

“The Rivalry is Hot:” Shakespeare, Harry Potter, and the Magic of Fanfiction

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From adaptation to translation, fan art to fanfiction, audiences have long sought to interact with the stories they are exposed to. Literary scholar Sheenagh Pugh describes this as wanting both “more of” and “more from” the narratives we care about. Fanfiction is defined by professor Bronwen Thomas as “stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a “canon” of works” (1). By this definition, fanfiction could be considered as old as works like *Paradise Lost* or Dante’s *Inferno*, but fanfiction in the modern sense has largely been attributed to fans of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, according to scholar Henry Jenkins. These fans distributed works in self-published compilations called zines; over time, these compilations moved online, spurring the formation of fan communities on sites like *LiveJournal*, *Fanfiction.net*, and most recently *Archive of Our Own*. No creator or author is exempt from this treatment, and the more prominent a story is in culture, the more likely it is to attract the attention of fans interested in participatory works. It should come as no surprise, then, that the works of William Shakespeare have amassed thousands of fanfictions, not only in the more abstract sense of film and modern adaptations, but in the concrete sense of written fanworks posted online to sites like *Archive of Our Own*. These fanfictions speak to the ability of Shakespeare fans to interact with his

works on an interpretive level, an interesting shift from Shakespeare’s previous place as the epitome of “high culture.”

Popular culture, typically the subject of most fanfiction, is often seen as the antithesis of “high” culture, thereby making some scholars, usually those who hold popular culture in some level of disdain, to categorize it as “less than.” Professor John Storey writes that often, popular culture is what’s left over after the collective “we” has decided what constitutes “high” culture, leaving popular culture as “inferior” (6). Using this definition, high culture is defined by its difficulty, which makes the work in question inherently exclusive to those who have intellectual or physical access to it. However, this definition, like all definitions of popular culture, is flawed, and Storey uses Shakespeare as an example of this flaw. He writes, “William Shakespeare is now seen as the epitome of high culture, yet as late as the nineteenth century his work was very much a part of popular theatre” (6). This movement across boundaries from high to popular culture is not unique to Shakespeare, but Shakespeare’s movement is certainly one of the easier paths to track. As Shakespeare’s plays became less popular in the theater and his language fell out of style, he became less accessible to the masses and more commonly the subject of academic study. To many, Shakespeare is “difficult,” and therefore considered a separate entity from the *Harry*

Potters and *Avengers* of popular media. Despite this, Shakespeare has nonetheless made an impact on the fanfiction community.

Much of the scholarship focusing on Shakespeare fanfiction has concluded that, by writing fanfiction about Shakespeare, authors transform him from highbrow academic literature into lowbrow popular culture, brought to the same level as *The Avengers* or *Star Trek*. As Kativa Mudan Finn writes in her article, “History play: critical and creative engagement with Shakespeare’s tetralogies in transformative fanworks,” “By considering fanfiction as another popular response to Shakespeare, we can nudge him yet further off his pedestal and interact with his plays as his original audience would have done—in conversation” (221); basically, fanfiction is a way of solidifying Shakespeare’s movement across the boundaries of high and popular culture. However, while some Shakespeare fanfiction fits this description, Shakespeare as an entity functions differently in the world of fanfiction, specifically in crossover fanfiction, where aspects from two different “canon” works are merged into one fanfiction. Typically, crossover fanfiction exists because an author wants to see characters from one work interacting with characters from another work, but in most Shakespeare crossover fanfiction, it is the characters of one work interacting with one of Shakespeare’s plays. By examining three Harry Potter crossover fanfictions where the characters participate in productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, it can be seen that by bringing Shakespeare to this “lower” level, both his language and his tropes are allowed to function as a lens through which authors examine other works

and characters, which gives evidence to the new and exciting role Shakespeare and his creations play in transformative and interpretive works.

