

**The Author Is Legion:**  
**Transformative Work and Fan Fiction as a Literary Meta-Genre**

Andrew Claybrook

Advised by Professor Taylor Walle

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**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Chapter I: Grounding Theory of Transformative Literature	8
Chapter II: An (Abridged) History of Transformative Literature	19
Chapter III: The Iliad and The Song of Achilles	36
Chapter IV: Fan Fiction and Transformative Literature	51
Conclusion	63
Bibliography	67

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## Introduction

Who owns a story? Who controls what a story is? The author, one might say, but a story does not stop at its author. Once a story has been created and told, it exists within every person who has received it, and each receiver is more than capable of making something from it. Something new, something transformative.

When this transformative project is applied to writing, it is known as transformative literature. Transformative literature—perhaps more commonly referred to as “fan fiction,” “fanfiction,” or simply “fic”—does not belong to any particular, singular moment in the history of literature or writing. Rather, fan fiction is a style of writing that is defined by its relationship with other works and the transformation inherent in moving from one work to another. Transformative work is also defined by the relationships that the creators and transformers have with one another, supporting one another in the process of creation and serving as an audience for the work. I define transformative literature as a meta-genre, containing other genres, as this definition more accurately captures the fact that fan fiction is more defined by its intertextuality and community than any particular story line or trope any author could invoke.

While I will use the terms “transformative work,” “transformative literature,” and “fan fiction” with a general degree of interchangeability, I want to elaborate on some technical differences in my definitions of the three terms in order to minimize confusion. Transformative work is any work that takes another thing and enacts a transformation upon it. This could be writing fan fiction—taking characters and settings and themes and placing them in new contexts, writing new stories—or it could be something like translating a book from one language to another. Translation is an act of interrogating the text, literally transforming words from one state to another. This is especially relevant in a case such as Homer’s *Iliad*, where the language and grammar was an essential part of the poetry of the

work. Transformative literature, then, is the specific literary context of transformative work under the larger umbrella of transformative work. I consider there to be a subtle difference between transformative literature and fan fiction. Fan fiction, as I describe it, can only be made by someone in the position of the “fan.” The fan can never claim authority or ownership over the original work, often because there is a still present author or authorial estate who is—in many cases—still exercising some control over the narrative.

Transformative literature can be made for any audience, and may even be monetized if done under specific circumstances, while fan fiction is made for a specific audience of other fans, and—crucially— cannot be monetized without violating copyright. Rather, the reward is found in the author’s own satisfaction, and from the community of fans in which an author is operating. All fan fiction is transformative literature, but not all transformative literature is fan fiction.

As mentioned previously, I describe transformative literature as a form of meta-genre, rather than being an individual genre itself; transformative literature is a method and framework of changing one piece of work into a new form, which does not necessarily lend itself to any particular genre. Most readers are familiar with traditional and conventional literary genres such as romance or mystery. Transformative literature can certainly contain those other genres—one can read and write fan fiction that has a romance plot— but the genre is romance, and the fact that the story is fan fiction speaks to something else.

Transformative literature and work is defined by its positionality, the fact that it exists in conversation with other pieces of media. Most “purely” written fanfiction, if such a thing could exist, would then simply carry over the genre of the original work. So in this way, for the purposes of this thesis, I describe transformative literature as a meta-genre containing other genres primarily concerned with the relationships between other pieces of media.

In this thesis, I utilize the *Iliad*, translated from Homer by Robert Fagles in 1990, and put it in conversation with Madeline Miller's 2012 novel *The Song of Achilles*. Within the *Iliad* specifically, I explore how it structurally holds transformative potential that will be picked up by later authors. Miller seizes upon subtext and characterization, but also boldly forges her own queer and feminist interpretations of the text. I then extend this conversation one step further, bringing in two fan fictions that draw from both the *Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles* to recontextualize the characters and tell new stories. Despite the radically different choices each author makes, the essential core of the story is conserved each time, suggesting that transformative literature can serve as a sort of mirror to the work from which it is adapted. That which is repeated over the most iterations is revealed to be the core of the story.

Before discussing the *Iliad* and the other literary texts, however, I sketch out a theoretical framework for transformative literature in Chapter I. The 1992 essay "Textual Poachers" by Henry Jenkins is considered a classic in the field of fan studies, which has historically housed the academic analysis of transformative work and fan fiction. This essay analyzes how fans take individual elements from media to create their own transformative works. I then apply this to Roland Barthes' 1967 "Death of the Author" theory, which presents an approach to literature that is free from authorial intent. "Death of the Author" frees a reader from trying to interpret a text "correctly," in the context of an author, and permits more radical changes. I branch out then to understanding how transformative work has historically been devalued, viewing it through the lens of Dwight Macdonald's 1961 "Masscult and Midcult." This view of transformative work as a midcult production is then skewered via an application of what I term "fandom Marxism," drawing on *The Communist Manifesto*, originally published 1848. Within fandom Marxism, the fan is equipped to retake means of social or cultural production that were concentrated out of their hands, and

can then funnel this storytelling capital back into a community that understands and appreciates the work in their unique way. These fans now make works for themselves and other fans in self-referential, intertextual communities separated from the inaccessible original producer. While there is exceptional work being done in the field of fan studies, it is still a younger field than other academic disciplines, so I gather these theoretical texts together both for my own purposes and to provide a grounding point for future considerations.

