” (Atkinson and DePalma, 2008 27). What this means in practice is the perception that what is ‘normal’ (natural or right) is; first, that the sex we are designated at birth (male/female) is coupled with the corresponding gender identity (masculine/feminine) and all the behavioural traits associated with that gender and; second, heterosexuality, the only appropriate expression of which takes place within a monogamous heterosexual relationship. A failure to conform to these norms is often perceived – by those who endorse the heteronormative paradigm – as just that, a failure; at best an illness, a misfortune, confusion; at worst an immoral choice, a symptom of deviancy. Although heteronormative expectations within a given society are not always this extreme – and are generally less so in the modern society that is the focus of this thesis – they remain as the (often unconscious) basis upon which social expectations about sexuality, gender, and love relationships are founded. Persons and relationships that do not conform to these expectations are viewed as something to be remarked upon and often judged in terms of how far outside of the norm they are situated.

Heteronormativity denies recognition to anyone who does not conform to its parameters (Cornell, *Shadow*) because it refuses to recognise as valid – cannot, by its very

definition, recognise as valid – non-heteronormative expressions of gender, sexuality, and love. This refusal takes both legal forms – the denial of rights to non-heterosexuals (the right to marry, the right to adopt children, the right to express their love in public places etc.) – and social forms such as homophobia, and the perception of non-heterosexuality and non-monogamy as deviant, dangerous, or immoral. This results in the exclusion – both symbolic and practical – from society of those persons who do not conform to heteronormative expectations, including non-heterosexual persons, persons who do not conform to normative conceptions of gender, and those persons (heterosexual or non-heterosexual) who form non-heteronormative love relationships (Cornell, *Shadow*). This social and legal exclusion of these persons amount to a denial of their identities: a refusal to recognise them as full persons. Cornell argues that “to deny a person the space to live out her sexuate being as it is presented and represented in her person is potentially to undermine her most basic sense of self” (*Heart of Freedom* 37). A heteronormative social imaginary is therefore unjust and damaging. In order to allow each of us the possibility of developing our full personhood we need to develop a new, non-heteronormative social imaginary; one which prioritises the freedom and protection of the imaginary domain, and which allows each of us the freedom to represent – to act upon, to live out – our individual sexuate being.

In this new social imaginary there are two constraints on freedom of representation – freedom of action – that should be kept: first, that no person may use force or violence against another in the expression of his or her sexuate being (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 60) and, second, that no adult should engage in sexual acts with a child. These constraints can be defended by distinguishing between social constraints of sexuality, which are a matter of convention, and moral constraints, which forbid expressions of sexuate being that violate the personhood of one of the participants, such as in cases of rape or pederasty. Rape violates the bodily integrity and the personhood of the victim by failing to recognise his or her right of

consent, while pederasty violates a moral duty to protect the developing personhood of children, who are not yet able to give consent to sexual acts. These minimal constraints on action amount to a position of negative liberty; the freedom to live however one chooses to live, provided that in doing so one does not harm anyone else. This basic freedom, however, is not sufficient for true freedom of representation. Cornell argues that freedom of representation requires

not only a negative right to be left alone, but also a positive capacity to create intimate spaces and social support for personal choices that establish and maintain personal relationships and identity (*Heart of Freedom* 42).

The social space needed for freedom of the imaginary domain and freedom of representation therefore requires not just passive tolerance of non-heteronormative sexualities, love relationships, and family structures, but *active support* for multiple representations of sexuate being⁵. Cornell argues that

no matter how thoroughly we discredit heterosexist ideas, we will neither understand them nor undermine their power *unless we provide an alternative ethic*, a new choreography of sexual difference (...) an alternative ethic of love (*Heart of Freedom* 229, italics added).

The aim of Cornell's argument is the legal protection of the imaginary domain, and through this protection, freedom of representation. J.M. Bernstein, however, argues that Cornell theorisation of the imaginary domain is not strong enough to support her legal argument, because it is not connected strongly enough to action to prevent it from simply "collapsing into mental space" (84). He argues that without a stronger formulation of the imaginary

⁵ Michael Warner makes a similar argument in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (2000) - that the normalization, and legalization, of any particular conception of sexuality (such as monogamy, whether heterosexual or homosexual) almost always results in the stigmatization and shaming of those that differ from it, and that, consequently, what is required for the possibility of full sexual autonomy is the acceptance and support of a much broader range of sexual possibilities (vii-vii). Similar arguments can be found in the work of Sara Ahmed (2010), Jose Esteban Munoz (1999), and Tim Dean (2009), each of whom advocates for the support and recognition of a broader range of sexual and romantic possibilities.

domain that makes it a necessary component of action, freedom of the imaginary domain amounts to little more than the traditional space of imagination (Bernstein 84), the protection of which will have no impact on freedom of representation. Martha Nussbaum makes a similar criticism of Butler for her focus on “the subversive use of words” (“Parody” 2) and parodic acts as a means of challenging social norms, rather than the more active engagement with politics and law that Nussbaum admires in other feminist writers. She contends that Butler’s theories have little value because they emphasise individual symbolic gestures rather than action to bring about change: “in Butler, resistance is always imagined as personal, more or less private, involving no unironic, organized public action for legal or institutional change” (“Parody” 10). She suggests that this focus on the personal and the symbolic is a screen for “quietism” that relieves the individual of the responsibility to act (“Parody” 13). However, Nussbaum appears to underestimate the potential power that lies in those private, personal moments of resistance. After all, the impulse to act, to bring about change in the world, must come from somewhere. In response to a question about “the use of increasing possibilities for gender” (Butler 28), Butler argues that “we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent (29). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to defend Cornell’s legal formulation of the imaginary domain, but law is only one means of challenging constraints on personhood. Spaces like fanfiction communities, in which freedom of the imaginary domain is *already* possible and protected, not by law but by the recognition within those communities of its importance, have the potential to be a powerful force in creating a new social imaginary.

1.4.3 Achieving this new social imaginary

Social and legal recognition of non-heteronormative sexualities is the central goal of sexual identity politics. A common tactic employed in identity politics is to claim the essential nature of sexuality and gender. Essentialism, in this context, is the view that certain

phenomena, particularly sexual phenomena such as sexual orientation and gender, “are natural, inevitable, universal, and biologically determined” (DeLamater and Hyde 10). Essentialism is defined in opposition to constructivism, which is the view that while sexuality and gender may be grounded in biology, they are “channelled in specific directions socially rather than biologically” (DeLamater and Hyde 14) and are therefore socially constructed phenomena. By implication, sexual orientations and gender identities that deviate from the socially constructed norms are the result of individual choice, rather than biological necessity. In claiming that sexual orientation is not a choice, but rather an inborn, biological trait, proponents of equal rights can make the argument that it cannot be changed and, therefore, that non-heterosexual persons should be granted the same legal rights and freedom of representation as heterosexual persons.

While this approach may be the most effective means of convincing the general public of the need for social and legal equality, there are two problems that need to be addressed. First, the essentialist view of sexual orientation, as it is used in identity politics, implicitly accepts what CJ Chasin defines as the “heteronormative conditional” (417); and second, it does not allow for the wide variation in lived experience that makes up individual sexual identities, nor for the possibility that sexuality may change over time. The heteronormative conditional is the view that to be heterosexual is preferable, and that “if someone can be made straight, ze should be and should be granted rights *only* because ze cannot help being lesbian, gay, [or] bisexual” (Chasin 417, italics added). The implied corollary is that if sexual orientation is a choice, then everyone should choose to be heterosexual, because homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality etc. are lesser choices, if not outright immoral ones. Arguments based on the essentialist view may well be necessary to achieving the goals of legal and social equality, simply because such achievements must, at this time, take place within the context of a social imaginary that accepts the heteronormative

conditional. It is not the intention of this thesis to imply that identity politics is not a valuable and necessary undertaking, or to devalue the achievements that such tactics have made possible. However, the kind of social imaginary that allows true freedom of the imaginary domain, and freedom of representation, cannot be defined by the question of whether sexual orientation is a choice or not. Rather, in such a social imaginary, it would not *matter* if differences in sexual orientation between persons were the result of choice or biology, because multiple variations of sexuality – and likewise gender and love relationships – would be accepted and supported as equally valid and valuable.

To achieve this new imaginary, we need to challenge the boundaries of heteronormativity, and to do so we need spaces where imaginative play with sexuality and sexual personae is possible. The concept of free play is central to Cornell's theory of the imaginative domain; the ability to 'try on' and discard different sexual personae in order to find or create one which fits, a process which is never truly complete (*Imaginary Domain* 4-5). Butler makes a similar point when she argues that sexuality "emerges precisely as an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints" (15). Biology imposes one set of constraints and social conventions another. While we can do relatively little to alter our biology, it is possible to limit social constraints on sexuality. To do this, we need to challenge the boundaries of the heteronormative social imaginary, recognising (and prompting others to recognise) as valid – as real, in Butler's terminology - sexualities and love relationships that are outside of these boundaries. Butler argues that "when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification" (27-28). These moments of instability allow non-heteronormative identities to "acquire new, positive and intelligible meanings and associations" (Atkinson and DePalma, 2009 25). These new, positive meanings and

associations are essential if we are to create a social imaginary that actively supports multiple forms of sexuate being. It is in the creation of these new meanings and associations - of the “alternative ethic of love” that Cornell advocates - that fandom and fanfiction can play a valuable role.

1.5 The Role of Fandom

Fandom and fanfiction can contribute to the development of a new social imaginary in two ways. First, fanfiction texts – and in particular, slash fanfiction texts - often challenge and undermine heteronormativity and model non-heteronormative sexualities and love relationships. Second, fandom and fanfiction communities are a queer space, which provides and protects the kind of social and creative space that is necessary for freedom of the imaginary domain.

1.5.1 Slash Fanfiction

Stories depicting Sherlock Holmes and John Watson as lovers are examples of slash, a genre of fanfiction depicting a romantic and/or sexual relationship between two characters of the same sex who are, or are implied to be, heterosexual in the canon text. The genre takes its name from the fan practice of using a slash punctuation mark (/) to denote that a story contains a romantic or sexual pairing (e.g. Holmes/Watson or Sherlock/John). There are varying definitions of slash. Some definitions exclude fanfiction about canon homosexual relationships, but not fanfiction in which character is homosexual in canon and the other heterosexual (“Slash”). For the most part, however, slash now refers to any romantic or sexual pairing between two characters of the same sex, either male or female, although the term *femmeslash* is sometimes used to denote a slash pairing between two women.

Although there are fan scholars who have studied slash fanfiction as a literary genre, much of the scholarship on slash focuses on the attempt to understand the motivations behind the production and consumption of the genre, particularly by *female* fans. Early studies identified slash fans (both authors and readers) as almost exclusively heterosexual women, and although the demographics of modern slash fandom are more diverse, including both men and women of all sexual orientations, slash fandom remains a female dominated space (Green *et al*; Lothian *et al*).

The various theories offered by scholars can be grouped into four interrelated categories: first, the theory that slash appeals particularly to female fans because it offers a vision of genuine equality between partners within a romantic and sexual relationship (Lamb and Veith, Jenkins, *Poachers*); second, the theory that slash offers an alternative to traditional masculinity that transgresses against heteronormative boundaries (Jenkins, *Poachers*); third, the theory that slash appeals to female fans because it offers a space for the liberation of female sexual fantasy (Russ; Bacon-Smith; Green *et al*; Lothian *et al*, Busse); and fourth, the theory that the appeal of slash is that it creates a queer space in which there is a radical openness to alternative possibilities for the combination of sex, gender, and relationships (Jenkins, *Poachers*; Bury; Pugh; Lothian *et al*).

The first school of thought, and some of the earliest scholarship on slash, including the work of Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith (1986), and Henry Jenkins (1992), argued that slash appeals to female fans because it offers a challenge to heteronormative, patriarchal conceptions of gender roles and sexuality, which limit women to a passive, submissive, and ultimately lesser position both in society and in heterosexual romantic relationships. They characterise slash fanfiction as akin to the romance novel genre, but separated from heteronormative, patriarchal constraints placed on gender relationships, creating a utopian vision of relationships in which gender is no longer “a governing and

determining force” (Lamb and Veith 254) in romantic and sexual relationships, allowing for genuine equality and intimacy between partners. Lamb and Veith also argue that it is the constraints placed upon women in a patriarchal society, particularly as was the case in the 1980s (those constraints may be less obvious in 2019, although they still exist), that explain why female fans find specifically *male* slash relationships so appealing. If a writer “pairs two women to avoid the heterosexual problem of male dominance, she must still overcome the cultural dictum of female passivity” (Lamb and Veith 252). Male slash characters, by contrast, can remain “powerful and in command of their lives” (Lamb and Veith 252), while at the same time being allowed to experience true equality and intimacy in their relationship with one another, without any “desire to dominate or be dominated” (Lamb and Veith 252). In this way, slash fanfictions “remove gender as a governing and determining force in the relationship” (Lamb and Veith 254), and slash characters are often portrayed as – in a sense – androgynous, each displaying masculine and feminine traits as the situation requires.

Similarly, Henry Jenkins observes that slash stories often describe male bodes in terms that are traditionally associated with female beauty, and that during sexual encounters depictions of the two characters “[slide] between genders” (*Poachers* 193) so that even in a single sexual act there is no point at which either character could be said to play either a masculine or a feminine role. This means that “both characters can be equally dominant and equally submissive, without either quality being permanently linked to their sexuality or their gender” (Jenkins, *Poachers* 194). In doing so, Jenkins argues, slash “confronts the most repressive forms of sexual identity and provides utopian alternatives to current configurations of gender” (*Poachers* 189). Slash characters have both masculine and feminine characteristics, but these characteristics are not in any way connected to the role that either man plays in the relationship. Slash

explores the possibility of existing outside of those categories, of combining elements of masculinity and femininity into a satisfactorily whole yet constantly fluid identity (Jenkins, *Poachers* 193).

The second school of thought, put forward by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* (1992), is that slash challenges heteronormative, patriarchal conceptions of masculinity by removing the social barriers that sharply separate male friendship from homosexuality. Jenkins draws on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who argues that in a patriarchal society, which is held together by the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and attendant homophobia, there are strictly enforced boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of male friendship (Jenkins, *Poachers* 203), and homosocial relationships between men are often characterised by “intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality” (Sedgwick 1). Sedgwick introduces the term ‘homosocial desire’, referring to “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1) to “hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1). For women, she argues, this continuum is largely intact, and that

it makes an obvious kind of sense to say that women in our society who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities [and there is a simple and largely unbroken] continuum between “women loving women” and “women promoting the interests of women” (Sedgwick 2-3).

By contrast, for men, the visibility of this continuum is “radically disrupted” (Sedgwick 2), and it is not possible to group male social bonds together in the same way, because a patriarchal society is predicated on the domination of women by men. Male bonds in the sense of “men promoting the interests of men” (Sedgwick 3) are used to enforce this dominance over women, and male homosexual desire is viewed as a threat to this dominance

(Sedgwick 3). To avoid any appearance of homosexuality therefore, the range of behaviour available to men is restricted (Jenkins, *Poachers* 203). The implication is that, unlike women, for whom close emotional intimacy with others of the same sex is a natural part of social life, men do not have the same options available to them because of the fear that emotional intimacy with another man will be interpreted as homosexual desire.

The basic premise of slash fanfiction is “the movement from male homosocial desire to a direct expression of homoerotic passion” (Jenkins, *Poachers* 186), and slash stories often present this movement as the natural progression of a close male friendship, provided that the men involved are courageous enough to admit to their desire for intimacy. Slash

throws conventional notions of masculinity into crisis by removing the barriers blocking the realisation of homosocial desire; [it] unmask[s] the erotics of male friendship, confronting the fears keeping men from achieving intimacy (Jenkins, *Poachers* 205).

As such, slash represents (among other things) a reaction against mainstream constructions of male sexuality and masculinity, which do not permit the open expression of affection or desire between men. Slash transgresses this boundary through “a refusal of fixed-object choices in favour of a fluidity of erotic identification, a refusal of predetermined gender characteristics in favour of a play with androgynous possibility” (Jenkins, *Poachers* 189).

It is important to note that slash fanfiction is not, for the most part (there are always exceptions), intended to depict realistic homosexual relationships. Slash is a genre predominantly written and read by women and, as several fans point out in interviews with Sheenagh Pugh (2005), “a slashed hero has more to do with what the writers *wish* men were like than what they *know* men are like” (102, italics added). Although slash is about intimacy

between men, it is reasonable to think that at least some (heterosexual⁶) writers of slash are expressing the desire for a similar intimacy (joined as it is with the equality emphasised by Lamb and Veith), between men and women.

The third school of thought argues that the appeal of slash fanfiction (and in this regard in particular, fanfiction on a broader scale not limited to slash) lies in its being, as Joanna Russ describes it, “pornography for women, by women, with love” (82). Russ describes slash as a literature that expresses women’s desire for “sexual intensity, sexual enjoyment [and] the freedom to choose” (89). Camille Bacon-Smith argues that the more pornographic elements of slash are liberating because they allow women to express erotic interests outside of heterosexual monogamy (247). Slash offers a challenge to heteronormative boundaries because it involves the open enjoyment, by women, of sexual fantasies that do not conform to heteronormative expectations. One fan claims that “slash is an intricate part of [her] sexuality and a sexual outlet” (Green *et al* 25). Another writes:

Some of us (gasp, horror, shock) read slash because it turns us on. Some of us read slash because it’s sexy, arousing, fine, one-handed reading, as satisfying to the emotions and the intellect as it is to the libido (Green *et al*, 31).

Drawing on roundtable discussions with slash fans in 2007, Alexis Lothian, Kristina Busse and Robin Anne Reid suggest that the “intensely personal connections between sexual identity and fandom means that ... slash is for many people a form of sexual identity” (107).

The fourth school of thought identifies the appeal of slash as lying in its play with alternative possibilities. This theory identifies slash fandom in particular as a queer space, “not queer identity, but queerness as (...) a blurring of sexual lines, something strange and unusual” (Lothian *et al* 107). This blurring of lines allows for a space in which fans are

⁶ Non-heterosexual slash fans may write and read slash for other reasons articulated later in this section, and of course the desire for intimacy and equality between men and women will not be the only motivation for all heterosexual fans either.

free to kind of imagine – any sort of relationship, without having to subject it to your sort of men-act-this-way, women-act-that-way heterosexual kind of grid (...) freer to imagine a space of eroticizing equality (Pugh 109).

As Sheenagh Pugh notes, slash “resists attributing identity categories – gay, straight, male, female – which then determine how a character acts or is represented” (109). Instead, slash allows writers to play with these categories, creating “new ways of understanding the relationship between sex, gender, and experience” (Pugh 109).

For the purposes of this thesis, these last two schools of thought are particularly relevant. Cornell’s concept of ‘sexuate being’ encompassess various different - although interrelated - aspects of the self, including gender, sexual orientation, and the way each of us chooses to “live out” those aspects of ourselves in our romantic and sexual relationships (*Imaginary Domain*). Sexual orientation or identity incorporates (although it is not limited to) gendered object choice, but also includes sexual desires. The imaginary domain is the space we use to ‘play’ with those desires in fantasy, to ‘try on’ different sexual personae. Through fanfiction, the space of the imaginary domain is expanded by engagement – through literary texts - with the sexual fantasies of others, giving the individual fan a greater array of personae and desires to ‘try on’ and either keep or discard. In addition, within fanfiction communities this imaginative play need not be kept secret, but can be shared and enjoyed with a community of other fans engaged in the same practice. This imaginative play is also not limited to sexual desires and fantasies, but includes play with different forms of romantic and sexual relationships. This likewise expands the potential space of the imaginary domain, allowing the individual fan to ‘try on’ different forms of relationships through engaging with narratives that explore their various dimensions. It is in this regard that fandom, specifically as a *queer* space, offers freedom of the imaginary domain.

1.5.2 Fandom as a Queer Space

‘Queerness’ as it operates in fandom is not simply a descriptor indicating a homosexual character pairing. Alexander Doty argues that queerness is “an attitude, a way of responding” (xv) to mass culture that refuses to contain itself within heteronormative boundaries. Lothian *et al* define ‘queerness’ as

a highly political rejection of the notion that you need to rigidly or explicitly define your own sexuality, that others can legitimately require you to make your sexuality public and intelligible (108).

Similarly, Doty defines ‘queer’ as

a militant sense of difference that views the erotically “marginal” as both (...) a consciously chosen “site of resistance” and a “location of radical openness and possibility” (3).

Modern fandom, and particularly slash fandom, embodies this sense of radical openness. Fandom creates a space where all forms of sexual being can be openly expressed, explored and discussed. A significant portion of fanfiction consists of stories about sex and relationships, including those that are non-heteronormative, ranging from short pornographic scenes known as PWP (Porn Without Plot or Plot, What Plot?) stories to detailed novel length stories dealing with all the complexities of relationships within the context of a larger plot. In many cases the sexualities and relationships portrayed in these stories are non-heteronormative, either because they involve non-heterosexual relationships, or because the relationship structures and dynamics are non-heteronormative in nature.

Additionally, within fandom there is a deliberate suspension of shame, and of taboos. Most fans are open to the exploration that this allows, and are prepared "to accept tropes that don't appeal to them personally as Just Not My Kink, rather than as bad or wrong" (Busse, “Pon Farr” 317). This shameless exploration and enjoyment of all forms of sex, sexualities

and love relationships is important because of the imaginative and social space that it creates and nurtures; one in which "sexual activities and proclivities on the fringes of ordinary acceptability are considered quite normal" (Lothian *et al* 106). As a queer space in which constant discussion and renegotiation of boundaries allows "ideas, expressions and groups [to] move from taboo to commonplace" (Lothian *et al* 108), fandom creates a space where freedom of the imaginary domain is both possible and protected.

1.6 Chapter Overview

The remainder of this thesis is structured in four chapters, each of which discusses a different aspect of how fanfiction and fanfiction communities engage with sexuality. In Chapter Two I discuss fanfiction texts that depict the character of Sherlock Holmes as asexual, and examine how those texts approach the question of defining love relationships in the absence of a necessary connection between romantic love and sex, an approach that is mirrored and influenced by the approach taken by the online asexual community. Drawing on theories of sexuality and identity (Scherrer; Pacho; Carrigan; Chasin; Decker; Hinderliter; Kurowicka) I identify three key features of this approach, each of which is embodied and sometimes explicitly expressed in fanfiction texts that focus on asexual characters. These three features, the development of a broader vocabulary with which to describe variations in sexual and romantic identities, the separation of romantic orientation from sexual orientation, and a blurring of the boundaries between what is defined as 'sex' as opposed to 'not-sex', align with Cornell's requirements for the project of personhood: in particular, access to language and a set of symbolic forms that allows us to differentiate ourselves from others, and freedom of the imaginary domain (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 4). I therefore argue that this approach to defining identities and love relationships could have value for both asexual and sexual persons, and that engaging with fanfiction texts that embody that approach has the dual

benefit of providing the reader with a broadened vocabulary of terms with which to describe sexual and romantic experiences and of creating a space where imaginative play with different romantic and sexual personae is possible.

In Chapter Three I discuss examples of the ‘first time’ genre of slash fanfiction, in which Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are depicted negotiating the beginning of a romantic and sexual relationship. I identify two concepts commonly explored in slash fanfiction: first, the possibility of stepping outside of heteronormative conventions, which define sexuality strictly in terms of gendered object choice, in favour of a more fluid conception of sexuality and, second, the exploration of sexuality and sexual practices without shame or fear of judgement. I draw on philosophical and psychological research on the concept of perversion and the nature and impact of sexual shame (Scheff; Locke; Maibom; Manion; Nagel; Primoratz; Goldman) to support Cornell’s claim that imposed sexual shame is damaging to the project of personhood because it “limits the psychic space for free play with one’s sexuality” (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 9). Through analysis of several slash fanfiction texts, the central narrative tension of which usually involves a character struggling to set aside either heteronormative conceptions of sexuality or sexual shame, I argue that engagement with such texts could help the reader to overcome any shame they might feel about their own sexuality and sexual desires. It is also valuable for the individual to have access to a community, like those found in fanfiction communities, in which sexual shame is deliberately discarded in favour of the free exploration and celebration of sexuality, as such spaces allow for freedom of the imaginary domain.

In Chapter Four I discuss fanfiction texts set in the Omegaverse, a science fiction genre of fanfiction in which human genders and sexualities are different from, and yet still partially analogous to, those in reality. In the Omegaverse, human beings have certain animalistic traits associated with the biology and behaviour of wolves, and that biology is the

basis of a hierarchical social structure. Much of Omegaverse fanfiction follows the tradition of feminist dystopian science fiction, in which existing social structures – such as modern gender relations – are exaggerated in order to draw attention to their negative effects on society (Murphy 473; Jones 487). I examine key Omegaverse fanfiction texts, and show how the figure of the male omega is used to draw attention to gender-based oppression and problematic consent norms. As a literary figure, the male omega occupies an ambiguous position; as a male he would normally occupy a position of social power, but as an omega he is subject to restrictions and forms of oppression normally experienced, in reality, by women. This disjunction draws attention to these restrictions and oppressions and prompts the reader to reconsider them.

In Chapter Five I discuss fanfiction texts that depict rape and sexual assault, and divide these texts into two categories; those that attempt to depict rape and its aftermath in a psychologically realistic manner and which emphasise the harm of rape, and those that depict rape fantasies that are intended to be sexually arousing to the reader. The latter category is controversial in fanfiction communities, as fans find it difficult to reconcile a belief that rape and sexual assault are morally wrong with deriving sexual or emotional enjoyment from reading texts in which these acts are depicted. These concerns are similar to those expressed in theoretical work about the potential harm of pornography (Dworkin and MacKinnon; McGowan; West) and rape fantasies (Kershner; Chapleau and Oswald; Shulman and Horne): that indulging in rape fantasies, through pornography or otherwise, is harmful because it increases the likelihood that one will either act upon the desire to rape, or become the victim of rape. Fans often express a concern, in particular, that younger readers might be made more susceptible to rape and sexual abuse through reading stories that depict rape fantasies. I argue that engaging with the larger context in which these texts are written and read – the ongoing discussions about the harm of rape and sexual abuse, and the importance of sexual consent

that take place within fandom communities – can mitigate, although not completely erase, the potential for harm and be an experience that has worth in and of itself.

Chapter 2

Asexuality in Fanfiction

This chapter will examine selected fanfiction texts in which Sherlock is portrayed as asexual, and consider the depictions of asexuality that can be found in these texts. The aim of this chapter is not a literary analysis of these texts, but rather to examine their *content* as representative of the ideals and concepts commonly explored within fanfiction communities, specifically as those ideals and concepts relate to freedom of the imaginary domain. The selected texts have two features in common; first, Sherlock is interpreted as falling somewhere along the asexual spectrum, and second, Sherlock and John are engaged in, or are in the process of negotiating, a love relationship. That Sherlock Holmes not only *loves* John Watson but is *in love* with him is a cherished theory within the *Sherlock* fan community. The question of whether this love is platonic, romantic, or sexual, however, remains open for debate. The nature of this love is the subject of many *Sherlock* fanfictions, and through these stories fans grapple not only with possible interpretations of the characters, but with questions about the connection between romantic love and sex. If Sherlock Holmes is asexual, what does it mean to say that he is in love with John Watson? And if sex is no longer a defining feature of romantic love, what implications will, or should, this have for how we as a society conceive of love relationships? Considered as a body of work produced by a community, this broad variety in the depictions of love relationships involving an asexual character demonstrates an awareness and acceptance, within that community, of the complexity of human sexualities and love relationships⁷. This chapter will argue that the approach to defining love relationships portrayed in the selected texts – an approach mirrored and

⁷ As in any community of persons, there exist within fandom multiple debates and disagreements, and many contradictory points of view and attitudes. In addition, fans have vastly differing levels of knowledge about sexuality and identity, which is reflected in the fanfiction texts that they produce. Nevertheless, while fans are by no means always in agreement with one another, the body of work produced by the fandom community still demonstrates a trend towards awareness and acceptance.

influenced by that of the asexual community – could have value for both asexual and sexual persons, in the navigation of their sexual and romantic relationships. This approach aligns with Drucilla Cornell’s requirements for the project of personhood: bodily integrity; access to language and a set of symbolic forms that allows us to differentiate ourselves from others; and freedom of the imaginary domain (Cornell, *Imaginary Domain* 4). There are three main features of this approach: first, the development of a broader vocabulary with which to describe variations in sexual and romantic identities; second, the separation of romantic orientation from sexual orientation; and third, following from the second, the blurring of the boundaries between ‘sex’ and ‘not-sex’.⁸ This approach also influences, and is influenced by, the broader approach to sexuality within fandom, and has particular significance for discussions about consent. Engaging with such fanfiction texts then, can be a valuable experience for persons who fall along the asexual spectrum, providing them with a sense of community and a broadened vocabulary through which to understand and articulate their own experiences and identities, as well as for sexual persons, by offering insight into the experiences of asexual persons, and by providing a possible approach to defining and understanding love relationships that is valid for both asexual and sexual persons.

2.1 Asexuality

The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) defines an asexual person as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (“AVEN”). A second definition is commonly used in conjunction with the first within the asexual community: an asexual is “a person who experiences little or no sexual attraction and calls themselves asexual”

(Hinderliter 2). These two definitions capture something of the distinction between an

⁸ A fourth feature also follows from the separation of sexual and romantic orientations: an openness to defining identities, orientations, and relationships by criteria other than gendered object choice. This feature is not unique to the asexual community however, and this openness is a common feature in many other genres of fanfiction. As such, it will not be discussed in this chapter, but will form part of the discussion of sexual exploration in Chapter Three.

asexual *orientation*, and an asexual *identity* based on that orientation (Hinderliter 2). This thesis, however, will use these two terms interchangeably. Asexuality forms part of what is known as the Asexual or ACE Spectrum. Two of the other identities that form part of this spectrum are demisexual, defined as a person “who only experience[s] sexual attraction after developing a bond with someone” (Decker 39) and gray-asexual/gray-sexual, defined as someone who “primarily live[s] with an asexual experience of the world, but can experience or [has] experienced sexual attraction” (Decker 36), and so “identifies with the area between asexuality and sexuality” (“AVEN”).

The inclusion of asexuality in this project may seem a strange choice, given the acceptance in Chapter One of the claim that sexuality is central to personhood. That claim appears, on the surface, to support the “pervasive social assumption that all humans possess sexual desire” (Scherrer 1), an assumption challenged by the inclusion of *asexuality* under the heading of sexuality or sexual orientation, a term used in the discourse to mean “not only something one *does*, but an identity, or something one *is*, usually biologically” (Scherrer 1). There is strong resistance within the asexual community to defining the absence of sexual desire as meaning that an asexual individual is somehow lacking or incomplete (Decker 9-11; “AVEN”). However, while the recognition of asexuality as a sexual orientation may undermine the view that sexual desire is an essential component of human existence, it does not undermine the claim that each person should be free to live out his or her *sexuate being* in the way that he or she chooses. Cornell’s concept of sexuate being encompasses not only sexual and gender identity, but the way in which each of us chooses to structure our love relationships, whether or not those relationships contain a sexual element. Cornell’s claim that “because we are sexuate beings we have to orient ourselves sexually” (*Heart of Freedom* 7) applies no less to the asexual person than to the sexual one. This process of orientation, “partly an act of imagination and partly an act of representation, the expression of our sexuate

being within a society of persons” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 10) is a complex one involving questions of gendered object choice as well as romantic and sexual preferences or desires, and this is true for all individuals, asexual or sexual. Further, the process of defining or orienting an *asexual* sexuate being draws attention to distinct aspects of love relationships in a way that is relevant for the definition of love relationships, and for the expression of sexuate being, for both asexual and sexual persons.

The asexual community (as it is expressed within online communities, such as that surrounding AVEN) engages with the question of defining love relationships in a way that draws attention to several distinct aspects of relationships. A. C. Hinderliter notes that while narrower “clear cut, unnuanced presentations of asexuality may be the most effective means of convincing the general public of asexual legitimacy” (14) and are used for this purpose, the discourse within the asexual community is far more nuanced and accepting of differing definitions of sexual acts and desires (14). Aspects of this more nuanced discourse include: a broadening of the language used to describe the multiple variations in individual sexual orientations and identities and the relationships that flow from them; the separation of romantic orientation from sexual orientation; and, following from that separation, a blurring of the boundaries between what is considered ‘sex’ and what is considered ‘not sex’. These aspects have important implications for the question of consent, as well as for the question of how, and which, love relationships are recognised within a society. The remainder of this chapter will show that this approach to sexuality and relationships is mirrored and embodied within fandom, demonstrating an implicit recognition of its value. In particular, fanfiction texts that depict asexual characters often articulate this approach explicitly as part of the development and negotiation of relationships between characters.

2.2 Sherlock Holmes as Asexual

Sherlock Holmes appears on a number of lists of fictional characters who are considered or confirmed to be asexual, including those on TV Tropes, Fanlore, and AVENwiki, which states in a general entry referring to all Holmes stories, canon and adaptations both, only that “Sherlock Holmes is generally considered asexual” (“Asexuality in Fiction”). As such, Holmes “has long been adopted as a symbol by the asexual community” (Coppa 220). In an 1892 letter to Dr Joseph Bell, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote of Sherlock Holmes that “Holmes is as inhuman as Babbage’s Calculating Machine, and just about as likely to fall in love” (Graham and Garlen 24). Describing his friend in “A Scandal in Bohemia”, Dr Watson writes of Holmes:

It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one in particular, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has ever seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position (Doyle, “Bohemia” 429).

The quotes above refer to love and romance, and not explicitly to sex, but to the 21st century reader, the implication here is that Holmes is interested in neither sex nor romance. Although the word “lover” can be used to refer to one’s partner in either a sexual or a romantic relationship, common modern usage places more importance on the sexual meaning of the word. We have no difficulty in imagining a sexual relationship that does not involve love, but the common 21st century understanding of a romantic relationship is that it involves, or will involve at some point, a sexual relationship as well.

In direct contrast to Watson’s assertion in the above quotation that Holmes finds emotions “abhorrent”, when Watson is injured during “The Adventure of the Three Garridebs” he discovers that he was wrong in his assumption about Holmes’ ability to love:

It was worth a wound – it was worth many wounds – to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well of a great brain (Doyle, “Garridebs” 1322).

This brief glimpse of emotion could be interpreted as an expression of platonic love, the love of one friend for another, but this proof that Sherlock Holmes is indeed capable of love, of emotion, casts doubt on Watson’s earlier claim that he could not be a “lover”, whether that term is used in its romantic or sexual sense. “A Scandal in Bohemia” was first published in 1891, while “The Adventure of the Three Garridebs” appeared over thirty years later, in 1925 (Campbell 31, 97). The contradiction could be attributed to the many discrepancies in details that appeared in the later stories due to Doyle’s lack of interest in Holmes (Booth 248). More interestingly, it could be attributed to Doyle wishing to portray Watson’s growing knowledge of his friend, and Holmes, over the course of a long friendship, having come to love Watson.

The Sherlock of the BBC’s modern adaptation embodies a similar contradiction: a stated disdain for both sex and emotion, combined with an obvious devotion to John Watson. This Sherlock is the archetypical outsider, set apart by his intelligence, an outward arrogance, and a lack of social and emotional awareness. Apart from his antagonistic relationship with his brother and a filial affection for his landlady, the only person with whom he shares any emotional closeness is John Watson. Sherlock also has a complicated relationship with his body. Francesca Coppa argues that unlike the original Holmes, whose body is subject to his will and often dismissed, “this Sherlock knows he has a body and struggles with it” (213). In fanfiction texts, many fans extend this struggle to the question of his sexuality.

In the opening episode of *Sherlock*, “A Study in Pink”, Sherlock states that he “considers [himself] married to [his] work” (Sherlock, “Study”), and even more definitively in the unaired pilot episode that “the brain is what counts, everything else is transport” (Sherlock, “Pilot”), reiterating the latter when John haltingly asks about his sexual

orientation. He is, if not asexual, uninterested in sex. Steven Moffat, writer and co-creator of Sherlock, says that although Sherlock Holmes's sexuality is supposedly

ambiguous or mysterious, the truth is that the books are completely clear: he's not interested at all. He's interested in what his brain is doing, not the other end of his body (Moffat).

Sherlock's lack of interest in sex is emphasised throughout the series. In the second season episode "A Scandal in Belgravia", Irene Adler, now reimagined as a dominatrix - thereby making her sexuality a central aspect of her character - unnerves Sherlock by appearing naked in front of him at their first meeting. She taunts Sherlock by saying that while John "knows exactly where" to look at a naked woman, she is "not so sure" that Sherlock does (Sherlock, "Scandal"). In the same episode, when Sherlock announces, "sex doesn't alarm me," his brother answers him with the cold retort, "how would you know?" (Sherlock, "Scandal"). In the third season episode "His Last Vow", Sherlock feigns romantic interest in a woman for a case. It becomes clear that despite her willingness to do so – she states that "just once would have been nice" (Sherlock, "Vow") – he does not engage in sex with her.