The three fanfictions that function as clear and useful examples of crossover Shakespeare fanfiction are all hosted by *Archive of Our Own*, and they consist of “Likewise Variable” by user ssstrychnine, “Drama Club” by user SaintDionysus, and “The Lark and the Nightingale” by user Felpata Lupin. Each of these fanfictions is different, but they have a few key elements in common. First, each center around two characters who are brought together while portraying the titular characters in *Romeo and Juliet*. Second, each fanfiction features a couple that is considered non-canon, meaning that they are not confirmed to be in a relationship in the original Harry Potter text. These relationships are, respectively, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger, and Remus Lupin and Chiara Nightingale, an original character created by the fanfiction’s author. These two similarities are crucial in understanding how Shakespeare, both his language and the tropes he popularized, are used as a spine within these fanfictions, and each fanfiction shows different ways these authors use Shakespeare to further examine characters within the Harry Potter universe.

The reasoning behind combining Harry Potter and *Romeo and Juliet*, while perhaps not immediately obvious, does follow logically when one considers how ubiquitous *Romeo and Juliet* is, especially in high school classrooms. According to Jonathan Burton and Whittier College’s 2013 survey of 400 high school English teachers, the play

appears in roughly 93% of all ninth-grade classes, which partially explains why it accounts for over one-fifth of all Shakespeare fanfictions currently posted to *Archive of Our Own*. This frequency of exposure is more fuel for the argument that Shakespeare is losing some of his elite status, with Michelle K. Yost arguing that “the play is no longer one of highbrow culture, but mass pedagogy” (196). However, when it comes to Shakespeare fanfiction, conceptualizing *Romeo and Juliet* as literature for the masses is helpful not because it indicates a realistic reading of Shakespeare’s status as a cultural figure, but because it shows the play’s accessibility and its utility in crossover fanfiction. Readers know *Romeo and Juliet*, and they are particularly familiar with the trope of the star-crossed lovers. By using tropes that are already familiar to their readers, fanfiction authors can cause their readers to view Harry Potter characters in new but familiar ways.

In her article, Yost divides Shakespeare fanfiction into categories; all three of the aforementioned fanfictions are what Yost would categorize as “Shakespeare as incident,” where “Shakespeare is an object in the plot hovering on the periphery, a tool for telling the kind of story the fan writer wants to tell” (206). The most common way for writers to attempt Shakespeare as incident is through the structure of a “play within a play,” where the characters from one work put on a Shakespeare play in their own universe. As Yost describes it, this “is the frame with which authors can structure a narrative for their own characters, often paralleling the themes of Shakespeare with their primary narrative” (207). She also notes that

often, *Romeo and Juliet* is used as “a tool for the exploration of love between other characters” (208). The familiarity of the text and its tropes, as well as the framework for exploration it establishes, all come together to help fanfiction writers add a new layer of investigation to beloved Harry Potter characters, especially when it comes to exploring a romance between two characters who were never romantic in Harry Potter canon. As eloquently stated by Draco Malfoy, “The whole muggleborn/pureblood, Gryffindor/Slytherin thing?...Admit it. The rivalry is hot” (“Drama Club,” Ch. 4).

At its core, each of these fanfictions functions in a similar way: Shakespeare is the catalyst through which two characters realize their feelings for each other. In two of these stories, this realization takes place during the audition for *Romeo and Juliet*, where two main characters are made to read lines from Act I Scene IV, the scene of the ball where Romeo and Juliet share their first kiss. In “Drama Club” and “The Lark and the Nightingale,” reciting these lines is what acts as the catalyst for the relationship. This revelation is summarized by Ginny Weasley in “Drama Club” when she says, “[Hermione] snogged Malfoy at the auditions and now is morally conflicted” (Ch. 4), and in “The Lark and the Nightingale” through the internal monologue of Chiara, the original character portraying Juliet, when she says “she kept getting distracted by all the details in Remus’ face she’d never noticed before... At the end of the scene she nearly kissed him for real” (Ch. 2). While the relationship in “Likewise Variable” develops more slowly, it is also directly the result of being part of the play. After kissing off-stage, Remus

and Sirius panic, with Sirius saying, “It’s only...Romeo and Juliet,” to which Remus responds, “Yes...It’s...this stupid play” (Ch. 7). By using *Romeo and Juliet* as the framework that paves the way to actual relationships, the authors of these fanfictions, intentionally or not, demonstrate the power inherent in Shakespeare’s texts, and in turn use that power to bring about change in the opposing fictional universe of Harry Potter.