I also provide a history of transformative work in Chapter II to help understand why the modern moment of transformative literature is the way it is, especially online. Modern fandom starts in the late nineteenth century and truly manifests in the later half of the twentieth, with the stories of Sherlock Holmes and *Star Trek* being major cultural forces in modern fandom's development. Unsurprisingly, these are names that are still very familiar today. The internet was a powerful force for transformative work, bringing communities even closer together while setting writers absolutely free.

Transformative literature is a specific, community driven form of literature that is self referential and highly intertextual, navigating original and transformed texts in a continual cycle. These cycles are important due to what they reveal—transformation often lifts up positions of marginality, perhaps most commonly the position of gender and sexuality. Historically, fan studies has often focused on the fans as people, but this thesis is a literary intervention and analysis on the works of those fans. Studying the applications of transformative frameworks reveals a flourishing literary and social culture that is incessantly modern, perpetually making and remaking stories. We are defined in no small part by the stories we choose to tell and retell, and it is absolutely worth taking a critical lens to understanding the mechanisms of “why” and “how.”

## **Chapter I: Grounding Theory of Transformative Literature**

To begin examining transformative work, transformative literature, and fan fiction in an academic sense, there is a benefit in drawing out a theoretical framework. Some people might question the literary qualities of transformative literature from the outset, though I contend that transformative literature is inherently literary because it consists of the creation of stories and engages in intertextuality—the relationship between texts. The meta-genre’s true values and virtues lie in its social aspects and implications. Transformative literature can engage in styles of writing and diverse stories that may not see traditional platforming, because transformative literature exists outside of conventional spaces. Transformative literature empowers a reader in ways that other styles of writing do not because of its inherent freedom from institutional structure, making it especially valuable for study. While some may decry transformative literature as “derivative” and refuse to acknowledge it based on a conception of low/high culture distinctions, transformative literature is literature, and it is worth discussing.

Modern fan studies, as it is recognized today, is often traced back to Henry Jenkins’ “Textual Poachers,” a 1992 essay and book of the same name. While fan studies and studies of transformative literature are not necessarily the same thing, there is considerable overlap, as fans, more often than not, are the ones producing transformative work. The fact that this transformative literature is produced by fans—who are just anyone—rather than writers who meet a certain level of societal or academic validation, may lend transformative work or fan fiction a certain level of disdain, or lack of prestige. I bring forth several pieces of theory to understand a framework for transformative literature.

In “Textual Poachers,” Jenkins crafts a fan-centered framework for the way a reader actively engages with text and creates their own meaning. The essay responds to the earlier critic Michael de Certeau’s notions of “poaching” as a reading style, grounding it in a

transformative framework. One central theme that Jenkins immediately seizes upon is what he describes as “an ongoing struggle for possession of a text and for control over its meanings” (Jenkins 26). Jenkins refers to de Certeau’s notion of “textual producers and institutionally sanctioned interpreters,” with regards to who is creating and providing understanding for a text, immediately invoking two other pieces of major theory (Jenkins 26). The reference to “institutionally sanctioned interpreters” invokes Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” and notions of a gatekeeping academy, which Jenkins goes on to explore in greater depth. With regards to “textual producers,” Jenkins and de Certeau jointly speak to a system that I term fandom Marxism, in which fans create and receive their own transformative texts for themselves as a response to being cut out of the systems of production that create the “real” product.

The Death of the Author theoretical framework is foundational in understanding transformative work. Roland Barthes exclaimed that “the birth of the reader comes at the death of the author,” setting forth his radical literary theory that separates and liberates the reader from any presumed or prescribed ways of interacting with a text (Barthes 148). Barthes explains that there is a modern urge to place emphasis on the “person” of the author, looking to them for “the explanation of the work” (Barthes 143). This is an important distinction from a more historic, communal form of storytelling. In the past, there is an understanding that stories are held in common, and in their telling “a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator,” a temporary caretaker of the story for the duration of its telling (Barthes 142). This is a possessionless form of storytelling, or one where everyone possesses the story equally in hearing its telling. This sets up the reader to become their own person, a title previously reserved in the literary world only for authors and producers. In contrast, Barthes suggests that the modern era has constructed a particular importance of the author-figure to give value or meaning to the work, and that a

reader must liberate themselves from that notion. By overcoming the author figure, the reader actually comes into line with an older form of storytelling, one that predates modern conventions and limitations.

Barthes argues that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God),” because to do so implies that the ability to understand the text is defined and limited by the reader’s ability to understand the author (Barthes 146). This echoes Jenkins’ reference to “institutionally sanctioned interpreters,” and an idea that there is a correct and incorrect way of interacting with a text. Jenkins posits that “a notion of misreading implies that the scholar, not the popular reader, is in the position to adjudicate claims about textual meanings and suggests that an academic interpretation is somehow more ‘objective.’” (Jenkins 29). These interpreters could be seen as such institutions as colleges or universities, those bodies that define literature by pedagogy. The person of the author is static, a fixed figure bound in space and time, who imbued their intent in the work and then put it out into the world. However, the reader is a dynamic and capable individual, and should be allowed to move past the fixed figure to understand their own relationship with the work. This is the liberation brought forth by Barthes and Jenkins.