He may be uninterested in sex, but the modern Sherlock, just like the original Holmes, is not incapable of emotion, particularly when it comes to John Watson. In "Sherlock Holmes: Poster Boy for the AVEN" Saucery argues that while Sherlock Holmes may be equally uninterested in having sex with either men or women, "he does develop romantic feelings and (...) there is one person, and one person alone that interests him *emotionally*, and that is John Watson" (Saucery). As with the original Holmes, there is evidence that the modern Sherlock is emotionally affected by John Watson, perhaps *only* by John Watson, and that whatever his opinion on emotion may be, he *loves* John, is perhaps *in love* with him.

Sherlock's stated opinion on emotion is clear. Sentiment, he claims, "is a chemical defect found in the losing side" (Sherlock, "Scandal"). He opens his speech at John's

wedding with the statement that “all emotions, and in particular love, stand opposed to the pure, cold reason I hold above all things” (Sherlock, “Sign”). Despite these statements, and his own description of himself as a “high-functioning sociopath” (Sherlock, “Study”, “Vow”), he does not claim that he is incapable of emotion. In his wedding speech he goes on to tell John that he considers himself “a ridiculous man, redeemed only by the warmth and constancy of [John’s] friendship” (Sherlock, “Sign”), a tacit acknowledgement that his rejection of emotions may be an error. He tells John, “today you sit between the woman you have made your wife and the man you have saved, in short, the two people who love you most in all this world” (Sherlock, “Sign”). Even more than these words, Sherlock’s actions – his determination to save John’s marriage, his sacrifice for John in “The Reichenbach Fall” and again in “His Last Vow” – prove his devotion to, and love for, John. The combination of these two aspects of the character, his total lack of interest in sex and his love for John, provide an interesting opportunity for writers to explore the types of relationship that such a character might enter into. If, as the evidence presented above suggests, Sherlock Holmes is asexual, then what does it mean to say that he is in love with John Watson? Must that love be entirely platonic in nature, or might it be romantic? If that love is romantic, despite the lack of sexual desire, what implications might this have for how we conceive of love relationships?

In *Sherlock* fanfiction, Sherlock is often portrayed as out of step with normative conceptions of sexuality and love relationships, partly because of his difficulties in understanding emotions and social norms, and partly (in the stories examined in this chapter) because of his asexuality. By contrast, John is the more socially conventional of the two characters, at least on the surface, and in the BBC series he often takes on the role of Sherlock’s guide in social situations, helping him to understand the emotional reactions of other people. As in “The Adventure of the Three Garridebs”, the John of the BBC series

becomes the focal point of Sherlock's own emotions. It is natural, then, that in many of the fanfiction texts Sherlock turns to John for guidance when his own understanding of emotions and relationships fails. In some ways, John Watson is the natural choice for the portrayal of what is, essentially, an idealised version of a romantic partner, tailor-made for the unconventional Sherlock. In the original Conan Doyle stories, Dr Watson is the focalising character. It is through his eyes that we are introduced to Sherlock Holmes, and it is his perspective of his friend that we are invited to take up as readers. Similarly, in the BBC series, we first meet Sherlock through John's eyes and, just as with the original Watson, we are invited to join him in marvelling at Sherlock's brilliance, and in despairing of his social skills. In the explorations of sexuality and romance that constitute so much of Sherlock fanfiction, it is often John who represents the author's understanding of how love relationships and sex should be approached, most especially with regard to questions of consent and respect for personal boundaries within a relationship. Sherlock, on the other hand, often represents the questioning of established social norms. As a character with little use for social conventions, Sherlock is a disrupting force, and in the fanfiction texts he often challenges those social conventions as expressed by John, prompting him to reconsider which ones are important, and which ones might be set aside in favour of a more unconventional relationship. In some fanfiction texts, fans make use of this contrast between characters to articulate their own understanding of how love relationships could, or should, work; keeping those norms they consider valuable, such as the importance of consent, and discarding those that impose unnecessary, often heteronormative, constraints. Engaging with such texts can provide the fan with a variety of models for non-heteronormative love relationships, as well as contribute to the reader's own project of personhood by introducing them to a broader vocabulary with which to understand and articulate their own experiences.

2.3 The Importance of Language and Emphasis on Variation

Cornell argues that one of the essential components for the possibility of personhood is “access to symbolic forms sufficient to achieve linguistic skills permitting the differentiation of oneself from others” (*Imaginary Domain* 4). This differentiation, or individuation, which is connected to the “self-representation of one’s sexuate being” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 62) is what allows each of us to negotiate an individual identity within the framework of a community. Charles Taylor makes a similar claim about the importance of language, arguing that “there is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language” (35) and with it, into conversation with others. For Taylor, the self is inseparable from this conversation, as “a self can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (35). Access to language, in this context, does not refer merely to the ability to speak, but to the availability of a shared vocabulary that allows for the description of one’s identity. That this vocabulary be a *shared* one is crucial. Taylor argues that the definition of the self always requires “some reference to a defining community” (36); a group of persons for whom that definition has meaning. In 2012, *Sherlock* creator Steven Moffat stated in an interview that Sherlock’s, and the original Holmes’, lack of interest in sex is “the choice of a monk, not the choice of an asexual” (Jeffries) because “there’s no indication in the original stories that he was asexual or gay” (Jeffries). This interview caused unhappiness among fans, one of whom pointed out that the Conan Doyle canon “does not have the language to describe sexual orientation” (Wojton and Porter 132), and therefore *could* not contain references to asexuality. In her 2008 study of asexual persons, Kristin Scherrer found that for many asexuals “part of the difficulty in coming to an asexual identity [was in] finding the appropriate language” (7) to describe themselves. In a similar study, also in 2008, Mark Carrigan found that many asexuals told a similar story about coming to identify themselves as asexual: a sense of differing from their peer group that caused them to question whether there

might be something wrong with them, followed by a sense of relief and “self-clarification (...) attained through the acquisition of a communal identity” (471). One participant says of their discovery of the language to describe asexuality that “it was like coming home” (Carrigan 471). This language – the word ‘asexual’ and related terms – offers asexual persons “a way of thinking about their asexuality as an essential characteristic of themselves” (Scherrer 8), as well as a means of articulating it to others.

The experience of learning the language to describe asexuality and of relief at the discovery that others share similar experiences, appears as a theme in several *Sherlock* fanfictions. In *A Study in Asexuality*, for example, Sherlock recollects making the discovery:

For all of Sherlock’s knowledge of the scientific definition of asexuality, he hadn’t known anything about the sexual orientation until he’d began [*sic*] looking it up. He’d joined some forums, some chat rooms, discussing with others like him what it meant. He had been pleased to know that asexual was more an umbrella term, and that there was such a wide array of them on the spectrum, but mostly he was just glad to know that he was not alone in these feelings (ladyxdarcy).

The Sherlock of this text is somewhat out of character when compared to the Sherlock of the BBC series canon, or even to Sherlock as he appears in other fanfictions. The BBC’s Sherlock, so utterly dismissive of other people and their feelings, seems unlikely to find much relief in discovering that he is “not alone” in his own feelings. As ladyxdarcy states in the Author’s Note of this text however, this version of Sherlock is a stand in for the author. His asexuality “matches [her] own”, and the story is intended to act “as a sort of an explanation to others who might not fully understand what being asexual means” (ladyxdarcy). As with the participant in Carrigan’s study mentioned above, who felt a sense of homecoming and relief at the discovery that he/she “wasn’t alone” (471), ladyxdarcy has drawn on her own experiences as an asexual to portray an asexual Sherlock. In doing so, she has contributed to

the ongoing conversation in fanfiction communities through which others may come to understand and define their own identities.

Other fanfiction texts present versions of Sherlock that are less obviously based on the author and are instead closer to the eccentric Sherlock of the BBC canon who, despite his brilliance, relies on John for insight on interpersonal matters. In *the art of getting by (isn't really so artsy at all)* by stupidmuse_hatesme, it is John who gives Sherlock the language that he needs to understand his sexual orientation. When Sherlock first hears the word 'asexual' in relation to himself it is a revelation:

"I know that you're asexual – or something. It's just not right that you let him think you were interested in anyone, let alone him."

Sherlock's thought processes come to a complete halt for the first time in his entire life as he looks at John as though he has sprouted horns from his head and started reciting Shakespeare – in Latin.

"That I'm what?" he repeats, mouth feeling disconnected from his brain and his words strangely inelegant.

"Asexual," John says forthrightly. "You know, not interested in sex with anyone." He peers at Sherlock and loosens his grip, running his fingers soothingly up and down Sherlock's arm. He seems to be comforting the detective through touch without even consciously thinking about it, and Sherlock has the odd feeling that he would let John do that sort of thing for however long he wishes.

"You," Sherlock says, staring at John in a whole new light, "are the most brilliant man I've ever met."

(stupidmuse_hatesme)

Sherlock's initial response to this new information is almost physical: an instant in which he has to pause in order to assimilate it into his understanding of himself, his thoughts coming to a "complete halt", his words "strangely inelegant" (both extremely unusual occurrences for him). Sherlock has two revelations in this passage; first, that there is a word to describe his lack of interest in sex and, second, that he finds John's touch comforting and would let John

continue to do “that sort of thing” for however long he wishes. The rest of the text depicts his efforts to reconcile these two pieces of knowledge about himself. When John asks if he is aromantic as well, thereby giving him the language he needs to make the distinction between sex and romance, it gives Sherlock the confidence in his own identity that he needs in order to pursue a romantic relationship with John.

The importance of language means that the exact definition of asexuality is a matter of debate within the asexual community. For political purposes, a narrow essentialist definition of asexuality, which implies that asexuality, like any other sexual orientation, is not a matter of choice, is the most effective. This narrow definition allows asexuals to claim asexuality as an essential part of their identity and personhood, and (much like other marginalised sexualities) to make use of this essentialist definition as a means to gain legal and social recognition for asexuality as a sexual orientation (Hinderliter 3; Scherrer 7). However, the narrow definition – “an asexual is a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (“AVEN”) - while politically useful, does not encompass the full variation of experience among asexuals. The argument in favour of a broader definition – an asexual is a person who experiences little or no sexual attraction and who identifies as asexual – “seeks to include people who do not experience sexual attraction but feel/do things generally associated with sexuality” (Hinderliter 2), such as enjoying kissing or cuddling. There is a strong taboo in the asexual community against claims that any individual experience of asexuality is more ‘valid’ than another, because “such claims do not foster a safe space for people to talk about things and try to understand themselves” (Hinderliter 3). For this reason, much of the asexual community prefers to focus on developing a language and vocabulary that allows for the accurate description of the varied lived experiences of asexual persons. Within fanfiction communities, this development occurs through literary exploration of these experiences. Scherrer notes that “while lack of sexual attraction and desire were a highly-common feature

of participant's descriptions of their asexuality, it was by no means a universally shared definition" (5). Similarly, Anna Kurowicka observes that

one of the most striking features of the asexual community is its internal diversity (...) Most asexuals construct their own definitions of who they are. This results in a dense web of terms referring to people who experience sexual attraction under specific, low levels, or no sexual attraction whatsoever (...) Asexuals also vary in terms of their approach to sex: some are sex-positive, others sex-neutral, and others still sex-averse. Another dimension is the attitude to romantic relationships, as romantic asexuals are interested in finding a partner while aromantic ones prefer to avoid romantic attachments (2).

This "web of terms" allows for the explicit acknowledgement of the wide variation in asexual identities. Terms to describe the internal variation of the asexual community include, for example, demisexual (a person who only experiences sexual attraction to someone with whom he or she already has an emotional connection), gray-sexual (a person who experiences low levels of sexual attraction, but may not desire to act on that attraction, and gray-A (a catch-all term for identities that fall somewhere in between sexual and asexual). Similar terms exist to describe romantic orientation, such as aromantic and demiromantic ("AVEN"). The ongoing broadening of the language used to describe asexuality (and other sexual orientations) "indicates that existing [definitions of] sexual orientations do not reflect the broad spectrum of diverse [experiences of and] attitudes towards sexuality" (Pacho 32). One of the stated purposes of the AVEN community is to share "experiences and perspective[s]" ("AVEN"), to help others come to an understanding of themselves. C.J. Chasin notes that, upon first discovering the asexual community,

it was not a definition of asexuality per se that struck me or led me to call myself asexual; it was the incredible sense that these people – members of the asexual community – *sounded like me* (405, italics added).

Simply creating new words and definitions for variations in asexual and sexual identities is not enough. What is needed are narratives, the accounts of “shared experiences” emphasised by the AVEN community, giving depth and meaning to those new words and definitions, that allow for the possibility of identification. For the further development of the language used to describe asexuality (and by extension, other sexual identities) then, we need to engage with narratives, both factual and fictional, that portray a wide range of asexual and sexual experiences.

In “101 Asexy Sex Scenes” posted on Dreamwidth’s asexual_fandom page, fan writer melannen presents a list of story prompts “for fanfic with asexual characters and sex scenes” (melannen), which is intended to “serve as an example of just how many ways of being asexual and being involved in sex there can be” (melannen). Discussing this list, Francesca Coppa notes that the stories that might result from these prompts

articulate something subtler than *either* gay or straight, *either* wanting sex or not, and they require characters not only to pay close attention to their own minds and bodies and those of their partners, but also to be willing to revise their expectations and understanding of themselves based on experience (221).

These texts, in turn, create opportunities for the fan (as either author or reader) to pay a similar kind of close attention, not only to the texts and characters, but to themselves.

The *Sherlock* fandom is a rich source of such narratives. As of August 2018, of the 9660 fanworks tagged as containing an ‘asexual character’ on Archive of Our Own, 3, 749 of these appear in the *Sherlock* fandom, the highest number found in any individual fandom (archivofourown.org). Out of these, 644 texts are tagged as containing a version of an ‘asexual Sherlock Holmes’. For the purposes of this chapter, the selection of texts has been limited to those that portray Sherlock himself as asexual, rather than any of the other characters. The following, in no particular order, are some of the scenarios that can be found in *Sherlock* fanfiction:

- 1) Sherlock is asexual, but discovers that he is capable of a romantic attachment to John. He struggles to reconcile these two aspects of himself, with John's help. (*the art of getting by (isn't really so artsy at all)* by stupidmuse_hatesme)
- 2) Sherlock is asexual and fears that John will eventually tire of their romantic relationship if they do not have sex. John reassures him that he is perfectly content with their relationship as it is. (*A Study in Asexuality* by ladyxdarcy, *The Issue of Cuddling* by lavvyan, *Loosed Reins* by aggressivewhenstartled)
- 3) Sherlock is asexual and believes that this precludes a romantic relationship with John. John disagrees. (*The Final Proof* by Canon_is_Relative, *Impish_Tubist*)
- 4) Sherlock and John enter a romantic relationship. Sherlock has no interest in physical affection, but will cuddle with John. John learns that Sherlock's unusual ways of showing affection suit John's needs very well. (*Traffic Lights for the Color Blind* by lavvyan, *The Sky for the Reaching*, by lavvyan)
- 5) Sherlock likes cuddling, and so even though he hates sex he is willing to suffer through it for the sake of physical closeness afterwards. John offers him physical intimacy without sex attached. (*What Makes Us Rich* by flawedamythyst; *Fallacy of Love* by heeroluva)
- 6) Sherlock has no interest in sex for his own part, but takes great (scientific) interest in John's sexuality. John finds that this works quite well. (*Compromises Lead to the Best Experiments* by SailorChibi; *Practical Angora Goat Raising* by lavvyan)
- 7) Sherlock and John are in a romantic relationship. Sherlock sees it as his responsibility as John's partner to ensure that John has adequate sex. Since he has no interest in sex himself, he chooses women for John to sleep with. (*Settling In* by PorcupineGirl)
- 8) Sherlock has no interest in sex, but is determined to experience as much as he possibly can with John. He and John enter into a polyamorous relationship with

Mary, who helps them explore the limits of Sherlock's asexuality. (*Indecorous* by basingstoke)

- 9) Sherlock proposes to John because he is afraid that John will leave him one day. John accepts because he wants to give Sherlock the sense of security that he needs. John continues to have sex with women with Sherlock's full knowledge and consent.

(*Horse and Carriage* by flawedamythyst)

- 10) Sherlock, John and Lestrade are in a polyamorous relationship, in which John and Sherlock have a romantic relationship but do not have sex, John and Lestrade have a romantic and sexual relationship, and Sherlock quite likes having Lestrade around.

He also likes to watch. (*That's Just How It Works* by round_robin, *With a Glance* by Beltainefaerie)

- 11) Sherlock, John and Mary are in a polyamorous relationship. Sherlock likes to watch John and Mary have sex, but does not participate. (*That Thing You Like* by rachel4revenge; *And Dream of Bees* by Lothiriel84)

- 12) John and Mary are married. John and Sherlock maintain a romantic relationship, with Mary's consent. (*Shared Custody* by justonemoremiraclesherlock; *Rings and Strings* by ellebow)

- 13) Sherlock desires sex on very rare occasions, primarily as a means to quiet his mind. He asks John to have sex with him one night, trusting John to understand that he is not asking for anything more than that. (*Fracture Mechanics* by kres)

One common element in each of the stories listed above is John's complete acceptance of Sherlock's asexuality, and his refusal to press Sherlock for more physical intimacy than he is comfortable in giving, despite the fact that John himself is not portrayed as asexual.⁹ Although

⁹ Another feature that appears in a number of these texts is some form of polyamory, either through a primary romantic relationship that involves more than two people, or through one partner in the relationship pursuing sex outside of the primary relationship, with their partner's consent. Depictions of polyamory in fanfiction, however, are not limited to those texts that portray asexual characters.

not all the authors of these texts identify as asexual (as some do by stating their sexual identity in their author's notes), it seems reasonable to assume that through their engagement with the *Sherlock* fan community each will have come across some discussion of asexual identity. As such, these texts can reasonably be considered representative of common desires experienced by asexual persons. Most prominent among these is the desire to be seen and accepted, and the desire for the freedom to form intimate, possibly romantic, relationships with others without having to deal with sexual expectations from their partners.

2.4 The Separation of Sex and Romance

As the range of stories discussed in the previous section suggests, many asexual persons do experience romantic attraction and the desire for a romantic connection with another person. Many asexuals define their identity in terms of a romantic orientation, rather than a sexual one (Decker 17-30; Kurowicka 1; Scherrer 9). This involves defining this identity first as either romantic or aromantic (or some variant on the spectrum between these two) and, for some of those who identify as romantic, defining that romantic identity in terms of gender (Decker 20-21; Chasin 407). Many asexual people "do experience romantic attraction that is usually directed toward people of specific genders" (Chasin 407). Such people identify as heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, or panromantic asexuals (Decker 20). Others, however, "do away with the need to specify gender object choice at all" (Scherrer 12).

The desire for a romantic relationship that does not include sex brings asexual persons into conflict with (largely heteronormative) societal expectations. The social assumption, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, that "all humans possess sexual desire" (Scherrer 1) has as a corollary the assumption that sex is the "*sine qua non* of a 'primary' relationship" (Kurowicka 1). This forms part of the social imaginary of modern, Western society. For a love relationship to be considered 'serious', and therefore recognised within a society as

such, the assumption is that it involves a balance between romantic attachment and sexual activity. A single sexual encounter is not considered significant as a love relationship, but then neither is a friendship. This means that “asexuals, who tend to form relationships in which sex is either non-existent or rare” (Kurowicka 5) often find that those relationships are not recognised as valid love relationships by their friends and family. A majority of the participants in Carrigan’s study had encountered the “‘sexual assumption’, which sees sex as a culmination of and perquisite for human flourishing” (474) when they attempted to explain their asexuality to others. In some cases, when attempting to describe a romantic relationship existing without the sexual element, asexual persons found their love “judged as puppy love, immature love, fairytale love, or something dysfunctional” (Decker 18). The problem that arises from this dismissal of an asexual person’s love for another person is that, as Cornell argues, marking out a sexual (or asexual) identity is partly an act of representation of that identity: “the expression of our sexuate being within a society of persons” (*Heart of Freedom* 10), an act that requires the recognition of others within that society in order to be validated and sustained. Similarly, Taylor argues that “a self only exists among other selves” (36). If a person’s primary romantic relationship is not recognised as valid by the community in which they live, that will negatively impact their freedom of representation, and so their project of personhood. In seeking recognition and validation for their identities and relationships, the asexual community challenges the social assumption that a romantic relationship must include sex in order to be ‘real’. Carrigan argues that the steady growth of the asexual community shows the success of “attempts to negotiate understandings of human flourishing which do not hinge on sexual expression and sexual fulfilment” (475). Similarly, Kurowicka argues that the example of romantic asexual relationships can be used to “redefine the factors that make a relationship ‘real’” (1) in the eyes of a society, and this could have ramifications that extend beyond the asexual community.

Many *Sherlock* fanfictions attempt just such an exploration of relationships. The unconventional Sherlock, with his lack of interest in social norms, enables fans

to acknowledge the power that heteronormative constructs have to shape perceptions of how intimate relationships can and/or should be structured, especially when it comes to the expectation that one should seek intimate partnerships that lead to sex and marriage (Wojton and Porter 113).

In many texts, John, as the more socially conventional character, is often portrayed as having various preconceived, and socially normative, notions of what a romantic relationship should look like. Confronted with Sherlock's unconventional approach to relationships, John must decide if he is willing to overcome these preconceptions in order to enter into a romantic relationship with Sherlock. In flawedamythyst's *Horse and Carriage* series, for example, Sherlock, finding himself barred from John's hospital room because they have no legal relationship to one another, proposes marriage as a solution to the problem:

"Sherlock, you can't possibly be serious about this!" interrupted John. "We can't get married!"

Sherlock frowned at him. "Why not?"

John stared at him, not sure where to start. "We're not in a relationship," he said. "We're just friends."

"Friendship is a relationship," said Sherlock.

"It's not the same thing!" insisted John, beginning to wonder if he'd damaged his brain more seriously than he'd thought and was hallucinating this whole conversation. Maybe he was still lying unconscious in that alleyway. "It's not the kind of relationship that ends with marriage."

"Why not?" asked Sherlock. "Last month, when you were haranguing me about my health, you said I should take better care of myself because you wanted someone to bicker with in the old people's home. A desire to grow old together – that's part of marriage. We live together, we work together, we enjoy each other's company more than we enjoy anybody else's. There's a whole list of reasons if you'd just open your eyes and see them."

“There’s more to marriage than that,” said John, trying to sound firm but unable to control the note of rising hysteria in his voice. His head was still swimming, he could feel nausea rolling around his stomach, he ached all over and he just wasn’t able to deal with this latest example of Sherlock’s disconnection with most normal social values in the calm manner he usually managed.

“You mean sex,” said Sherlock. “You know I’ve no interest in that kind of thing, and I don’t care who you sleep with. Marriage wouldn’t mean you’d have to give up your women.”

“And,” allowed Sherlock begrudgingly, “if you ever manage to find one that you can stand being with for longer than four months and decide you want to throw your life away on her, we can always get a divorce.” He paused and added thoughtfully, “If I approve of her, obviously.”

“Sherlock!” hissed John sharply. “You’re being insane – you’ve misinterpreted marriage completely!”

“Have I?” asked Sherlock, his jaw tensing angrily. “For centuries it was considered a way to form an alliance, or a business transaction, not the wishy-washy, over-romanticised rubbish that it’s descended into today.”

“If it’s wishy-washy over-romanticised rubbish, why do you want to enter into it?” said John, his head starting to pound as he sat up further to argue the point with Sherlock.

“It would be different with us,” said Sherlock as if it was as obvious as the difference between a bus driver’s cuffs and a train driver’s.

“For God’s sake!” exclaimed John, losing his temper entirely. “We can’t get married just because you want access to my hospital rooms – it’s ridiculous! You’re not ... you’re not human!”

Sherlock’s face went white. “If that hasn’t stopped you being friends with me, I don’t understand why it means we can’t marry,” he said. “You’re just not thinking about it correctly.”

“I’m not thinking correctly?!” said John, just as the door swung open and a doctor entered with a glare at them both.

“What’s going on in here?” he demanded. “Mr Holmes, when I agreed to let you in, it wasn’t so that you could rile my patient up. He needs his rest.”

Sherlock stood up and swept his coat on. “I was just leaving,” he said in bitten-off tones. “I think it’s clear just how welcome I am here.”

He strode for the door and John sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He usually tried to remain patient with Sherlock's more extreme demands and eccentricities and talk him down from them carefully, because he knew that he was the only person who could genuinely hurt Sherlock's feelings, but this one had blindsided him at a difficult time, and now he was regretting some of the things he'd said.

"Sherlock," he said tiredly. "Tell me – why do you really want to do this? I can't believe you care about our taxes."

Sherlock paused in the doorway but didn't look back. "I had to call Mycroft, John," he said in a low voice. John winced. He knew how little Sherlock like relying on his brother for anything. "Just to see you." He put his hand on the door and added, in an even quieter voice, "and I don't want you to leave me."

(flawedamythyst, "Horse and Carriage")

In framing this discussion as a disagreement between characters, the author is able to articulate both sides of the argument, with John representing social convention and Sherlock the disruption of those conventions. As John's objections are gradually overcome by Sherlock's reasoning, so the author presents an argument for the overcoming of social convention in favour of love. John's initial response to Sherlock's proposal reflects the socially conventional understanding that the defining feature of love relationships, and marriage especially, is a sexual component. Sherlock, in his attempts to convince John, begins by pointing out practical reasons in favour of their marriage, among them tax breaks and access to each other's hospital rooms in the event of illness or injury. This is partly due to his reluctance to admit to anything like an interest in "wishy-washy, over-romanticised rubbish", but also partly due to a very real desire to be legally tied to John. That being barred from John's room is what prompted the proposal in the first place indicates Sherlock's desire for legal recognition by society of the importance of their relationship. When that fails to convince John, Sherlock moves on to more personal reasons, pointing out that their relationship already has many of the features that would be common to marriage, such as a

desire to grow old together and enjoying each other's company more than that of others; reasons that would be more acceptable to society, but which also edge closer to romance. Sherlock's hurt reaction to John's dismissal of his proposal, and his final quiet admission of his true reason, that he wants to marry John because he doesn't want John to leave him, is what prompts John to step back and truly consider the proposal. This is as close to a romantic declaration that the Sherlock of this text is likely to come, and shows a desire for emotional security; an acknowledgement that he is as important to John as John is to him. Sherlock wants recognition, from John and from society, that their relationship is valid and valuable. John has to decide if he is capable of overcoming his preconceived notions of marriage in order to give Sherlock that security. As he considers this, John has conversations with Mrs Hudson and Mycroft Holmes, both of whom reiterate for John just how important he is to Sherlock. As outside observers who nevertheless have a personal interest in the relationship between John and Sherlock, these supporting characters sometimes serve as the author's voice in fanfiction, presenting arguments that have been well rehearsed among *Sherlock* fans:

“Marriage is a little drastic as a way to prove I'm not going to abandon him,” John pointed out. “We're friends, it's not...” he broke off, not sure how to finish that thought. ‘Not the done thing?’ Nothing he and Sherlock did was ‘the done thing’.

“You're not like any pair of friends I've ever known,” Mrs Hudson observed mildly. “It's essential to marry the most important person in your life, you know – I married the best-looking, and look how that ended. Have you ever thought about what Sherlock would be like if he was in a ‘real’ relationship? He wouldn't be having sex then, either.”

John thought about that for a moment, then shook his head again. “He'd at least inform the other person,” he said.

“Well, it sounds as if he just has,” she said.

(flawedamythyst, “Horse and Carriage”)

As Mrs Hudson points out, the relationship that John and Sherlock have (in this fanfiction text, as well as in the BBC series) is already far from conventional. She also dismisses John's

protest that because he and Sherlock are not having sex, they cannot be in a ‘real’ romantic relationship, arguing that it is “essential to marry the most important person in your life”, which for John and Sherlock is each other. She also affirms the romantic significance of Sherlock’s proposal. Mycroft has a similar argument:

Mycroft frowned. “You’re missing the point,” he said. “If you remove the sexual and some of the more overtly romantic aspects from the equation, then you and Sherlock are already in a relationship that closely resembles a marriage. Making it official would have multiple benefits, most of all that it would make Sherlock happy.”
(flawedamythyst, “Horse and Carriage”)

Here, Mycroft reiterates Sherlock’s earlier argument that the relationship between him and John has many things in common with a marriage. The absence of sex remains the sticking point for John, not because he wants to have sex with Sherlock, but because he has trouble conceiving of a marriage, or romantic relationship, that does not include a sexual element. As Sherlock, Mrs Hudson, and Mycroft have all pointed out however, his relationship with Sherlock gives him reason to reconsider that preconception, not only because of the parallels each has drawn for him, but because Sherlock *is* important to him. For Sherlock, sex is inconsequential, and he has no qualms about John continuing to have sex with women while married to Sherlock. As Karma Waltonen argues, John’s heterosexuality means that their otherwise extremely close relationship is necessarily asexual, and therefore that he is “exactly what Sherlock wants and needs in a partner [which is why, in the BBC series] he never corrects anyone who assumes that they are together” (204). It is only the idea that one of these women might come between him and John that gives Sherlock trouble, as he “grudgingly” allows that if John should find a woman who is important enough to him, then Sherlock would give him a divorce so that he could marry her. In the BBC series canon, Sherlock is extremely possessive of John, and “only seems interested in keeping John’s attention, ensuring that John remains (or, after Mary’s death, returns as) his flatmate, or

protecting John” (Wojton and Porter 117). The Sherlock of *Horse and Carriage* is similarly possessive, proposing marriage as a means of keeping John close to him.

It may seem slightly out of character that the unconventional Sherlock would propose marriage, which as a concept is so closely intertwined with heteronormative social conventions. However, as with the Sherlock of ladyxdarcy’s *A Study in Asexuality*, the Sherlock of the *Horse and Carriage* series represents, to some degree, the experiences and desires of at least some members of the asexual community. As Julia Decker notes, when asked what they want “the single most common and resoundingly consistent answer from asexual communities is that [they] want [others] to acknowledge that asexuality exists” (165). In this fictional text, that acknowledgment is given by and to the characters, and by extension, to the reader. In addition to the acknowledgment of asexuality as a genuine orientation and identity, the desire for acknowledgment includes the recognition of asexual persons’ primary relationships as valid and important. Kurowicka argues that

there is no question that legal systems treat monogamous heterosexual couples in a preferential way, by awarding them certain privileges from tax breaks, to hospital visitations, to picking up each other’s mail at the post office. But even relationships that are not formalized for various reasons but meet the basic social criteria for a primary relationship: involve two people, romantic love, and sex, are treated as significant and worthy of respect (5).

In desiring to formalise their relationship, to give it legal and social weight, Sherlock is expressing the desire for that relationship to be recognised as “significant and worthy of respect”, as ‘real’ in the eyes of the society in which they live. Once John understands this desire, he accepts Sherlock’s proposal.

The remainder of the *Horse and Carriage* series, comprising fourteen stories in total, chronicles the slow development of John and Sherlock’s relationship over the years following their marriage. John discovers, to his surprise, that “this strange thing with Sherlock

[becomes, increasingly] more important than anything else in his life” (flawedamythyst, “Horse and Carriage”). Sherlock himself is more settled, and takes to initiating more (non-sexual) physical contact between them, which John finds it easy to reciprocate, partly because there is now no uncertainty about their relationship:

It seemed that now they both knew exactly where they stood – the most important person in each other’s lives – they could dispense with worrying about social boundaries.

(flawedamythyst, “Horse and Carriage”)

Despite having legally formalised their relationship, John and Sherlock must still contend with societal norms and expectations regarding relationships, sex, and fidelity. John continues to date women, with Sherlock’s full knowledge and consent, which sometimes requires explanations of their arrangement to other people. In one story, Sherlock and Lestrade pull John away from a date with a woman when they need his help to investigate a murder. Lestrade is concerned that John might be hurting Sherlock by cheating on him:

“In my experience, going out on a date when your husband’s elsewhere is a bad thing,” said Lestrade.

John nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Put like that, it does sound bad. You don’t have to worry, though. Sherlock doesn’t care about it at all – you know he doesn’t see things like other people do. And if he did have a problem with it, he’d make it very, very clear. Not just to me, but to everyone in a two mile radius.”

That was probably true. Lestrade felt himself relax a bit. Sherlock was a master manipulator, after all. If he wanted John to not go on dates, then John wouldn’t be going on dates.

“Fair enough,” he said.

(flawedamythyst, “Wine Stains and Waistcoats”)

Lestrade struggles to understand how Sherlock can be so at ease with the idea of John having sexual partners outside of their marriage. He cannot reconcile their relationship with his own understanding of fidelity. Most socially normative ideas about infidelity “are firmly grounded

in the sexual assumption and tend to define cheating as having sex with someone who is not one's primary partner, they are not easily applied to relationships of asexuals" (Kurowicka 5). For all that Sherlock and John have formalised their relationship within the legal structure of marriage, their marriage does not take the form that society (represented here by Lestrade) might expect it to. As he comes to a fuller understanding of their marriage, however, Lestrade comes to realise that this does not matter:

They have their own moments of easy comfort, he remembered Mycroft saying, and then how disgusted Sherlock had been by the idea of anyone wanting to change John. That was it, then. Sherlock didn't care about John spending time with women, or even sleeping with them, because anything else would have meant changing him and he didn't want that. It was only when one of them tried to claim more of John than Sherlock was willing to relinquish that it became a problem, and John had made his choice on that one more than clear.

(flawedamethyst, "Wine Stains and Waistcoats")

The desire of asexuals for recognition then, as expressed in this text, is not the desire to have their primary romantic relationships recognised as being *just the same* as heteronormative romantic relationship, but rather to have them recognised as being *just as valid and important*, regardless of how closely they may or may not conform to societal norms.

2.5 Blurring the Boundaries between Sex/Not Sex and the Clear Articulation of Desire

As the story continues in *Horse and Carriage*, the progression of physical intimacy between John and Sherlock is steady, but extremely slow. The story is told from the perspective of both John and Sherlock, and those sections told from Sherlock's point of view focus increasingly on his desire to be close to John in all ways, except sexually. In the sixth story, "Beds and Bees", Sherlock discovers to his surprise that he enjoys physical closeness with John, finding that "having physical evidence that he was close meant that Sherlock's mind

was able to concentrate fully on whatever else was currently important” (flawedamythyst, “Beds and Bees”). Four years into the marriage, Sherlock decides that his mental files on John’s sleeping habits are “woefully thin” (flawedamythyst, “Beds and Bees”) and that he’d quite like to share a bed with John. His concern, however, is that “there were certain associations with sleeping together in a bed that Sherlock wanted nothing to do with” (flawedamythyst, “Beds and Bees”). To avoid these connotations, and to John’s quiet amusement, he sets out to ensure that whenever they travel there will only ever be one bed available, so that they will have to share, but not because Sherlock has expressed the desire to share. His machinations become increasingly complicated, until eventually John takes pity on him and lets him know that he is always welcome to sleep in John’s bed.

In the seventh story of the *Horse and Carriage* series, “Respect and Affection”, Sherlock struggles with the question of kissing. He wishes to show John how much he cares for him, but finds the expression of affection difficult, especially when it might take a physical form. He considers offering John a kiss, but he finds kissing “wet and messy and invasive [and that] there was something about it that made his spine itch uncomfortably” (flawedamythyst, “Respect and Affection”), and although he trusts John “who had never pushed for more than Sherlock was willing to give” (flawedamythyst, “Respect and Affection”) he still worries about the potential sexual connotations of the act. When Mrs Hudson hangs a sprig of mistletoe in their doorway, however, Sherlock sees it as the perfect opportunity:

A mistletoe kiss, though – that had clear boundaries attached to it, and it was hardly going to physically harm him to do it just once.

(...)

John would like a kiss. Sherlock could give him one, and it could say everything he’d been thinking about without him actually having to go through all the tedious business of finding the words for it. It really was the perfect solution.