One of the most integral aspects of crossover fanfiction is the melding of two fictional worlds. In the case of Shakespeare and Harry Potter, the author is challenged to intermix the magic of Harry Potter with Shakespeare’s more reality-based drama, especially in a play like *Romeo and Juliet*, where there are no witches or fairies to help make the transition from the so-called “real world” to fantasy. How this transition is handled is one of the key differences between these three fanfictions. In “Likewise Variable,” magic is removed from the world completely; the main characters attend a non-magical English school, and while they are all characters taken from the Harry Potter series, they have been stripped of their magical powers and removed from their magical environment. In “Drama Club,” this environment is kept in place, and, in a move employed by many fanfiction writers, the “muggle-born” characters—characters who were born into the non-magical world but still possess magic themselves—are used as a point of connection between Shakespeare, considered in this story to be a non-magical playwright, and the magical world of Hogwarts. Finally, in “The Lark and the Nightingale,” not only is Shakespeare brought into the magical world, but the magical world

is brought into Shakespeare. While the text of *Romeo and Juliet* remains the same, this story reveals that Romeo and Juliet were actually wizards, and that they were prevented from being together because Romeo was a werewolf. The uses of magic within these fanfictions varies, but each interaction between Shakespeare and magic also gives information regarding Shakespeare and power, which is what magic in Harry Potter functionally is.

Magic in original Harry Potter books is instrumental to its narrative structure. It’s used both as a fix-it for the problems of the regular world and a social status symbol; those with magic or who come from a long line of magic-users are privileged above those who don’t come from a magical lineage. As a result, magic carries with it a sense of both physical power in that it can conjure objects, heal wounds, and cause pain, but also social power, as it is a way of moving up in community hierarchy. This is why it’s important to examine Shakespeare’s role in fanfictions where magic is and is not a regular part of the Harry Potter universe; is he a substitution, an enhancement, or both? In these fanfictions, Shakespeare exhibits a physical power, both healing and hurting as he brings about the coupling of these characters. However, the fact that his play possesses both the reputation and the skeletal structure strong enough to make this insertion effective indicates that he also carries a certain amount of social power. Shakespeare functions as magic in the world of these fanfictions, certainly. But he also functions as a form of magic to each fanfiction’s reader; his words and plots have a binding effect, and they function as a near-universal language

that can enhance readers' understanding of an entirely separate work.

By framing each story around a Shakespeare play and making this play crucial to the story's plot and characterization, the authors show just how much influence Shakespeare can have over a story's development, and how much the mere mention of his name can cause both readers and characters to change the way they view the narrative. In these fanfictions, Shakespeare's cultural power is not only implied by the fanfiction's plot, but explicitly celebrated within the text. Two of the three fanfictions make direct references to the 1996 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and in "Likewise Variable," Remus Lupin is characterized as reading Shakespeare "religiously," to the point where he murmured lines out loud in his everyday life (Ch. 2). In "Drama Club," Draco and Hermione are aware that they're living the plot of the play as they perform it, and they use this to their advantage by using their performance in the play to normalize their relationship to Draco's disapproving father. All of these aspects of these fanfictions utilize and build on Shakespeare's accrued cultural capital, the power inherent in being a recognized and understood story structure, as well as a legitimizing force to any plot. While some may argue that these fanfictions are unoriginal, very few will argue that Shakespeare's plots are ineffective.