Once one has moved past the need for the figure of the author, there is no need for the reader to submit to any authorial intent. The work is not necessarily beholden to the life or experiences or intentions of the producer, but is now informed by the context and experience that the reader brings to it. This throws open the door for interpretations and retellings of older stories, informed by the reader, often with markedly more queer or feminist themes than the original text seemed to proclaim. The history of the Western world is one built on systemic patriarchy and heteronormativity, and as Jenkins puts it, “this respect for the ‘integrity’ of the produced message often has the effect of silencing or

marginalizing oppositional voices” (Jenkins 27). The literary canon is no different, determined in the context of Western tradition. Transformative work is thus a prime vehicle for marginalized peoples to seize upon means of storytelling that represent themselves. This seizing upon means of storytelling outside the institution—often understood as a capitalist one—begins to open a Marxist theoretical lens.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels decry how “more and more the bourgeoisie keeps doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands” (Marx 14). I liken this to the way that modern media is produced, moved towards increasingly centralized corporations such as Disney, ViacomCBS, or Warner Brothers and out of the hands of smaller artists and creators. Fans struggle to have access to the means of producing the media of which they are fans. Through transformative work, and particularly transformative literature, fans are able to circumvent the costs and gatekeepers of traditional publishing or production and create their own work. This work is received by other fans, creating a social community where those receiving fans then become producers themselves, creating a cycle. I term this entire process “fandom Marxism,” as they work to create their own environment of producing and receiving, returning to the “scattered state” with respect to corporations and forming their own communities. There are no pressures on what stories can be told—pressure manufactured by the capitalist push for marketability and sales figures. Rather, any person can make anything that is true to them. This fandom Marxism pushes back against the popular tendency of the concentration of capital in the hands of fewer and fewer producers, which creates a one sided relationship.

This one sided relationship is explored from a different angle when considering transformative literature’s cultural status. Transformative work is often considered

derivative, and demeaned as such. Some suggest that authors of transformative work are just riding on the successful coattails of others, shamelessly borrowing other creators' work in lieu of doing any creative work of their own. This seems to be the position of Anne Rice, author of *Interview with the Vampire*. Rice was famously against fan fiction, stating on her website "I do not allow fan fiction. The characters are copyrighted. It upsets me terribly to even think about fan fiction with my characters. I advise my readers to write your own original stories with your own characters" (Anne Rice). This position, which privileges the author and their interpretation over the reader, is not necessarily universal, however, as Neil Gaiman demonstrates. Gaiman, who himself wrote at least two instances of what he considers Sherlock Holmes fan fiction, responded to a fan online that making interpretations and leaps beyond what the author said or intended "is the fun of fanfiction, and part of the tradition of fanfiction... The point is Fanfiction exists so that you can imagine, enjoy and fill in the gaps. The point is that you can change things and have fun with them" (neil-gaiman).

Regardless, fan fiction is not generally considered a highbrow art form. Yet it is not precisely lowbrow either; transformative literature ends up somewhere in the middle. This is muddied even further by the nuances within transformative literature as a meta-genre: some transformative literature can receive higher acclaim by virtue of being published, of seeing acceptance, that other fan fiction may not. This suggests that there is an element of prestige to the act of becoming published, of being validated; that a published work possesses some inherently "good" quality. The term middlebrow is often applied with scorn, marking it with the same derision often afforded transformative works. In his essay *Masscult & Midcult* Dwight Macdonald decries the supposed deterioration of art through a perceived lowbrow mass media, which he terms masscult, and its middlebrow counterpart he terms midcult. Macdonald claims "[in] Masscult the trick is plain—to please the crowd by

any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them” (Macdonald 38). This is prefaced by Macdonald’s earlier criticizing masscult’s “impersonality and its lack of standards, and ‘total subjection to the spectator’” (Macdonald 7). The connection to transformative work is evident, as one could equally argue that all fan fiction can do is claim to desperately appeal to the High Culture it is drawn from, working at a pale imitation while basely catering to the reader.

However, I argue that Highbrow and Lowbrow can be deconstructed with application of Death of the Author. Part of the upholding of the author figure is the idea that there is a “good” or “bad” interpretation of the work, a “correct” or “incorrect” viewpoint. I believe that there has been a subconscious construction of the idea that this ability to read art “correctly” has shaped communal understandings of highbrow and lowbrow. When an author creates an original work, or engages in transformation that is deemed acceptable, they are validated in a way that does not occur if the transformation is deemed derivative or transgressive—those categories belong to the lowbrow. There is a suggestion that because the author then writes the lowbrow, they are lacking a certain sophistication—which is to say, there may be an unconscious coupling of assuming that all “derivative” work is a lesser form of writing, and that therefore the writer cannot rise above such things. While I do believe that some transformative work is just better written than others, as there is a sliding scale of quality to all art, transformative work as a genre and meta-genre is not inherently lesser.