(flawedamythyst, “Respect and Affection”)

These two stories in the series, “Beds and Bees” and “Respect and Affection”, give a clear articulation of Sherlock’s asexual identity, although he does not use that word to describe himself. He finds kissing “invasive”, and worries that even the innocent sharing of a bed would bring up “certain associations” with sex that he wishes to avoid. He states clearly in “Respect and Affection” that his early experiments with kissing “had made him decide not to even attempt sex [because] if that was just more of the same, why on earth should he bother?” (flawedamythyst, “Respect and Affection”). At the same time, Sherlock wishes to express his love for John, although again he does not use that word to describe his feelings. He is aware that he is not skilled at expressing his emotions verbally, but he wants to give John a token of affection that John will understand and appreciate, such as a kiss. Despite his trust in John, however, he still desires a context for the kiss that has “clear boundaries attached to it” (flawedamythyst, “Respect and Affection”), so that there can be no misunderstanding. The amount of deliberation that goes into Sherlock’s decision to offer this one chaste kiss to John, five years into their marriage, illustrates the potential difference in significance that an asexual person might attach to such acts, especially when it is placed in contrast to mainstream portrayals of romantic relationships, where kisses are commonplace and usually more of a first step. By examining this act from the perspective of an asexual character, the author draws attention to how each aspect of a romantic (or sexual) relationship, no matter how small, has potentially different significance for different people.

This potential significance means that an important part of defining an asexual identity, and a relationship involving an asexual person, requires “accurately identifying and articulating desire” (Scherrer 12). In particular, “defining the boundaries between physical affection and sexual interactions is important to an asexual identity” (Scherrer 5). Asexuality problematizes the boundaries between the sexual and the nonsexual, allowing for the separation of romantic intimacy, physical affection, and sex. The significance of various acts

differs among individuals. Scherrer notes that when describing “an ideal relationship [many asexuals] described interest in some sort of physical intimacy with another or others” (5).

Many asexuals enjoy acts such as kissing, holding hands, or cuddling but, crucially, do not consider these acts sexual in nature. Kurowicka notes that

much like the approach to sex itself varies significantly in this community, so does the need for and range of other types of physical contact. When asexuals describe their relationships and physical behaviours they engage in it becomes exceedingly clear that what ‘counts’ as sex is inherently individual (4).

The question of what ‘counts’ as a sexual act is especially important because “many romantically inclined asexuals pursue romantic relationships with non-asexual people” (Chasin 407). Such couples “face exaggerated discrepancies between each partner’s level of sexual desire” (Chasin 407), and so a clear definition of the boundaries between physical intimacy and sex, *as experienced by each individual within the relationship*, is necessary.

The relationship portrayed in *Horse and Carriage*, with its subtle, understated romance, in some ways bypasses the problems that may arise in a romantic relationship between an asexual person and a sexual one. The Sherlock of that story is disinterested in sex to the extent that he does not care how John goes about satisfying his sexual appetites, just as long as none of John’s sexual partners attempt to supplant Sherlock as the most important person in John’s life. John, for his part, is portrayed as content to have sexual encounters that are separate from his primary romantic relationship. Other fanfiction texts examine versions of the relationship between John and Sherlock in which the romantic element is much more prominent, and in which John is sexually interested in Sherlock, meaning that there is a need for more of a compromise regarding physical intimacy. In *What Makes Us Rich*, also by flawedamethyst, Sherlock tries to explain his lack of interest in sex to John, who has some trouble understanding:

“You don’t like sex,” [John] said carefully.

“No,” agreed Sherlock.

“But you do like me,” continued John.

“I suspect I love you,” said Sherlock. If he was going to tell his secrets, he might as well tell all of them and get them all out in one conversation.

“Oh,” said John again, sounding completely taken aback. Sherlock carefully shifted his head to look down at John’s face, but it was angled down and all he could see was his hair. The hand that he had wrapped around John’s shoulders crept up to play with the tendrils of it that lay at the nape of John’s neck. “Right,” said John unevenly. “So, what? You just want to ... cuddle, then?”

“I like kissing as well,” said Sherlock.

“Right,” said John again, still sounding puzzled. “But not sex.” He was silent again for a moment, then couldn’t keep it in any longer. “I’m sorry, how does anyone not like sex? You came, didn’t you?”

“That’s merely physiological,” Sherlock pointed out. “The whole thing is messy and intrusive, and your whole body is out of your control and hijacked by your libido so that you can’t concentrate on anything else. It’s unpleasant.”

John let out a half-laugh, which was not the reaction Sherlock had been expecting. “Of course,” he said. “Mr. Control Freak doesn’t believe in acknowledging the needs of the body, not eating or sleeping or, apparently, sex.”

“At least I’m not a slave to animal desires,” snapped back Sherlock.

“You mean things like the comfort of another body in close proximity?” asked John, squeezing Sherlock’s ribs to emphasise his point.

“If you’re going to mock me,” started Sherlock, moving his arm from John’s shoulders and preparing to sit up.

“No, no,” said John quickly, reaching up to catch Sherlock’s arm and pull it back. “I’m just trying to understand.”

Sherlock allowed himself to settle again. “You won’t be able to,” he said. “I know how you feel about sex. I’m not saying I won’t give it to you in exchange for all the rest of it.”

John pulled away to prop himself up on his elbow and stare down at Sherlock’s face. “No,” he said firmly. “How could you even think I’d want that?”

Sherlock frowned. “You wouldn’t be forcing me,” he pointed out. “Weren’t you the one who said relationships were about compromise?”

“This isn't the same as remembering to put body parts in sealed containers before you put them in the fridge,” protested John. “I'm not going to have sex with someone who doesn't want to.”

(flawedamythyst, “What Makes Us Rich”)

Unlike the Sherlock of *Horse and Carriage*, who likes cuddling, but dislikes kissing and sex (placing both in the same category), the Sherlock of *What Makes Us Rich* likes both cuddling and kissing (suggesting that for this version of Sherlock, kissing does not ‘count’ as sexual contact), but still has no interest in sex, although this version of Sherlock has tried it with John and with other partners. He states clearly his lack of interest in sex, the author once again using the words “messy and intrusive” (flawedamythyst, “What Makes Us Rich”) to describe his experience of it. The implication of this conversation however, is that he is willing to have sex with John “in exchange for all the rest of it” (flawedamythyst, “What Makes Us Rich”), by which he means other aspects of a romantic relationship. John’s response, that he is “not going to have sex with someone who doesn’t want to” (flawedamythyst, “What Makes Us Rich”) is the response of the ideal partner, who not only will not expect, but will not *desire* sex with a partner who does not enjoy it, even if they consent to it. Although this version of John is clearly unfamiliar with the concept of asexuality, he accepts Sherlock’s word for it, and he will not expect Sherlock to engage in sex with him when he knows that it is not what Sherlock wants. Similarly, in *Loosed Reins* by aggressivewhenstartled, John and Sherlock attempt to negotiate a romantic relationship, and Sherlock assumes that John will at some point expect them to have sex. John disagrees:

“I don’t know whose words you’re repeating, Sherlock, but they’re not mine. Affection and sexual contact are not lead-ups to the ‘real thing’ where you ‘let’ me do anything. There’s no sex goalpost.”

(aggressivewhenstartled)

Here again we have John refusing to engage in any sexual activities with Sherlock when Sherlock is unwilling to do so. The frequency with which this issue arises in stories about an asexual Sherlock suggests that this is a common difficulty faced by asexuals when negotiating a relationship with a sexual person. Studies show that many asexuals “perceive sexual contact as a ‘price of admission’ for being in a relationship, while for others the opportunity for intimacy is more valuable than avoiding sex” (Kurowicka 4).

The possible mismatch of sexual desires between partners means that there is strong potential for misunderstanding. It should be noted that this potential is not limited to relationships between an asexual and a sexual person. Similar mismatches in desire are equally possible between two sexual persons, with a similar (if perhaps less extreme) potential for misunderstanding. This has important implications for the notion of consent. Unspoken assumptions about the ‘natural’ progression of a love relationship can lead to situations where a partner who is uncomfortable with a particular act or behaviour feels unable to articulate this discomfort because of social expectations about how a relationship should progress. Kurowicka notes that “the assumption that a romantic relationship must involve a sexual component is so prevalent that explaining [that one has no interest in sex] is very challenging as it can lead to immediate dismissal” (4). Sherlock is often portrayed in fanfiction texts as lacking an intuitive understanding of social relationships, a portrayal based on his characterisation in the BBC series. In some texts, he is shown as relying on portrayals of romantic relationships in popular media for understanding. As Kurowicka argues, such media “impresses upon everybody the importance and *inescapability* of sex” (3, italics added). This appears as a theme in several *Sherlock* fanfictions. In *Fallacy of Love*, by heeroluva, Sherlock and John have a romantic relationship that includes sex, for which Sherlock feigns enthusiasm, until one night Sherlock is unable to hide his negative reaction,

and John notices that something is wrong. In the ensuing discussion, it becomes clear that Sherlock believes sex is the price he must pay for the rest of their relationship:

“Sherlock,” John began hesitantly. “What does love entail?”

It was Sherlock’s turn to frown at John. What a stupid question. John knew this. “Sex, of course.”

John drew a shuddery breath, his arms tightening almost painfully around Sherlock. “Always?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, no hesitation. Sex was the key component, something Sherlock didn’t like, but could deal with to get the rest.

“And you want me?”

“Yes, John. I always want you,” Sherlock replied in his you’re-an-idiot voice. That’s all he ever wanted. Everything else was just periphery.

“I mean do you want sex. With me?”

Sherlock froze at that. The one question that John never asked. Every time John had tried to ask his preference, Sherlock had distracted him, with a touch, a kiss, anything to prevent the questions about what Sherlock wanted. Because the answer was always the same, and Sherlock couldn’t say it. Even the first time, Sherlock had never let John ask, just gone along with it.

The silence stretched between them and that was answer enough for John, who suddenly released Sherlock and turned as he was sick off the edge of the bed.

(heeroluva)

In this text, unlike others, Sherlock has not been forthcoming about his lack of interest in sex. He admits to deliberately avoiding the question of his own enjoyment, giving John implicit consent to their sexual activities. Although Sherlock has his reasons, John is justifiably angry with him for the deception, as well as with himself for not asking for explicit consent before continuing. John’s horrified reaction to the knowledge that he has been having sex, however consensual, with an unwilling partner, places him once more in the position of the ideal partner. Sherlock’s deception means that John was unaware that he and Sherlock did not

share the same desires, and his reaction draws the reader's attention to the importance of communication between partners about sexual desires.

2.6 Conclusion

These three features of the asexual community's approach to defining sexual and romantic identities - the importance of having the language to articulate one's identity and experiences, the separation of sex and romance, and the blurring of the boundaries between 'sex' and 'not-sex' - have value for both asexual and sexual persons. In particular, the importance of "accurately identifying and articulating desire" (Scherrer 12) is not limited to asexual persons and identities, although it is in the absence of sexual desire that it becomes most evident. Cornell argues that "there are as many different possible forms to our sexuate being as there are people" (*Heart of Freedom* 8), and variation between individuals occurs within all sexual orientations. It follows then that the effort to articulate and recognise this variation will have value for all persons. Approaching the definition of sexual and romantic identities in this way allows individuals the freedom to imagine and define their identities in the terms that best fit their individual experiences and preferences. This approach is embodied, and often clearly articulated, in fanfiction texts such as the ones discussed in this chapter. For the reader, engaging with these texts has the dual benefit of providing a broadened vocabulary of terms to describe sexual and romantic experiences, and of offering narrative insight into those different experiences.

Chapter Three

Slash Fanfiction and Sexual Exploration without Shame

This chapter will examine selected examples of the ‘first time’ genre of slash fanfiction, in which Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are depicted negotiating the beginnings of a romantic and sexual relationship. The ‘first time’ genre of slash is specifically focused on the *beginning* of a slash relationship, in contrast to texts that depict an already established romantic and sexual relationship. There are two concepts commonly explored in slash fanfiction, each of which is related to the possibility of articulating new, more inclusive, norms of sexuality by stepping outside of the existing ones: first, setting aside the social boundaries and conventions that define sexuality strictly in terms of gendered object choice, in favour of a more fluid conception of sexuality; and second, the exploration of sexuality and sexual practices without shame or fear of judgement. Both of these concepts appear as themes within the ‘first time’ slash story. This chapter will argue that this approach to sexuality, as it is portrayed in the fanfiction and as it exists in fandom communities, has value because it allows for the “free exploration of sexual representations” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 8), or freedom of the imaginary domain, which Cornell argues is one of the basic conditions necessary for personhood. Additionally, the act of reading and engaging with this kind of text can have a positive impact on the reader because it allows for a kind of imaginative rehearsal (through reading texts in which the characters do so) of the act of stepping outside of heteronormative social boundaries, which in turn might make it easier for the reader to do the same. Similarly, engaging with texts in which sexual activities of all kinds are explored, which is in itself a kind of imaginative sexual exploration, and with a community in which

there is no shame attached to this exploration, could help the reader to overcome any shame they might feel in connection to their own sexuality and sexual desires¹⁰.

3.1 Sherlock Holmes and Sex

Fans have been speculating about the romantic and sexual life of Sherlock Holmes for almost as long as the character has existed, and “culture has persistently remade Holmes into the romantic figure of audience desire” (Graham and Garlen 33). The modern Sherlock of the BBC series is no exception. Although many fans interpret Sherlock as asexual, the character remains ambiguous enough that fans have no difficulty in imagining him otherwise.

Francesca Coppa argues that the popularity of the BBC’s version of Sherlock Holmes is not only the result of actor Benedict Cumberbatch’s sexual attractiveness, but also of his “emphatic performance of a mind-body struggle” (213). Despite his claim that “the brain is what counts; everything else is transport” (Sherlock, “Pilot”), Sherlock is entirely present in his body, using it as a tool to sharpen his mind through the use of stimulants, and expressing both pleasure and frustration through physical gestures. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s conception of the cyborg, Coppa describes Sherlock as a figure of science fiction who blurs the boundaries between organic and mechanical; not only making use of technology as the original Holmes did, but incorporating it into a “hybridize[d] embodied self (212) whose brain “is in his clapping hands, in nicotine-enhanced blood (...) in the nearest cell phone tower” (213). In blurring these boundaries, the figure of the cyborg “calls other important boundaries into question” (213). As a character, Sherlock is ambiguous; his physicality, his mental state, and his romantic and sexual identity are not easily defined. This ambiguity

¹⁰ This is not to say that shame is always negative. There are certain sexual acts and desires about which it is appropriate to feel shame – such as rape and pederasty, for example. The difficulty lies in determining precisely which desires one *should* be ashamed of, and which one should not. This question is often the subject of heated debate within fandom, which presents multiple and contradictory answers. This question - of which desires it is appropriate to feel shame for and which it is not - is addressed in more detail later in this chapter, and again in Chapter Five of this thesis.

provides an opportunity for fans to investigate and *renegotiate* the boundaries that govern sexuality and relationships in a heteronormative society.

John Watson, by contrast, is depicted in the BBC series as a more conventional character (sexually at least). He asserts his heterosexuality throughout the series, usually immediately after someone has assumed that he and Sherlock are romantic partners. Amandelin Valentine observes that John has no difficulty finding dates with women, which suggests that on his own he appears comfortably heterosexual; it is only when he is with Sherlock that other people assume differently. Valentine suggests that “it must be the presence of Sherlock, then, that nudges John across the line from eligible bachelor to sexually ambiguous” (3.5). John’s oft repeated denial that he is “not gay” is intended not only to affirm his heterosexuality, but to act as a denial that his relationship with Sherlock might be anything more than platonic. It is Irene Adler who points out to him, in “A Scandal in Belgravia”, that the two are not mutually exclusive:

Irene: Are you jealous?

John: We’re not a couple.

Irene: Yes, you are.

John: Look, who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes but, for the record, if anyone out there still cares, I’m not actually gay.

Irene: Well, I am. And look at us both.

(Sherlock, “Scandal”)

As a heterosexual man and a homosexual woman, what John and Irene “should have in common is an attraction to women, but instead it is an intimate bond with this man” (Valentine, 3.9). The intimacy of the relationship between John and Sherlock provides writers with the leeway to imagine that Sherlock could be the exception to John’s heterosexuality.

In addition, although the relationship between John and Sherlock in the BBC series is portrayed as intimate but platonic, and therefore fits the heteronormative paradigm in that

they are two men who are close friends but who are not engaged in a romantic or sexual relationship with one another, their relationship is also not entirely within the bounds of 'normal', partly because of the nature of their characters and the work that they do. Sherlock is out of step with social norms and regularly "produces a range of startlingly alien (non) emotional responses" (Coppa 217-218) that set him apart from others. The Sherlock of the BBC series is socially awkward, scathingly dismissive of sentiment, and appears to have little use for intimate relationships, with one glaring exception: John Watson. Sherlock is clearly affected by, and learns to value, John's easy acceptance of his peculiarities, admiration for his brilliance, and unflinching loyalty. For his part, John is something of an adrenaline junkie who finds in his work and friendship with Sherlock a substitute for the chaos of the battlefield. As Mycroft Holmes observes of John in "A Study in Pink", "You're not haunted by the war, Dr Watson. You miss it." (Sherlock, "Study"). John Watson, for all he understands and cares about social norms in a way that Sherlock does not, is also capable of shooting a man to save Sherlock's life and then giggling about it while still at the scene of the crime (Sherlock, "Pilot", "Study"). Despite his regular protestations to the contrary, John thrives on the unpredictable nature of his life with Sherlock. The relationship between Sherlock and John is already outside the bounds of the 'normal', so it is not such a big step to imagine that it might be outside the bounds of the heteronormative as well.

3.2 Sexual Perversion, Shame, and Freedom of the Imaginary Domain

In *At the Heart of Freedom*, Drucilla Cornell argues that

we need the space to let our imaginations run wild if each of us is to have the chance to find the sexual orientation that can bring us happiness. To even aspire to the self-representation of our sexuate being we need freedom to explore without fear the representations that surround us. This place of free exploration of sexual representations, and personas, is the imaginary domain (*Heart of Freedom* 8).

Chapter One discussed Cornell's argument for the basic conditions necessary for personhood: bodily integrity, access to language and symbolic forms, and freedom of the imaginary domain. The last is necessary, she claims, because there is an aspect of the self, and specifically of the sexual self, that is itself imaginary. Our sense of identity involves the projection of the imagined self into the future and, in order for that self to be sustained, we require that it be recognised (as real, as valid, as legitimate) by others in our society (Cornell *Imaginary Domain, Heart of Freedom*; Butler *Undoing Gender*). To claim that an aspect of the self is imaginary is not to separate this part of the self from its other aspects. Central to our sense of identity and closely connected to the imaginary domain is how we relate to our physical bodies, how we express or represent our sexualities and genders, and how we choose to structure our love relationships. Each of these aspects of identity is influenced by what our society is willing to recognise as valid. In a heteronormative society, social norms and conventions limit this relation, often through the imposition of sexual shame on those who do not conform.

Shame, as it is defined in affect theory, involves "seeing oneself negatively in the eyes of others" (Scheff 244); "a painful, sudden awareness of the self as less good than hoped for and expected, precipitated by the identification of others (imaginary or real, or simply by the ashamed self, of a seemingly significant character shortcoming" (Manion 21). Unlike guilt, which has to do with action and can therefore be overcome by action, shame involves a judgement of the whole self as having failed to live up to expectations. This failing cannot be overcome by action, and so there is no way to undo it (Locke 149). Heidi Maibom argues that shame is a social emotion; a feeling of shame results, specifically, from a failure to live up to the expectations of others in our society (566-567). A central component of shame is "the notion of a seeing other, of an audience [which] can be an imagined one" (Maibom 569). Shame and the imaginary are therefore connected. Maibom argues that "people stop

themselves from doing what is shameful out of fear of the *imagined* reaction of others” (569). Importantly, we do not necessarily have to agree that a particular action or way of being is shameful in order to feel shame, because we “do not choose a moral or social practice; we enter into a pre-existing one that we have relatively little power to change” (Maibom 571). Thomas Scheff argues that, particularly for young children, shame is “as primitive and intense as fear” (254) because it signals a threat to the social bond upon which children are almost entirely dependent for survival (247). While an adult may examine the norms of his or her society and choose to reject them, a young child does not have this option. On the one hand, the recognition of social norms and boundaries *is* necessary for (social) survival, especially for a child. On the other hand, if, as Cornell argues, to sustain our sense of identity requires both that we project an imagined self into the future *and* that that imagined self be recognised as valid by others in our society (*Imaginary Domain*), then shame could have a devastating effect on the development of the self. If we fear the imagined reaction of others to our imagined self-identity, then we are less likely to allow others to see that identity in the first place. The imposition of shame, especially on a young child, can profoundly limit the development of the imagined self:

if, famously, we deny to infants and young children the ability to play with all of their body parts, including the “no-no” parts, we disrupt the space in which the child struggles to maintain a projected image that says, “This is my sex and I am proud of it” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 234).

The shutting down of the sexual imaginary that begins with this first imposition of shame, teaching a child that certain parts of his or her body are not to be touched, *even by themselves*¹¹, continues in others ways through the socialisation of gender norms and the heteronormative concept of ‘acceptable’ forms of sexuality. All of this “severely limits

¹¹ Cornell is not suggesting that the child should not be taught how to protect themselves from sexual abuse by others. Rather, her claim is that when the prohibition on touch is extended to the child him or herself, it essentially denies that child ownership of his or her body.

psychic space for free play with one's sexuality, if it does not cut it off altogether" (Cornell *Imaginary Domain* 9), which in turn limits the possibility of achieving full personhood.

The constraints imposed on the imaginary domain by heteronormativity are not all as obvious as the example above. "Sex" as a concept in common usage encompasses several dimensions in addition to biological sex and the act of having sex. It includes the identities and personae that we assume as a result of our gender, both as we experience it from within and as it is imposed on us by social convention. It also includes our understanding of human beings as fundamentally sexed creatures. Heteronormativity places constraints upon each of these dimensions; on the act of having sex, recognising only certain (hetero)sexual relationships as 'natural' or 'normal'; on gender identities by designating certain behaviours as masculine or feminine, and by marking as abnormal those whose gender identities are not congruent with their biological sex; and on the concept that we are (or should be) engaged in lives of (sexual) pleasure. These constraints, present to varying degrees in different societies, can have far reaching consequences for the project of personhood, particularly if sexual identities that do not fall within those constraints are viewed as shameful. In order to achieve full personhood then, it is necessary to find a means of overcoming those constraints; of learning to overcome sexual shame.

Sexual shame is closely connected to the concept of sexual perversion; a term most commonly used to describe sexual activities and behaviours that differ from what is considered 'normal' sexuality. The term carries a strong negative connotation:

in ordinary discourse, to say of a type of sexual behaviour or orientation that it is unnatural or perverted is not only to say that it has certain important traits; normally, it is also to condemn it, perhaps harshly, and also to imply that there is an objective reason, reason dictated by nature, that grounds the condemnation (Primoratz 245).

It is difficult, however, to state exactly what that 'objective reason' for the moral condemnation of any particular act or orientation might be. Ordinary usage of the term

‘perverted’ is inconsistent, as is the level of moral condemnation attached to it. What one person or society might consider ‘perverted’ may be considered quite ‘normal’ by another. Likewise, in a potential list of sexual perversions, paedophilia, bestiality, and rape (to name just a few) generally incur far stronger moral condemnation than something like masturbation or a foot fetish. While the concern of this thesis is more to do with the ordinary usage of the term, a brief perusal of the different theoretical accounts of perversion gives some indication of why that usage is so inconsistent.

One school of thought defines perversion as “unnatural sex”. In this view, the natural purpose of sexual activity is reproduction, and so only those sexual activities that could under normal circumstances lead to reproduction are natural. Any other sexual activities are unnatural, and therefore perverted (Gray 190). This coincides with the traditional Judeo-Christian view of sex being sacred to marriage and procreation, which views sexual activity as morally right only within marriage and when its aim is reproduction (George 168). Opponents of this view object that it is too inclusive; that there are sexual activities, such as masturbation and oral sex, that are not connected to procreation, but which “are so widespread as to make it odd to call them unnatural” (Primoratz 247). Opponents also argue that human beings pursue sexual activity for reasons other than procreation, such as for physical pleasure or to express emotions, and that “the psychological manifestation [of sexual desire] has become, if it were not always, distinct from its biological roots” (Goldman 272). Another view defines perversion as “impersonal sex”, in which there is a breakdown of either reciprocity or communication. Thomas Nagel, for example, argues that for a sexual act to be complete it must involve an active awareness of both oneself and one’s partner, and a mutual recognition of embodied reciprocal sexual desire (11-13). He therefore defines sexual perversion as sexual acts that “constitute truncated or incomplete versions of the complete configuration” (Nagel 13). This definition, however, lacks the moral force that usually

attaches to the notion of perversion. Nagel lists masturbation, sex with inanimate objects, and sex with small children as examples of sexual perversions; the first two because they are solo activities in which awareness is limited to one's own body, and the latter because small children do not possess sexual self-awareness and therefore cannot fully reciprocate (14). While paedophilia is included in most lists of sexual perversions, the moral condemnation attached to that inclusion has more to do with the harm that such acts inflict upon the child than with the idea that sexual acts involving children are in some sense incomplete. By the same token, while masturbation and sex with inanimate objects may be incomplete according to Nagel's definition, this incompleteness does not appear to have any moral force, affecting as it does only the individual involved in the act. Roger Scruton defines sexual perversion as any deviation from sexual activity that is "directed at another human being as the embodied particular person he or she is" (Primoratz 248). Critics of this view argue that it is too inclusive, placing casual sex (which is impersonal but arguably far from immoral) in the same category as acts such as necrophilia (Primoratz 248). Robert Solomon defines sexual activity between humans as a form of embodied communication, particularly of emotion, and sexual perversion as any sexual activity that is unsuccessful in this communication, or which abuse sex-as-communication through insincerity or deceit (Primoratz 249). Again, detractors from Solomon's view argue that it is too inclusive, as breakdowns in communication during sex are extremely common. This definition would classify much of 'ordinary' sex as perverted, and the idea of perversion would no longer refer to something outside of the norm (Primoratz 249). A third view is Alan Goldman's "plain sex" theory, which defines sexual desire as "desire for contact with another person's body and for the pleasure which such contact produces" (268) and sexual activity as "activity which tends to fulfil such desire of the agent" (268). Goldman argues that "there is no morality intrinsic to sex, although general moral rules apply to the treatment of others in sex acts as they apply to all human relations"

(280). This view defines sexual perversion as something that exists only as a deviation from the norm; an atypical sexual preference (Goldman 284). The norm from which these atypical preferences deviate, however, is a statistical norm, with no moral connotations. One objection to this view is that if a particular sexual activity, such as paedophilia, should become the norm in a society then, on Goldman's definition, it could not be considered a perversion (Primoratz 250). Goldman's response is that the immorality of paedophilia, and of rape, lie in the violation of "the general moral prohibition against using other persons against their wills" (281) and without their full consent, which children are not able to give, rather than in the sexual nature of the acts themselves. A fourth definition of sexual perversion, put forward by Sara Ann Ketchum, argues that good sex requires communication and mutual consent, "that both parties desire the same and pursue it willingly, in concert" (Primoratz 251). The aim of good sex, on this view, is that both partners should enjoy the activity and desire that their partner should enjoy the activity. Sexual perversion, in this view, is a sexual preference in which this ideal is reversed; the 'perverted' partner, rather than desiring their partner's enjoyment, actively desires that their partner should not enjoy the activity (Primoratz 251). An objection to this view is that it would not allow for the definition of some 'traditional' sexual perversions, such as necrophilia or fetishism (Primoratz 252). Another objection might be raised, by the BDSM community, to the inclusion of sadism in this definition of perversion, although this objection could be answered by making a distinction between sadism as inflicted on an unwilling partner and sado-masochism as part of a consensual sexual encounter.

Despite their differing definitions of the term, elements of each of these views potentially underlie the ordinary usage of the term 'perversion'. It seems reasonable to assume that the majority of people are unfamiliar with the detailed philosophical arguments for each definition, and that each person or community is likely to have a slightly different

understanding of exactly what counts as sexual perversion, and which sexual activities or identities fall into that category. While there may be widespread agreement that rape, paedophilia, necrophilia, and bestiality, to name a few examples, are sexual perversions deserving of moral condemnation, there is by no means the same level of agreement about masturbation, homosexuality, fetishism, or ‘kinky’ sex. Some consider these latter examples to be perversions, while others consider them to be natural and commonplace. Depending on the community in which an individual finds him or herself, his or her sexual identity and/or preferences may or may not be considered perverted. If they are, the moral condemnation attached to the notion of perversion could easily lead to that person feeling shame for that identity or preference. Even those whose sexual identity and (known) preferences are what their community considers ‘normal’ might struggle with feelings of shame for various reasons; wanting to explore sexual activities when their community defines all sexual activity outside of marriage as morally wrong, for example, or upon discovering a sexual preference that they were previously unaware of, and which is not considered ‘normal’ within their community.

To achieve freedom of the imaginary domain, and therefore full personhood, it is necessary to find a means of overcoming imposed sexual shame, in order to allow for free imaginative play – through fiction or fantasy - with sexuality, with the eventual aim of allowing each individual to pursue his or her sexual desires. The difficulty in arriving at a clear definition of sexual perversion presents something of a problem here. It seems clear that there are some sexual practices to which the proper response *is* moral condemnation and shame. In overcoming imposed shame, we should not shake off constraints to the point where we would feel no shame for engaging in, say, rape or pederasty, to choose the most obvious examples. By contrast, it *is* desirable to overcome imposed shame for identifying as homosexual. (It does not seem possible even to write about the topic of perversion without

making evident one's own beliefs. Nor is this necessarily a problem, but it does mean that there is no real neutral position in the debate.) Goldman's argument, that there are strong reasons to condemn rape and paedophilia but that these reasons are moral rather than sexual, seems the most logical answer to the problem. Others will no doubt differ. Whatever the constraints an individual eventually chooses to keep or to throw off however, each of us requires a space in which to explore the many possibilities open to us. One such space is fandom, where imaginative play with sexuality and sexual personae – through writing and reading fiction - free from shame, is possible.

3.3 Slash Fandom and Fanfiction as a social and creative space that allows for freedom of the imaginary domain

Chapter One of this thesis discussed modern fandom as a queer space, which embraces a radical openness to all forms of sexuality and sexuate being. The result of this openness is a space where social norms and conventions are set aside, consciously and deliberately, allowing fans to express sexual fantasies and question sexual norms, as well as to learn about the wide variety of human sexualities and sexual activities that exist as possibilities for exploration. Lothian *et al* note that

what's interesting about the eroticism of fandom isn't the erotic content in general but its communal nature and the way sexual activities and proclivities on the fringes of ordinary acceptability are considered quite normal (106).

This radical openness to sexuality within the fandom community means that fandom provides fans with the kind of creative space needed to let their imaginations “run wild” without shame; to share their explorations of sexuality with others without worrying that they will be negatively judged for doing so. On the contrary, fandom celebrates this exploration, creating a space where all forms of sexuate being can be openly expressed, explored, and discussed. Within fandom there is a deliberate suspension of sexual shame; an agreement to approach

sex as something to be celebrated and enjoyed in all its variations. This creates a valuable space into which the imagined self can be projected – in the guise of a fictional character - and recognised by others.

That this space exists online and allows for anonymous interactions with a community of others is also valuable. A 2001 study of online sexual activities found that the expression of a person's sexual identity online can have a positive impact on how that person views that sexual identity:

greater expression of the sexual-self online leads to increased importance of that identity and then to real-world consequences for oneself and one's relationships (McKenna *et al* 302).

The study found that shame and the fear of losing important relationships are experienced not only by those whose sexual identities do not fit the heteronormative paradigm, but also by “those with quite mainstream sexual preferences and needs” (McKenna *et al* 303). However, those who participated in online groups in which those aspects of sexuality were expressed and accepted were able to “[incorporate] the previously taboo aspect of identity into their self concept” (McKenna *et al* 303). As a result, those individuals were more likely to accept that aspect of their sexual identity, and also more likely to tell friends and family members about it (McKenna *et al* 303). One possible reason for this increased self-acceptance may be that the internet provides a larger social group in which that aspect of sexual identity is not viewed as shameful, thereby lessening the fear of being shamed by one's immediate social community. Or, perhaps, being able to acknowledge one's sexual identity without being shamed by one community removes some of the power of other communities to impose shame for that identity in the first place.

It is this shifting of ideas and expressions (specifically, of gender identity, sexuality, and love) from taboo to commonplace, and the creation of a space in which individuals can

find greater self-acceptance of their sexual identities, that is one of the most valuable and important aspects of fandom. Reading stories is a kind of imaginative rehearsal. If a person reads enough stories in which a character decides that social norms of sexuality are less important than being truly oneself and happy, then that person might find it easier to do the same in their own lives. There is, of course, also a negative side to this potential. Immersion in an online community that espouses a racist ideology, for example, could make it easier for an individual to cast off social norms that restrict racist behaviour. Any claim about the positive impact of an engagement with fanfiction communities must therefore include the caveat that the ideals expressed within those communities should be positive ones to begin with. Naturally, it is the argument of this thesis that this *is* the case.

Slash Theme 1: Setting aside heteronormative conventions of sexual identity

Slash fandom and slash fanfiction, in a similar manner to the asexual communities and fanfiction about asexual characters discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, draw attention to the possibility of defining sexual identities, orientations, and relationships in ways other than those allowed by the heteronormative paradigm. In the search for language that accurately describes the variety of desires and a lived experience of asexual persons, the asexual community defines sexual identity on three separate, though interrelated, axes. The first has to do with sex, the axis that runs from sexual to asexual through the 'gray-A' spectrum. The second has to do with romance, the axis that runs from romantic to aromantic. The third has to do with gendered object choice. For the romantic asexual this runs from heteroromantic to biromantic to homoromantic. For the sexual person, this axis runs from heterosexual to bisexual to homosexual (Decker 17-30; Kurowicka 1; Scherrer 9). This is a very simplified account of the variation along these axes, which may intersect and diverge in many different ways in an individual identity. The separation of these different aspects of sexual identity

allows not only for a more precise articulation of individual sexual identities, but also, because it opens up the possibility of the inclusion of other axes as well, allows for a more fluid conception of sexuality. In particular, it allows for the possibility that a romantic connection with another person, or a shared desire for a particular sexual activity or dynamic, could have greater importance than the genders of the persons involved. Slash fanfiction, and specifically “first time” slash stories, usually place at least one central character in a position where he must decide how important a role gender plays in his sexual identity, and whether or not the importance of gender might be outweighed by romantic considerations. This possibility, however, runs very much counter to the heteronormative paradigm, which prioritises gender as a matter of course. A slash story, particularly a “first time” slash story, is as much about overcoming social conventions regarding sexuality as it is about love or sex.

The ‘first time’ story is a particular subgenre of slash fanfiction, depicting the moment, or series of events leading to the moment, when the relationship between two characters of the same sex shifts from platonic to a romantic or sexual relationship. In slash, the label ‘first time’ does not necessarily have anything to do with virginity, but rather indicates that at least one of the characters is considering engaging in a particular sexual activity, such as having sex with a partner of the same gender, for the first time. First time stories tend to follow a particular narrative structure, opening with scenes that show the two characters in their everyday lives, followed by an inciting incident that prompts the shift from a platonic relationship (often a close friendship) to a romantic or sexual relationship, and then closing with scenes showing how the characters have integrated this relationship into their lives. The narrative of the ‘first time’ story often hinges on one or both characters having to reconsider their sexual identity and many authors devote much of the story to detailing the internal struggle that this entails. Henry Jenkins argues that the moment in a slash story when the characters acknowledge that a romantic and sexual relationship between them is both

desired and possible has “emotional power because slash narratives go to such lengths to demonstrate the impossibility of such love, it identify the forces preventing the open expression of feelings between men” (220). Although Jenkins refers specifically to the social norms preventing intimacy between men, his argument can be extended to include heteronormative social expectations about relationships and sexual activity in general. ‘First time’ stories as a genre are specific to slash fanfiction because in a heteronormative society there are obstacles to non-heteronormative relationships that do not exist for heterosexual romances and sexual relationships. As one fan argues, in heterosexual romance fiction, the narrative obstacles encountered by the protagonists are external, and often artificially contrived for the sake of drama:

Thus begin these sagas of previous commitments, missed opportunities, misunderstandings and hurt feelings, conniving rivals, interfering friends and relatives, bombs, invasions, revolutions and icebergs. It’s not a matter of getting these two characters together. It’s trying to keep them apart for a few minutes that’s exhausting. And although this archetypical story has its charm, it’s rather like watching a rock roll down a hill. In the end, of course the rock will roll down the hill. Gravity. Where else would it go? (EinahSirro).