While much of this power comes from the familiar tropes in *Romeo and Juliet*, a fair bit of it also comes from Shakespeare's language. All three fanfictions quote Shakespeare at length, and just like each one has a different method of reconciling Shakespeare's world with the Wizarding World,

each one also has a method of utilizing Shakespeare's actual words within their text. In each of these fanfictions, Shakespeare's words function as a form of magic, as his quotations are used to bring about changes in plot and character the same way a magic spell or potion would in the Harry Potter series. It is the embodiment of Romeo and Juliet during the audition scene that brings Draco and Hermione together in "Drama Club," and in "Likewise Variable," the absence of actual magic words only makes more prominent the "magical" quality inherent in Shakespeare's text, especially when it comes to Remus and Sirius's developing relationship. Shakespeare's words sound different from the otherwise modern dialogue, and when Sirius texts Remus, "Give me my Remus and when I shall die take him and cut him out in little stars and he will make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night" (Ch. 2), it feels like something has shifted between the two of them, even if it's a text sent in jest.

While present in the other two works, the idea of Shakespeare's words as magic features most prominently, and most literally, in "The Lark and the Nightingale." In this fanfiction, the witch Juliet is punished for falling in love with the werewolf Romeo, and a curse is put on her bloodline that affects any descendent who kisses a werewolf. When Chiara Nightingale, a character created by the author who is a descendent of the Capulet bloodline, kisses Remus Lupin, a werewolf, she is cursed to become a nightingale by day and a fully corporeal human on the full moon, when Remus would be a wolf and they would be unable to be together. While the text of *Romeo and Juliet* in this

universe remains the same, Shakespeare is nonetheless crucial to breaking the curse, as it is his line “Give me thy sin again” (Act I, Scene IV) that helps the characters discover that the cure to the curse is another kiss. In this fanfiction, Shakespeare’s words literally act as magic, and in this reimagining of the tale, his writing paves the way for the couple’s salvation rather than their demise.

This magic in Shakespeare’s language is combined with the familiarity and cultural power of Shakespeare’s plots to create a fanfiction that is unable to be replicated through any other crossover. When writing about fanfiction that interacts with Shakespeare’s sonnets, Yost writes, “Shakespeare could be replaced by a romantic poet like Blake or Wordsworth, but just as characters putting on a play by another writer would not hold the same symbolic strength for fanfiction’s readers and writers, Shakespeare’s sonnets hold a unique cultural power derived from their author’s mystified status” (208). This certainly hits at an important note within Shakespeare fanfiction, which is that Shakespeare’s cultural power is what makes the utilization of his work so effective. This power is a two-way street; as professor Douglas Lanier writes of Shakespeare’s cultural capital, “Shakespeare’s association with a mass-cultural product, medium, or genre lends that item a moiety of highbrow depth, ‘universality,’ authority, continuity with established tradition, or seriousness of purpose, while at the same time the association with mass culture lends Shakespeare street credibility, broad intelligibility, and celebrity” (104). By using Shakespeare’s plays in their fanfiction, authors give their work all the aforementioned traits, but as

Shakespeare is continually integrated with these works, he becomes associated with popular culture in a way that keeps him continually relevant and a crucial character in the discussion of modern storytelling.

When it comes to Harry Potter fanfiction, Shakespeare couldn’t be replaced by any other writer and have the fanfiction work, because his cultural capital is necessary to his integration with the magical world. Shakespeare, through his status as “the greatest playwright of sixteenth century’s England. Possibly the greatest of all times” (“The Lark and the Nightingale,” Ch. 2), is the only nonmagical author who can be convincingly pulled into the magical world, or, in the case of the non-magical setting of “Likewise Variable,” the only one whose words hold enough understood power to function as magic in a world where magic doesn’t exist. This symbolic strength doesn’t just make these fanfictions more impactful; it makes them possible. As a result, Shakespeare becomes instrumental to each fanfiction’s existence, rather than just an instrument.