Macdonald argues that “Masscult is bad in a new way... it is non-art, it is anti art” (Macdonald 4). Masscult and Midcult, to Macdonald, are pieces of media intended to entertain or distract the broadest audience possible rather than to stand on their own artistic grounds. Macdonald makes a distinction between Masscult and Folk Art, which

Macdonald holds as the alternative to High Culture; Macdonald sees Folk Art as authentic and genuine, despite not being High Culture. These conditions that Macdonald describes, however, are not the fault of the individual or the fault of society, but a natural failing of capitalism. Through the lens of *The Communist Manifesto*, media production is becoming more and more consolidated into fewer and fewer hands. Companies such as Disney, whose ultimate purpose is to make money, will naturally choose “safe” products that are ensured to sell to a society, regardless of their capability to create “high art.” Macdonald cites this trend of making “safe” art back to the eighteenth century, where trends in consumption were transitioning towards a culture where “the question was not how good the work is, but how popular it will be” (Macdonald 19). The masscult is the safer choice because at the same time the individuals of society are being coerced into becoming a “mass man,” as Macdonald states, a body devoid of individualism (Macdonald 11). These two problems of middlebrow culture are addressed by the fandom Marxist approach.

The fan is liberated from the gatekeeper—in this case a producer who holds a monopoly, such as Disney— through transformative work. Middlebrow, far from being the thing that destroys culture, offers the writer a space to establish identity through their active interpretation of other works. This too relies on the notion that the author is dead; the reader is free to compost their corpus to create stories anew. *New Yorker* writer Macy Halford writes that middlebrow’s virtues are that it is

[D]evoted to the high but also to making it accessible to many; to bringing ideas that might remain trapped in ivory towers and academic books, or in high-art (or film or theatre) scenes, into the pages of a relatively inexpensive periodical that can be bought at bookstores and newsstands across the country (and now on the Internet). (Halford)

It is perhaps ironic to note that Macdonald himself was a writer for the *New Yorker*, an ostensibly middlebrow publication as described by Halford. Transformative literature often interacts with what society considers high culture, but does not necessarily proclaim to be so itself. It can reach so, at times—such as the case with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a transformation of the *Odyssey*— but even those cases are shaped by larger societal forces such as status and privilege. It could be argued that Joyce had built his reputation already as a successful author before engaging in transformation, though it could also be true that some subjects are simply more acceptable subjects for transformation.

In the case of the Greek canon, it may be true that it is old enough, widespread enough in the West, and has already undergone such a long history of adaptation and transformation that the Greek myths may be, in a sense, ownerless. The lack of an author figure to claim them—or an author figure whose wishes or opinions can be held against transformation—may then make transformation more permissible in the eyes of the general public. This could explain the lowbrow connotation to fanfiction written about still-ongoing modern media, given the presence of the author figure, while upholding adaptations such as *Ulysses*. This theory also suggests that the path to a larger appreciation for transformative work is merely time, and that as time passes and more transformations are enacted, it becomes more accepted.

Building on the communal aspect of transformative literary storytelling, it is important to note how intertextual and interconnected transformative communities are. As fandom Marxism collapses the boundary between reader and writer in the production and reception of texts, Professor Cornel Sandvoss argues that “the textual field in which the individual text is positioned will allow the reader to construct different meanings” (Sandvoss 66). As I have said previously, transformative literature is a meta-genre of literature that is composed of as many contradictions as it is similarities. Sandvoss strives to

understand where the concrete aesthetic value of transformative work lies and ultimately cannot, stating “the empirical study of fan audiences over the past two decades has indisputably documented the absence of universal and inherent aesthetic values of texts” (Sandvoss 73). This is because transformative literature exists in multiplicity, responding and reacting to other fans and transformations as fast as they can be created. This is not a failing of the meta-genre, but should be celebrated in the same way that the intertextuality of comparative literature is celebrated.

To help ground the above theory, I offer an example of a transformative work and some cursory analysis. The excerpt I examine is taken from *Foreign Object*, a 2016 fan fiction written by author audreycritter, working out of the *Batman* comics published by DC. In this fan fiction, Bruce Wayne, the Batman, has learned that he has a brain tumor and is grappling with what it may mean for him and his family. In this particular scene, Barbara Gordon—known most famously as Batgirl, though here in her later identity as Oracle—is driving Bruce to the hospital for the operation to remove the tumor. The referenced characters include standard characters of the *Batman* and larger DC Comics mythos, predominantly Bruce’s family:

Her relationship with Bruce is not like the rest of the family’s. Somewhere, over time, Barbara has stopped being one of the kids and has become a peer. Even Dick is still navigating that journey and she isn’t sure he’ll ever make it all the way. After all, a son is a son, and Barbara has only been *like* a daughter. She has her own father to hide things from. And for the younger squad, the boundary lines are drawn in separate, wandering places.