By contrast, in slash fanfiction, a sexual or romantic relationship between the two protagonists does not have this same kind of inevitability. Although slash stories can and do include external obstacles such as those mentioned above, the true obstacles that keep a close, platonic friendship between two slash characters from becoming sexual or romantic are “real, internal, built-in obstacles that are part of their identities” (EinahSirro). The typical slash protagonist is “a man who [has] never had occasion to think of himself as other than straight and who now [has] to rethink himself and his relationships” (Pugh 96). The decision to enter into a slash relationship is not the inevitable end to the story, but rather “an alternative path down which that story might go, *if he were adventurous enough to recognise other*

possibilities in himself and open up to them” (Pugh 96, italics added). Doing so requires that one or both slash characters must be willing to redefine his understanding of himself as exclusively heterosexual. Slash stories explore how a character might redefine his sexual identity by being willing to step outside the boundaries established by social conventions and heteronormative expectations of sexuality and relationships. In this way, the openness to explorations of sexuality that characterises slash fandom is expressed as a theme within the fanfiction itself.

In *Sherlock* fanfiction, first time stories with Sherlock and John as the main pairing often follow one of two particular narrative patterns. In the first scenario, John, who has up until this point considered himself exclusively heterosexual, becomes aware that his interest in Sherlock is, or has the potential to become, romantic and/or sexual. This awareness is usually as a direct result of something that Sherlock says or does, often in the context of an experiment or a ruse of the sake of a case. John’s motivation for participating in these experiences or ruses is often a combination of curiosity, adrenalin, enjoyment of Sherlock’s unpredictable nature, and a refusal to back down in the face of a challenge. As he realises that he may be romantically and sexually attracted to Sherlock, John has to consider what this means in terms of his own sexual identity, and decide if he is willing to redefine that identity in order to pursue the possibility of a relationship with Sherlock. The second scenario, often used in combination with the first, depicts Sherlock conducting sexual experiments to remedy a lack of sexual experience on his part, and turning to the more sexually experienced John (who is sometimes portrayed as bisexual in this scenario) as part guide and part guinea pig.

An example of a story that combines these two scenarios is *Thought Experiments* by entanglednow. Following a conversation in which Sherlock tells John that he has never bothered to have sex because it holds no particular appeal for him, to which John replies that Sherlock should not dismiss sex entirely until he has tried it for himself, Sherlock decides that

he should experiment, with John. On hearing this suggestion, John, who considers himself heterosexual, is surprised to discover that he is interested in taking Sherlock up on his proposal. When Sherlock admits that his interest is not rooted only in scientific curiosity, but rather in an attraction to John, John spends some time questioning his sexual identity before ultimately deciding that a potential romantic and sexual relationship with Sherlock is worth more to him than maintaining a conventional heterosexual identity. This particular plot, which occurs with minor variations in hundreds, even thousands, of other fanfictions, examines the tension between heteronormative social conventions of sexuality (represented in this case by John Watson's understanding of himself as exclusively heterosexual) and a potential relationship that would disrupt those conventions. Sherlock, for his part, plays the role of disruptor in this text, as in many others. In a 'first time' slash story it is often Sherlock who, intentionally or otherwise, disrupts John's understanding of their relationship and its boundaries. As a character who is 'out of step' with social conventions, he can say things that other characters would not; and his outsider's perspective can be used to point out the contingent, and sometimes absurd, nature of the boundaries that heteronormative social conventions place around sex and relationship. This is the main preoccupation of the 'first time' story; confronting the need to set aside social conventions in order to embrace a desired relationship that does not fit into any of them.

John Watson is the narrator and focalising character of *Thought Experiments*, and the story details his observations of Sherlock and his reconsideration of his own sexual identity as he considers the possibility of adding a romantic and sexual dimension to his relationship with Sherlock. In the opening scenes, set a few months after they first meet, the dynamic between John and Sherlock is depicted much as it appears in the BBC series, and John muses on his own enjoyment of that dynamic despite his awareness that it is decidedly unconventional:

John can't remember the last time he came back to the flat and had to ask a normal question. It's never 'do we have any milk?' or 'where's the post?' No, these days it tends to be 'why are there eyeballs in the microwave?' or 'why are all the walls covered in dead butterflies?' or 'where did this 40 gallon tank come from?' Or, on one particularly memorable Thursday, 'why are you tied to a chair?'

Far be it for Sherlock to disappoint John's newly acquired sense of morbid curiosity.

"Why is the sink full of electrodes?"

(...)

John puts the electrodes on the drainer, which is marginally less disturbing than the sink, or maybe it's more disturbing. He's worried Sherlock has moved the posts where 'disturbing' used to be when he wasn't looking. It's barely been a few months and he's slowly forgetting what it's like to live somewhere where weird things don't happen. Where he doesn't keep getting 'involved' in things.

He's fairly sure that he's caught in Sherlock's orbit and it's not exactly a stable one.

(entanglednow)

Humour is a common device in *Sherlock* 'first time' stories. As a scientist and a detective, Sherlock can be depicted, very plausibly, as engaging in all manner of strange behaviours that might incite amusement and affection (and possibly arousal) in John, in addition to his usual exasperated resignation. In the passage above, the author uses humour to highlight the unconventional nature of the domestic life that the two men lead. Similar scenes appear in several *Sherlock* episodes: in "A Study in Pink" a police officer finds a jar of eyeballs in their microwave, which Sherlock insists should be put back because they are part of an experiment; in "The Great Game" John finds a severed head in their refrigerator (another experiment); in "The Hounds of Baskerville" Sherlock arrives home covered in blood and carrying a harpoon. In each case John is initially surprised and annoyed but quickly dismisses the incident, suggesting that these are everyday occurrences in their lives. It is common, in *Sherlock* fanfiction texts such as *Thought Experiments*, for the author to draw attention to

John's easy acceptance of these incidents by having John himself reflect that most people would not be so matter-of-fact about Sherlock's peculiarities; that his relationship with Sherlock already exists outside of the boundaries of a socially conventional friendship. This is typically followed by a passage indicating that John is aware of how this friendship appears to other people; that others interpret their relationship as something closer to a romantic partnership, and that his own acceptance of Sherlock's behaviour only fuels those assumptions:

"I shall try to contain myself," Sherlock says after a minute.

"Oh God, don't do that, you'll probably explode." People like Sherlock aren't supposed to be contained, John's not even entirely sure they can be steered. Possibly they just *happen*.

He's fairly sure he shouldn't enjoy being a bystander quite so much. Especially since Sherlock will press close enough that John can practically feel him vibrating with whatever random intellectual puzzle he's currently obsessed with, no matter how many clothes he's wearing. Then he'll loom over anyone within range, in that carelessly arrogant way he has, while simultaneously demeaning anyone that happens to come close and professing terrible, life-threatening boredom.

The whole thing seems to be designed purely to leave the rest of the world under the impression that they're sleeping together. John's starting to think that it'd be simpler, and faster, to just ignore it and stop protesting. Though he's fairly sure that's going to come back and bite him on the arse at some point. Most likely the next time he meets a woman and ends up trying to convince her that he is *actually* interested in her. Not just trying to make his boyfriend jealous.

(entanglednow)

John's observation that "he's fairly sure he shouldn't enjoy being a bystander"

(entanglednow) to the chaos that Sherlock causes in his relentless pursuit of the answer to a puzzle, demonstrates his awareness that, even only a few months into their friendship, his relationship with Sherlock already exists outside the boundaries of a socially conventional friendship. He is also aware that their friendship appears more in the nature of a romantic

relationship to others, and that this misconception is due in part to their physical behaviour. This passage indicates that John is intensely aware of Sherlock on a physical level, and that this is part of his enjoyment of being involved in Sherlock's work. That Sherlock will "press close enough that John can practically feel him vibrating (...) no matter how many clothes he's wearing" (entanglednow) is something that John enjoys. Despite knowing, however, that this will have an impact on potential relationships with women, he has no desire to change how he interacts with Sherlock. His observations of Sherlock's behaviour are tinted with amusement both at Sherlock and at himself for finding it amusing in the first place. Until Sherlock makes his suggestion however, (bypassing discussion in favour of waking John up in order to kiss him) John has not considered what this might mean for his understanding of himself and his relationship with Sherlock.

The key passage of the story, in which John must directly confront the possibility of entering into a romantic and sexual relationship with Sherlock, takes place the following day. Having sent Sherlock away the night before (after explaining that having sex with one's flatmate as a compromise between wanting to learn about sex and said flatmate enjoying sex in general is not how relationships are supposed to work) John is out grocery shopping, and is surprised by a text from Sherlock:

What if it's not a compromise? SH

John stares at the text over the tomatoes.

He has no clear idea whether it's a thought exercise or curiosity, or whether Sherlock has decided he's genuinely interested.

It occurs to him, in the salad section, with a disturbing lack of fanfare, that there's the slight possibility he may be interested in Sherlock in exchange. That he's never really protested too hard about anything of the liberties and assumptions and that he really was more impossibly frustrated than impossibly irritated about having to send him away in the middle of the night.

The man's a contradiction of brilliance and arrogance and enthusiasm. Even if he is infuriating and shockingly rude and quite possibly genuinely unhinged. It's impossible not to get dragged along for the ride.

He's fairly sure becoming attached wasn't part of the plan though.

The cherry tomatoes have nothing to say on the matter.

John's never been interested in another man before. Not really, there's always been the understanding that one drunken night of experimentation would be the closest he ever got to bisexuality. But he's most assuredly not drunk now and the world will forgive him if he's a little confused. Because he thinks he may be seriously considering agreeing to be Sherlock Holmes' non-drunken night of experimentation. Which feels like the sort of huge life decision he shouldn't be forced to make while buying vegetables.

He's still staring at his phone and he knows he should send some sort of answer. But he can't for the life of him decide what to say. He's strangely unwilling to have Sherlock know what he's thinking before he does, and he suspects if he provides any sort of communication then he immediately will.

His phone goes again before he can formulate any sort of calm and sensible reply that Sherlock won't read anything into.

Pick up more milk while you're having your sexual identity crisis. SH
(entanglednow)

The mention in this passage of John's "understanding that one drunken night of experimentation would be the closest he ever got to bisexuality" implies that John is not as entirely heterosexual as he has thought himself to be. He realises in this moment however, that the excuse of alcohol has allowed him to pass off that experience as something done under impaired judgement, allowing him to maintain his own heteronormative assumptions about himself. By contrast, what Sherlock is proposing will be a deliberate choice, and he will not have that excuse. If he agrees to Sherlock's experiment, especially given he now suspects that this is motivated by romantic attraction on Sherlock's part and that he himself feels a similar attraction, he will have to redefine his understanding of himself as entirely heterosexual. Ultimately, John does not find this particularly difficult to do.

The juxtaposition of the mundane chore of grocery shopping with John's sudden moment of insight not only continues the use of humour in the text, but has the dual effect of emphasising that this realisation will have a profound impact on his life ("which feels like the sort of huge life decision he shouldn't be forced to make while buying vegetables") while at the same time placing that moment on a similarly everyday level. John's earlier observations about himself show that he has already decided that social conventions are not important enough to let them interfere in any way with his relationships. He enjoys being "dragged along for the ride", and so despite the initial shock of Sherlock's proposal, he has almost decided to go along with it before he has even considered it. By beginning and ending this moment of insight with Sherlock's texts, the author reinforces the sense of John's realisation being just one more item on the shopping list; something he needs to get out of the way so that he can go home to Sherlock and, ultimately, be happy. In making the choice to say yes to Sherlock, John is not really taking such a great risk. It has already been established, in the BBC canon and in this text, that should he and Sherlock begin a romantic and sexual relationship they will only be confirming what others already assume and accept about them. John is also not particularly disturbed by the idea of redefining his sexuality; his realisation comes with a "lack of fanfare", and there is no shame involved. His realisation is more that he has simply been going along with the expected homonormative narrative because he had no reason to do otherwise. Now that Sherlock has presented him with an alternative, he simply has to decide to take the opportunity, which he does. In a way, this text presents a kind of idealised version of this key moment in which a person has to redefine their understanding of their sexuality; an example of how simple it could be to do so in a situation where there is no reason to fear the reaction of others, in which there are no constraints on our expression of our sexuate being; even an example of how simple it *should* be to do so.

The decision to set aside heteronormative social conventions in order to pursue a relationship that does not fit into the expected paradigm is not always as easy as it is portrayed in *Thought Experiments*, and many stories depict a proportionally longer period of deliberation. In flawedamythyst's *Horse and Carriage*, for example, which was discussed in Chapter Two, John's struggle to set aside his preconceptions about marriage takes considerably longer, and requires intervention from both Mycroft and Mrs Hudson, but the outcome remains the same. In agreeing to marry Sherlock despite Sherlock's asexuality and his own heterosexuality, John sets aside the social conventions that define marriage as necessarily including a sexual relationship. The implication is the same as in any other 'first time' story; that not all relationships and sexualities fit into the narrow boundaries established by heteronormative social convention, and that the pursuit of happiness will often require that we set those conventions aside. This is the task that Judith Butler describes as essential on both a personal and legislative level; that of

distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to love, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself (Butler 8).

Fanfiction offers fans – both authors and readers – a means of exploring, through fiction, the effects of various norms and conventions, as well as the potential implications of setting them aside.

Slash Theme 2: Sexual exploration without shame

Sexual identity, defined in terms of gendered object choice, is not the only aspect of our sexuality that is constrained by social conventions and sexual norms. These norms also constrain sexual practices, and the expression of sexual desires, by designating some as 'normal' and others as 'perverted'. For many people, despite the high visibility of sex in many modern societies, there is often a sense of shame attached to taking pleasure in sex, and

particularly in 'kinky' (or unconventional) sex. As discussed above, this sense of shame is often closely connected to the notion of sexual perversion; the idea that to engage in certain sexual activities, or even to feel the desire to engage in them, is somehow immoral and therefore shameful. The difficulty, for each individual, lies in pinpointing which sexual activities are deserving of moral condemnation and which are not. In order to do so, we require the space to explore sexual identities and sexual activities, first in imagination and then possibly in reality.

Fandom, as a community, offers a space where imposed sexual shame is deliberately discarded, and sexual exploration without shame or fear of judgement appears often as a theme in fanfiction, and especially in slash fanfiction. Having set aside one set of social boundaries by removing gender as a consideration, slash authors generally have little difficulty in setting aside others, in order to explore marginalised forms of sexuality and sexual practices. In contrast to 'conventional' sexual practices which, though difficult to define and differing between communities, often fall roughly in line with the view that sex should be heterosexual and composed largely of activities that could, in theory, result in procreation, these more marginalised sexual practices are often described as 'kinky' sex. In a sexual sense, the term 'kink' refers simply to an unconventional sexual preference. This term is very much a relational one, derived from the idea of a 'kink' or a bend in a person's sexual preferences in contrast to 'straight' or conventional sexual preferences, and the definition of what counts as 'kinky' varies greatly depending on where a person or community draws the boundaries of 'conventional'. Common examples of practices defined as kinky sex include BDSM practices such as spanking or bondage, or sex incorporating fetish items such as rubber or leather, which are integral to the sexual pleasure of the fetishist. Within fandom, the term 'kink' is also sometimes used to refer to character or personality traits that provoke sexual arousal in a character, or in the reader. For example, a character or fan may be

described as having an ‘intelligence kink’ or a ‘competence kink’, meaning that an individual finds these characteristics in a partner to be sexually arousing.

Additionally, the term ‘kink’ is sometimes used within fandom in a non-sexual or emotional sense. These are sometimes described as ‘narrative kinks’, describing “an element in fiction that a reader or viewer is especially interested in, *sometimes on a visceral level*” (“Narrative Kink”, italics added). A narrative or emotional kink is an intense emotional reaction to a particular image, act, or scenario. Kinks that elicit positive emotion are often associated with ‘fluff’ fanfiction; stories with little to no plot that depict small moments of romance, humour, or pleasant domesticity. On the other side of the spectrum, a genre commonly associated with emotional or narrative kink is ‘angst fic’; stories in which characters struggle with seemingly hopeless situations and dark, brooding emotions. Fans may describe ‘having a kink for’ stories in which a favourite character sleeps with a teddy bear, stories about overcoming bullying or abuse, or for stories about unicorns. As with sexual kinks, narrative and emotional kinks are entirely individual, although many people may share a particular kink.

In fandom, the word kink is a morally neutral term. There is usually no judgement, moral or social, attached to the description of a particular preference as a kink. To describe a sexual act or scenario as ‘one of my kinks’ is to state that one finds descriptions of that act or scenario sexually arousing. That is not necessarily the same thing as to state that one engages in, or even wishes to engage in, similar acts or scenarios oneself. By the same token, to describe an act or scenario as ‘not my kink’ does not imply any negative judgement, merely a lack of (sexual) interest in that particular kink. The opposite of a kink is a ‘squick’, meaning a feeling of revulsion; something that is an immediate sexual (or emotional) ‘turn off’ (“Squick”). Despite the visceral reaction that it describes however, the term ‘squick’ does not normally have any negative judgement attached to it; it is used, for the most part, as a simple

explanation for choosing not to read fanfiction depicting certain acts. This neutrality regarding kink means that fandom, and fanfiction, is the ideal space in which to explore one's sexuality; both through engaging imaginatively with the various sexual acts and scenarios depicted in the fanfiction itself, and through participating in a community in which there is no shame attached to that exploration. As fan Ellen Fremedon writes:

in fandom, we've all got this agreement to just suspend shame. I mean, a lot of what we write is masturbation material – not all of it, and not for everyone, but. A lot of it is, and we all know it, and so we can't really pretend that we're only trying to write for our readers' most rarefied sensibilities, you know. We all know right where the Id Vortex is, and we have this agreement to approach it with caution, but without any shame at all (Fremedon).

The 'Id Vortex', a term coined by Fremedon in the same essay, refers to emotionally and sexually charged subject matter: "sex, power issues, identity issues, physical or emotional violence, revelation, transformation, transcendence, violent catharsis, and whatever else is a high-tension power line for that writer" (Hayden). Fremedon argues that while writers for mainstream media often avoid dealing with this subject matter in great detail, for various reasons including time constraints, content restrictions and, importantly, *shame*, writers of fanfiction are free to concentrate their efforts on exploring and expressing that same subject matter (Fremedon).

This open and shameless exploration of emotionally and sexually charged subject matter has two potential benefits for the reader. The first lies in the narrative structure of the texts. As with the 'first time' story discussed above, in which a character must decide whether or not he is willing to step outside of heteronormative boundaries and redefine his understanding of himself as heterosexual, stories in which characters experiment with 'kinky sex' for the first time require that one or both characters must be willing to admit to sexual desires that are unconventional, and to work through the sense of shame that may accompany

those desires. These stories are also ‘first time’ stories, although the alternative path that the character must decide on has to do with a particular sexual act, rather than with the gender of their partner, although these two elements are sometimes combined in a single story. The narrative structure remains much the same; the story opens with scenes showing the characters in their everyday lives, followed by an event or series of events that create the possibility for a particular sexual activity. In some stories the discovery of mutual desire for a particular activity is sufficient for the characters to engage in it. In others, however, one or both of the character struggles with feelings of shame for desiring the sexual activity in question, and fears that the other will judge him negatively for it. The drama of these stories lies in the character’s attempts (successful or otherwise) to work through that shame and accept that desire as a part of their sexual identity. This struggle is often resolved with the help of a partner, who counters shame with acceptance. Through engaging with texts that show characters overcoming shame in order to achieve self-acceptance, and often multiple texts that follow the same narrative pattern, the reader is presented with narrative evidence that this is possible.

Several examples of this narrative pattern can be found in wendymarlowe’s *Sherlock* fanfiction series entitled *John and Sherlock’s Kinky First Times*. As of December 2018, this series consists of thirty-nine first time stories, each one depicting a different set of circumstances leading to a first sexual and/or romantic encounter between Sherlock and John. Each story is self-contained, and focuses on a different sexual act or kink, which serves as the catalyst for a ‘first time’ encounter between the two characters. In *Sherlock* fanfiction, although it is most often John who is portrayed as the most socially conventional (and therefore as struggling with the question of sexuality as defined by gendered object choice), the struggle with sexual shame is divided more equally between Sherlock and John, depending how the author chooses to characterise each of them. Several of wendymarlowe’s

Kinky First Times stories portray John as the one struggling, and Sherlock offering acceptance. In *Sherlock Visits a Sex Shop*, for example, when Sherlock deduces John's sexual kinks and proposes an experiment to determine his responses to various sex toys, John is not necessarily ashamed of his desires but he is concerned that it will negatively affect Sherlock's opinion of him if he agrees:

"That's not it," John interrupted. "I mean, seeing you get off wouldn't be any weirder than some of the other shit we've been through together. I'm more concerned of what you'll think of *me*."

"Ah. That I'll think less of you once I know the details of your sexual tastes." Sherlock steepled his fingers under his chin, his favourite "thinking through a knotty problem" pose.

"That, and the expectation you'll blurt them out at inappropriate times. Like in front of other people."

"Honestly, John," Sherlock grumbled. "I've known you had a tendency toward kink in general and humiliation in particular for *ages* now. And I've never gone and told anyone, not even when the observation would have fit into the conversation. Do give me some credit."

(wendymarlowe, "Sex Shop")

Similarly, in *Sherlock Afoot*, John is mortified when Sherlock deduces his kink:

"This isn't normal, you know," John muttered.

"Nonsense – two-thirds of the general population have a sexual interest in something which could be termed a 'fetish,' and around fifteen percent of those revolved around feet. Nothing abnormal about it.

John withdrew his foot so quickly he kneed himself in the nose.

(wendymarlowe, "Afoot")

In the two texts quoted above, John's initial reaction to Sherlock revealing that he knows about John's sexual kinks is shame and the fear that Sherlock will think less of him. Sherlock soothes this fear by treating the situation as completely normal, and this allows John to move past his initial shame and enjoy himself. In *Sherlock Visits a Sex Shop*, Sherlock counters

John's shame partly by making it clear that he is capable of discretion when he chooses to be, and partly by treating the whole situation as an interesting experiment. In *Sherlock Afoot*, the situation is more sexually charged, and Sherlock counters John's shame by admitting to sharing his particular fetish and arguing that it is completely logical that they should enjoy themselves together.

In other texts, it is John who is portrayed as being open and comfortable with the idea of sexual kinks, while the more inexperienced Sherlock has difficulty understanding his own reactions to sex. Unlike Sherlock's more clinical approach in texts where the situation is reversed, in these texts John is most often portrayed in the role of Sherlock's guide, offering explanations and reassurance. In *Sherlock Learns What He Likes*, Sherlock approaches John with questions about why he (Sherlock) cannot stop thinking about Irene Adler and her riding crop:

“Ah,” John said again, and chose his next words carefully. “You do ... know ... why she keeps a riding crop around, right?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

“So you know that some people find that kind of thing sexually stimulating.”

“Your point, John?”

John sighed. “My point is that you may be one of those people, Sherlock. It's not something you can just decide not to be aroused by – you've got a kink. Big deal – most people do.”

(wendymarlowe, “Learns”)

When Sherlock finds John's explanations and suggestions for online pornography unhelpful, John suggests that he ask Irene Adler for help in exploring his kinks. Sherlock insists that John accompany him, and when Sherlock finds the situation difficult, John talks him through it:

“Is that okay?” John asked,

Sherlock swallowed and nodded again.

John suddenly realized – “Is there anything you know for sure is *not* okay? Something you want to tell us before we go any further?”

“I...don’t know.” He squirmed, shifting his shoulders over the leather of the bench. “I lack the experience to know precisely what the expected boundaries for this sort of thing are.”

Ah. Trust Sherlock to try to analyse his reactions in the context of wider statistics while in the middle of a scene... “Don’t worry about what’s expected,” John said. “This is about your body, no one else’s. And like I told you back at the flat – there’s no reason to be ashamed of how you’re wired. It’s just how it is.”

(wendymarlowe, “Learns”)

Although his tone is different to Sherlock’s more clinical approach in the earlier texts, John takes a similarly matter-of-fact approach to the situation, offering reassurance to counter Sherlock’s feelings of shame. What all of these texts have in common is the way in which sexual kinks are framed, and specifically discussed, as something for which it is not necessary to feel shame. The initial embarrassment and confusion expressed by one character or the other is a nod to the fact that sexual kinks, almost by definition, are often considered abnormal (and therefore shameful). When those kinks are discovered, or disclosed, there is a moment of shame, but this is quickly countered with acceptance by the other character, both verbally and through their actions. That acceptance, and the enjoyment that both characters take in exploring those kinks acts as a counter to the view that such kinks are a cause for shame. Jenkins argues that the eroticism of slash fanfiction “is an erotics of emotional release and mutual acceptance; an acceptance of self, an acceptance of one’s partner” (221). In these texts, that acceptance counters shame, and so undermines the social conventions that label the enjoyment of sex, even kinky sex, as abnormal. The implication, as John states, is that having a kink is not a “big deal”.

In other texts, such as codswallop’s *Masochism for Geniuses* series, sexual shame is not so easily overcome. In this series, Sherlock, already aware that physical pain can be a

useful tool to quiet his overactive mind, discovers (when John accidentally hurts him while doctoring an injury received on a case) that pain inflicted *by* John is also sexually arousing. They begin to experiment with sadomasochism, but while Sherlock himself has no concerns, John is more reluctant:

It works out rather well, because if Sherlock likes to be hurt, John is good at hurting people--though he doesn't like to do it, or can't admit he likes it, or has some petty moral qualms around the issue--anyway it's a difficulty, at times. John *really* likes doing what Sherlock wants, though, and he likes finding Sherlock's edge, whether he'll admit it or not. Making him whimper, making him break. So it balances out, often enough.

(codswallop, "Masochism")

At first, while Sherlock is aware that John has some "petty moral qualms" about hurting him for the purposes of sexual pleasure, he sees it only as a practical difficulty. In Sherlock's mind, so long as they are both enjoying themselves John's reluctance to admit his own enjoyment is irrelevant. As the series progresses, however, it becomes apparent that John is deeply ashamed of deriving sexual pleasure from the act of inflicting pain, no matter how willing his partner. The second story, *Aftercare of Your Reluctant Sadist*, focuses on John's struggle to accept this aspect of his sexuality:

There's a bit of blood, not much. John reaches for the bedside table drawer, finding the tube of antiseptic ointment that gets depleted nearly as quickly as the lube these days. This ought to be the part that he likes, and he does, in a way. There's a professional satisfaction in it, and a personal one, too: the novelty of Sherlock, *Sherlock*, this sharp and biting entity of pure intellect, turned pliant and biddable under his hands, accepting animal solace.

It isn't the healing he likes best, though. It's the *hurting*. It frightens him how much he likes it. It shouldn't be allowed.

(codswallop, "Aftercare")

The conflict between John's identity as a healer and his enjoyment of sadomasochistic sex is a recurrent theme in the series. Although the word 'shame' never appears in the text, John's reflections on his actions with Sherlock indicate that it is shame that he struggles with. The last thought in the passage above, that "it shouldn't be allowed", is a moral condemnation. He does not apply that moral condemnation to his *actions*, however, so much as to his *enjoyment* of those actions. As Sherlock observes in *Masochism for Geniuses*, John likes to do what Sherlock wants, and so long as he can think of his actions as being for Sherlock he has little difficulty with them. The struggle arises when he begins to understand just how much he enjoys what they do together. It is the latter that he condemns in himself. This suggests that what he is feeling is not guilt for his actions, but rather shame; "a painful, sudden awareness of the self as *less good than hoped for*" (Manion 21, italics added). Another indicator of shame is the "fear of the *imagined* reaction of others" (Maibom 569). An earlier passage mentions John deleting the list of safety rules that he had typed up when he and Sherlock first started experimenting "because the thought of accidentally publishing it to his blog somehow gave him cold sweat nightmares" (codswallop, *Aftercare*). This also suggests that what he is feeling is shame; he fears being seen and judged negatively by others, in this case the imagined audience who reads his blog. It also suggests that John does not necessarily agree that he *should* feel shame. As Maibom notes, because we do not choose the social norms of our community, we may feel shame for an action or way of being even if we do not agree that it is shameful (Maibom 571). John struggles with feelings of shame through the story, but nevertheless he continues to try to overcome them.

Sherlock, for his part, does not truly understand why John should feel shame. As the story progresses and their relationship deepens however, he makes more of an effort to help John. In the first story, Sherlock dismisses John's concerns, noting that "If John is troubled – which he often is – it's easy enough to placate him" (codswallop, *Masochism for Geniuses*),

but gradually comes to understand that John needs more than that from him; a different kind of aftercare. ‘Aftercare’, in BDSM terminology, refers to physical care and emotional reassurance provided directly after an intense experience that may have left one’s partner in a vulnerable state (“Aftercare”). Sherlock comes to understand that just as John provides aftercare for him by tending to the injuries he has inflicted, John requires aftercare in the form of verbal reassurance that Sherlock trusts him, what Sherlock thinks of as “his own verbal sort of ice pack” (codswallop, *Masochism*). As the story progresses, Sherlock offers more concrete reassurance that he enjoys what they do together, that he is “a very willing participant” (codswallop, *Aftercare*). With Sherlock’s help, John gradually overcomes his feelings of shame:

Another dark path he'll follow this man down, then. And if it helps to think of it as Sherlock's need he's following, and not his own...well, whatever gets him through the night, right? He'll revise his sliding list of rules as necessary, *he'll continue to struggle with it, but he'll allow himself to claim this as something he can do.*

(codswallop, “Aftercare”, italics added)

No matter what other kind of damage he’d been inflicting on Sherlock’s body, John refused to ever be rough when he entered him. Anyway, the mere contact against his over-sensitive skin was enough to give Sherlock the edge he seemed to need. He pushed back against John greedily, but pulled away with another hiss after every stroke, seeking out the pain and the pleasure equally.

John still wasn’t sure which one he needed more, *though he wouldn’t lie to himself, the pain was certainly a part of it.*

(codswallop, “Hit Me Again”, italics added)

These two passages occur towards the end of the second and third stories respectively, and show the gradual change in how John sees himself. By the end of *Aftercare of Your Reluctant Sadist* he is able to claim his desires as a part of himself, although he continues to struggle with them, still relying in part on the fiction that his actions are entirely for Sherlock’s

benefit. By the end of *Hit Me Again* however, he finds that he is able to be honest with himself and accept his desires. In engaging with texts such as those discussed above, in which characters learn to overcome sexual shame, the reader is able, in imagination, to engage with that process alongside the character. This in turn may make it easier for the reader to engage in that same process in their own lives.

The second potential benefit for the reader of such texts is simply the content of the stories. Fanfiction offers fans a knowledge base about sexuality and sexual practices. Cornell argues that personhood requires the freedom for imaginative play with sexual personae. For this play to be possible, we require the correct imaginative vocabulary. Put simply, if we do not know about the various sexual possibilities available to us, then we will not be able to play with them, imaginatively or otherwise. Fanfiction offers that knowledge. Kristine Busse writes:

When I started reading fanfiction nearly fifteen years ago, I was immediately fascinated by the huge amounts of sex, and more interestingly, the huge amounts of kinky sex. Every sex act I'd ever imagined – and some I hadn't – were easily accessible and, even better, labelled (Busse, "Pon Farr" 316).

Some of the different sexual activities or kinks explored in wendymarlowe's *Kinky First Times* series include:

- Sherlock crossdressing (*Sherlock the Model*)
- Sherlock wearing a chastity belt (*Sherlock Locked*)
- John demonstrating the appeal of 'dirty talk' during sex (*Sherlock Gets Dirty*)
- John having a foot fetish (*Sherlock Afoot*)
- Sherlock discovering the appeal of service submission (*Sherlock Finds a New Addiction*)
- Sherlock experiencing bondage and pain play for the first time, with the help of Irene Adler, while John discovers the appeal of voyeurism (*Sherlock Learns What He Likes*)
- John taking Sherlock to a BDSM sex club (*Sherlock Is All Tied Up*)
- John enjoying being humiliated during sex (*Sherlock Visits a Sex Shop*)

- Sherlock and John inviting Lestrade for a threesome (*And Sherlock Makes Three*)
- Sherlock selecting women for John to have sex with (*Sherlock Cuckolds Himself*)

In each case, the kink depicted is treated (both by the author and – in some cases after a period of adjustment – by the characters themselves) as something to be enjoyed rather than as a cause for shame. This series is only a small sampling of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of fanfictions that depict sexual kinks without shame. As of December 2018, out of over 4 million fanworks on AO3, approximately 33% (around 1.5 million works) are marked as either ‘Mature’ or ‘Explicit’, indicating that they contain explicit sexual content (toastystats, 2016). Within that 33%, a search for ‘kink’ returns approximately 150 000 fanworks, and for ‘BDSM’ a further 140 000. The actual number of works containing kinky sex is likely to be higher, as less explicit descriptions are often rated for ‘Teen’ audiences, while some authors choose not to attach a rating to their stories at all. The effect, at least within fandom, is that sexual kinks, and the *having* of sexual kinks, is treated as quite normal and not a cause for shame.

For the individual fan, the experience of sharing sexual fantasies and sexual kinks with a community in which “sexual activities and proclivities on the fringes of ordinary acceptability are considered quite normal” (Lothian *et al* 106) can be a liberating one. The study by McKenna *et al* confirmed the researchers’ hypothesis that “expressing and exploring on the Internet those particular sexual needs, fantasies, and preferences which one cannot express in the real world has the effect of increasing one’s acceptance of those self-aspects” (309). The study found that participants in online discussions and explorations of sexuality reported not only a greater self-acceptance, but “a greater tendency to “come out”, telling important friends and family members about this previously hidden self-aspect for the first time in their lives” (McKenna *et al* 303). Lothian *et al*’s 2007 survey of slash fans indicated that participation in fandom has very similar effects, and fans often “invoke narratives (...) of

coming out” (107) when discussing their experiences of fandom. The act of ‘coming out’ is an example of the disruption of norms that Butler describes: a laying claim to reality. To ‘come out’, whether that means to claim a non-heteronormative sexuality or to openly proclaim an enjoyment of a particular sexual practice, or even to claim an enjoyment of reading fanfiction about sexual acts, is a demand to be recognised; to claim the validity of one’s sexual being.

3.6 Conclusion

Fanfiction communities create a space in which sexual shame is deliberately set aside, and the free exploration of sexual identities and desires celebrated. This free exploration without shame or fear of judgement appears not just as a feature of the community, but as a narrative theme in the fanfiction texts that they create. Slash fanfiction, in particular, explores the possibility of setting aside the social boundaries that define and limit sexualities and sexual desires. The struggle with sexual shame, and the countering of that shame with acceptance, is a common theme in fanfiction texts, and repeated engagement with this theme could help the reader to overcome any shame they might feel about their own sexuality or sexual desires. Further, an engagement with multiple texts in which sexual activities of all kinds are explored is a form of imaginative sexual exploration, and doing so in the context of a community in which such exploration is not shamed but celebrated allows for true freedom of the imaginary domain.

Chapter Four

Omegaverse Fanfiction: Gender-Based Oppression and Problematic Consent Norms

This chapter will examine selected *Sherlock* fanfiction texts set in the Omegaverse. The Omegaverse is a fanfiction genre, akin to science fiction, which creates an “alternate universe” in which human genders and sexualities are different from, and yet still partially analogous to, those in reality. The different biological genders of the Omegaverse are the basis for a hierarchical social structure and its attendant gender politics, which again are different from but partially analogous to gender relations in reality. Fan authors make use of these similarities and differences to draw attention to various aspects of gender relations in reality, particularly those that are oppressive to women. These include gender-based oppression and problematic consent norms. Attention is drawn to these issues through the figure of the male omega, who by virtue of being male would normally occupy a position of social power, but who, by virtue of being omega, occupies the lowest tier of the hierarchical Omegaverse society and is therefore subject to oppressions normally experienced by women in reality. This chapter will argue that Omegaverse fanfiction, considered as a body of work produced by a community, offers fans a means of examining and reconsidering the constraints that social norms of gender and sexuality can and do impose upon individuals within a society, and which can have a negative impact on the project of personhood.

4.1 What is the Omegaverse?

The Omegaverse, also referred to or tagged as Alpha/Beta/Omega fic, or a/b/o for short, is a fictional “alternate universe” in which human beings have certain animalistic traits associated in the popular imagination with the biology and behaviour of wolves (Busse, “Pon Farr” 677), and in which social status is determined at least in part by that biology. As a genre, the Omegaverse combines a number of fanfiction tropes that existed prior to its inception,

including mating and heat cycles in human characters, male pregnancy, soul bonding, knotting – “a swelling at the base of the penis found in canines after ejaculation that forces the penis to stay inside to ensure impregnation” (Busse, “Pon Farr” 678) - and unequal power dynamics encoded both biologically and socially (netweight; norabombay). In combination with some or all of the above tropes, the defining characteristic of Omegaverse fanfiction is that human beings are depicted as being born with both a primary and a secondary gender. There are two primary genders; male and female. With the exception of some physical differences in genitalia as a result of the secondary gender, these primary genders are identical to the sex/gender classifications found in the real universe (i.e. the one which we, the readers, inhabit). Where the Omegaverse differs from reality is in the existence of recognised secondary genders (sometimes referred to as secondary sex characteristics) which take three forms: alpha, beta, and omega. These occur in all combinations, making a total of six possible genders; male alpha, female alpha, male beta, female beta, male omega, and female omega. The degree to which these secondary genders influence the lives of characters in these stories varies. As with all fanfiction, Omegaverse fanfiction is polythetic in nature, and each writer interprets and makes use of the framework and associated tropes in different ways. There are various themes in Omegaverse fanfiction that are often combined and explored simultaneously: the erotic (the heat cycles and pheromones that cause intense sexual desire, as well as the sexual power dynamics of dominance and submission connected to the Alpha/Omega distinction), the domestic (marriage, bonding, and pregnancy), the ethical (situations in which consent is dubious due to the biological imperatives involved) and the social (social hierarchies in which social status is determined by the secondary genders) (Busse, “Pon Farr” 686; Gunderson 16).