Shakespeare and the trope of the star-crossed lovers becomes even more applicable due to the nature of the non-canon couples in each fanfic. Each of these couples have obstacles to overcome within the text, be it homophobia, prejudice between Hogwarts houses (a parallel which is surprisingly underutilized in these fanfictions), disapproving parents, or a literal curse on a character’s bloodline. But beyond these more obvious barriers, there is one that is inherent in all of these couples: the Harry Potter canon does not allow them to be together. Each couple is star-crossed because

they are not together in the text, and each author, through the utilization of a well-known trope that details this very conundrum, seeks to bring these couples together in fanfiction. Once again, Shakespeare serves as a catalyst, not only in the narrative of this fanfiction, but outside the narrative, as he provides a framework for authors to bring their star-crossed non-canon couples together, defying fate and J.K. Rowling herself.

All three fanfictions show that when Shakespeare and other works enter into conversation through crossover fanfiction, it is his tropes, language, and cultural capital that make this fanfiction possible and successful. However, this does not mean that Shakespeare is immune to critical conversation and interpretation. One example of this is found in each fanfiction's interpretation of the play's production. While the specific details of each production are not made equal across these fanfictions, two of them do offer specifics about the production that indicate certain interpretative choices. In "Drama Club," magical effects are added to the play that make it flashier and more grandiose, causing one theater-goer to remark, "Flitwick's interpretation of Shakespeare is very...colorful," to which another replies, "I was going to say blatantly oversexualized, but we can go with your description" (Ch. 7). In this fanfiction, the love and lust in *Romeo and Juliet*, while mocked by certain characters, also heavily plays into the story's tone and content, particularly in the off-stage interactions between Draco and Hermione. (It's worth mentioning that this fanfiction is rated "M" for mature and is much more sexually explicit than the other two.) In a differ-

ent vein, "Likewise Variable" describes the costuming in its production by saying, "[The directors] want their Romeo and Juliet quiet and soft in their love while their families and their friends are in a tumult around them. Romeo and Juliet in simple black and white in the middle of loud, gaudy sets and loud, gaudy people in loud, gaudy costumes" (Ch. 9). These are acts of interpretation, clearly on the part of the characters within the story, but also on the part of the author of the fanfiction. It also shows an interaction with the text that extends beyond the trope, engaging with the play as a whole. This interaction goes deeper than merely quoting the text or using the narrative framework; when it comes to the actual in-story production of *Romeo and Juliet*, each author makes certain interpretative choices that not only affect the plot of the fanfiction, but also use Shakespeare as an object of interpretive study.

Of course, the major way that these fanfictions rewrite or recontextualize Shakespeare is that at the end of the story, tragedy is averted. No one dies at the end of these fanfictions because that doesn't contribute to the larger purpose. These fanfictions focus on non-canon couples; the authors have a vested interest in having them live happily ever after, because fanfiction is the only place where this ending is possible. When it comes to the star-crossed lovers as a trope, the barriers between the two characters matters much more than their "inevitable" fate. *Romeo and Juliet* is about much more than just two children in love; it's about the feud between two families and the larger consequences it has on the world. But when it comes to *Romeo and Juliet* fanfiction, "this variation on 'star-crossed' love seems to

speak to [authors] more directly than bitter family feuds” (Pugh 62). This indicates that not only are Shakespeare’s tropes becoming powerful interpretative lenses, but that these tropes are also undergoing a sort of transformation as they are applied to crossover fanfiction. What is appealing about the trope of the star-crossed lovers is the barriers the characters have to overcome, not the tragedy inherent in these characters’ fates.