Somehow, she’s ended up in the middle. Privy to the kids’ opinions and heartbreaks, able to talk to Bruce like an equal. And that’s why it is falling to

her to deal with this, after spending half the night on her phone, texting Jason, texting Tim, trying to get Dick to answer, checking on Cass, confirming with Alfred that Damian was in his bed, gently handling Stephanie's frustrated and confused ranting, complete with tears, in the kitchen over a mango smoothie. And since she knows from Clark that Bruce got to vent, and that vacant look isn't in his eyes anymore, it's time to set some things straight. (audreycritter)

This scene demonstrates the writer's active and intertextual read of Barbara Gordon as a character, drawing on a framework of Death of the Author and fandom Marxism as the author creates and extends threads of character development from the comic canon. The character Barbara Gordon debuted in 1967 as Batgirl, a sidekick to Batman and foil to Robin. Barbara would be Batgirl until 1988, where she would lose the use of her legs and become the superhero Oracle. Barbara would return to the mantle of Batgirl and regain the use of her legs in 2011 following a company-wide reboot that saw DC reset many characters. *Foreign Object* was published in 2016, five years after Barbara's paralysis was undone, but the author chooses to maintain Barbara's paralysis. The restoration of Barbara to Batgirl was criticized at the time as the erasure of a prominent disabled superhero, and many fan authors choose to keep Barbara in her Oracle role, despite her being Batgirl for many years longer in her total publishing history. One cannot argue that the author is merely writing for a different time period in the Batman canon where Barbara had yet to regain the use of her legs, as Jason is referenced as an involved member of the family. Jason was a villain during the period when Barbara was Oracle, with Jason only returning as an ally after the 2011 reboot when Barbara would have regained the use of her legs. All this to say, the author is specifically and totally rejecting an "approved" understanding of Barbara Gordon as a character, refusing the original author's intent in favor of the relationship mediated by

audreycritter's understanding of the character. This understanding, too, is shaped by the fan community's mutual understanding of the character. The authors stake a claim on these characters despite not being in any way empowered by DC Comics to have ownership, seizing her own means of production. The author invokes the "official" characterizations and her knowledge of plot details with ease, drawing on Jenkins and poaching what is needed without regard for an initial author to craft an entirely new story that expands beyond the limits of comics. Comics, as a genre, are also not historically regarded as a highbrow form. Rather, they were seen as common, mass market media—the sort of thing Macdonald would decry. However, in this work, the author is taking what may not be considered highbrow and applying their literary prowess in a way that is unquestionably literary and sophisticated. At this point in the story, 20,582 words into an 86,112 word fan fiction, the author has done nothing but literary character analysis. The central conflict—that the Batman has a brain tumor—still has yet to be directly addressed. The author navigates over eighty years of characterization for these characters, guided by different authors and editorial teams, and creates cohesive characters who interact with one another in all new ways to tell new stories.

Transformative literature offers a style of writing that is beholden to nothing and open to everyone. The act of writing transformative literature is exceptional in of itself for the unique exercise of navigating the relationship of many creators and many texts. That this is a style of writing democratically open to everyone is also essential to understanding the project and trends of transformative literature, because those who are marginalized or cannot see themselves in mainstream publication will find themselves liberated in transformative literature's subversion of the literary gatekeeper.

## **Chapter II: An (Abridged) History of Transformative Literature**

It would be impossible to pinpoint when transformative work first began to be written. Transformative works have been happening as long as people have been sharing stories. In pre-modernity, stories were held in common and told repeatedly by different storytellers, with the recipient of the story becoming part of its existence. As Anne Jamison, an associate professor at the University of Utah describes, “reworking an existing story... was *the* model of authorship until very recently” (Jamison 18). Even the stories of Homer, a figure held up as one of the great composers of the Western canon, are not entirely unique to him. Homer drew upon a larger canon of Ancient Greek mythology and cultural references to write— or perhaps more precisely compose and recite— such classics as the *Iliad*.

It is worth noting that pre-modern literature such as the *Iliad*, or even later work such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, could potentially be understood as transformative, but not precisely fan fiction as we know it today, despite seemingly meeting the criteria. Transformative work and fan fiction exist in a particular space with relation to copyright laws, and they speak back to the idea of singular authorship or ownership that is perpetuated by such laws. Homer and Dante did not need to seek permission to use the mythologies present in their societies to craft their works, as there was not a notion of Greek or Christian mythologies belonging to any one person. This does not disqualify their stories from being transformative, as there does not have to be an owner to rebel from in creating transformation in the way fan fiction requires an owner that the fan is defying. There was no intellectual property declaring one interpretation to be supreme with all others derivative, there was just a dominant story told and upheld through their resonance with their audience. The stories those two authors told took place in the context of an environment of more collaborative storytelling, and made stories that were transformative to the pre-

existing canons. This perspective is valuable because it speaks against an idea of singular understanding, which in turn speaks against the ethos of singular ownership supported by modern copyright laws— this is echoed by the notion that transformative work is a corollary to a modern folklore system, told and retold stories held in common. In another aspect, transformative work speaks to an equality of writing, where anyone is capable of becoming an author and creator. This engages in what I have described as a form of fandom Marxism, drawing on “Textual Poachers” and *The Communist Manifesto*. There is value in inspecting literary works with transformative frameworks in mind, analyzing how written works can often suggest and reflect particular histories and cultures. As explained by Karen Hellekson and Kristen Busse, coeditors of the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*, “fan studies offers a theoretical apparatus that explains much of the appeal of current audience responses... studying them, and even creating them, can tell us much about our culture” (Hellekson and Busse 1). Especially in the cases of stories told and retold—the variations in retelling are often the connective tissue most suggestive of the cultural moment producing the work.