The concept of secondary genders is not new to literary fiction. It appears, for example, in Ursula Le Guin’s 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which individuals

are without gender except at a certain time in their mating cycle, during which they can become either male or female. Within fandom, the concept of heat/mating cycles has its origins in the *Star Trek* canon, in which the Vulcan character Spock experiences a mating cycle during which he must either have sex or suffer insanity or death (Busse, “Pon Farr” 679). As a distinct genre, Omegaverse fic, or Alpha/Beta/Omega fic, originated in the *Supernatural* fandom in 2010, drawing on the concept of Alpha werewolves in the television show (Busse, “Pon Farr” 680; netweight). From there it spread rapidly to other fandoms, and can currently be found in most major fandoms, including the *Sherlock* fandom. In her history of the Omegaverse, fan author netweight attributes this rapid development of the genre to another popular practice within fanfiction communities, namely the ‘kinkmeme’. Particularly associated with LiveJournal websites, kinkmemes presented fans with the opportunity to post anonymous story prompts, and to answer those prompts anonymously with their own stories. As the name suggests, the prompts are wide-ranging across sexual desires and practices. The rules of the kinkmemes are fairly standardised, as outlined below by netweight:

mandatory anonymity and a strenuous policy of Your Kink Is Not My Kink and That’s Okay!, which allowed for any kinds of requests and forbade disparaging and judgemental comments about the requests made and the fic written (netweight, emphasis in original).

The early Omegaverse texts met with a positive response, and the growing popularity of the genre meant that authors began to post their stories under their own names (or, at least, their online pseudonyms), and in doing so exposed their readers from other fandoms to those stories. Omegaverse prompts began to appear in kinkmemes dedicated to fandoms other than *Supernatural*, and by 2013 it was a well-established genre in a wide variety of fandoms (netweight). The designation ‘Omegaverse’ (as opposed to Alpha/Beta/Omega fic) appeared at around this time, and is mainly associated with the BBC *Sherlock* fandom (netweight). A 2014 study of fandom statistics noted that the *Sherlock* fandom produces the third highest

number of Omegaverse fanworks (proportionate to the total number of fanworks produced by that fandom), following closely behind the *Supernatural* and *Hannibal* fandoms (toastystats, 2014). As of December 2018, there are 46 102 works on AO3 tagged as containing “Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics”, and a further 8 663 tagged as “Omegaverse” fic. The rapid growth of the Omegaverse and its adoption across multiple fandoms indicates that many fans are attracted to the genre and to the space it creates for the exploration of gender and its role in both sexual and social spheres. As Busse notes, the appeal of the Omegaverse is usually multidimensional, incorporating both an enjoyment of the tropes for their erotic potential and of subverting those same tropes in order to “interrogate some of the issues and prejudices of our day” (Busse, “Pon Farr” 687). For many fans, a major factor in the appeal of the Omegaverse is that it offers a unique way of engaging with these issues. One fan writes that “some of us like to explore worlds in which there is a marked inequality between the sexes, because it helps us to deal with how we feel about inequality in real life” (pilgrimkitty). For many fans, the majority of whom identify as women or non-binary persons (centrumlumina, 2013a), gender-based social inequalities are a reality that must be dealt with on a daily basis. Writing and reading fiction in which these inequalities are recognised as unjust can be a positive experience.

4.2 The Omegaverse as Science Fiction

Fanfiction writers use the term “alternate universe” to describe a wide variety of stories, not all of which fit into the literary genre of science fiction. The Omegaverse, however, is an alternate, or science fiction, universe in two important senses: first, because it is a universe that differs from the real world in a way that can be explained in scientific terms (albeit fictional scientific terms) and, second, because of how it functions to draw attention to aspects of the real world by altering those aspects in particular ways in the fictional universe. Samuel Delany, writing in 1986, proposed a definition of science fiction based on its

subjunctivity. Unlike naturalistic or realistic fiction (fiction set in the real world), which depicts events that could-have-happened, or fantastic fiction, which depicts events that could-not-have-happened, science fiction depicts events that have-not-happened but might yet do so, or might have done so in a different past:

Events that have not happened include those events that might happen: these are your (...) predictive tales. They include *events that will not happen*: these are your science-fantasy stories. They include *events that have not happened yet* (...) these are your cautionary dystopias [which] include past events as well as future ones. *Events that have not happened in the past* compose that SF speciality, the parallel world story (Delany 1986, quoted in Russ 16).

The Omegaverse, with its six human genders, might appear to fit better into the category of events that could-not-have-happened, rather than simply events that have-not-happened.

However, as Joanna Russ notes of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “when the question of possibility comes up in science fiction, the author can only reply that nobody knows” (22).

As with Le Guin’s race of hermaphroditic humans, we cannot say that the six genders of the Omegaverse are possible or impossible in some other world, on some other planet, in an alternate timeline, or in the future, because we do not know. Within the BBC *Sherlock* fandom, fanfic writer BeautifulFiction’s *The Gilded Cage*, and stories like it, are examples of stories about events-that-have-not-happened-in-the-past; true alternate universes, in which the modern society that exists is the result of a history that did-not-happen in reality. The existence of Alphas, Betas, and Omegas is not explained in the text; it simply *is* the reality of human biology in that universe and the characters must negotiate the social structures that result. AmandaDBone’s *Dustfall*, on the other hand, is an example of a story about events-that-have-not-happened-yet, opening with the arrival of a strange dust from outer space that alters human biology from how it currently exists in reality to that of the Omegaverse. The

characters must then negotiate the changes that this brings about in human behaviour and its implications for society.

The question of possibility, however, is relatively unimportant. The Omegaverse as a genre can be classified as science fiction for a more interesting reason, which has to do with what science fiction as a literary genre *does*, which is to draw attention to aspects of reality by altering them. In writing about events that have-not-happened, science fiction relies for its effect on the reader having knowledge of the real world (Russ 16). The strangeness of the science fiction world exists only in contrast with the familiarity of reality, and the awareness of the reader goes back and forth between the two, constantly making comparisons. While some aspects of the Omegaverse, such as its six human genders and the possibility of male pregnancy, are very obviously science fiction, others are far more familiar, if initially disguised by the strangeness of the fictional universe in which they occur. Often in science fiction,

what is at first bizarre turns out have hidden in it the familiar, but this perception of the familiar causes the familiar to be seen from an odd perspective that makes it, in turn, bizarre (Russ 24).

The purpose, or at least the effect, of the Omegaverse is to draw attention to gender relations in the real world by creating a universe with alternative gender relations that are both similar to and different from those that exist in the real world. The awareness of the reader therefore constantly shifts between finding the similarities and noting the differences. The Omegaverse draws attention to existing gender relations and invites the reader to consider them, and then to reconsider them with a critical eye. In this regard the Omegaverse can be viewed as part of the larger tradition of feminist science fiction to which *The Left Hand of Darkness* belongs, in which writers create societies that differ from reality because they are based on different structures of gender relations: androgyny, hermaphroditic humans, sexual role reversal,

matriarchy instead of patriarchy, or the total absence of men (Jones 485-487). The purpose of these feminist science fiction novels was often to criticise the subjugation of women under patriarchy and other destructive value systems by offering a vision of either a utopian alternative in which those value systems do not exist (Jones 487) or a dystopian world in which those value systems and their negative effects on society are exaggerated (Murphy 473). Much of Omegaverse fanfiction falls into the latter category, depicting societies in which social status and personal rights are biologically determined and often, for the Omega, severely constrained. This invites the reader to consider whether, and how, similar constraints operate in reality. This critical consideration can be a valuable tool in the ongoing project of personhood. As Cornell notes, “we cannot mark out an identity without implicating who we are through a set of *culturally encoded* fantasies about what it means to be a creature with a ‘sex’” (*Imaginary Domain* 6, italics added). Our sense of identity is inextricably linked with our physical (sexed) body and whether we view ourselves, and are viewed by others, as male or female. Gender in particular affects, to a greater or lesser degree, how we are treated as persons by others in our society and the kinds of behaviours and relationships in which we are expected (or allowed) to engage. It also affects our experience of ourselves and of the world. By creating a fictional universe in which gender relations are similar enough to reality for the reader to find the parallels easily, but just different enough to cast those similarities in a new light, the Omegaverse offers the reader a way of examining how the gender relations of reality place constraints upon their own behaviours and relationships. Specifically, the Omegaverse often draws attention to problematic aspects of gender relations in reality, such as the oppression and control of one gender by the other on the basis of biological differences, and the question of sexual consent norms. The greater awareness that can result from this examination offers a starting point from which to challenge those constraints and norms.

4.3 Sex and Gender in the Omegaverse

The physical and behavioural characteristics of each of the six gender combinations in the Omegaverse vary from fanfiction text to fanfiction text, as each author interprets the various tropes that make up the Omegaverse slightly differently¹². What follows is therefore a description of the most common interpretations, although each of these is used, subverted, or ignored at the authors' discretion. These descriptions are drawn from norabombay's article *Alphas, Betas, Omegas: A Primer* and netweight's discussion of the Omegaverse in *The nonnies made them do it!*, combined with extensive reading of Omegaverse fanfiction texts.

In the majority of Omegaverse stories, *alphas* are at the top of the social hierarchy. Alphas, especially male alphas, are often larger and more physically imposing than betas or omegas. They tend to have dominant personalities, and are generally aggressive and territorial. They often have an enhanced sense of smell, designed specifically to detect omega pheromones, which can often trigger an alpha rut, during which time the alpha is driven to have sex with the omega and can become violent towards any perceived threat to their claim. While alpha behaviour is affected by the omega pheromones, the release of these pheromones is usually depicted as being beyond the control of the omega (although in a few fanfiction texts this trope is subverted to reverse the social hierarchy, with omegas then assuming social dominance). Alphas, both male and female, are able to impregnate omegas (and often beta females as well). A common trope drawn from canine biology is knotting, in which the alpha develops a knot at the base of the penis when aroused. During sex, if the omega is in heat, this knot will swell and 'lock' the alpha and omega together for a length of time (this varies from minutes to hours) in order to increase the chance of pregnancy. Female alpha genitalia varies depending on the text, and is sometimes left entirely to the reader's imagination. In

¹² Some fans take worldbuilding in the Omegaverse very seriously, and have written studies exploring various aspects, including how the genetics involved in having six genders might work and how different combinations would impact population dynamics. The three main studies are azriona's *Omegaverse Genetics*, Diana Williams' *Omegaverse Genetics – One Theory*, and Chapter 4, "Advanced Population Mathematics" of norabombay's *Primer*. These are not strictly relevant to this thesis, but make for fascinating reading.

some texts female alphas also have a penis. In others, such as AmandaDBone's *Dustfall*, they have intravaginal appendages rather like tentacles, which fulfil the penile function of transferring sperm, resulting in viable pregnancy.

Omegas are placed most frequently at the bottom of the social hierarchy within the Omegaverse, often possessing little or no social power of their own. In some texts, such as BeautifulFiction's *The Gilded Cage*, omegas are rare and considered highly valuable, but still lack social agency. The stereotypical omega is submissive both sexually and in personality. However, many Omegaverse texts focus on omega characters, such as Sherlock Holmes, who defy that stereotype. Both male and female omegas can become pregnant, and there is a higher likelihood of this happening at the height of their heat cycle. The omega heat cycle, or mating cycle, is a central aspect of Omegaverse fanfiction. Omega characters 'go into heat' at regular intervals (the duration of which varies from a few weeks to a few years, depending on the text). During this time omegas become highly aroused and desperate to have sex, and often have little to no control over their actions. An omega in heat gives off pheromones that attract alphas, and which can trigger an alpha's rut. In some Omegaverse texts, alphas and omegas are able to form a soul bond, or pair bond, by mating during the omega's heat. This bond unites them on a biological level, and as a spiritual unit. Whether this bond can be broken by anything other than death varies between texts.

Betas are essentially 'normal' men and women as we know them in the real world. They do not have secondary sex characteristics. Depending on the text, beta males may or may not be capable of impregnating omegas, and beta females may or may not be capable of becoming pregnant. Betas are often depicted as less aggressive and more emotionally stable than alphas, and are largely unaffected by omega pheromones.

Unpresented individuals also appear in Omegaverse fanfiction. These are adult characters who, due to some quirk in biology, have not yet 'presented' as alpha, beta, or

omega. Presenting, in this sense, is something like puberty; the point at which secondary sex characteristics are activated. This usually happens during adolescence, but in some cases an individual may not present until much later in life. In some texts, the character may present because they are exposed to the individual destined to become their mate. The unrepresented is sometimes depicted as analogous to a real world person who identifies as asexual or demisexual (not experiencing sexual attraction until emotional attachment is present and established).

These biological differences are foregrounded in Omegaverse fanfiction because they are the basis for a hierarchical social structure, usually with alphas at the top and omegas at the bottom. Marianne Gunderson argues that this foregrounding of sex and gender leads to a “hyper-gendering” of the characters (18). The corresponding hyper-gendering of the social hierarchy is likewise brought into the foreground. Despite the six gender possibilities, the Omegaverse often mirrors, examines, and criticises real life gender politics, which are likewise rooted in the biological differences between men and women. In the Omegaverse, alphas are coded as masculine, and display behavioural traits that are typically associated with masculinity: social and sexual dominance; aggression; and taking the active, penetrative role during sex. By contrast, omegas, both male and female, are coded as feminine, most obviously because of their ability to become pregnant, and because their emotions are often affected by their hormonal cycles, but also because omegas are associated with behavioural traits that are typically associated with stereotypical femininity: social and sexual submissiveness; and a nurturing personality. In associating alphas with masculinity and omegas with femininity, the writers of Omegaverse fanfiction create a parallel system that mirrors the male/female gender system of the real world. The mirroring is distorted, however, because alpha/omega is not a perfect parallel to male/female. The figures of the female alpha and, in particular, the male omega disrupt the easy association of alpha/omega traits with

either gender. The figure of the male omega, which appears far more frequently as a central character in the texts than the female alpha, combines male biological sex with gendered behavioural traits associated with femininity, creating a disjunction. This sense of misalignment allows writers to draw attention to issues that arise (both within the created literary world of the Omegaverse and in the real world) as a result of gender-based expectations placed on both men and women.

Among the issues explored in Omegaverse fanfiction are gender-based oppression and problematic consent norms. Although men, particularly those who do not conform to heteronormative gender roles, can also be victims of gender-based oppression and problematic consent norms, the Omegaverse most often focuses on the experiences of women, expressed through the figure of the male omega. This is partly because the majority of writers who produce fanfiction texts identify as female and partly because the majority of Omegaverse texts – approximately 90% (toastystats, 2013) - focus on relationships between two male characters. By focusing on the character of the male omega, the Omegaverse as a literary construct enables the writer to draw attention to these issues by subverting the usual path of such events and placing a male character in situations more usually associated with female vulnerability in the real world.

Within the Omegaverse, the omega has a social status that is analogous to that of women in the real world. That social status places constraints upon the omega, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the particular text. Omegas “frequently suffer from a second class legal and social status” (norabombay). In some texts they are banned from certain professions, such as the military or police force, and find their potential for advancement and professional recognition limited in others. Omegas are also discriminated against in other ways. In BeautifulFiction’s *The Gilded Cage*, for example, omegas have no legal agency, and cannot make legal or medical decisions for themselves. In other texts their testimony is

considered suspect, or they are considered less than capable of handling certain situations. The figure of the male omega who, in the case of BBC *Sherlock* Omegaverse fanfiction, is usually closely associated in the mind of the reader with the male actor who plays that character (Gunderson 18), allows the writer to draw attention to those constraints. While the experience of a female character dealing with the social and physical constraints routinely placed upon women by a society may go almost unnoticed by the reader, to see a male character forced to deal with such constraints jars the reader into noticing them. Social acculturation often leads to constraints upon women being accepted as ‘just the way things are’, but to see a male character navigating those same constraints draws attention to them and may prompt the realisation that those constraints are restrictive and oppressive. As one fan writes:

There is something about putting female concerns about sexism in the bodies of men that legitimizes it somehow. Things that women are ‘supposed ‘ to just live with or have in the past – if you force men to do the same things it suddenly becomes OBVIOUS how fucked up it is to anyone reading it (Songlin).

As a literary technique this is very effective. For the female reader, it draws attention to constraints placed upon her that she may not have considered in a critical light before. For the male reader - although there are far fewer male readers than female readers in fandom (centrumlumina, 2013a) - it presents an opportunity to imagine living under the constraints placed upon women. Cornell argues that there is often an imaginative disconnect between men and women, because many (heterosexual) men find it difficult to understand why and how women find certain experiences unpleasant, degrading, or threatening. To overcome this failure of imagination “we rely on the aesthetic realm, in the form of narrative or other artistic accounts, to help us in crossing the barriers so that greater understanding of women’s experience is possible” (*Imaginary Domain* 188). Martha Nussbaum makes a much stronger claim, arguing that the kind of imaginative engagement that is made possible by fiction is the

basis for moral knowledge, which requires “seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and *richly responsive way*” (Nussbaum, “Finely Aware” 152, italics added). Similarly, Simon Haines notes that “literature is a distinctive mode of thought about being human” (23) that allows for a deep emotional response to the experiences of others. The Omegaverse offers a very particular type of narrative account that responds and draws attention to the constraints placed upon women and non-binary persons in modern society by inviting the reader to engage on an emotional level with the figure of the male omega.

4.4 Gender-based Oppression in the Omegaverse

The association of alphas and omegas with particular behavioural traits is a form of biological essentialism. Essentialism is the theory that women have a certain ‘essence’ that is the direct result of their biology and that results in all women sharing certain fixed behavioural characteristics and functions that cannot be changed (Grosz 47-48). Elizabeth Grosz argues that theories which make use of this kind of essentialism “rationalize and neutralize the prevailing sexual division of social roles by assuming that these roles are the only, or the best, possibilities, given the confines of the nature, essence or biology of the two sexes” (49). Specifically, biological essentialism “usually ties women closely to the functions of reproduction and nurturance” (Grosz 48) and makes use of biological ‘evidence’ to limit women’s social status and possibilities. One school of feminist thought, which has its origins in the work of Simone de Beauvoir, who described pregnancy as “a fatiguing task of no individual benefit to the woman but on the contrary demanding heavy sacrifices” (33), views the female ability to bear children as the fundamental cause of women’s oppression, as women’s bodies are the means by which the patriarchy reproduces itself (Shanner 406). Another school of thought views pregnancy as a source of inherent power which men are driven to subjugate through social dominance (Shanner 406). In either case, the social importance of reproduction has been used by patriarchal societies as a means of justifying

oppressive control of women's bodies and social status (Shanner 406), and the essentialist notion "that all women *should* be and *desire* to be mothers has always been used to keep women in a subordinate position while paying lip service to the social importance of their role" (Giminez 215, italics in original). The Omegaverse depicts fictional societies whose social and legal constructs are based on this kind of essentialist view, with omegas taking the place of women. Importantly, this essentialism is not simply accepted by either the characters within Omegaverse texts, or by the authors of those texts. A central theme of most Omegaverse texts (with the exception of the simpler Porn Without Plot type stories) involves one or more characters challenging either the social or legal constraints placed upon them as a result of their gender, or the essentialist association of certain behavioural traits with a particular gender, or both.

Within the *Sherlock* fandom, one of the best known and most frequently recommended Omegaverse texts is BeautifulFiction's *The Gilded Cage*. The situation of omegas in this text is not directly analogous to the situation of women in modern (Western) society, being closer to that of women in previous centuries, but there are still aspects that are more relevant than is comfortable, or acceptable, to modern women. In this story, omegas are rare and highly prized, but have no legal standing within society. Given their rarity, they are generally only found among the aristocratic elite, treated largely as property, and as only an omega can give birth to omega children, they are generally kept well sequestered from the rest of the population:

The truth was, most people forgot Omegas even existed. People knew of them of course, but they were rare, something valuable and precious to be coveted and hidden. These days it wasn't about fighting to the death; it was about having the money. Alphas of the aristocracy and the elite frequently paid millions to an Omega's family for the right to bond, regardless of what the Omega might want.

(BeautifulFiction)

The role of biology in the oppression of omegas is a central theme in this text. Legally and socially, omegas are reduced to their ability to become pregnant, and this essentialist view is used to justify limiting their legal and social rights. Considered fit only for bearing and raising children, omegas are the legal property of first their families and then of the alphas to whom they are bonded. They have limited access to education, cannot pursue a career, and are not considered to be legally competent. Additionally, omegas are biologically dependent on alphas because of their heat cycle. In this text, mature omegas suffer from an extreme, painful heat cycle that can only be stabilised by bonding with an alpha, thus forcing omegas into a biologically dependent position.

Enter Sherlock Holmes, who has no use for social rules and conventions, no matter what universe he lives in. In this text, Sherlock is an omega who, with his alpha brother's assistance, has escaped an abusive bondmate and lives independently in London, working as a consulting detective. When he and alpha John Watson meet, John has difficulty pinning down his new flatmate's secondary gender because Sherlock does not give off any of the usual identifiable scents, but does not even consider that Sherlock might be an omega:

The truth was that, even now, unless Sherlock stood particularly close or they were within their own territory of Baker Street, John could barely smell him at all. His first thought had been Unpresented, but the doctor in him had written that off almost immediately. Sherlock was physically developed, whereas those who didn't mature sexually retained childlike, androgynous physiques. With large hands, stunning, obvious facial structure and his looming height, there was no way Sherlock fit the bill.

His next thought had been a Beta, but then Sherlock had moved and blown that idea out of the water. Too much confidence and swagger, too much presence and certainty. No Beta John had ever met before could prowl like that or command the attention of a room so thoroughly. That left one viable option: Alpha.

(BeautifulFiction)

This passage, set early in the text, establishes that this version of Sherlock, as with most versions of the character, does not fit easily into any social category. Both Francesca Coppa and Amandelin Valentine observe of the BBC's *Sherlock*, that its title character challenges "false binaries", such as that between straight and gay, by combining elements of both sides of that binary in such a way that he cannot be placed on one side or the other, and so resists the possibility of definition by those categories (Coppa 218; Valentine 1.2). Similarly, in *The Gilded Cage*, Sherlock challenges another false binary - or perhaps false ternary - the sharp divisions between alpha, beta, and omega, by combining elements of all three. Physically, he appears as either alpha or beta, and the evidence provided for this references his stereotypically masculine physical traits – large hands, obvious facial structure, and height. Behaviourally, he appears to be an alpha, and once again these behavioural traits are stereotypically masculine – "confidence and swagger" and "presence and certainty". There is also a hint of the more animalistic alpha nature in the use of the word "prowl" to describe his movement. At the same time, however, Sherlock lacks the scent that would identify him to John as another alpha, which suggests that his physical appearance is deceptive. The discovery that Sherlock is in fact an omega explains why John could not identify his scent, but this description of his alpha-like appearance and behaviour makes it clear that Sherlock does not fit into any of the – stereotypically – defined biological and social roles of the Omegaverse.

John's discovery of Sherlock's true secondary gender occurs during their investigation of a case involving the death of an omega who had died on the operating table during a black market transaction to sell her own reproductive organs for the money to escape from her Alpha. As John learns more about how omegas are treated he begins to draw the awful and obvious conclusions about Sherlock's own treatment at the hands of his bondmate:

'It's not like she did so well out of it,' Anderson said from the doorway where he and Donovan were peering over Lestrade's shoulder. 'So what was in it for her?'

‘Money,’ Sherlock replied, putting on some latex gloves and stepping towards the body, his fingers tentatively parting the incision to reveal the bloody mess inside.

‘Why would she need that?’ Donovan demanded. ‘She might not be that pretty, but she was still an Omega. Her Alpha would have given her everything she wanted.’ Sherlock’s snort of derision was surprisingly subtle, but it still reached the sergeant’s ears. ‘Oh, what? You expect me to feel sorry for some girl who’s had the world land in her lap just because she can pop out a kid every nine months like clockwork?’ Sarcasm dripped from her next words. ‘Imagine how awful that must be.’

‘Donovan...’ Lestrade’s voice held a warning, but it was nothing compared to lethal, silken darkness of Sherlock’s as he began to speak.

‘Yes, how awful to have no choice in the matter. To be seen as merely a means of producing children and sold into a bond she had no desire to form.’ He brushed the woman’s hair back from her shoulder and turned her head, revealing the circular wound of an Alpha’s bite. It was still raw and healing, a week old at most. Only Omegas bore a mark like that. Thanks to the chemicals in an Alpha’s spit, it would scar as it healed: a symbol to show she belonged to someone. For as long as her Alpha lived, the rough circle of teeth marks would remain there for the world to see. ‘She’ll be little more than property, and any beneficial treatment she received was not to ensure her happiness, but to allow her Alpha to prove themselves to their peers. She could not vote or be employed, and her only method of acquiring self-sufficiency would be to sell what society views as her primary asset.’ He looked back at the surgical slice in her stomach. ‘She thought the risk was worth it, not only that of being caught, but that of losing her life as well. Imagine how desperate she must have been.’

John had forgotten to breathe. Sherlock’s words were not impassioned, but they did not need to be. He laid each sentence down as fact, unassailable.

(BeautifulFiction)

Donovan’s derision here represents the popular perception in this society that omegas ‘have it easy’, and are given everything that they could want simply because they are capable of producing omega children. It becomes clear, as Sherlock lays out a different interpretation of the situation, that her acceptance of the popular perception is largely the result of never

having had cause to doubt that perception, simply because she has never come into contact with an omega before.

Almost immediately after this scene John discovers that Sherlock is an omega, and the restrictions placed on him as a result of his social status as omega suddenly seem doubly untenable, both to John and to the reader. Unlike the anonymous female omega who died on the operating table – the target of Donovan’s scorn for her ‘easy life’ – it is difficult for John (and the reader) to imagine Sherlock Holmes subjected to the same restrictions:

John tried to imagine him in that situation, tied to someone with no expectations beyond staying quiet and bearing children. In theory, his Alpha would be wealthy enough to purchase anything he wanted, but the components Sherlock believed made life worth living – the chase, the game, an exhilarating puzzle – they were the kind of thing money couldn’t buy.

An existence like that, hidden away by an Alpha, even one who adored him, may as well be the death penalty for Sherlock. He would stagnate, the engine of his mind tearing itself apart without cases to keep it engaged, and that thrilling spirit of intelligence would wither and die, superfluous to what his Alpha would consider to be Sherlock's purpose.

(BeautifulFiction)

John is thinking about Sherlock as an individual here, and the situation seems odd, even ridiculous, to the reader on that count alone because of what we know about his character, but there is an added level of strangeness to the picture painted above, because Sherlock is male. While the reader may find it distasteful to imagine a female character in that situation, it would not necessarily strike anyone as strange or out of place. To see a male character in the same situation, however, is odd. It jars us, because we are accustomed to seeing male characters in positions of social power. To see a male character treated as property strikes us as intrinsically wrong, which then prompts us to examine why we do not have the same reaction to seeing a female character treated in the same way.

The treatment of omegas as property in *The Gilded Cage* may appear extreme to the modern (Western) reader. If asked directly, it is not difficult to imagine that many people in modern Western society, male and female, would be outraged at the idea that women should be considered the property of men. Yet there are still aspects of this way of thinking and living that survive, and it is only relatively recently that the perception of women as part of the property of a father or husband has shifted in the Western world. Aspects of the English legal doctrine of coverture, under which a married woman's legal rights were subsumed by her husband's, persisted in some former British colonies and parts of Europe as late as the 1980s ("Coverture") and similar legal systems still exist in other parts of the world. Writing in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir proposed that a woman is always perceived a secondary to a man, as other; "she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her" (16), and that even where a woman's rights "are legally recognized in the abstract, *long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores*" (19, italics added). Legally, women may no longer be the property of men, but this way of thinking and the modes of behaviour that go with it still exist in modern society, in various forms, and are a part of the lived experience of women. As Gretchen Kelly writes in her article "The Reality That All Women Experience That Men Don't Know About", among the experiences that make up a woman's daily reality is "lying and saying we have a boyfriend just so a guy would take 'No' for an answer (Kelly). Similarly, on the #YesAllWomen website, where women post their experiences with sexual harassment, another woman writes:

#YesAllWomen because 'I have a boyfriend' is more effective than 'I'm not interested' – *men respect other men more than my right to say no* (Wiess, emphasis added)

Underlying both of these examples is the shadow of the idea that women are the property of men; that a man in modern society is more likely to respect another man's claim on a woman

than he is to respect that woman's right to make her own decisions. This may not apply to all men, nor (hopefully) is it likely that the men to whom it does apply are thinking about these interactions in explicit terms of property and ownership, but the high incidence of similar encounters and other forms of sexual harassment (Cortes) indicates that this kind of behaviour and thinking remains highly prevalent in modern society. The moment in *The Gilded Cage* that is most closely analogous to gender relations in modern society occurs after John and Sherlock have bonded:

‘What, that Jacobs girl? Your informant? Why?’ Lestrade shifted, grabbing Sherlock's cuff before he could stride away.

They both froze, Sherlock in surprise and Lestrade in apparent horror, as if he had only just realised what he had done. Everyone, even those not of the elite, knew you didn't touch a bound Omega. Over the years of their acquaintance, the significance of that knowledge had faded, worn smooth by the continuing absence of Alexander and Sherlock's righteous independence. In its place there was something like friendship, which meant Lestrade often forgot that Sherlock's gender had any role in their interactions.

Now though, things were different. Sherlock's Alpha was right there, present and very much aware. More to the point, the bond was in its infancy, and it was at that stage that an Alpha was at their most territorial.

Yet John didn't snarl a warning or step between them. He just shrugged on his jacket, apparently indifferent. Only a faint tension in his shoulders suggested otherwise. If John had been of the elite, it wouldn't have crossed his mind that such possessive behaviour was in the wrong, but of course that wasn't the case. John's rationality stamped its mark across his features, passive and calm as Sherlock plucked his sleeve free and smothered a smirk at Lestrade's pallor. (BeautifulFiction)

There are two reactions that stand out in this passage. The first is Lestrade's, who freezes in horror because he realises that in touching the newly bonded Sherlock, he is touching *John's property*, and he expects John to defend his claim. This reaction is in direct contrast with his previous behaviour towards Sherlock, which was not constrained by Sherlock's gender and

was, therefore, how Sherlock preferred to be treated. The second is John's, who conspicuously does not react. He is not unaffected. The possessive instinct is still there, but John suppresses it because he recognises that to 'defend his claim' would be to treat Sherlock as property, rather than an autonomous being. This sets him apart from the 'elite' class of alpha, those whose money and position in society have permitted them to buy omegas, and who are more inclined to defend their claim on what they perceive to be their property, bought and paid for. John serves as a counterexample to this way of thinking about omegas.

Connected to the treatment of women as the property of men is the question of birth control, which appears as a central theme in many Omegaverse fanfictions, including *The Gilded Cage*. Access to birth control and therefore to the ability to choose when or if to have children, or the lack of that access, has a profound impact on women's lives. Women with legal and social access to birth control are more likely to achieve a tertiary level of education, and more likely to achieve economic success (Planned Parenthood). Access to birth control also gives women sexual freedom, as it makes it possible for women to have sex for pleasure and not merely for procreation (Seligson). Even today, however, there exist groups of people and organisations who are opposed to giving women easy access to birth control and other methods of contraception. While it is typical for societies to promote the production of children in order to ensure the continuation of that society, feminists have argued that this has a negative impact on women because the burdens of reproduction and parenting generally fall on women, and have been used as a justification for discriminatory practices against women:

[b]roader social restrictions on sexuality, marriage, divorce, and women's participation in professional and political realms [are] indirect, but more pervasive mechanisms to control women's reproductive capacities (Shanner 406).

In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Michel Foucault discusses how the turn to scientific enquiry about sexuality in the 18th and 19th centuries meant that sex and sexuality became

something that was studied and catalogued, and so became a means of control for the state to impose on its citizens;

Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. It was in the nature of a public potential; it called for management procedures; it had to be taken charge of (24).

At this time, sex became understood as “a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species” (Foucault 146). The role of the state came to involve the regulation and control of its population, and since women’s bodies were the means by which a population increased, women’s bodies and reproductive capacities were likewise regulated and controlled, with men holding “a position of power and authority over the bodies of women” (Foucault 99). Among the many aspects of sex “taken charge of” by the state at that time was the use of “those notorious “deadly secrets” which (...) were already familiar to the inhabitants of the countryside” (Foucault 26): contraceptive practices. In many countries, at different times, the use of contraceptives, especially by women, has been strictly regulated by the state. In the United States, even the dissemination of information about contraception was made illegal in the 1870s, and the use of contraceptives by women was not made legal until 1965 (Knowles). Access to contraceptives remains limited in many developing countries, and even where they are available there is often resistance to using them, due to religious beliefs and social taboos (Superdrug). Abortion as a method of birth control is even more controversial, and remains illegal (except when it is necessary to save the life of the pregnant woman) in 85 countries (Women on Waves). Even in countries where abortion has been legalized it remains controversial, with social and political groups actively campaigning for abortion and other methods of contraception to be made illegal, often for religious reasons (Shorto; Joyce).

Omegaverse stories often focus on the impact that biology has on the lives of omegas (and by analogy, women), such as the very real consequences of pregnancy and the need for birth control. In *Two Facts*, by SailorChibi, for example, the text opens with omega Sherlock worriedly trying to remember if he has taken his birth control pills regularly:

It happens after one of those cases that are so endless that eventually they cross the line from fun to frustrating. Sherlock was exhausted from almost two weeks straight of little sleep and food. His body was running on empty and that's his excuse, because normally he always remembers to take his birth control pills. They're so important that not even a case superseded them, but in this case he honestly can't recall if he took the pills during those past few days or now.

(SailorChibi)

This passage is a small part of a larger story, but it stands out because it is an odd thing for a male character to have to remember. It is also significant because this is Sherlock Holmes, for whom “all that matters ... is the work” (Sherlock, “Game”), and yet here is something so important that it takes precedence over the work; making sure that he does not fall pregnant, because that would affect the work. This is not presented as a problem, apart from Sherlock's concern that he might have forgotten, but it does illustrate how an omega's biology (or a woman's biology) affects their life in ways that their alpha (or male) counterparts do not have to consider.

In other texts, the question of legal access to birth control is a central focus. In the Omegaverse, one form of birth control is what is referred to as heat suppressants, a medication that prevents omegas from going into heat. In some cases this works because omegas can only fall pregnant during a heat, while in other versions of the Omegaverse the heat suppressions simply prevent the loss of control experienced by omegas during a heat, allowing for the rational choice to make use of other birth control methods. Many Omegaverse authors engage with the question of birth control by creating versions of the

Omegaverse in which access to heat suppressants is illegal, or under threat. In doing so, these authors often express a version of the feminist view that the restriction of birth control within patriarchal societies, which is often based on essentialist views of women, is really a means of controlling women. In sweetcupncake's *Relative Incandescence*, for example, Sherlock has been taking heat suppressants since presenting as an omega in his teens. When Mycroft brings him the news that the suppressants will no longer be available, Sherlock is furious:

“At the end of the month, they’re halting manufacture of the substance. The news of it should break by week’s end. Suppressants won’t even be available to anyone willing to pay in order to bypass the prohibition. I’ve already looked into it.” He smiles placatingly, like he’s done Sherlock a favour by trying to throw a bit of money at the drug company.

“For what reason?”

“For all the reasons you’d suspect. Prolonged exposure has been linked directly to compromised glandular function, high blood pressure, pulmonary embolism,” Mycroft pauses and examines the way his fingers clasp around the handle of his umbrella, “Irreparable damage to the reproductive matrix, resulting in infertility.”

Sherlock barks back a laugh, bitter. “That’s all they care about, though, isn’t it. How many offspring an omega can produce in the thirty some odd years’ worth of heats.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft sighs, “This isn’t some simple issue. The continuity of the species-”

“I don’t care one whit about the species. Species go extinct every day. Why don’t they recall contraceptives in that case? Hm? You just want us all dripping and *writhing*, and out of your workplaces, into your beds, your kitchens, pressing your *suits*. I think I’ve heard enough of the Alpha Agenda for the time being, good day Mycroft.”