This alternative focus on the trope and the pivot away from its tragic end is interesting when juxtaposed with another aspect of fanfiction scholarship, which professor Cornel Sandvoss articulates when he says, “As the object of fandom corresponds with a textual field of gravity, rather than a text in its classical sense, readers gain new tools to normalize texts and to reconcile their object of fandom with their expectations, beliefs, and sense of self” (71). He goes on to describe fandom as primarily focused on “familiarity and the fulfillment of expectations” (72), which speaks both to the shift in focus away from the tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet* and to the usage of non-canon couples in *Romeo and Juliet* fanfiction. Shakespeare’s tropes heavily contribute to the familiarity of the piece: they provide a narrative framework that audiences can easily identify and follow. But the expectations and beliefs that these fanfictions wrestle with do not refer to the expectations of the play itself, but rather the expectations of the other tropes in fanfiction, specifically the happy ending each couple receives. Because these couples exist only in the world of fanfiction, to have their happy ending robbed from them would be contradictory to each author’s beliefs; they don’t need to “normalize” the couple’s

tragic fate, because as far as canon goes, this tragic fate is already the norm. Through their work, each author participates in a reading of Shakespeare that reconciles his familiar framework with their rejection of a tragic ending as inevitable. Instead, they choose to fulfill the larger expectations of “shipping,” the romantic pairing of characters in fandom through fanworks, and give each non-canon couple the happy ending they were denied in Harry Potter canon.

This rejection of tragedy is not only implicit in each fanfiction’s ending, but also made explicit through critique of Shakespeare’s story. In “Drama Club,” when Hermione-Juliet wakes up to find Draco-Romeo dead beside her, it’s called “a painful reminder of how fucked up this play is;” later, a character remarks, “That’s not love. That’s psychotic” (Ch. 7). The critique found in “Likewise Variable,” while not as overt, is nonetheless impactful; after the dust has settled and Remus and Sirius have begun a real, off-stage relationship, Remus reflects, “He is glad to be rid of Shakespeare because he and Sirius are not Romeo and Juliet, despite James calling them that at every opportunity. They are not dead children, they are *alive*” (Ch. 17). In each refusal to acquiesce to Shakespeare’s tragic ending, there is a kernel of defiant hope which hints at a phenomenon described by scholar Jess McCall when she says, “Fandom has re-legitimized the validity of loving love as a particularly...subversive act” (34), meaning that in these fanfictions, the love between two characters and the triumph of this love functions as a more powerful ending than a replication of Romeo and Juliet’s tragic fate. Despite the fact that each author uses Shake-

spere's trope to frame their own narrative, they're still openly critical of what they see as the main takeaway from *Romeo and Juliet*: that lovers are doomed to die, that the walls that keep people apart are impossible to tear down, that in the end, our heroes lose. This is certainly not the only takeaway from the play, but it is a crucial one that puts *Romeo and Juliet* firmly on the list of Shakespeare's tragedies. By acting against and openly criticizing this ending, the authors of these fanfictions are not only using Shakespeare for their own narrative advantage, but they are also entering into a critical discussion of Shakespeare's work and its many interpretations.

Shakespeare, of course, is not unique in this treatment; all fanfiction is, at its core, interpretative. But all of these factors together: the familiar frame of star-crossed lovers, the power inherent in Shakespeare's language, and the cultural capital he lends to each fanfiction, all mean Shakespeare functions on a level in fanfiction that is unseen by any other

literary figure. As said by Finn and McCall, "There is no question that 'Shakespeare' has taken on mythic status in modern Western society, whether we mean the author 'Shakespeare'...or the textual 'Shakespeare'" (31). With this mythic status comes a host of power, and while writing fanfiction featuring Shakespeare's texts opens the doors to new and interesting interpretations, it does not diminish this power or Shakespeare's status as a cultural icon. These three fanfictions and their focus on the world of Harry Potter serve to highlight just how akin Shakespeare has become to magic, both in the power of his words and the way he is able to be integrated into the magical world. By bringing Shakespeare to the "lower" level of popular fanfiction, these authors reaffirm again and again just how much power he really has. If we accept fanfiction as an indication of how literature matters, then Shakespeare has cemented himself as a powerful cultural shortcut and interpretive lens, a role in fanfiction that no one else can play.

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