### **The Author vs. The Character: A Study of Doyle**

Investigating the differences between the fan followings of authors Jane Austen and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle provides a glimpse into the transition from early transformative literature, which is harder to quantify, to the modern and more understandable manifestation. Both the works of Austen and Doyle, such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and any of the Sherlock Holmes stories (1887-1927), have long outlasted their authors and been subject to a large amount of transformation. Both of these authors were popular in their time, around the turn of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. But the two authors had a key difference: while fans of Austen “display a reverence around the author herself,”

as Jamison puts it, fans of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories were much more interested in the subject of the stories: Holmes and Watson (Jamison 42). The figure of Sherlock Holmes inspired one of the earliest fandoms organized around a central media character, rather than an author. This dedication to the character was so much so that when Doyle attempted to kill off Holmes in 1893's "The Final Problem," his fans responded in mourning and protest, a large public outcry that would lead to Holmes' eventual reintroduction.

One of the ways that fans protested was by creating their own works out of the Sherlock Holmes mythos, some fans even as noteworthy as J.M. Barrie, who is most famous as the author of *Peter Pan*. Barrie once wrote a short story that describes a scene in which Holmes and Watson meet Barrie and Doyle, the latter of whom is identified as having "taken credit for most of Holmes' own achievements" (Jamison 43). This short story is legally defined as a parody, but through a transformative lens is instantly recognizable as a "self-insert" fan fiction.

This anecdote reveals two things. Firstly, the tropes of transformative writing are not new inventions of the twenty first century, instead being old conventions in new contexts. Self-insert fan fiction, defined by the fan culture site Fanlore as "a practice by authors of writing themselves into their own stories... writing themselves into their favorite source material so that they can interact with canon or its characters" was not specific to Barrie or his time period (Self-insertion). A glimpse at any major fan fiction website shows that the self-insert fan fiction is alive and well today. This is consistent with the idea of transformative work's meta nature as a modern folklore, as transformative work repeats stories and characters and ideas in perpetual conversation with one another, offering audiences new configurations and ways to get through stories that they already know. The joy remains in finding how characters get through the environment from beginning to end, rather than a joy in learning new characters and environments.

The other phenomenon illuminated by the Barrie story, which is crucial to the evaluation of Doyle and Sherlock Holmes in the history of transformative work, is the primacy of the character. Whereas Austen was celebrated specifically as herself and as the author, many fans choose to see Doyle as a mere interlocutor of Holmes' stories. Some fans choose to interpret Sherlock Holmes as a real character, whose adventures are chronicled by a real John Watson, whose writings are merely published by Doyle. This constructed perspective on the Sherlock Holmes mythos is referred to by fans as "The Great Game," and it allows fans who create transformative works a way to engage in the stories as characters themselves (Jamison 8). The fan has been transformed through their belief in the medium into something greater than mere reader, and even more than author— they have entered the canon because the canon is real.

This begins to get into the question of why people create transformative work. In broad strokes, it is often because people love something and want to see more of it, or they dislike something and feel they could have done it better. Jenkins suggests that the fan "is continuously re-evaluating his or her relationship to the fiction and reconstructing its meanings according to more immediate interests," creating readings that are both in congruence and in opposition with the meanings set by producers (Jenkins 31). The case of Sherlock Holmes was obvious; people mourned his "death" in the streets, and the reader demand was so great that Doyle would later contrive Sherlock's survival to write more stories— or if one believes in the Great Game, that Doyle discovered more of Watson's manuscripts. Under the frameworks of The Great Game and Death of the Author, fans demand Doyle-the-character resurrect Holmes and continue his story while at the same time rejecting Doyle-the-author's wishes. As I will discuss more later, the cost of most media creation creates a barrier to the average fan, if such an avenue is even available. If the fan cannot petition the author for more "official" material, and cannot produce it themselves,

amateur writing is left as the most accessible avenue for creation. This empowers the reader to simultaneously seize a means of production and reception, becoming both reader and author— embracing one of the central dichotomies of transformative work. Doyle even encouraged this, as noted by his approval and appreciation for Barrie's work written about them, and other instances of him responding to fan work. This seems in line with Doyle's desire to rid himself of Sherlock Holmes, accepting his authorial death with the passing of the torch to others.

Doyle's seeming secondary nature to the enduring figure of Sherlock Holmes is monumental in the turn away from such author figures as Austen. Especially through the lens of the Great Game, the author was only as valuable as he could bring more Sherlock Holmes stories to the mass market. Accompanying this transition came a steady flow of transformative works centered around the character, and the authors of this transformative work began to engage in conversation both with the producer of the media— Sir Arthur Conan Doyle— and each other via correspondence. This was unusual for the time, but began to lay the groundwork for modern transformative work as we now know it: a genre defined by its relationships. Transformative work thrives on its ability to exist in conversation with its source material, but also its relationship with other transformative material that has sprung from the same source. Fans who are readers who are authors consume and respond to each other's work, just as they do the source, and this interconnection is a crucial foundation for understanding modern transformative work.

The transformative works centered on the character almost require a form of literary analysis: understanding what motivates a character, being able to think of how a character would react in a certain situation, even convincingly writing dialogue requires an understanding of the character. This requires a scrutiny on the character that is first seen in

its full intensity with regard to Sherlock Holmes, but he certainly was not the last character to fall under this gaze.