(sweetcupncakes)

As Sherlock says, the excuse about preserving the species would only be valid if other measures, such as banning the contraceptives available to alphas and betas, were also being

taken. As they are not, banning the heat suppressants is a move to take control of omegas; to deprive them of the freedoms that the suppressants afford them. These freedoms include not only the ability to avoid pregnancy, but also the ability to take part in public life; to pursue careers and economic independence.

Similarly, in *The Gilded Cage*, while there are contraceptives available to the rest of the population, an omega's purpose as far as society is concerned is to have children:

'What are you taking?' John croaked, 'And where the hell are you getting it from? Sherlock, there is nothing professionally manufactured available to suppress Omega heats.'

'A fact of which I am thoroughly aware,' he growled. 'Alphas have access to condoms and medications for contraception and Omegas have nothing.' He straightened his shoulders, and John wasn't sure if Sherlock was furious at him or society in general. Probably a bit of both, and how could John blame him?

(BeautifulFiction)

Instead, Sherlock, like his omega mother and countless others before him, makes use of other substances:

Sherlock rolled his eyes, 'Poison, John. Its other name is birthwort. In medieval times it was used as a labour aid, though its efficacy is questionable. However, any Omega with half a brain and a fraction of independent thought will grow it if they can, along with flora of similar properties. It's an effective abortive agent.'

(...)

Sherlock cleared his throat, examining the particulates again before he continued, his voice pitched low and secretive. 'It's old knowledge. Traditionally, Omegas are isolated even from those of the same gender. However, these things find their way around, especially from an Omega parent to their corresponding offspring. My mother taught me various methods away from the prying eyes of Mycroft and my father. She did her best to arm me for the future. A seven year age gap between children and only two in a fertile couple isn't natural. She did what she could to reclaim command over her biology.'

'And gave you the same knowledge, aware you'd need it.'

(BeautifulFiction)

This knowledge of how certain plants can be used as a means to avoid unwanted pregnancies allows omegas to take control of their biology even in the absence of officially sanctioned birth control methods. This aspect of the text mirrors the long history of women making use of herbal remedies (both effective and ineffective) to prevent pregnancy. Plants such as pennyroyal, pine, and vitex were used by the ancient Greeks for this purpose, and are now known to have contraceptive properties, but also to be toxic in the wrong quantities. The plant silphium was used for contraception and was harvested and traded to extinction by the 4th century. In India and Sri Lanka, women ate papaya, which contains an enzyme that helps to prevent pregnancy. The Aztecs ate Barbasco root (Knowles). By the early 20th century however, this knowledge had been suppressed and all but forgotten, partly as a result of the witch-hunts of the 13th century, and partly due to 19th century laws that made sharing knowledge of contraceptive methods illegal (Knowles). This knowledge was partially revived in the 1940s and 50s by scientific research, driven by feminists Margaret Sanger and Katherine Dexter McCormick, into the use of Barbasco root by Aztec descendants, and led to the development of the first birth control pill (Knowles). In *The Gilded Cage* however, no such pill was ever developed, and so omegas continue to rely on herbal remedies. Solving the case that began with the dead female omega eventually turns on Sherlock's knowledge of these plants and remedies. In the process however, John (and the reader) learns how dangerous the home made remedies are in the wrong quantities, and the risk that omegas must take in order to have any form of control over their biology. Although it is never stated, the implication is an argument in favour of legal access to birth control. By inviting the reader to engage imaginatively and emotionally with the omega character who must struggle to maintain control over his biology and – by extension – his life, Omegaverse fanfiction draws attention to the similar plight, even in modern society, of many women.

4.5 Consent Issues in the Omegaverse

It is important to note at the outset that not all Omegaverse fanfiction challenges gender oppression, or explores issues of consent which mirror those found in the real world. A lot of it is just a means for writing “hot animalistic sex” (Songlin), often used specifically *because* the consent norms in the Omegaverse are different from those in reality. However, many texts do use the Omegaverse as a means of drawing attention to issues of consent. It is also important to note that these two things are not mutually exclusive, and that the writers themselves, while often aware of these issues, may not be attempting to make any deliberate point about them. It is also important to note that the authors of Omegaverse texts will not necessarily have knowledge of the most recent scholarship regarding gender-based oppression or issues of consent, but (usually) draw instead on a combination of their own experiences and the representation of these issues within popular cultures.

The biological imperative to have sex during heat or rut is at the centre of most Omegaverse texts. When in heat, an omega is driven to have sex, and often becomes increasingly desperate if their need is not fulfilled. Alphas are affected by the pheromones that omegas produce during heat, which they find ‘irresistibly’ attractive, and are likewise driven to have sex with the omega, often staking a biological ‘claim’ in the process. The influence of pheromones and biological instinct in these situations means that consent is difficult to establish. The closest real world analogy is a situation in which one or both parties are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and so cannot give meaningful consent to sexual activities. While in many societies consent is protected in law – without it, sex is rape - the reality of what constitutes consent is often a matter of ongoing debate. While in many societies being under the influence of alcohol is not considered a mitigating factor in rape, in others it is still treated as an excuse (in public opinion, if not in law). Similarly, the question of a woman’s sexual history and her manner of dress are often used to discredit her claim that

she was raped, with the underlying implication that she must be somehow responsible; must have enticed her rapist. By creating a fictional world in which an actual biological compulsion to have sex exists, the Omegaverse allows for the exploration and interrogation of these issues.

As with the Omegaverse's exploration of gender politics, for many fans this tangle of consent issues is a significant part of its appeal. For some fans this is because they enjoy reading texts that contain dubiously consensual or nonconsensual sex. For others, it is because these texts provide a means of exploring issues of consent in the real world. Often, it is both. A 2015 survey about the appeal of the Omegaverse, conducted by fan author Songlin, found that out of 228 respondents, 120 specifically stated that the exploration of gender politics and consent issues is a major factor in their enjoyment of Omegaverse texts. All but 12 of these also stated that they found the sex scenes "hot", despite, and sometimes because of the consent issues involved (Songlin). One fan writes that she likes that "there's so many opportunities for dubious consent scenarios, and then to deal with the fall out from those situations" (Songlin). Another writes that the Omegaverse provides "an interesting frame for looking at (...) the idea of mandatory consent even when 'biological urges' prevail" (Songlin). Similarly, a third writes that she enjoys (among other things) "how characters must negotiate consent in the face of exaggerated biological compulsions, which again feels analogous to the reality of rape culture" (Songlin). These responses indicate that these are pressing issues in the lives of fans, and that reading and writing Omegaverse fanfiction is a means of understanding and coping with their effects.

In a 2000 article published by the New York Academy of Sciences, Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer presented an overview of their forthcoming book, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*, in which they argue that rape in human beings can be explained by evolutionary biology; an adaptive strategy in males to ensure the

perpetuation and survival of their genetic material when other strategies (to obtain a consenting sexual partner) have failed. The implication is that rape is something for which men are not consciously responsible. They argue against the viewpoint, espoused by theorists such as Susan Brownmiller, that rape is an act of violence and humiliation, motivated by power and born out of a society in which women are disrespected. This view argues that rape is “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men keep all women* in a state of fear” (Brownmiller 15, emphasis in original), and

the popularity of the belief that a woman seduces or “cock-teases” a man into rape, or precipitates a rape by incautious behaviour, is part of the smokescreen that men throw up to obscure their actions (Brownmiller 312).

Thornhill and Palmer argue in favour of an “evolutionarily informed” education program for young men to teach them to understand and control their sexual behaviour. However, they also propose a corresponding education for young women to teach them that “current attempts to avoid blaming the victim have led to *false propaganda* that dress and behaviour have little or no influence on a woman’s chances of being raped” (Thornhill and Palmer, emphasis added). They go on to argue that “surely the point that no woman’s behaviour gives a man the right to rape her can be made without encouraging women *to overlook the role they themselves may be playing in compromising their safety*” (Thornhill and Palmer, emphasis added). In other words, if a woman is raped, it is at least partially her fault for failing to take proper precautions. This way of thinking has a long history. Susan Bordo traces its origins to Christian theology, within which the body is viewed as the prison of the soul, and in which, crucially, the soul is male and the body female (3). In this way of thinking, pure male souls are brought to temptation by impure female bodies, and so the arousal of the male body is “the result of female manipulation and therefore is the woman’s fault” (Bordo 6). This is true even in the absence of the woman’s conscious intention, for women’s bodies

are seen as “speaking” a language of provocation [and when] these inviting female bodies are inaccessible or unresponsive to male overtures, this may be interpreted as teasing, taunting, mocking (Bordo 6).

Bordo argues that the pervasiveness of this way of thinking means that both men and women are vulnerable to it. For women, this means “holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults” (Bordo 8). For men, it works “to disclaim male ownership of the body and its desires” (Bordo 6), placing on women the responsibility (or blame) both for arousing those desires and for satisfying them.

The purpose of this thesis is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of the causes of rape. However, this brief overview of Thornhill and Palmer’s argument is included to show that this view of rape exists and is taken seriously. While the scientists themselves may state explicitly that their contestation that rape is a biological imperative does not provide a justification for rape, this distinction is often lost or forgotten. When interviewed about Thornhill and Palmer’s claims, Brownmiller noted that their theory misrepresents and oversimplifies her own position, but stated:

The most important thing I can say about their book is that I think it will be used as a defence by lawyers in rape cases. These guys will become expert witnesses, for a fee, as part of the defence, and that’s dangerous. The ones who will benefit will be high-profile rapists who can afford to hire them (quoted in Ellison).

As Bordo shows, Thornhill and Palmer’s argument is just a part of a long tradition of thought that places the blame for rape firmly on the victim, and this view has permeated our general social awareness so that, consciously or not, many people continue to believe that men rape women because they simply cannot help themselves, and the corollary to this belief is that if anyone is to blame in a case of rape, it is the woman who, by her behaviour or manner of dress, provoked the rapist.

The Omegaverse is a response to this way of thinking. It should be noted again that this response, while certainly deliberate on the part of some authors, is not the sole purpose of Omegaverse fiction, and the approach to these issues differs from author to author. The Omegaverse presents a world in which an actual, *almost* irresistible, biological imperative to mate does exist. The pheromones produced by an omega in heat can trigger a rut in an alpha who is then driven to mate with the omega. This is the world that Thornhill and Palmer describe. It is also the world that Brownmiller fears, in which this biological compulsion is used to defend the actions of rapists, placing the blame on the victim. The details, and the *actual* irresistibility of the pheromones differ between texts, but the Omegaverse as a body of work explores, and critiques, the social consent norms that exist as a result. These consent norms often mirror, and therefore critique by analogy, consent norms as they operate in real modern societies. Not every author takes up the opportunity to articulate a perspective on consent under those circumstances, of course. If the intention of the author is simply to write about the characters having sex, then issues of consent are often set aside to be dealt with later or not at all. Other authors however, incorporate the question of consent into the story. In *Sherlock* Omegaverse fanfiction is it often the alpha John Watson who wrestles with the question of consent. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, John Watson is the character with whom the reader is invited to identify, and who represents society and its prevailing morality in Sherlock Holmes stories (both the original Conan Doyle stories and the BBC's modern *Sherlock*). As in other genres of fanfiction, the version of alpha John Watson that emerges from many Omegaverse texts might be considered a representation of an ideal within the fandom community. This ideal encompasses a particular understanding of, and respect for the importance of, consent within a sexual relationship.

In *The Gilded Cage*, the discovery that Sherlock is an omega means that John must confront the very real concern that, should Sherlock go into heat while John is near, John

might not be able to control himself. To allay his concerns, Sherlock engineers the opportunity for John to be exposed to ‘telikostrone’, the chemical produced by omegas in heat that triggers an alpha’s rut, under laboratory conditions:

Never, in his entire life, had he experienced something to which his body was so viscerally attuned, like an empty vessel that had been waiting for this moment to find its fill. His hairline itched with a fine sheen of sweat, and his leg muscles thrummed as if he’d suffered a massive adrenaline rush. He longed to pace and prowl, but he managed to hold firm to Mike’s instructions, staying on the mark on the floor. The amount of concentration required was huge, and he closed his eyes, scowling hard as he tried to force his body back under his control.

It took him a while to notice the hum of the ventilation fans and the hiss of the neutraliser. Already, the telikostrone was fading from the air, and John shivered as a new jolt of desperation shot through him. He wanted to chase down the elusive phantoms of hormone, to pin it down and hold it close. It was a glimpse of the Alpha mating drive, terrifying in its ferocity. He’d only been exposed for a few seconds. What would it be like if he was actually sharing this space with an Omega? Would he have the mental capacity to hold on to rational thought, or would that all vanish beneath the strength of a biological imperative?

(...)

A shudder worked its way down his frame. If an Omega had been in the room, would he have stopped if they’d asked him to? Would they have been able to deny him, even if they wanted to? The issue of Omegas and consent wasn’t explicitly stated, at least not among the normal working classes. They never crossed paths, so it wasn’t a concern, and somehow he doubted the elite considered it important. They probably thought that if an Omega’s body said yes, then what did it matter what protests they actually voiced out loud?

Nausea clamped in John’s stomach, and he swallowed it back, letting his hands dangle between his spread knees as he let out a sign. He thought of himself as a considerate lover. He didn’t treat his bed-mates like toys, the ways some people did. He respected them, but if the pheromone released by an Omega could make him lose sight of that, then what would it do to someone who felt entitled?

(BeautifulFiction)

This passage articulates a crucial difference between John (and by extension, the ideal of sexual consent that he represents) and the aristocratic elite, to which class Sherlock's abusive bondmate Alexander belongs. While both John and Alexander are alphas, and therefore equally affected on a biological level by the omega pheromone, they differ sharply in their attitudes towards consent. To Alexander, and the class of alphas that he represents, an omega is the property of the alpha to whom they are bonded and so the question of consent is never raised. This is a society in which the equivalent of marital rape (sex between a bonded alpha/omega pair to which the omega did not consent) is not illegal. Alexander does not consider Sherlock's consent important, if indeed he considers it at all. Additionally, Alexander has been taught that an alpha affected by the omega pheromones is not capable of resisting; that once rut has been triggered there is no point in even attempting to resist. As Sherlock observes of Alexander, "Many would argue it was not his fault. The scent of my pyresus removed any choice he may have had in the matter" (BeautifulFiction). Here, Sherlock articulates a view of rape very similar to that of Thornhill and Palmer; that Alexander was compelled to rape Sherlock because he was exposed to Sherlock's pheromones. In this case, an actual biological imperative exists, and John recognises that Sherlock is correct when he says that many people would easily accept the provided excuse:

John's recent exposure to telikostrone had shown him the violent nature of such urges. It might sicken him, but he could imagine reaching the point where his highest priority was forcing a warm body beneath him, willing or not. The worst part was, people would excuse it. Even in normal society, where rape was acknowledged as a crime, they would jump to offer him a way out, labelling his behaviour as natural in the face of an Omega's biochemistry (BeautifulFiction).

This is exactly the objection that Brownmiller raises to Thornhill and Palmer's argument; that to give legitimacy to the view that rape is a natural impulse opens the way for that view to be used to excuse rapists.

John, by contrast, has been given the same information about the influence of the pheromone (and this brief experience of it gives him no reason to doubt the veracity of that information), but his immediate concern is whether or not he would still be capable of respecting an omega's right of consent while under that influence. The possibility that he might not be able to resist "sicken[s] him". That he is able to resist the urge "to pace and prow" in order to obey the doctor's instructions suggests that it *is* possible for an alpha to control themselves while under the influence of the pheromone, although it requires a great deal of concentration. The comparison between Alexander, who did not even attempt to control himself, and John, who worries constantly that he will not be able to, is sustained throughout the text. John's repeated question about Alexander – did he even *try* to control himself? – draws attention to the key difference between the two alphas; Alexander sees no reason to attempt to control himself, but John, while he acknowledges that even 'normal society' might be willing to find ways to excuse rape, refuses to accept that excuse for himself, even in a hypothetical situation. As Sherlock points out, this is the reason that John's worries ultimately prove unfounded; it is *because* he worries about it that he is able to restrain himself:

"You're not accustomed to it – the way you behave in this situation. You seem to forget that I am."

John recoiled as if he'd been slapped, his teeth bared in a grimace. "No. No, you're used to Alexander's reactions. We are not using him as a measure for acceptable Alpha behaviour."

"I wasn't suggesting we did. I know the warning signs of an Alpha who is beyond every ounce of restraint. Alexander never even considered holding back. With you, it's always on your mind. You're afraid of what might happen if you lose control."

(BeautifulFiction)

In this moment, Sherlock confirms that the key difference between John and Alexander is how each of them has been taught to think about consent and about their own biology; that this is a difference of socialisation rather than biology. Alexander has been taught that he will not be able to control himself, and does not care enough about Sherlock or any other omega to question that. John, on the other hand, has taken responsibility for his actions long before he ever finds himself in a situation where he might have cause to act, and takes whatever measures he can to ensure that he will not hurt his partner. In John, we have a representation of the author's ideal of consent; that it is both *important* and *possible* to overcome biological urges in order to ensure consent.

In AmandaDBone's *Dustfall* the author articulates a very similar ideal of consent. *Dustfall* falls into the science fiction category of events-that-have-not-happened-yet. As the story opens, a strange dust has begun to fall from outer space, and people are slowly becoming aware that it has altered human biology. At first, no one can identify exactly what those changes are; John notes of his patients at the clinic that "not a one of them could describe what was wrong, only that they knew something felt *different*" (AmandaDBone). Eventually, the biological changes are confirmed, but no one has any idea of how to deal with the effects that these changes have on behaviour. In particular, the question of sexual consent has become extremely unclear:

Things had got bad enough that the papers and news programs couldn't ignore or downplay them anymore. Reports of rape had more than doubled since the dust had fallen, and it was clear that law enforcement had no idea how to sort it all out. They weren't just beyond their normal numbers, either; from what John could tell, and what he'd gleaned from Lestrade, the reports were often confused on both ends, with some of the victims claiming to have felt drugged but clear-headed, others saying one moment that they'd consented and the next that they hadn't meant to or hadn't at all, and an unprecedented number of men and women coming forward and confessing, often with the same mix of answers the victims gave (AmandaDBone).

Both Sherlock and John find themselves physically altered by the dust. Sherlock has become what is eventually designated an omega, and John has become an alpha. John worries about Sherlock, aware that there is now a new threat to his friend as a result of his biology; the threat of rape. Susan Brownmiller argues:

Man's structural capacity to rape, and woman's corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself. Had it not been for this accident of biology, an accommodation requiring the locking together of two separate parts, penis into vagina, there would be neither copulation nor rape as we know it (...) we cannot work around the fact that in terms of human anatomy the possibility of forcible intercourse incontrovertibly exists (14).

Furthermore, while it is of course true that men can also be raped, and that the rectum is likewise vulnerable to penetration, crucial to Brownmiller's theorised history of rape is that the female victim "could not retaliate in kind" (15), and was therefore forced to recognise her own vulnerability. Brownmiller's argument is that this biological difference between men and women is the basis upon which patriarchal social structures of power are built.

In *Dustfall*, a different "accident of biology" means that Sherlock has effectively changed genders. Although still male, he is also omega, and so has become a member of the class of people who have a "structural vulnerability" to rape; the class of people who *can be raped*, and for whom the threat of sexual violence is an inescapable reality. While Sherlock's situation is of course not completely analogous to that of women in reality, it does mean that this new vulnerability is something that he has to consider, although he is resistant to the idea when John broaches the subject:

"You've got to think of how to prote- how to restrain yourself. I know you think you're completely in control, but so did every person who wound up in the middle of a sex offence case after this all started. They're reworking the bloody consent laws, even. It's all a mess, and if you – if *we* aren't all careful, if we aren't aware of just how our bodies have changed, the consequences-"

"I am perfectly aware of myself," Sherlock cut in, his voice slightly dry after his neglect. "I always say and do exactly what I mean to, unlike the rest of the world. Go back to worrying about your compromised sexuality; I, for one, don't care what new organs I may have so long as they don't get in the way of my mind."

It took John considerable effort to unclench his jaw a moment later, pulling a tight, insincere smile. "Right. Of course. You might want to think about how you're going to deal with everyone else, then. Most of the world isn't like you. How will you say 'no' if you are physically incapable of saying anything but 'yes'? Or what if someone else wants to stop, but doesn't know how?"

Sherlock huffed and rolled his eyes, his impatience with the topic already beginning to boil over. "Most of the world isn't you, either, John. You might have noticed that a large portion of London can't stand to be around me for more than a few minutes; I hardly think I'll be anyone's top choice now."

John started at him a moment, then laughed hollowly, shaking his head. "God, you've got no idea, have you?"

Sherlock closed his eyes, already beginning to check out of the conversation. "I'm sure you'll enlighten me."

"You smell," John began, then stopped short, licking his lips. Amazing? Fantastic? So strongly it was a wonder all of London didn't pound at their door just to get a better sniff? "You smell like sex."

Sherlock's eyes opened at that, a mix of panic and something else swimming in them.

"You smell like a wet dream hung out to dry," John continued, aware that he was babbling but unable to stop himself. "Like you've been out in the sun and ripened, like if anyone opened you up you'd taste like – like fucking. The entire flat smells like a bloody brothel, except all the bad parts of it are taken out and what's left over is just the wanting part, constant and suffocating and – and you think you can go out like that and no one will notice?"

He realised as he stopped that he was breathing fast, hardly able to catch his breath, and that he was terribly, obviously hard. He couldn't even feel ashamed, know that Sherlock could see the way he tented his jeans. He'd dug his fingers into the arms of his chair, and he wasn't sure he could let go without grabbing his flatmate and doing something completely terrible.

(AmandaDBone).

In this conversation, John and Sherlock wrestle with a concern that is very familiar to women. It would be ideal to say, as Sherlock does, that biology does not matter so long as it does not “get in the way” of who we are, but the reality is that it is not only their own biology that women have to consider but the culture of entitlement which, in some instances, tells those of male biology that they cannot, and need not, control their urges. John does not elaborate on what he means by, “they’re reworking the bloody consent laws”, but the implications are ominous. Given the context of the story, it is likely that reworking the laws means no longer holding alphas responsible for rape because it is believed that they are incapable of controlling themselves around omegas. As this point in the text, even John is uncertain about his ability to restrain himself in the face of Sherlock’s pheromones.

When the new biology is given scientific terminology – alpha, beta, omega – some people argue about the words, but most seem relieved, and “John thought he could see people conform to their new identities like stiff new clothes” (AmandaDBone). John finds this conformity to the new identities alarming, because the official designations are accompanied by behavioural descriptions – of alphas as naturally aggressive and dominant, and omegas as naturally passive and submissive – that rapidly become behavioural expectations, and even behavioural prescriptions. John takes his cue from Sherlock’s dismissal of his own new ‘identity’, and examines the implications of the designation ‘alpha’:

Alpha, he found himself thinking, looking at himself in the mirror. A secondary sex, some called it, and he could only worry about how that would muddle biological terminology, because it was easier than acknowledging that his idea of himself as nothing but male was crashing down around him. *Alpha*, he thought again, and straightened his back, trying to find pride hidden in the word.

Alpha male. Alpha wolf. Did he want that domineering, aggressive image for himself? He thought of his recent behaviour, of the way he’d hit Mr Hanes, the snarling thoughts that had come to him unbidden when he’d seen the way Molly

looked at Sherlock. Perhaps they held a certain truth, but he didn't have to accept it. He could fight it, be his own man. Sherlock was.

Sherlock, yes. Omega, but he couldn't imagine applying any sort of submissive lower-tier identification to that kind of genius. If Sherlock was an omega at all, it was nothing but a Greek letter, a footnote to everything else he was.

If it could be that way for Sherlock, John decided, it could be that way for him, too.

Even a footnote required some attention, though, and it was with that certainty in mind, that idea that it could be insignificant to their identities and yet still worth talking about, that John sat in his armchair in the sitting room, cleared his throat, and very determinedly did not breathe deeply.

(AmandaDBone)

The association of 'alpha' with 'alpha wolf' emphasises the animalistic nature of the new biology that John must now learn to live with, but also the social status that comes with it. The alpha wolf is the dominant male in the pack. While as a man, John already held that status to a certain extent, the solidifying of the new social roles means that a new dimension has been added to it; a biological underpinning that implies an inevitability to those roles, and to the associated behaviours. This inevitability is the danger that he needs to avoid, and by extension, the danger that his society needs to avoid. If those roles and behaviours are accepted as inevitable by society, as John sees happening once the biological categories have been named, there is a danger that people will cease to hold themselves and others responsible for those behaviours. For himself, John refuses to accept this. While he acknowledges that the changes in his biology means that his instincts have changed, he does not accept that this makes him a different person in any meaningful way. Importantly, he does not accept that he will be unable to control his new biology, a point that he proves later in the story. When Sherlock goes into heat in the middle of a case, he calls John to help him, and John arrives just in time to pull another alpha away from Sherlock. Despite being

strongly affected by Sherlock's heat, he is able to control himself enough to ensure Sherlock's consent:

"God," John breathed, shuffling closer. He put his hands on Sherlock's sides, pulling him closer and relishing the feel of the firm heat of his cock through his jeans. "What if I wasn't here in time? Would you have let him have you?"

"Does it matter?" Sherlock asked, rutting harder against him. "You're here now. John – this isn't enough. I need it. Please."

John was sure he knew, but he had to ask anyway. "What? What do you need?"

"Fuck me," Sherlock gasped, no trace of shame in his voice.
(AmandaDBone)

The perspectives on consent that are presented in these two stories are essentially the same: that even if there is a biological compulsion at play, what is important is intention. In *The Gilded Cage* John is able to control himself even while under the influence of the omega pheromone, albeit with great concentration. In *Dustfall*, although he struggles to control himself and worries that he will not be able to, John ultimately proves that he can master his biology. In both cases, this control comes from a belief that consent between partners is vital, as well as a belief that his will is strong enough to overcome his biological urges where that consent has not been given. In both cases, as Sherlock points out in *The Gilded Cage*, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. John both believes that he *can* resist, and that it is *important* that he do so, and so he is *able* to resist.

4.6 Conclusion

The Omegaverse, as a literary construct, offers a unique form of commentary on the constraints that norms of gender and sexuality impose upon individuals within a society. As a science fiction genre, the Omegaverse creates a society in which gender relations are both similar and different to those in reality. Fan authors use the figure of the male omega to draw

the readers' attention to aspects of those relations that are oppressive - in particular, gender-based oppression and problematic consent norms – and offer their own perspectives on these issues. In the case of gender-based oppression, the Omegaverse usually presents a more extreme version of oppression than is common in modern societies (although of course, there do exist societies in which such extremes still exist), but this exaggerated version can help the reader to recognise the more subtle forms of oppression that do operate in their own life. In the case of problematic consent norms, the contrast between the Omegaverse and reality is often less extreme than is desirable. The threat of rape is a reality that all women must deal with, along with a culture in which the victim of a rape is often more likely to be blamed than the perpetrator. The Omegaverse offers fans a means of drawing attention to these issues, through which they can articulate the impact of this threat, and express their own perspectives on the importance of consent.

Chapter 5

Depictions of Rape in Fanfiction

This chapter will examine selected *Sherlock* fanfiction texts that depict acts of sexual assault and rape, as well as the paratexts – author’s notes, tags, and readers’ comments – which frame the main texts, and metatextual discussions about the moral implications of this type of fanfiction. Fanfiction texts that depict rape and sexual assault can be broadly divided into two categories; first, stories that attempt to depict rape and its aftermath in a psychologically realistic way, and which often include explicit discussion of the harm of rape and the importance of consent, and second, stories that include rape fantasies; depictions of rape and sexual assault that are intended to be sexually arousing to both author and reader. Although there is often overlap between these two categories, for the purposes of this thesis they will be examined separately. The latter type of text in particular has the potential to place both author and reader in the difficult position of needing to reconcile a belief that rape and sexual assault are morally wrong with deriving enjoyment – sexual or emotional – from reading texts in which these acts are depicted. The dilemma created by this contradiction has led some fans to argue that fanfiction texts that contain rape fantasies should be censored because they are potentially harmful, especially to younger readers. Censorship, however, even if it were possible, would infringe upon freedom of the imaginary domain. This chapter will argue that engaging with the larger context in which these texts are written and read – the ongoing discussions about rape and sexual abuse, and the importance of consent, that take place within fandom communities – can both mitigate the potential for harm and be an experience that has worth in and of itself.

5.1 The Moral Question

Chapter One of this thesis argues that there is a need for a new, non-heteronormative social imaginary; one which allows for both freedom of the imaginary domain and freedom of representation for all persons. The creation of this new social imaginary is a step towards the creation of a social reality that allows for those same freedoms. Freedom of the imaginary domain is necessary because “the struggle to become a person is inseparable from *the psychic space needed to truly play with imposed and assumed sexual personae*” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 9, italics added). Freedom of representation is the freedom of each person to *live out* their sexuate being as they choose – the freedom to *act* upon their romantic and sexual desires - without fear of violence or exclusion from the community of persons within which they live.

While ideally our social imaginary should place as few constraints upon these two freedoms as possible, Chapter One argues, in agreement with Cornell, that there are two important constraints on *freedom of representation* that should be kept. First, that no person may use force or violence against another in the expression of his or her sexuate being (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 60) and, second, that no adult should engage in sexual acts with a child. These two constraints are defended by distinguishing between social constraints on sexuality, which are a matter of convention, and moral constraints, which forbid expressions of sexuate being which violate the personhood of one of the participants, such as in cases of rape or pederasty. Rape violates the bodily integrity and therefore the personhood of the victim, while pederasty violates the moral duty to protect the developing personhood of children, who are not yet able to give consent to sexual acts.

It is important to emphasise that the two constraints mentioned above are constraints on the freedom of representation – constraints on *action* – and *not* on imagination or the

imaginary domain. In contrast, when it comes to freedom of the imaginary domain, Cornell argues:

We have to defend the widest possible space for expression, precisely because without it, we legitimate foreclosures on what can be said, written, or imagined, and thus undermine and reshelve the project of each of us representing her sexual being in all its fluidity and incessant opening to new possibilities (*Heart of Freedom* 24-25).

The overall argument of this thesis is that fandom creates a space in which freedom of the imaginary domain is possible and protected, and that engagement with fandom and fanfiction therefore has positive value for the individual fan. Chapter Two examines fanfiction texts that show the importance of recognising that each person experiences desire and intimacy differently, and therefore the importance of the clear articulation of those desires and respect for the boundaries that are their corollaries. Chapter Three discusses fanfiction texts that model the exploration of sexual desires without shame or fear of judgement, which is crucial for freedom of the imaginary domain, and argues that this lack of shame and judgement is the attitude of the fandom community as a whole towards sexuality. The argument of both chapters is that engaging with texts that express this careful ethic of consent and attitude of open acceptance towards sexuality will influence the individual fan in a positive way. Texts such as those discussed in Chapter Two provide the reader with a broadened vocabulary with which to understand their own and others' sexual and romantic orientations and desires, and therefore, it is hoped, result in their taking greater care to respect both their own boundaries and those of others. Engaging with texts such as those discussed in Chapter Three could conceivably result in a greater openness to sexual exploration, and a reduction in feelings of shame attached to the experience of sexual desire. In other words, engaging with fandom and fanfiction has the potential to influence not only the individual fan's imagination but, through that imaginative engagement, their *actions* as well.

In the cases described above, the argument of this thesis is that the influence on individual readers is a positive one. However, there are cases where the potential influence of fanfiction texts is not so clearly positive. Just as fanfiction can have the effect of normalising positive sexual relationships, it could potentially and as easily have the effect of normalising negative ones. Specifically, there are many fanfiction texts that depict acts of rape and sexual assault or sexually abusive relationships. Some of these texts depict such acts and relationships in a way that emphasises the harm that they cause and condemn them as morally wrong. Other texts, however, present such acts and relationships in a more ambiguous manner, often with the intention of causing sexual arousal in the reader. This creates the following dilemma:

- 1) Freedom of the imaginary domain requires that we place as few constraints as possible on what can be said, written, or imagined.
- 2) An important constraint on freedom of representation (meaning on *action*) is that no person should use force or coercion against another in the expression of his or her sexual being, because doing so violates the personhood and freedom of the other.
- 3) Fanfiction provides a space in which freedom of the imaginary domain is possible, and the content of fanfiction should therefore not be limited.
- 4) Fanfiction can influence the sexual ethics and actions of its readers.
- 5) Some fanfictions depict acts of rape and sexual assault, and do so in a manner that is intended to be sexually arousing to the reader.
- 6) These fanfictions form part of the imaginary domain.

The dilemma that this creates is as follows: Given that the imaginary domain can have an influence on our actions, how can fans, as individuals and as a community, reconcile the belief that rape and sexual assault are morally wrong (which places necessary constraints on action) with reading, writing, and enjoying - sometimes by becoming sexually aroused by - fanfiction texts depicting rape and sexual assault (which form part of the imaginary domain and should therefore not be constrained)?

Fanfiction texts that depict acts of rape and sexual assault in a manner that is intended to be sexually arousing to the reader fall into two overlapping categories that are the ongoing subjects of both psychological study and feminist moral debates: pornography and rape fantasies. The theoretical positions discussed in this chapter are not necessarily the most recent work done on this topic. However, they were chosen because they most closely parallel current fandom discussions, possibly because these are the arguments that fans are most familiar with. The dictionary definition of pornography is “the depiction of erotic behaviour (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement” (“pornography”). By this definition, a significant portion of fanfiction texts can be defined as pornographic, as they contain sexually explicit descriptions that are intended to be arousing to the reader. This simple definition, however, is morally neutral, and does not fully capture the sense in which the term is used in some theoretical discourses, or even in common parlance. The term ‘pornography’ is often used in a *normative* way, to suggest, in addition to the definition, above that pornography “is *bad* – and perhaps also that its badness is not redeemed by other artistic, literary, or political merit the work may possess” (West). If this definition is correct, then the difficulty, and the subject of debate, is in defining what qualities of pornography make it bad and whether or not those qualities are found in all pornography or only in a subset of it. The conservative argument against pornography as a whole is that sexually explicit material of any kind is morally corrupting, encouraging deviant sexual practices and sexual promiscuity, and therefore harmful to the individual and to society (West). This sweeping general argument, however, has less relevance to this project than the more nuanced feminist debates. Furthermore, this thesis has already argued that engagement with some forms of pornographic material (in the form of sexually explicit fanfiction texts) is not only *not* harmful, but beneficial. The question remains, however, as to whether some forms of

pornography (and for the purposes of this thesis, some types of fanfiction texts) *are* harmful to those who engage with them.

Within fandom communities, this concern is raised often about sexually explicit fanfiction texts that depict, among other things, rape, sexual assault, and sexually abusive relationships. Feminist philosophers Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin argue that pornography *is* harmful, specifically to women, because it eroticises sexual violence toward woman and therefore contributes causally to the sexual abuse and rape of women through “the cultural legitimization of sexual force” (MacKinnon, *Roar* 17), and the habituation of men to sexual violence (MacKinnon, *Words* 16). There is some evidence to support this claim. Studies have shown that by perpetuating rape myths - such as that women can take pleasure in being raped or that women dressing in certain ways are ‘asking’ to be raped - viewing pornography makes some men more likely to act on the desire to rape (McGowan 28; Walby *et al* 192-193; Chapleau and Oswald 73-74). Further, Dworkin argues that pornography, which depicts “the objectification of women as a fundamental element of [male] pleasure” (35) contributes to the social and political disempowerment of women by perpetuating a view of women as primarily sexual objects who are subordinate to men (Dworkin; McGowan 27; West). Importantly, this argument against pornography applies only to a very specific subset of pornographic materials; those that contain depictions of “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or words” (MacKinnon and Dworkin 444), including depictions of women as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure as a result of pain, humiliation, rape, or other forms of sexual abuse and torture (MacKinnon and Dworkin 444). This definition also includes materials that use “men, children, or transsexuals in the place of women” (MacKinnon and Dworkin 444) in similar depictions. For the purposes of this thesis, this is a relevant argument, since there do exist fanfiction texts that fit this definition of pornography.