### **Enter Star Trek and the Zine Transition**

If the Sherlock Holmes era of the late 1800s established a fandom and literary interest around specific characters, the culture of the mid to late 1900s established the primacy of interest around those specific characters and their media as what we refer to today as fandom. As these fandoms continued to develop and create transformative work, the transformative work took on a meta-following, and a fandom coalesced around the creation of transformative work itself.

To trace the development of modern fandom, its transformative work, and the cultures around both, one cannot escape discussion of *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* was an American television program centered around the space-set adventures of the *USS Enterprise*, helmed by Captain James T. Kirk, his first officer the Vulcan half-alien Mr. Spock, and an assorted crew. In the wake of its 1966 premier *Star Trek* would eventually gain a large following. Notably, as documented by many fan historians including Jacqueline Lichtenburg, this fandom following was largely women. This was at odds with the conventional fans of science fiction at the time, who were predominantly men.

As the following around *Star Trek* began and continued to grow, a corresponding shift began in the way people consumed media. In the time of Doyle or Austen, as noted by Jamison, actually owning novels was not common due to the price of printing and binding books (Jamison 6). This led to the serial publication of Sherlock Holmes stories, which prioritized a form of short form storytelling in the context of a larger magazine. This seems like a natural precursor to the zine— a fan created magazines about a specific topic that were widely distributed through both the mail and fan conventions (History of Media Fanzines).

Similar to traditional magazines in many aspects, the key feature of the zine was its standing outside of “traditional” publishing, with all work for it being done by the fans who wrote and read them. Zines had long existed before *Star Trek*, but past zines had generally focused more on genre than any particular piece of media. That is to say, whereas before *Star Trek* someone may have gone out and gotten a zine about the general genre of science fiction, in a post-*Star Trek* world one could go out and find a zine that dealt with *Star Trek* exclusively. The zine had been focused, and just as a transition had happened from genre to character, media consumption had moved from specified genre to a particular fandom.

As this turn was happening, another major turning point in the history of transformative work—and transformative literature in particular—was occurring. As zines began to grow as the media they were based on grew in popularity, they increased a person’s ability to create fiction— fan fiction— and put it out into the world for others to read at a relatively low cost. In the past, in cases like Sherlock Holmes, while people would create their own transformative stories, it was often the case that the writers would then write to Doyle asking for his approval, or if he could turn their stories into a “true” Sherlock story. Even the case of J. M. Barrie is one where his fic is privileged by his status as another contemporary author and peer of Doyle. In both of these cases, the fan fiction does not see wide distribution unless it is privileged, reflecting again on the nature and realities of printing at the time. Zines as they were before *Star Trek*, being more general to genre, did not generally work with or focus on fan created fiction, instead preferring non-fiction that intersected with fan’s interests. This is in line with one of the earlier definitions of “fan fiction,” being stories *about* fans rather than being ones created by fans that were about particular media or fandoms (Hellekson and Busse 5). With zines, fans now had a place not only where they could put their work, but also a place where they could find others who had similar interest in the stories being told.

This leads to a key point in the argument for the application of lenses of transformative work to other literatures, and an argument for the literary value of transformative literature in its own right: as fan fiction becomes more specific, more focused on a particular piece of media, it comes more often than not with a particular scrutiny on the characters, world, and themes of the media. For people to then create transformative work, and especially transformative literature, requires a level of active interrogation with the text akin to literary analysis. The written fan fiction then becomes a form of literary criticism, taking another story apart and looking at each piece separately. The transformative author can put the original work back together in new ways or configurations that draw out themes or subtext within the text, or create new material entirely based on the author's judgment on what could or should have been.

In this way, the fan fiction writer traverses the line that is created in traditional publishing between most readers and writers, where the writer is in a separate sphere, engaging more one directionally with their readership. The creator of transformative literature is both writer and reader: reader of the media of which they are creating the transformative work, and likely a reader of other people's transformative literatures and fan fictions.

This community aspect that is exemplified by zines, that the writer is a reader of other fan fictions and transformative literatures, is an important note to consider in understanding transformative work as a body to be defined by its relationships. Jacqueline Lichtenburg, a *Star Trek* fan, described how she had in the early 1970s "a vision of an interactive world... where fiction creators get feedback from fiction consumers and all participate in the creation of the stories" (Jamison 99). This vision would come to fruition; Lichtenburg was the author of not only a widely popular fan study book that introduced many to *Star Trek* and its fandom, but also a popular running *Star Trek* fan fiction series

that would be published in zines (Jacqueline Lichtenburg). This dream of interaction within texts is the central theme of transformative literature, that these works exist in conversation with one another. However, Lichtenburg's experiences also reveal the interconnectedness of the fan fiction writers' community, facilitated by the zine culture that had risen.

Lichtenburg's "Recollections of a Collating Party," as recounted by Jamison, portrays an environment of women working on the communal creation and cataloging of zines, printing and binding them before distributing them through the mail. It is impossible to read Lichtenburg's "Recollections" without considering the gendered dynamic, perhaps obviously, at the forefront— that all these women at the collating party were *women*. This is not an insignificant fact, recalling that science fiction, pre-*Star Trek*, was not a genre occupied by women in large numbers (Jenkins 41). However, the party shows that if nothing else, the women were interested in *Star Trek* and in sharing the stories that the community was telling. These women were not doing mere grunt work for other men, sorting and stapling the pages of the zines—while there were certainly male members of *Star Trek* fandom, this was a woman's enterprise and community.