The second category into which these types of fanfiction texts fall is that of the rape fantasy; a sexual fantasy of “a scenario involving sex in which a sexual participant’s right [of consent] is infringed” (Kershner 254). A key feature of a sexual fantasy is that the person experiencing the fantasy, either through imagining the scenario or by reading or viewing material that depicts it (as in pornography), is sexually aroused by it (Kershner 253). Studies have shown that both men and women are capable of being aroused by rape fantasies (Kershner 255; Walby *et al* 192-193; Chapleau and Oswald 73-75; Shulman and Horne 368). The moral status of those fantasies, however, is difficult to determine. Stephen Kershner argues that rape fantasies are not intrinsically morally wrong, as there is no necessary connection between taking pleasure in a rape fantasy and acting on that fantasy, or wishing that fantasy to come about (261-264). At the same time, in the case of men, there is also evidence, as discussed above, that indulging in rape fantasies – through pornography or otherwise – makes it more likely (although by no means certain) that men will act on those fantasies and become rapists. In the case of women, on the other hand, studies have found no correlation between engaging in rape fantasies for the purposes of sexual arousal and a desire to be raped or a belief that rape is in any way justifiable¹³ (Kershner 255; Shulman and Horne 368). This gender difference is potentially significant, particularly with regards to rape fantasies depicted in fanfiction texts, as the majority of those texts are written and read by women. Studies attempting to understand the reasons why women engage in rape fantasies have reported varying and often contradictory conclusions. Some studies found that there is a correlation between high feelings of sexual guilt or shame and rape fantasies, and that “women engage in force fantasies to avoid the guilt that would be experienced if they were to

¹³ The mention of this gender distinction is not meant to imply that men cannot be raped and women cannot be rapists, but rather that engaging in rape fantasies does not appear to increase the likelihood that a woman will become a rapist in the same way that it does for men. Although it is not stated in the studies mentioned above, this distinction may be the result of an assumption that in a rape fantasy a man will always place himself in the position of the rapist, and a woman will always place herself in the position of the victim, which is not necessarily the case.

assume responsibility for their sexual desires” (Shulman and Horne 368). Other studies found no such correlation, and suggested instead that

women with low sex guilt are more open to a variety of sexual experiences and stimuli (...) allow[ing] women to experiment with different sexual thoughts and acts, and so they are more likely to entertain, among other fantasies, those involving force (Shulman and Horne 369).

Within fanfiction communities either explanation is plausible, and given that those communities consist of women of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and sexual experience, it is likely that both are true. If this is the case, and if it is also true that, for women, engaging in rape fantasies does not change their attitudes towards rape in reality, then the dilemma described above becomes less pressing. The question remains, however, of whether or not engaging in rape fantasies (by reading and enjoying fanfiction texts depicting those fantasies) is morally dubious in itself, or for some other reason.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the different ways in which rape and sexual assault, and the question of sexual consent, are dealt with in fanfiction texts, and demonstrate that the fandom community is well aware of the problematic nature of fanfiction texts depicting rape and sexual assault, particularly when such texts are intended to be sexually arousing. There is an ongoing debate among fans about the dilemma outlined above, although there is little consensus on how it might be resolved. This chapter will argue that freedom of the imaginary domain is too important to allow for any form of censorship (even if that were truly possible, which is doubtful), but that there are steps that can be, and often are, taken within fandom to limit the potentially damaging influences of such texts. More importantly, this chapter will argue that the constant debate surrounding these issues is valuable in itself, and that engaging with fandom as a collective is likely to have a positive influence on a person’s sexual ethics regardless of the content of the stories that they read.

5.2 The Harm of Rape

Chapter One of this thesis discusses Cornell's claim that the bodily ego, which allows us to organise our perceptions of ourselves and to recognise those perceptions *as* belonging to ourselves, is absolutely central to the self. We cannot separate the self from the body (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 35). In particular, the bodily ego cannot be separated from our physical sex and the perception (our own and that of others) of our bodies as male or female, because these things affect how we are recognised as persons by those around us. This in turn shapes our experience of, and ability to imagine, ourselves (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 35). If we accept this view of the body as central to the self, then the harm of rape and sexual assault is different not only in degree from other forms of violence, but different in form. Rape is a sexual harm, and in addition to whichever other physical and psychological damages that result, damage is done to the sexuality of the victim. Since sexuality is so closely entwined with the body and with the self, rape is a harm done to the personhood of the victim. While the same may be true of other forms of violent assault, feminist theorists maintain that the sexual character of rape is central to the harm it inflicts. Anne Cahill defines rape as "an affront to the embodied subject (...) a *sexually specific act* that destroys (if only temporarily) the intersubjective, embodied agency and therefore personhood of a woman" (13, italics added). Louise du Toit observes that rape is experienced by the victim "an attack on the very conditions for being a self and a subject in the world" (6). Similarly, Carolyn Shafer and Marilyn Frye argue that the harm of rape is different from the harm from other forms of assault or violence because the act intrudes upon the body of the victim, and therefore harms the personhood of the victim. Shafer and Frye define personhood as an embodied behavioural concept; a person is recognised as such because they behave in certain ways, indicating that they are

the sort of creature that is capable of identifying its own interests, choosing a fairly wide range of more or less complex goals for itself, and engaging in communication about and pursuit of those interests and goals (337).

These behaviours are embodied. The person does not *have* a body; “rather, the behaving body *is* a person, the sort of thing which acts and owns and consents” (Shafer and Frye 337). The physical body is therefore the centre of a person’s domain – the physical, emotional, and psychological space within which that person lives and acts – and it is over their domain, and especially over their body as the centre of that domain, that a person has the right of consent (Shafer and Frye 336). To fail to respect that right of consent, or to exercise the power of consent over the domain of another person, as in the case of rape, is in a sense “to deny that there is a person there at all” (Shafer and Frye 340). The victim of a rape is treated as if she (or he) is part of the rapist’s domain – there as an object with a sexual function, and not as a person. For the victim, rape “means that she is not seen as a person; and she is the observer *to whom* it means this” (Shafer and Frye 341, italics in original). Similarly, discussing violence in more general terms, Michael Staudigl argues that in the experience of violence, the *violation*, the damage done, “consists in experiencing one’s intentional openness to the world to be oppressed, expropriated and alienated by another person” (244).

This experience by the victim of rape, of seeing herself reduced to an object and not as a person, damages not only the body and the bodily ego, but also the victim’s capacity to imagine herself as a whole, because it disrupts the “projection into the future of an embodied self that can collect herself, and thus give meaning to herself” (Cornell, *Heart of Freedom* 36). Cornell argues therefore that rape is not only an attack on the body, but an attack on the personhood of the victim, resulting in “a sense of collapse, paralysis, and an inability to collect [the self] and go on” (*Heart of Freedom* 36). Susan Brison makes a similar claim, noting that rape interrupts the series of events that makes up the victim’s life, meaning that

“not only is it now impossible to carry on with the series, but whatever sense had been made of it in the past has been destroyed” (103). More than that, Staudigl argues that the victim’s very *capacity* for making sense of her life is damaged (244). This is an example of what Bufacchi and Gilson refer to as “the temporal indeterminacy of violence” (28), which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the victim to move forward from the moment of the rape, because the effects of the rape are not isolated to the moment of the attack.

5.3 Sexual Consent

To give sexual consent is to indicate, verbally, that one is willing to engage in sexual activity with a specific person (or persons) at a specific time. The giving of consent is - must be - a *deliberate* act, something that cannot or *should not* be assumed by another person.

Discussions of what constitutes consent in a sexual encounter are often centred around legal definitions of rape. Although the details of rape law (especially given its variance from country to country within the global community that is the concern of this thesis) are not necessarily the same thing as the question of what is right, or - crucially and often distinctly different from what is right - what is socially understood to be permissible, it does provide a useful framework for a discussion about consent.

In her 2004 paper, “Negotiating Sex”, Michelle Anderson discusses three different models of sexual consent. This chapter will discuss the issue of consent through the lens of Anderson’s paper because her third model, which she calls the ‘Negotiation Model’, and for which she advocates, most closely resembles the attitude towards consent that can be found articulated (collectively) within fandom communities and the fanfiction texts that they produce. For the sake of simplicity of phrasing, this chapter will continue Anderson’s practice of discussing rape as if the victim is always female and the perpetrator male, but it is important to reiterate at this point that both men and women can be victims of rape, and

likewise both men and women can be the perpetrator. Similarly, Anderson's paper focuses specifically on *sexual penetration* without consent, but her models of consent are equally applicable to other forms of sexual activity and sexual assault.

The first model of consent, which Anderson refers to as the 'No Model', requires that the woman "verbally express her refusal" (1404) in order to withdraw her consent to sexual penetration. If the woman does not *say* 'no', under this model she is understood to have consented. The problem with the model, as Anderson points out, is that "just as the trauma of the situation can obliterate the power to resist physically, it can obliterate the ability to say 'no'" (1405). The second model is the 'Yes Model', which requires that a man "obtain affirmative permission from his partner before he penetrates her" (Anderson 1405). The woman must "express a 'yes' *of some kind*" (Anderson 1405, italics added), without which any act of penetration is then considered rape. The problem with this model is the slippery phrasing present in "of some kind". This model does not require a verbally stated "yes", but accepts that "a woman can express a 'yes' through her nonverbal behaviour" (Anderson 1405), such as her body language. The difficulty here is that men have consistently been shown to misinterpret women's body language in their favour, and are likely to interpret body language as a non-verbal 'yes' regardless of the woman's actual intentions (Anderson 1406).

Anderson argues that what is needed instead is a different understanding of the notion of consent. She notes that, in both these models, "consent (...) is permission to be acted upon in some way. By itself, it suggests a passive response to the actions of another" (1408). Instead of this passive understanding of consent, what is needed is active engagement from both partners. Anderson proposes a third model, the 'Negotiation Model', which would require that people engage in a conversation about their desires and boundaries, and come to an agreement, prior to engaging in sexual activity (1423). Additionally, as agreements reached through this kind of conversation may change over time, this model requires that

partners continually ‘check in’ with one another during sexual activity, to ensure that both are willing and happy to continue. In requiring negotiation¹⁴ prior to sexual activity, the ‘Negotiation Model’ requires a conversation between partners “that expresses a willingness to consider the other person’s inclination and humanity” (Anderson 1423). More importantly, it requires that both partners be actively engaged, and “assumes reciprocal responsibilities between partners and equal authority to direct the sexual interaction” (Anderson 1424).

Although Anderson discusses negotiation specifically in regards to sexual penetration, this requirement can, and should, be taken further, to include all forms of sexual activity. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, the significance of various sexual acts differs among individuals. Even acts that some may consider nonsexual, such as kissing, may have a greater significance for some people (such as those who identify as romantic asexuals) than for others. This has implications for consent, which makes the need for discussion and negotiation between partners even more crucial.

Beliefs about consent, as expressed in fandom as a collective (bearing in mind that there will always be outliers), tend to favour something like Anderson’s Negotiation Model, although individual stories and discussions may express versions of both the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ models as well. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, there is a general recognition within the fandom community of the importance of the clear articulation of desires and boundaries, and the importance of negotiation and discussion as a part of sexual exploration.

¹⁴ It is possible that the word *negotiate* is the wrong word to use in the context of sexual consent. Although one sense of *to negotiate* means to have a discussion with the aim of reaching an agreement, there is a connotation to the word that implies a sense of competition, a view of a negotiation as something that can be *won* by one party or another. A second sense of the word is perhaps more appropriate, in which *to negotiate* means to navigate or to find a way through a difficult route or situation. Navigation, a process requiring the constant consultation of maps and compasses and reference points, may be a more fitting metaphor for the kind of discussion between partners that Anderson advocates.

5.4 Issues of Consent in Fanfiction

This overall recognition of the importance of consent, and of communication between partners to establish consent prior to sexual activity, is expressed in fandom in a number of different ways: first, through literary texts in which negotiation and respect for one's partner's boundaries is modelled, as in the texts discussed in Chapters Two and Three; second, through literary texts that deal with rape and sexual assault and their aftermath (often called 'rape recovery' fics), in which the importance of consent and negotiation is explicitly discussed between characters; third in the paratexts - the author's notes, tags, and comment thread discussions - that frame the texts; and fourth, in metatextual discussions between fans about the significance and moral implications of these texts, and of how texts depicting rape and sexual assault are 'tagged'. It is important to note that these different areas of discussion (literary text, paratext, and metatext) are usually encountered by fans in conjunction with one another, each one informing the readers' understanding. This conjunction is facilitated by the functionality of the internet, which allows fans to link their discussions to texts and *vice versa*.

This section will focus on the question of 'tagging' fanfiction texts. Genre in fanfiction is often distinguished by how an individual fanfiction is labelled or tagged. Tags serve an organisational purpose within archives of texts, acting as 'filters' through which readers can find content and genres that appeal to them, as well as 'warnings' for content that readers might find disturbing and wish to avoid. By tagging their work, authors "offer readers the ability to affirmatively consent to read their stories and to expose themselves to the ideas and emotions the fan fiction may engender" (Busse 2017, 198). This, however, is not their only function. How an individual fanfiction text is tagged serves as an indicator to the reader not only of the content of the text but also of "the kind of emotional experience the story offers" (Wilson 2.5) and, to a certain extent, of the 'lens' through which it should be read.

This is similar to the system whereby books are categorised by genre in a library or bookstore. A reader uses these categories as a way to narrow down the search for a book; someone looking for a suspense-filled reading experience can go directly to the 'Thriller' or 'Horror' shelves to find what they are looking for. Additionally, the way a book is categorised lets the reader know how to approach the text; if the reader knows that they are reading a mystery story, for example, their approach to the text will include searching for clues to the solution of the mystery. Gerard Genette defines this paratextual space as one of "transaction [which] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2). Tags have a similar function, letting the reader know what to expect from the text in terms of genre and content, but also how to approach the text. A 'crackfic', for example, is not to be taken seriously and the reader should not expect narrative coherence from the text. If a story is tagged as having a 'non-linear narrative', the reader can expect that the text will be confusing at first, but that the confusion will be cleared up as gaps in the narrative are filled. A story tagged 'fluff' will contain little in terms of plot, but is intended to elicit pleasant emotions in the reader. The tag 'PWP' is expanded to mean either 'Porn Without Plot' or 'Plot? What Plot?', and indicates that the story will contain graphic descriptions of sexual activities that are intended to be sexually arousing to the reader.

There are a number of different tags used to label fanfiction texts that deal with issues of consent, in addition to more content-specific tags. These include 'rape', 'non-con' (short for 'non-consensual'), 'dub-con' (or 'dubious consent') and 'consent issues'. The definition of these tags, and the categorisation of the fanfiction texts to which they are attached, is a matter of heated debate in fandom, and there is a great deal of slippage between the terms. However, the use of the tags, and the existence of that debate, indicates that the fandom community is very much aware of the problematic nature of the texts and genres to which these tags are attached. What follows is an attempt to understand the broad usage of these

various terms within fandom, drawn from fandom discussions and extensive reading within the genre.

Within fandom there are two ways in which the contrast between the terms ‘rape’ and ‘non-con’ is used. The first makes use of them to distinguish between two different types of *content* in fanfiction texts, while the second uses them to distinguish between two different genres, or two different ways of *depicting* the same content. In the first usage, the tag ‘rape’ is used to indicate a text in which non-consensual sexual penetration takes place, while the tag ‘non-con’ is used to indicate a text in which activities other than sexual penetration, such as kissing, or oral sex, take place without the consent of one of the characters. The distinction here is about the content of the stories, but in both cases the lack of consent is clear. One advocate for this form of usage notes that she likes the term ‘noncon’ precisely because it can be applied not only to non-consensual sexual penetration, but to any form of non-consensual sexual activity, and as such it helps readers “to recognise standard romantic comedy tropes that are, in fact, noncon, like the non-consensual kissing you see in a lot of romcoms” (thingswithwings). In the second usage, the difference between these two terms denotes a difference in how rape and sexual assault are depicted; it is a literary or artistic distinction between genres, and indicates to the reader something about *how* the story should be read. Under this usage, the ‘rape’ tag indicates a story in which rape and sexual assault, and their aftermath, are depicted “with some attempt at psychological realism” (gryphonsegg). In contrast, the ‘non-con’ tag “is the increasingly widely acceptable label to simultaneously warn for and advertise a story that features rape as a kink” (gryphonsegg) and which is intended to be sexually arousing to the reader. This second distinction, between artistic *depictions* of rape, aligns more closely with common tagging practices observed in fandom communities, and particularly in the *Sherlock* fanfiction community. It is also the more useful distinction with regards to the way in which tags are used by readers as a means of finding or

avoiding particular texts; the way in which the content of texts is depicted is at least as important, if not more so, than the content itself. Even more importantly, the tags attached to a story guide a reader as to what to expect of the text; the more straightforward, “realistic” depiction of rape and its aftermath in ‘rape’ fics, as opposed to the more ambiguous, and consequently morally challenging, approach of ‘non-con’ fics that depict rape and sexual assault in ways intended to be sexually arousing to the reader. These latter texts are sometimes referred to as ‘rape kink’ fics.

The slippage of terms between ‘non-con’ and ‘dub-con’ (dubious consent) is even more pronounced and difficult to clarify. Some fans and fandoms use the two terms interchangeably. Even more so than the distinction between ‘rape’ and ‘non-con’, the distinction between ‘non-con’ and ‘dub-con’ is often an indicator of genre, of artistic choice, and of how the reader is intended to approach and enjoy the story. One fan writes that she uses ‘dub-con’ and ‘non-con’ to distinguish between “the pornographic romantic fantasy where the point is that everything turns out alright between the [two characters involved], and the brutal violation where the point of the story is (usually) H/C [hurt/comfort] and recovery” (liviapenn). This distinction is the same one made by gryphonsegg above, between ‘rape’ stories that offer an attempt at psychological realism, and ‘non-con’ stories that offer rape as a kink. The term ‘non-con’ is therefore sometimes used equivalently to both ‘rape’ and ‘dub-con’, depending on which it is being contrasted with. There is room, however, within the slippage of terms, for each of these three terms to be used separately, with distinct meanings.

Unlike ‘rape’ and ‘non-consensual’, the term ‘dubious consent’ is rarely, if ever, used outside of the fandom context. As such, it is the most clearly literary of the three terms, and it is used to indicate that consent in a particular situation is unclear or uncertain, either to the reader or to the characters involved, in contrast to stories in which consent is definitely absent (“Dub-con”). It is used to refer to a number of different scenarios, including:

- when a character involved in some form of sexual activity is uncertain about whether he or she wants to be participating in that activity, which is usually depicted through that character's internal thoughts and "a tangle of yes-no-maybe-Idon'tknow feelings" ("Dub-con")
- relationships or situations in which one character is unable to give meaningful consent, such as in cases where there is a distinct power imbalance, such as "student/teacher, prisoner/guard, patient/doctor, child/adult" ("Dub-con")
- stories told from one character's point of view in which he or she is uncertain whether the other character is consenting or not
- stories in which one or both characters are compromised by external forces, such as alcohol or drugs, or various biological imperatives (such as those experienced by characters in the Omegaverse)

In each of these scenarios, the question of whether everything "turns out all right" (liviapenn) between the characters involved, is a matter of choice on the part of the author. Not all dubious consent stories have the happy romantic ending that liviapenn describes above. Likewise, not all stories that depict situations in which there is a clear absence of consent offer an attempt at "psychological realism" (gryphonsegg) in either the characters' experience of the event or recovery from it.

Drawing from these discussions, it is possible to assign a distinct meaning to each of these three tags, or rather, to distinguish between three types of stories. First, the 'rape' tag can be used to indicate a story in which an act of rape or sexual assault is depicted with some attempt at psychological realism, by which is meant that the rape or assault is depicted as unambiguously bad, resulting in trauma in the victim and, importantly, the description of the rape or assault is *not* intended to be sexually arousing to the reader. Second, the 'non-con' tag can be used to indicate a story in which a rape or sexual assault is depicted in a way that *is* intended to be sexually arousing to the reader, and *in which the absence of consent is clear* to both the characters involved and the reader. Third, the 'dub-con' tag can be used to indicate a story in which a sexual encounter is depicted in a way that is intended to be sexually arousing

to the reader, but *in which consent is unclear*, such as in the scenarios described above. For the purposes of this chapter, these are the definitions that will be used.

5.5 The Moral Implications of Tagging

A significant portion of the debate about the definitions of tags focuses on the potential for a reader being emotionally harmed or ‘triggered’ by encountering material that reminds them of a trauma in their own lives. The use of tags warning for potentially sensitive material can mitigate this risk. Another source of concern is the fear that the use of tags like ‘non-con’ and ‘dub-con’, as opposed to tagging all fics that include issues of consent as ‘rape’, may help to reinforce rape culture. As thingswithwings argues, it is not good “to pretend that we can use terms that mean ‘non-consensual’ and ‘dubiously consensual’ as genre markers that are completely separate from the idea of consent” (thingswithwings), because “when situations that exist in real life and that would be called rape in real life are labelled ‘dubcon’ I think it does real harm to us all” (thingswithwings). Another fan argues that the terms ‘non-con’ and ‘dub-con’ are

far more insidious than out and out rape porn. At least when we say it is rape, then we can move on to the next step: saying that it’s wrong, just a fantasy etc. But avoiding the label perpetuates the rape myths that have such a damaging effect on victims and justice: did she enjoy it, she didn’t really say no, she was a tease, they’ve done it before. None of those things matter, and when a person labels their fic, they need to stop pretending they do (lunardreamed).

Many fans, myself included, feel that writers and readers of fanfiction, as members of a community that consciously and openly explores sexuality, have a responsibility to do all that we can to ensure that we are not perpetuating rape myths and rape culture in any form. One way to do this is to make sure that the words we use to label stories “align (...) with their

real-life equivalents” (toft). Another is to interrogate the implications, for ourselves as individuals and as a community, of reading and writing stories about rape.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss two different types of fanfiction texts that depict rape or sexual assault: first, texts that can be tagged as ‘rape’ according to the definitions outlined above, and which include explicit discussion of the importance of consent, and second, texts that can be tagged as ‘non-con’ or ‘dub-con’ according to the definitions outlined above, which are written for the purposes of sexual enjoyment on the part of both author and reader. It is important to note, as always, that these distinctions are not always clear, and that many fanfiction texts are a combination of these two types of text.

5.6 ‘Rape’ fic

This section will discuss selected fanfiction texts that could be tagged as ‘rape’ fic, according to the definitions outlined above: texts in which the depiction of rape or sexual assault is not intended to be sexually arousing to the reader, and which attempt to depict rape and its aftermath with psychological realism. This attempt, it should be noted, is not always successful; the realism is largely dependent on the writer’s skill and knowledge of human psychology in the face of trauma. What is important, however, is the acknowledgement, by the writer and the characters, that rape and sexual assault are traumatic events, and an attempt to depict that trauma and its aftermath in a realistic manner. Texts that focus on the physical, emotional, and psychological recovery from a rape or sexual assault are sometimes tagged as ‘rape recovery’ fics. ‘Rape recovery’ fanfiction is a subgenre of the ‘hurt/comfort’ genre of fanfiction. In ‘hurt/comfort’ stories, one character is hurt either physically (through injury, illness, assault, abuse, torture, etc.) or emotionally, and the other character offers comfort. Often the second character is intimately involved in helping the first character to recover from the hurt. The heightened intimacy of such situations allows for a close exploration of the

characters and their relationship, and is often used as a literary device for bringing the two characters together romantically (“Hurt/Comfort”).

In ‘rape’ or ‘rape recovery’ texts, one character is raped or sexually assaulted, and the other character helps them through the aftermath. In some stories this means the immediate aftermath, and the second character is intimately involved in helping the first through, for example, reporting the incident to the police, going to the hospital, cleaning up afterwards, and so on. In other stories, the focus is more on the emotional and psychological aftermath, and the second character helps the first to deal with more long term ramifications of the rape or assault, such as guilt, or shame, or a fear of sexual intimacy. Importantly, as part of the ‘comfort’ aspect of these texts, the second character usually articulates the importance of consent in any sexual encounter. In *Sherlock* ‘rape’ or ‘rape recovery’ fanfiction, it is often Sherlock Holmes who is raped or assaulted, and John Watson who offers comfort. This continues the trend discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, in which John serves as a guide for Sherlock when it comes to social norms and emotional reactions, of other people but sometimes also Sherlock’s own. In *Sherlock* ‘rape recovery’ stories, Sherlock’s lack of social or normative understanding is sometimes extended to include a lack of understanding of consent. This gives the author the opportunity to articulate, through John, an explicit theory of consent. Additionally, in many of these texts, John and Sherlock are involved, or in the process of becoming involved, in a romantic and sexual relationship. In such stories, sexual encounters between John and Sherlock are often presented in direct contrast to the instance of rape or sexual assault depicted in the text, and used by the author as an illustration of sexual consent.

In *Perception* by holyfant, for example, Sherlock is raped by the criminal that he and John are chasing. The story begins just after the rape, when the criminal has been arrested. John does not yet know what has happened, but notices that Sherlock is unsettled by

something. Sherlock, concussed and not fully understanding what has happened, expresses himself clumsily, and gives John the impression that he was a willing participant:

“What happened?” [John] says, and the question is as straight-forward as it is impossible to answer.

And Sherlock still doesn't know a lot about what he's supposed to do about John, but so far all of it has been fine, just like John had promised. It's always fine, maybe after some shouting but that's okay, that he on occasion forgets that John is with him on cases, or that he on others *can't* forget that John is around and hovers too close to him as John is trying to have a cup of tea or watch a stupid soap opera and very emphatically doesn't need to be dissected by Sherlock's eyes. It's fine that he always steals the covers on the nights they sleep together. It's fine that Sherlock doesn't always know when he's been using his voice and when he hasn't and scolds John for forgetting something that he, in hindsight, might in fact not have said out loud. It's fine that Sherlock still sometimes doesn't know what to do with John's morning erections, and can't always help fleeing from it, because he does always return, and John never really expects anything, but it's fine for Sherlock, too, and when he does curl his fingers around the still surprising heat of John's cock in the morning everything is all right, and more; disorienting, surprising, thrilling.

Not saying it is not an option, it seems, pushing at the roof of his mouth as it is. So, hoping against hope, against the nauseating feeling of water churning in his gut, that this will be fine, like all of the things that he never expected to be fine but that apparently are, he says: “I had sexual intercourse with Davis.”

For a long, stretching second bursting with fear and hope he thinks it might actually be fine. John's hands remain soft and firm at the same time on his neck. His mouth stays in the same twitch of concern.

“Sexual intercourse,” John then says, tonelessly, and Sherlock thinks he might be about to mock Sherlock for his clinicalness, which is something John likes to do, especially *during* sexual intercourse, when he teaches Sherlock terms that somehow only work in that bubble, in that heat, with John's fingers grasping at him with intent.

He starts to open his mouth to retort something to the effect of *okay, he fucked me, whatever you want to call it* but then all of John is suddenly removed from him. John takes his fingers and his warmth away, backing against the door of the bathroom.

Only his eyes are still tangible, and they are clouding over with such a sheen of disappointment and hurt that even Sherlock has no trouble identifying it.

“You’re serious,” John says, and sounds as though that was maybe his final lifeline, and then something sinks over his face of such darkness, such depth that Sherlock is off the edge of the bath in a reflex, starting toward him, but John puts up his palms, and he looks like steel. He looks like iron. FE. John. Repelling water. Repelling Sherlock. “How did that – why did it - ” John is saying, but they’re not questions, and one hand is twisting the door handle behind him, to break the bubble around them.

“John, I didn’t-” Sherlock begins to say, but then he doesn’t know what it is that he didn’t do, because he did, didn’t he? He allowed the scrape of teeth and nails, didn’t he? He welcomed the tug at his trousers until there was a mouth on his cock, didn’t he? He can’t say why, which is infuriating, and it will have to be examined later, but first John needs to come back and Sherlock needs to figure out what it is he didn’t do, because if there isn’t anything, he doesn’t know what he’ll do, and that’s unacceptable.

“Save it,” John says.

(hollyfant)

In this passage the author establishes several key details about both Sherlock and John. Sherlock struggles to understand the social norms surrounding romantic relationships, but has taken the leap into one regardless, relying on John’s promise that it will all be “fine”. The repetition of “it’s all fine” occurs in many *Sherlock* fanfictions, echoing the conversation between John and Sherlock in the first episode of the BBC’s *Sherlock*:

John: You don’t have a girlfriend, then?

Sherlock: Girlfriend, no. Not really my area.

John: Oh, right. Do you have a boyfriend? Which is fine, by the way.

Sherlock: I know it’s fine.

John: So you’ve got a boyfriend.

Sherlock: No.

John: Right, okay. You’re unattached, like me. Fine. Good.

Sherlock: John, um, I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work, and while I'm flattered by your interest I'm really not looking for ...

John: No. I'm not asking ... no. I'm just saying ... it's *all* fine.

(Sherlock, "Study")

In *Perception*, the list of Sherlock's social missteps – forgetting that John is with him on cases, assuming that John is privy to conversations held only in his head, and so on – is tempered by the constant repetition that, in John's eyes, "it's fine", if only "maybe after some shouting" (hollyfant). This echoes the relationship between the two men in the BBC series, in which John frequently shouts at Sherlock for various reasons, but generally calms down quickly, accepting Sherlock and his eccentricities with a remarkable degree of equanimity. *Perception* extends this acceptance of Sherlock into a romantic and sexual relationship. This version of Sherlock is sexually inexperienced, and "still sometimes doesn't know what to do with John's morning erections, and can't help fleeing from it" (hollyfant). Importantly for the overall theme of this text, however, this is also fine, because "John never really expects anything" (hollyfant) of Sherlock when it comes to sex. This single line in the description of their relationship gives a clear picture of John's ethic when it comes to consent. He does not expect anything of Sherlock that Sherlock is not ready to give. This passage also establishes - through the brief mention of John teaching Sherlock less clinical sexual terms - that as the more sexually experienced partner John serves as a guide for Sherlock in this area, as he does in other areas of social interaction in the BBC series and in many *Sherlock* fanfiction texts. This role becomes central to the remainder of this text, once John has learned the truth about the rape and realises that Sherlock does not fully understand that he was the victim, and is blaming himself:

"But I didn't stop it," Sherlock says, and his face is flushed in a strange way.

"You were half-unconscious," John says through gritted teeth, hoping Sherlock knows this anger is not directed at him.

Sherlock considers. "But I didn't stop it as soon as I came back to," he says, and sounds so wondering at all of it that John can't help but wrap him back into the hug that they'd half slipped out of to talk, sprawled together on the couch. "And I ... responded," he says, and even from the close angle of his face pressed close to John's, John can make out the wince.

"Your body really can do things you don't want it to," John says. Then, taking a breath, he says:

"Did you want him to touch you?"

Sherlock is a strange stretch of silence against him for a moment.

"No," he says then, quietly.

"Well then," John says, feeling a bit nauseous, "you didn't. And you never consented. Do you realise that? Not stopping something because you're not sure what's happening is not a yes, Sherlock."

(hollyfant)

Sherlock is expressing a view of rape here that is akin to the 'No Model' that Anderson describes; the view that because he did not try to stop what was happening, by saying 'no' or fighting, what happened to him was not rape. John corrects his thinking, stating clearly that Sherlock did not consent; that "not stopping something because you're not sure what's happening is not a yes" (hollyfant). The change in focaliser emphasises the different perspectives, by contrasting Sherlock's confusion about the rape and the question of what constitutes consent with John's very definite understanding. By alternating between these two perspectives the author both illustrates the confusion and guilt that a rape victim may feel, and makes a very clear statement, through John, that there is no cause for the victim to feel guilt, because they did not give their consent. Although the story ends with Sherlock not fully convinced, this clear statement about consent remains.

Similarly, in *No Means No* by lindor1306, Sherlock is raped during an end of year party at Scotland Yard. As in *Perception*, Sherlock fails to understand that what has happened to him is rape, and in the ensuing discovery John and Inspector Lestrade must explain to him

that it was, by walking him through recounting the incident and helping him to understand that he was not at fault:

“Sherlock...” Lestrade said, his face filled with concern. “Are you saying he raped you?”

“No,” Sherlock said, irritated. “I told you, I agreed in the end. It was unpleasant, and I only agreed to get it over and done with, since it was clearly going to happen whether I agreed to it or not, but he didn’t really hurt me or hold me down.”
(...)

“So as far as you’re concerned it’s the use of force that makes it rape?”
Lestrade asked.

Sherlock nodded, turning to John for support and feeling his mouth go dry when all he found was the doctor shaking his head sadly.

“You’re wrong,” Lestrade said. “It’s the use of the word ‘no’ that makes it rape.”
(...)

“I thought I was doing it wrong,” Sherlock whispered, grabbing at John’s jumper and resting his face against the shorter man’s stomach. “I thought I just wasn’t doing it right and that’s why he wouldn’t stop.”

“Doing what?” John asked, sinking to his knees and pulling Sherlock’s trembling form into a tight embrace. “What did you think you were doing wrong?”

Sherlock hiccupped as a sob broke through his chest. “Saying no.”

“Sherlock,” Lestrade said, crouching down next to the two other men. “There is no right or wrong way to say that. No means no.”

(lindor1306)

The characterisation of Sherlock in this text is not entirely convincing when compared to his characterisation in the BBC series, being more emotional and apparently lacking in self-defence skills, and the story lacks the more artistically nuanced approach to the subject found in *Perception*. However, it is clear from the comments on the text that the *situation* in which Sherlock finds himself is realistic, and similar to the experiences of several readers. One reader comments:

I read rape recovery fanfic to help cope with my own issues stemming from a history of sexual abuse. This is some Roberta Flack-esque killing me softly with my song, to be honest. Thank you for writing a story so engaging and so upfront and correct about rape (RhineGold).

Another reader comments simply:

Can't believe I'm going to write this: but yeah, this is how it felt. Thanks for sharing this fic (greyamber).

These comments indicate that this kind of text serves two purposes. First, they allow the author to articulate a theory of consent, and in doing so to counter misconceptions about what does and does not constitute meaningful consent, as John does for Sherlock in both texts discussed above. In doing so, the authors contribute to the discussions about consent that are ongoing in fandom, and demonstrate, through the differing perspectives of the characters, the complexity of the question. Second, these texts appear to serve as a kind of catharsis for many readers (and writers as well). As RhineGold comments above, many fans read stories about characters recovering from rape and sexual assault because it assists them in their own process of recovering from similar traumas. Reading such a story may also lead to a reader acknowledging for the first time, as is heavily implied by greyamber's comment ("Can't believe I'm going to write this"), that they have had a similar experience. In this way, reading such stories and engaging with others who read and write them can serve as a kind of therapy for victims of rape and sexual assault. Susan Brison argues that group therapy is important for victims because "rape survivors, who typically have trouble getting angry at their assailants, find that in group therapy they are able to get angry on their own behalf by first getting angry on behalf of others" (63). While engaging with fictional stories about rape and rape recovery may not be effective on the same scale as the kind of therapy Brison describes, it could still be beneficial.

Both *Perception* and *No Means No* are set in the immediate aftermath of a rape. Other stories, such as KeelieThompson's *Consent*, depict characters dealing with the more long term effects of rape and sexual assault, and place a strong emphasis on the importance of negotiation between partners prior to sexual activity. In *Consent*, John and Sherlock attempt to navigate the beginning of a romantic and sexual relationship. This attempt is complicated by Sherlock's experience of sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle when he was a teenager. Although the relationship is long past, Sherlock struggles with a fear of sexual intimacy and a confused understanding of consent:

"Would you require sex?"

John nearly dropped the tea. "I..." He put the cups down and turned to Sherlock who looked as if he hadn't moved throughout the tea making process. "I enjoy sex," he finished, not really sure what Sherlock was asking. "Do you not?"

"I have orgasmed with a partner."

John turned back to the tea and picked them up, feeling more prepared this time and having the feeling that he needed something in his hands for this conversation. "That was not what I asked," he said firmly, walking over to Sherlock and offering the mug.

Sherlock accepted it, eyes following John's movements carefully, seemingly waiting for further clarification.

Sitting. Sitting would help. "Do you... feel sexual urges, desires?" he asked, trying to keep his tone casual and his phrasing accurate.

"Yes."

Something lodged at the back of John's throat. "Do you ... Do you laugh during sex?"

"Laugh?" Sherlock sounded perplexed by the idea.

John rested an elbow on the arm of the chair, rubbing at his eyes with his fingers and thumb.

"Ask," Sherlock ordered in a very dangerous voice.

"Have you had consensual sex?" John asked, not moving.

"Define consensual."

John barely resisted the urge to let out a frustrated snarl, his thoughts scrambling in a million different directions at the possibilities that were being raised. There were selfish murmurs in his head – ones that balked at the idea that he had pounced on a rape victim, a traitorous one that felt slightly disappointed by how the conversation was going. There was a Sherlock-esque voice berating him for not seeing it earlier as his mind scanned through their time together, throwing up anomalies that he should have spotted.

(KeelieThompson1)

Throughout the rest of the story, as Sherlock reveals more details about his previous sexual relationships, John is careful to insist on negotiation prior to any sexual encounter between them, worried that Sherlock will push himself faster than is wise:

“What...” Sherlock seemed to be startled at the idea. “What if I wanted to?”

“Then that would be ...” what? Great, good? Any of those words would imply that the opposite would be bad. “Something we would have to discuss.”

“Such as?”

“I ... have no idea,” John confessed. “We have questions for each other I suppose...”

“Yes.” Sherlock stood. “I assume you will need to know about my dislikes as well?”

Want to know? God, no. Need to know? Yes.

“You’re probably jumping ahead,” John said, keeping a careful eye on Sherlock.

“I am not fragile,” Sherlock hissed.

“Go on then,” John gestured with a hand.

Sherlock faltered.

“How tempted are you to say everything?” John asked, standing up wearily. “This isn’t a race, Sherlock. It’s not a competition. No winning or losing.” He walked to the door. “Think about what you want, whether you really want it and whether it’s worth it because at the moment I’m not sure this isn’t anything more than you trying to prove to yourself that you’re not weak.”

Then John winced at the words and turned, “And for the record, you’re not. Weak. I’ve seen you at scenes that must remind you of what happened to you and you

don't even flinch. You've let me and others into your life despite the mind fuck your uncle must have done on your head all those years ago. You don't need to prove anything."

Sherlock looked away and John resigned himself to yet another day of staring.
(KeelieThompson1)

John's care to avoid even the *implication* that Sherlock choosing not to have sex with him would be a bad thing demonstrates how important consent is to him. He also articulates that the responsibility for ensuring ongoing consent is shared by both partners:

"Promise?" John asked finally, "Promise me you'll stop or ask me to slow down if you need to."

"Yes, fine," Sherlock said, a little too quickly for John's liking.

"I mean it," John said firmly, "I'm trusting you here."

Sherlock looked a little intrigued at the idea. "Trusting me?"

"To say no. To not make this into something... I can only trust what you tell me Sherlock. I'm not you. I can't see the inner working of your mind. I need you to be honest otherwise we'll tear each other to shreds with second guessing each other and feeling pressure."

(KeelieThompson1)

Here again, the author (through John) expresses something very like Anderson's Negotiation Model, which requires that partners continually 'check in' with one another during sex to ensure that consent is ongoing.

As with the comments on *No Means No*, the comments on *Consent* indicate that for many readers the text provides a kind of catharsis; a means of coping with and reflecting on similar experiences in their own lives:

I have been in a relationship like the one depicted. I was very very young, very lonely, and I had no Mycroft to get me out and get my revenge. I had to come to understand my abuse all by myself and then cut that monster out of my life step by painful step. It took a year to get him out of my life, and a year after that, when he called me out of

the blue, I felt such deep panic that I hardly had the breath to scream at him. I changed my phone number and email address within the hour.

All this is just to say that now I am 30, and have been without him for 10 years, and reading your fic is making me think about how my recovery from that toxic relationship has gone, is going ... and this is such a safe, wonderful venue to touch on these incredibly sensitive topics. So thank you for writing in this fandom, and for tackling sensitive, emotionally charged topics, and most of all for a good story (Suzu).

Comments by other readers do not indicate such a close similarity between Sherlock's experience of sexual abuse and their own, but focus rather on the similarities in their experiences of acknowledging and recovering from sexual abuse:

You've perfectly captured how wrenching and painful it is to speak out loud the traumas that get bottled up and covered over (a_big_apple).

Readers also found a hopeful message in the text that despite the difficulties of the recovery process, "a person who has suffered sexual abuse can still be a healthily sexual person" (Pol). This supports the view that engaging with narratives of rape and sexual abuse, and of the recovery process, can be of value to a survivor of a similar experience.

5.7 'Non-con' fic

This section will examine a fanfiction text that could be tagged as 'Non-con' according to the definitions outlined above; a text in which a rape or sexual assault is depicted in a way that is intended to be sexually arousing to the reader, and *in which the absence of consent is clear* to both the characters involved and the reader. The text is a two part story entitled *A Thorough Examination / In Depth* by emungere. This fanfiction was selected for three reasons; first, because the setting includes no science fiction elements to complicate the question of consent (such as exist in Omegaverse texts); second, because the depiction of the sexual assault is clearly intended to be sexually arousing to the reader and the wrongness of the situation is

deliberately recognised for the purposes of enhancing that sexual arousal; and third, because the story plays with the idea of John Watson as a social and moral guide to Sherlock Holmes, examining what might happen if John were not such a reliable ‘moral compass’ for Sherlock.

The common *Sherlock* fanfiction trope in which John acts as social guide and moral compass for Sherlock has its origins in a small moment in the first episode of the BBC series. Sherlock, having failed to understand that a woman might still be upset about a stillbirth even many years after it happened, makes a comment to that effect and, registering the disapproval of others in the room, turns to John and asks, “Not good?” John replies simply, “Bit not good, yeah” (Sherlock, “Study”). This scene, during which Sherlock declares irritably, “I’m not a psychopath, I’m a high-functioning sociopath,” (Sherlock, “Study”), establishes John as a voice of reason by contrast. Throughout the series, several characters express explicit concern about Sherlock’s obsession with crime, notably the police officer who predicts, again in the opening episode, that “one day [the police will] be standing around a body and Sherlock Holmes will be the one that put it there” (Sherlock, “Study”). Sherlock’s potential to become a criminal is emphasised through his similarity to Irene Adler and Jim Moriarty (McLaughlin 16-17; Marinaro and Thomas 74-76) and “seems at times to dangerously dissolve the already blurred boundaries between villainy and anti-heroism” (Marinaro and Thomas 75). It is his friendship with John Watson that prevents Sherlock from crossing the line into criminality (McLaughlin 17-18; Marinaro and Thomas 76) by offering “humanising companionship, often reminding Sherlock of the consequences of his detective work and providing a model for stable sociability in society” (McLaughlin 18).

In her essay, “The Watson Effect: Civilising the Sociopath”, April Toadvine offers a different interpretation of the character of John Watson in the BBC series. She argues that the contrast between Sherlock and John implied by the scenes discussed above is misleading, and that far from being the voice of reason, John is in fact, “a trained killer transported to London

and uncomfortable in his new environment” (60) and, importantly, that “his morality becomes situational and inconsistent as the character is placed in more difficult situations” (59). As an example, she points to a scene later in the same episode in which John, having killed a man, returns calmly to the scene of the crime to wait for Sherlock, displaying no remorse for his actions whatsoever. Sherlock, having confirmed that John is the killer and so solved the puzzle, simply suggests that they go for dinner (Sherlock, “Study”). Toadvine argues that their similar reactions to the death illustrate that John “is depicted as a sociopath on par with the character of Sherlock Holmes” (49). As such, this version of John Watson cannot be held up as an uncomplicated moral example, and any moral guidance that he offers Sherlock must necessarily be suspect.

In *A Thorough Examination / In Depth*, emungere explores this possibility, that John Watson may not be the morally upright man that he appears to be. The story is set early in the BBC series, five months after John and Sherlock meet for the first time, and on the surface their relationship is exactly what it appears to be in the television series; that of close friends who share a taste for the excitement and adrenalin that solving crimes gives them. As is implied in the television series, and stated so often in *Sherlock* fanfiction, the Sherlock of this text is completely uninterested in and generally unaware of sexual dynamics. He has also come to rely on John as a guide in social situations, aware of his own limitations in that arena. For his part, John is fascinated by Sherlock and drawn to him, and this fascination manifests itself in a sexual obsession with Sherlock. The common representation of John Watson in *Sherlock* fanfiction is as a fundamentally good man who takes steps to ensure his partner’s full consent before engaging in sexual activities, as illustrated in the texts discussed in the previous section. In this text, however, John Watson is not that good man. He plans and executes a gradual, skilled manipulation of Sherlock – aided by Sherlock’s lack of social and

sexual awareness and his trust in John – that culminates in a rape, involving penetration with various foreign objects (a speculum and a urethral sound).

The first half of the story is told from Sherlock's point of view, detailing his observations of John's actions and his attempts to understand John's motivations. It becomes clear early on that Sherlock's reliance on John's judgement when it comes to social and moral matters is what places him in danger to begin with. While Sherlock is capable of recognising when John acts in a way that is inconsistent with his surface moral character, his trust in John and lack of trust in his own instincts means that, while he is confused by these instances, he is more likely to assume that he has misunderstood the situation rather than that John has acted inappropriately. This is demonstrated early in the story by an encounter in a supermarket in which John warns off a woman who is flirting with Sherlock:

“That was ... not very nice,” Sherlock had said, uncertain, because John was always nice, and Sherlock was a terrible judge of nice, and perhaps he had misunderstood (emungere).

This reliance means that, while Sherlock recognises that there is something more going on beneath the surface of John's manipulations, his basic trust in John's goodness prevents him from understanding the danger that he is in.

Sherlock's trust extends to John's medical expertise, which John uses as a means of manipulation. After a series of increasingly invasive medical 'check-ups', John drugs Sherlock, who wakes to find himself strapped to an examination table. Even at this point, however, his overwhelming feeling is one of confusion, because he cannot reconcile the situation with his understanding of John as a good man:

Sherlock nodded, cautious, certain this was not a good situation at all, and yet everything in John's stance and expression said this was ... fine. Normal. John was Sherlock's touchstone for normality, for what was fine and what was not, for right and wrong (emungere).

Sherlock's main concern throughout the story is not so much what John is doing to him, but rather figuring out what it is that he has missed about John's character. Sherlock is driven by the need to understand, and this situation is no different. He wants to understand John. He also wants to understand his own reactions to John's manipulations, which he is aware are not as straightforward as they might be. While he was uncomfortable with John's unprofessional behaviour in their first few encounters, it is his own reaction to the penultimate encounter that makes him stop and consider things more carefully. The final 'check-up' before John acts is:

uneventful but for the way John was perfectly, carefully professional in every respect, but for the way John kept his hands strictly to himself, but for the way Sherlock felt afterwards, which was *not relieved at all* (emungere, italics in original).

While this sense of confusion is a direct result of John's manipulations, which he uses to further undermine Sherlock's confidence in himself, it also stems from Sherlock's own fascination with John. He begins to test John, attempting to make him react, so that he can understand what is going on:

Perhaps he hadn't missed anything. There was always something about John that made Sherlock keep looking, that kept him from dismissing John as a solved riddle. Most people were so easy to figure out. They had great, huge, obvious buttons and if you poked them, they behaved in expected ways. Sherlock had begun to think John simply didn't have those buttons, but maybe they were only better hidden. Maybe this was an ideal position from which to discover them (emungere).

The scene plays out, and Sherlock keeps reminding himself not to "theorize ahead of data" (emungere), as he tries to understand both John and his own reactions to the situation. John remains an enigma, until afterwards, when things stop going according to his plan:

When Sherlock woke, the blindfold was gone. He opened his eyes and scanned the room. Crucial changed details: John standing across the room with handcuffs fastened around one wrist, John's gun and the scalpel on the otherwise empty instrument tray.

John saw he was awake, took the other half of the handcuffs, and clicked it closed over the radiator.

Sherlock picked up the gun, as he was clearly meant to. He checked the clip and found it fully loaded. He chambered one bullet.

John sat down on the floor and watched him solemnly.

“You’ve chosen quite a complicated and potentially painful way to kill yourself,” Sherlock said.

(emungere)

This moment is the first time that Sherlock, and the reader, has some genuine insight into John’s character. Sherlock goes on to deduce that John is uncomfortable with his desires, and feels guilty for continuing to have those desires despite his rational judgement that they are wrong. Although there is no explicit discussion of his reasons, the implication is that he views all of his more unconventional sexual desires – the medical kinks, the dominant urges – and not only the rape fantasy as wrong. John is perfectly aware that to act on the rape fantasy would be morally wrong, but has apparently not considered that his other desires are not in the same category. It is only Sherlock’s professed sociopathic nature that has given him the excuse he needs to act on his desires, because he believes that Sherlock will have no difficulty with killing him in retaliation. Having chosen Sherlock as his victim, John has (he believes) ensured that he will not survive the night. When Sherlock asks “why are you doing this?” he replies, “Conservation of energy (...) two birds with one stone” (emungere).

Sherlock, however, does not follow through as John expects him to. His reaction to the rape is atypical throughout, being more one of confusion than fear or anger:

“You can’t just forgive something like this,” John said.

“I can do what I like. And anyhow I’m not. Forgiveness implies anger. I’m not angry. I’m tired. I suppose I might be angry later. Right now I want to go home.”

(emungere).

Sherlock refuses to kill John, but he does not do it out of mercy or forgiveness. He does it because he is confused by John's actions, and he wants to understand why John did what he did, and how Sherlock had failed to observe these aspects of his friend, how he had failed to see the sociopathic tendencies beneath the surface. In the immediate aftermath, Sherlock makes himself a cup of tea, and his thoughts about the mug he finds in John's office show that he has a somewhat skewed perspective on the acceptable boundaries of friendship:

The mug was one from home, one Sherlock had nicked from Scotland Yard three months before he'd met John. (...) John hadn't asked if he could have it for work; he'd just taken it. Sherlock had liked that. He'd understood that was a thing friends did: took without asking, gave without begrudging.

He'd like to believe this was a similar situation, but John was too clearly ashamed. The gun, *the scalpel*, said this was something for which he felt he ought to suffer.

(emungere, italics in original)

Sherlock would like to put the rape into the same category as the mug; something that John took from his friend, without asking, because he needed it; and by implication, something that Sherlock was willing to give him. John's obvious guilt stops him from doing that because it does not fit into the established pattern. In this sense, John is still serving as a moral guide for Sherlock, not through his actions but through his guilt about failing to act the way that he believes he should. This situation makes it clear that it is actually Sherlock who has the clearer understanding of right and wrong, even if John is still the standard against which Sherlock measures them:

John was silent while he recovered and levered himself upright again, while he found tea bags and milk and made tea with four spoons of sugar in.

"None for me?" John said.

"People who rape sociopaths should not expect tea for their trouble," Sherlock said, absently. He caught the flinch it sent flaring across John's face. "Oh, sorry. Was I not supposed to use that word? Maybe you'd prefer lover."

“No.” It was a denial of the whole situation. John closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“Do you suppose I don’t know what it’s like to want something and just take it, because I can? I do it all the time, John. *You tell me off for it.*”

(emungere, italics added).

In a further reversal of their expected roles (as they are established in the BBC series and in much of its fanfiction), despite John’s obvious guilt about his desires and actions, it is Sherlock who pinpoints John’s real transgression, when he says:

“You could have asked. I might even have said yes. But I don’t suppose you wanted that. Negotiations and safewords and all that tedious business. Would that take all the *fun* out of it?”

(emungere, italics in original)

Sherlock is able to separate, in a way that John has been unable to, John’s having unconventional sexual desires, which is not a moral transgression, from his acting on them without asking for consent, which is.

The second part of the story, which is told from John’s point of view, shows the two men working through the aftermath of the assault. From John’s perspective, Sherlock refusing to kill him is not a mercy at all. As Sherlock points out later, John believes that he deserves to die, even if he doesn’t necessarily want to. Sherlock not only refuses to kill John, but forbids him to kill himself, and John’s guilt ensures that he obeys. A month later, they are back to “a sort of terrifying normality that made John physically flinch every time he thought about it straight on” (emungere). Then Sherlock starts testing John again, reminding him of the rape at strategic moments in an attempt to understand him. John believes at first that this is a punishment, fully expecting

the other shoe to drop, to wake up tied down with a knife at his throat, or worse, to see the sort of hurt and betrayal that he knew ought to be in Sherlock’s eyes every time he

looked at him. But Sherlock looked at him as he always had, with detached possession and perhaps a degree of fondness (emungere).

John does not expect forgiveness because he does not think that he deserves it. He is just waiting for Sherlock to come to the same conclusion and follow through with some form of retribution. However, Sherlock's own sociopathic tendencies and his ability to set emotion aside in favour of rationality make him capable of an odd kind of grace; an ability to forgive something that should possibly not be forgiven.

Sherlock eventually puts the pieces together and, continuing the reversal of their expected roles, comes to a clearer understanding of John's motivations than John himself is in possession of. He realises that John loves him, and that in his own – admittedly misguided – way, John was trying to be kind even as he gave in to the worst of himself:

“You never planned to get me off with your hand, did you? You never planned to touch me sexually at all without the intervention of some sort of equipment.”

“How did you...”

Sherlock pointed at him. “*You* are not right in the head, which is why it took me so long to get this bit.”

John blinked at him. “So sorry to inconvenience you with my twisted psyche.”

“It's all right, I got it eventually. You knew I was a virgin. You wanted me every way you could have me. And yet you left out just about all the standard fixtures of sexual relations, due to some misplaced kindness that made you think it would be easier on me, if or when I decided to have it off with someone else. Correct?” He said ‘kindness’ as if it were a dirty word.

John nodded.

(emungere)

Having confirmed his deduction, Sherlock moves on to the next part of his own plan, climbing into bed with John and demanding that they have sex. John protests, but only because he thinks he should, and Sherlock brushes that aside, something he feels perfectly entitled to do given John's previous actions:

“We are going to fuck,” Sherlock said. “Do you really think you have any right to argue with me on this?”

“I think you should have your head examined!”

“Stop being so pedestrian. We’re both quite obviously cracked, but I believe we’re cracked in complementary ways. Also I’ve got handcuffs and you haven’t got a choice.”

He produced them from ... somewhere. Down the back of his pyjama bottoms, possibly. They looked like the real thing.

“Did you nick those off Lestrade?”

“Donovan, actually.”

They shared a brief, utterly surreal grin. John’s faded quickly.

“You won’t need them,” he said.

“I thought not.”

(...)

John was fairly sure that some of that had been acting on Sherlock’s part. It didn’t matter. It still worked for him. If Sherlock was willing to do that just to keep him ... Well, Sherlock was obviously a sodding madman, but that wasn’t news. Sherlock could have him, if that was what he wanted, all of him, forever. Which wasn’t a sane thought for a love struck teenager, let alone a grown man nearing forty. But there it was.

(emungere)

With this final paragraph, the author ends the story in much the same way as a more conventional romance, with an initial misunderstanding resolved and leading to mutual declarations of love. For the reader, there is a sense of satisfaction at this resolution, a relief that they have managed to come together despite the obstacles in their way. Given the actual nature of those obstacles, however – the rape of one partner by the other – any satisfaction that the reader feels at the conclusion of the story is complicated by moral concerns. Unlike in the texts discussed in the previous section, which contain a clear message about the importance of consent and the traumatic effects of rape, this text is far more ambiguous. John’s actions are presented as being the result of his love for Sherlock, and while Sherlock is

aware that what John did was wrong, he simply decides that he *does not care*, thereby making the romantic ending possible. More importantly, the description of the rape itself is clearly intended to be sexually arousing to the reader, and as part of accomplishing that goal the author repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the non-consensual nature of the act. In other words, the story is intended to be sexually arousing not in spite of, but *because of*, the fact that it depicts a rape. This presents the reader with a moral dilemma.

This story is, whatever else it may be, about sex. It has an element of pornography to it, in its detailed, graphic descriptions of sexual activities. So much of fanfiction is an exploration of sexuality that fans are generally well accustomed to explicit sexual description, and not ashamed of feeling sexual arousal while reading it. If the activities described here were taking place as part of a consensual sexual relationship, many fans would read this story with unabashed enjoyment. Fans as a group tend to be open minded about sex, so even if the story is, as one reader comments, "not a list of kinks I'd have initially been into" (cyclogenesis), most fans are willing to explore and enjoy new things. This story, however, does not allow for uncomplicated enjoyment, sexual or otherwise. It fulfils MacKinnon and Dworkin's definition of harmful pornography, because it depicts the victim of a sexual assault experiencing sexual pleasure during the assault. The sexual act is non-consensual, which means that a reader who experiences arousal while reading a description of it is placed in the difficult position of being aware that this arousal is morally problematic. The majority of readers who commented on this text appear to share an ambivalent response to it. The most common words used to describe both the story, and the readers' reactions to it, are 'hot' and 'disturbing'. Another reader comments:

I don't know what's more disturbing: this fic, or the fact that I WASN'T disturbed by this fic cause this is the kind of stuff I usually get off on (eklektikavrgjoe).

Other readers have similar reactions: “I’m very conflicted, squicked and aroused at the same time. More than anything else, I am disturbed by my reaction” (msdistress); “It sort of worries me that in the end I found this romantic” (themuchtoomerrymaiden); “I enjoy dark!John more than I think I should” (prinzessinEilis); “This is horrifying yet amazing” (be_a_rebel); “I feel bad about being so excited in the face of such a twisted love story” (hobbylobby). It is common for fans to describe their responses to stories in terms of the physical reactions that the story elicits. Fanfiction is not the only literature that has this effect, but fans as a group seem far more comfortable with acknowledging their physical reactions than most. Fans seem particularly attuned to the way in which emotional reactions are connected to physical ones, or how the intellectual understanding of a person or situation can have a physical impact on the body. Several comments in the thread reference physical responses. One reader comments; “I think I’m experiencing tachycardia, but I’m too scared to consult a doctor now” (MirithGriffin). Another reader had a similar reaction:

Look, this was triggering for me but it was all too interesting to STOP, so I ended up teary, hyperventilating a little, pretty turned on and pretty heartbroken all at once, and now I’m meant to sleep but I’m shaking violently.

This was amazing. The best interpretation behind those kind of actions in otherwise kind people, a great story and a great look at the two characters, especially Sherlock’s self-diagnosed sociopathic tendencies, and just, I love it. But I still need to go be sick now. But it was gorgeous (AdderTwist).

Despite their awareness that this story presents them with a moral conflict, fans seem to enjoy the challenge. One reader comments that “this was gorgeously disturbing” (raindrops), while another states, “I loved every moment reading this in an almost sinfully guilty way” (tomorrowtoday). The sense of conflict expressed in these responses indicates that readers feel that there is something wrong in their enjoyment of this story and others like it.

The reason for this sense of guilt remains unclear. Comments are usually written immediately after reading a fanfiction text; what they show is the reader's first response, and so generally express the sense of conflict and moral questions generated by the story rather than considered answers to those questions. Although not all fans may make the attempt to find answers to those questions, many do, and there is an ongoing conversation in fandom communities as fans attempt to understand and resolve their concerns. The final section of this chapter will discuss the nature of these conversations, and argue that the conversations themselves could be the solution to some of the concerns that they articulate.

5.8 The Importance of the Conversation

Fanfiction as an art form, and the fandom community itself, is conversational in nature. Fanfiction is intertextual, existing in conversation with a canon text, and with other fanfictions. Fans often write stories inspired not only by an original text, but by other fanfictions as well. They write fanfictions based on story prompts given by other fans, they participate in story writing festivals, and they exchange fanfictions as gifts. One text inspires another, and each new variation is consumed, compared, and contrasted by enthusiastic readers, who go on to write new stories and story prompts. Popular themes and story devices find new expressions in different fandoms surrounding different canon texts. Fanfiction expands exponentially.

In addition to these intertextual links, each fanfiction exists in conversation with two other textual spaces: its own paratexts (including authors' notes, tags, and comment threads) and the metatextual discussions about various aspects of fanfiction that take place between fans. It is in these two spaces that discussions about the moral implications of reading fanfiction texts like *A Thorough Examination / In Depth* occur. As expressed in these conversations, there are three concerns that arise about engaging with these texts:

- 1) a sense of guilt or shame and a concern that experiencing pleasure, either sexual or emotional, as a result of reading this kind of fictional depiction of rape or sexual assault is morally dubious in some way
- 2) a concern that reading and engaging with such texts, and thereby supporting and encouraging the production of similar texts, could reinforce rape culture by perpetuating rape myths, such as that rape can be a pleasurable experience for the victim
- 3) a concern that reading and engaging with such texts could make readers (especially younger readers) more vulnerable to abusive relationships because these texts present a skewed picture of what a healthy romantic relationship should be like; most especially by presenting the actions of the rapist as being motivated by love, as John's actions are in *A Thorough Examination / In Depth*.

All three of these concerns are closely related, and discussions generally touch on all three at once. The last, in particular, presents a problem for the overall argument of this thesis, which is that the experience of engaging with fanfiction can be a valuable one for the individual fan because it creates a space that allows for freedom of the imaginary domain, which is necessary for the development of full personhood. If it is the case that engaging with fanfiction texts that depict rape fantasies could make readers more vulnerable to sexual abuse, then this could seriously undermine the potential value of engaging with fandom and fanfiction. However, even as these concerns are raised, so are counterarguments and discussions that illustrate not only an awareness of the potential harm that such texts could do, but ways of mitigating that harm and promoting the benefits.

There are many reasons why fans might feel guilty or ashamed of enjoying fanfiction texts that contain rape fantasies. One reason that is discussed often among fans is the fear that reading, writing, and enjoying texts that contain rape fantasies means that the fan is somehow “sick” or “perverted”, desiring either to rape or to be raped (Anarfea; tiltedsylogism; havingbeenbreathedout). In some instances, this concern has taken the form of an accusation against fan authors for producing such texts, and against the fandom community as a whole

for condoning them. In 2015, an individual who signed themselves “K M” started a petition on change.org, asking Archive of Our Own to “Delete the ‘Rape/Non-Con’ and ‘Underage’ tags, as well as any fanfiction that falls under those tags” (“K M Petition”). The motivation for the petition stated that “the existence of these tags contributes to rape culture and a society that dismisses sexual violence, and is perhaps, even titilated [sic] by it” (“K M Petition”), and argued that by including these tags the Archive was “implicitly condoning pedophilia and rape (...) [and] the fetishization of sexual violence” (“K M Petition”). While fans are willing to debate these issues, however, very few are willing to accept that censorship in any form is either possible or desirable. The petition garnered only five supporters (“K M Petition”). A number of fans have addressed these concerns in essays and blog posts responding either to the petition or to similar arguments. The most common opening to such a post is what fan author briarwood refers to as the “standard feminist disclaimer” (briarwood), which she phrases as follows:

I am not discussing real life. I’m discussing fanfic, and specifically sexual-fantasy fanfic. In real life, there’s no such thing as “dubious consent”. In real life, either informed consent exists, or it’s rape (briarwood)

Similarly, fan author Anarfea writes:

I am turned on by rape fantasies. But to say this means that I “think rape is sexy” is to conflate actual rape with the fantasy of rape. Actual rape is not sexy, and everyone I know who has rape fantasies knows this (Anarfea).

The presence of these disclaimers, and the discussions that repeat and reinforce them, serves as a safeguard. Kristina Busse argues that “the very reason rape fiction can be eroticised safely within fan fiction spaces is that everyone agrees that rape and sexual violence are truly despicable crimes in need of punishment” (Busse, 2017 210).

Far from condoning rape and sexual abuse, many fans read and write rape fantasies as a means of recovering from these traumas, and emerge with a clearer understanding of their own experiences and reactions (Anarfea; havingbeenbreathedout; RhineGold; longwhitecoats). In this way, “non-con” and “dub-con” fanfiction texts serve a very similar purpose to the more realistic “rape” texts, and censoring these texts or shaming those who read and write them serves to shut down this aid to recovery. This is only one reason for the production and consumption of these texts however. Busse notes that while there is correlation between the presence of abuse survivors in fandom and fanfiction texts that depict abuse, “noncon clearly serves a variety of functions for reader and writers, ranging from working through trauma to kinky fantasies” (Busse, 2017 209). In addition, it would be a dangerous sort of gatekeeping to insist that recovery from trauma is the only legitimate reason why a fan might engage with them without being considered sick (Anarfea; bironic). Susan Brownmiller, in the introduction to her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, writes that the most common question she is asked in interviews is whether or not she has been raped, and that she suspects the question arises from the assumption that

a woman who chooses to write about rape probably has a dark personal reason, a lurid secret, a history of real or imagined abuse, a trauma back there somewhere, a fixation, a Bad Experience that has permanently warped her (7).

Alongside this assumption is the implicit view that only someone who has been raped has the right to write about it, either in philosophy or in fiction. Anarfea argues to the contrary:

It is not necessary to be a survivor of rape or CSA [Childhood Sexual Abuse] to produce fanworks which engage these topics, nor is it necessary to out yourself as one. Saying that noncon is only for survivors can be damaging, because it makes people who are not survivors (and really, everyone who lives within rape culture is a survivor of the inherent violence of rape culture) search for things that are wrong with them (Anarfea).

There is the additional difficulty that, while the distinction that this chapter makes between “rape” texts and “non-con/dub-con” texts does exist, it is difficult to say for certain which category any particular text belongs to, especially because there is so much variation in reader responses, as well as in author intention and ability. Fan author havingbeenbreathedout argues that what is most problematic about the blanket condemnation of these kinds of texts is

the assumption that there’s only one reason that a sexually explicit scene could possibly exist in a piece of fiction: to arouse the reader and uncomplicatedly celebrate whatever sexual activity is taking place. At best, when this mentality does acknowledge the existence of other types of sex scenes, it assumes that the categories “sex scenes that celebrate and arouse” and “sex scenes that problematize and dissect” are mutually exclusive, and that the line between them is clear, easy to draw, and easy to agree upon (havingbeenbreathedout).

Instead of shaming those who engage with, read, and write “non-con” and “dub-con” fanfiction texts, fans argue that the exploration of these darker aspects of human desire is a legitimate and necessary pursuit of literature (Anarfea; havingbeenbreathedout; bironic).

Anarfea argues that

creative works that depict sexual violence or abuse can be transformative. Just as fans can transform canon works and subvert the narratives to better suit themselves, so can creators subvert the narratives of rape culture (Anarfea).

In this way, far from perpetuating rape culture, these texts offer a challenge to it, if not directly, then through the conversations that arise from them, in which, as shown above, the harm of rape and the importance of consent is articulated explicitly and repeatedly.

The third concern, that younger readers could be made more vulnerable to sexual abuse as a result of reading these texts, which might normalise abusive relationships, is also addressed explicitly in these conversations. For the most part, fans agree that boundaries should be put in place to prevent children from accessing more explicit works (Anarfea;

having been breathed out; things with wings; “Age Statement”). At the same time, it is not reasonable to expect that children and teenagers will never access these texts. Nor is it reasonable to suggest that all literature publically available should be ‘suitable’ for children, even if it were possible to agree on what ‘suitable’ might mean. A safeguard exists, however, in the ongoing conversation in fandom about these issues. As tilted syllogism argues:

the conversation we need to have *comes after the story*: we need to create spaces for readers to process their encounters with fiction, and talk to others who can help them find their feet in response to what they’ve read. That crucial, potentially life-saving conversation is one you can only have after reading. You can’t have an educational, compassionate discussion with someone about a story you won’t let them read. And it’s hard to make the kind of compassionate discussion – the kind that less critically acute readers may really need to have, after their first encounter with stories that touch a nerve or leave them vulnerable to abusers in their lives – if you create a culture of shame around the reading of those stories (tilted syllogism, italics in original).

Engaging with fanfiction texts in isolation can be valuable, but the true value of the experience lies in the conversation. The warnings, tags, authors’ notes, and comments that frame each text are important, because they prompt readers to interrogate their responses to what they read, and provide a space to discuss those responses with others who are engaged in the same kind of questioning. This is especially important for younger readers, who may otherwise be made more vulnerable to abuse. What is needed is perhaps for those spaces to be made more visible and accessible, so that readers for whom these concepts are new and potentially disturbing can join the conversation easily, and without being made to feel ashamed of either their enjoyment of the stories or their lack of knowledge about the questions raised. In this way the conversation could have a balancing effect on any problematic content in the stories themselves.

Conclusion

On April 2nd 2019, the finalists for the 2019 Hugo Awards – the world’s most prestigious awards for science fiction literature - were announced. Among the six finalists for the category of “Best Related Work” was *Archive of Our Own*. When I saw the announcement, my first thought was that this *had* to be an April Fools’ joke that I had noticed a day late, but on further investigation I discovered that it was indeed fact. This marks, in a tangible way, a gradual but ongoing shift in the mainstream perception of fandom and fanfiction that has taken place over the last decades. In shortlisting the *Archive*, the Hugo Awards have placed fanfiction – not any individual fanfiction text but a body of texts produced by the global fanfiction community - on equal footing with more traditional literary criticism; an acknowledgement, perhaps, that fanfiction and literary criticism are engaged in a similar process of commentary on a source text, despite their differences in form and formality.

As fandom becomes more visible in modern culture, so its potential influence grows. It remains a space where those marginalised by mainstream media can go to find and create expressions of their own experiences and desires, and to imagine those that have not yet been experienced. As fans become more vocal about their fannish pursuits, and fanfiction becomes more widely known and read, these marginalised expressions are becoming more visible. As fandom grows, so too does the academic study of fandom, requiring an inter-disciplinary approach which involves not only literary analysis of fanfiction texts, but the study of the behaviours and beliefs prevalent in the communities within which those texts are produced.

In this thesis I have shown that within fanfiction communities there exists a culture that encourages and celebrates the exploration – through reading and writing fanfiction - of sexual desires and identities, without shame or fear of judgement. Fanfiction texts created by these communities offer the fan (as reader and author) a way to imaginative narrative experience of the many different ways in which sexual and romantic identities can be defined

and expressed, both individually and within love relationships. These texts also depict a wide range of sexual activities and desires. Within the fandom community there is an overarching ethos of tolerance and celebration of difference, which counters sexual shame and guilt with acceptance, expressing this as a theme within fanfiction texts as well as a topic of critical discussion. As a result, fanfiction and fanfiction communities have created a space in which freedom of the imaginary domain is possible, allowing individual fans to ‘play’ with different sexual desires and personae.

I have also shown that this exploration of sexual desires and identities is accompanied by ongoing discussions of sexual ethics. Through examination of selected fanfiction texts, paratexts, and metatexts I have shown that within fandom there is a careful and considered approach to sexual ethics that prioritises consent and ongoing communication between sexual partners. Fans wrestle with the ethical questions raised by the production and enthusiastic consumption of fanfiction texts in which consent is not clear, and argue passionately about the best way to prevent such texts from causing harm to vulnerable readers. I have argued that these metatextual discussions can serve as a kind of safety net, placing depictions of rape and sexual assault very firmly in the category of “DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME!”

I have also suggested that fanfiction and fandom could have positive impact on modern society, by contributing to the creation and propagation of an alternative, non-heteronormative social imaginary; one which not only tolerates but actively supports multiple forms of sexual and romantic orientations and relationships. The social imaginary of a society – the underlying narrative of the life of that society – influences attitudes and values within that society. It is my belief, and my hope, that as a non-heteronormative social imaginary gains traction in modern society, through various influences (of which fanfiction is only one), so attitudes towards gender, sexual and romantic identities, and love relationships will become more open and accepting.

This thesis has emphasised the potential impact of fandom and fanfiction on the individual fan, but has not engaged in detail with the question of how that individual impact could have an effect on a broader social level. A simple answer is that as individual attitudes and behaviours change, so those changes will have a gradual influence on the attitudes and behaviour of others. Another, more immediately measureable, possibility is through fan activism. This has already received substantial academic attention, notably in the work of Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) who discusses the structural similarities between fandom activity and active democracy. Other studies have shown that fans are increasingly involved in political and social activism, often motivated by concerns originating in fandom (Brough and Shresthova, 2012; Dym and Fiesler, 2018). This kind of activism could be the means by which ideas and ideals expressed within fandom and fanfiction gain recognition and acceptance on a broader social level.

The increased visibility of fandom also opens up new areas for research. One such area that has recently come to my attention is the fandom activity of children. In my work as a primary school teacher over the last two years, I have found that my students are increasingly involved in online fandom, creating and sharing their own artwork and fanfiction, and blithely ignoring - as I myself did at sixteen - the “Adults Only” warnings and disclaimers on fan-created websites. At the beginning of 2019, one of my Grade 7 students asked me to read a *Harry Potter* fanfiction that she had written, and mentioned casually that she had decided not to include any of “the sex stuff”. She was twelve years old at the time. Recent research (Farley, 2018) has shown that increasing numbers of teens and preteens are engaging in fandom practices. While I believe I have demonstrated that a critical engagement with the debates surrounding fanfiction texts could mitigate the potential harm of reading romanticised depictions of rape and sexual abuse, the fan I had in mind while constructing

that argument is someone who is considerably older than twelve. The impact on child fans could be significantly different, and this is an area that I would like to research in the future.

I end this thesis where I began: with the firm conviction that the practice of reading and writing fanfiction texts, particularly within the context of a community that encourages the shame-free exploration of sexual desires and identities, can have a profound and positive impact on the individual fan. The existence of these spaces in which freedom of the imaginary domain is possible means that fans have the opportunity to explore and understand their own sexual and romantic identities. Further, the cultural objects around which fandoms are created form a part of the narrative that our society tells about itself, and which influences attitudes and values. That narrative remains largely heteronormative, but fanfiction creates spaces within it for alternative forms of sexuality and love. In time, perhaps, fanfiction could contribute to the creation of a new narrative, a different kind of society; one in which multiple forms of gender, sexuality, and love are recognised and embraced.

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