This returns to the question 'why write fic?' There is love for the media, for the medium, enough love that women are willing to balance the demands of 1970's femininity— Lichtenburg describes managing her children and husband at the same time as the collating party— while doing the passion project of creating zines. Transgressive for their interest despite their gender, Lichtenburg goes on to recall how they discussed sex and sexuality, "a topic that printed science fiction barely touched on at the time" (Jamison 94). This too speaks to the zine— and the zine culture's— power as a form of publishing and communication beyond traditional boundaries.

All of Lichtenburg's "Recollections of a Collating Party" continue to illuminate the fandom Marxist approach and its effects. Jamison describes how "fan fiction zine culture

[took] off as the production costs of television and movies— the works that increasingly inspired fic— skyrocketed,” reflecting a growing trend where the creation of original material became more and more inaccessible to everyday people (Jamison 104). This follows from the novel’s history of being too expensive for common readers, leading to the need for serialized publishing; television shows cannot be made by everyday people, leading them to create zines using the worlds and characters they already care for or believe need more attention. Lichtenburg describes a model in which people mailed in the stories they wrote themselves, where those stories were collected and then sent out in zine format with directories so that fans could find the authors who created the works. This newly formed environment, a sort of semi-permeable ecosystem, had returned the power and means of production to the consumer. This furthers the social environment that melds the reader and writer into one body—as described by Jenkins, “fan reading... is a social process” (Jenkins 39). The fans who read the works of others then go on to create more, “[providing] a foundation for future encounters with the fiction, shaping how it will be perceived” (Jenkins 39). There was a lack of a gatekeeper that would have turned away the discussion and material related to sexuality that the zines permitted, because the zine’s only audience was the fans themselves. Suddenly transformative literature was not only a mode of self expression, not just a form of literary analysis, but a statement of egalitarianism against capitalist systems.

### **The Internet and its Impact**

This egalitarianism would only continue with the arrival of the internet, and its near-immediate impact on fandom, transformative work, and fan fiction. Of course, it must be noted here that this equality only extended to those who had internet access, something

perhaps easily taken for granted today by many, but must be understood as a privilege— in particular a privilege decided by class.

If zine culture was predicated on fans being able to write and publish their transformative literatures directly to an audience of fans equally interested in their specific writing, the internet was a natural and radical expansion of that culture. No longer did fans have to hunt through directories within zines to call or mail with authors, paying for postage and the costs of the physical material. People in areas that did not have regular conventions or fan meet-ups no longer had to worry about missing community. Those with email could now receive updates of fan fiction in regular lists from dedicated fan fiction archives and websites that had sprung up. The two mediums saw different readerships and different philosophies, with long-time fan Judith Gran reflecting

[T]he net community [is] egalitarian and communitarian. Communication on the net is immediate, highly interactive, and non-hierarchical. As a result, net fiction tends to be idea-driven, collaborative and interactive... the printzine medium is hierarchical and individualistic. Writing is a more a solitary pursuit, [sic] with reinforcement tending to come from editors and the small number of readers who write reviews. (Zines and the Internet)

This perspective highlights several aspects of the differences between zine and internet culture from the point of view of someone undergoing the shift in real time. Gran comments on the non-hierarchical nature of the internet, which is true in comparison to zine culture. As she mentions, zines had editors and gatekeepers that would control what was published in zines—what content and of what quality. These editors were fans themselves, and therefore more open than those in traditional publishing, as discussed in the cases of Lichtenberg's collating party. But the internet took that openness and deconstruction of the

editorial literary gatekeeper to the next level, such that anyone with an internet connection could now post transformative literatures and have an audience.

This was not a necessarily well received position, with one other fan commenting that “it's a writer's world, not a reader's. Unlike 'zines, which you pay for and are allowed a certain amount of expectation, Internet fan-fiction comes with no guarantees, no rules, no respect” (Zines and the Internet). Comments such as these are reminiscent of Macdonald crying against the subjugation of literature to Masscult and Midcult. However, this does represent the most liberated form of writing within fan communities that had yet existed, with stories becoming increasingly held in common. Writers are now free to write exclusively to their own taste, and the pleasing of an audience was an entirely secondary concern.

The notion of stories being held in common was facilitated by the internet's instantaneity, and writing challenges and memes began to proliferate. These would be events where groups of writers would be given or decide upon a purpose or theme, and then create transformative work in community, often fan fiction. One common communal writing event that was started in 2003 and continues to this day is Yuletide, “an annual rare-fandoms gift exchange where participants write and receive fan fiction of 1,000 words or more based on their recipient's requested characters” (Yuletide). This indicates a communal desire to see fans and fandom continue to grow, with fans writing with the direct wishes and preferences of other fans in mind. Other challenges could be themed around a particular character or relationship, where fans all work together in a short period of time to produce a large amount of content playing off of the same base idea.

As interactivity between fans grew, so too did opportunities for interactions between fans and the primary creators of the media of which the fans were producing transformative work. One example of this phenomenon was found in the fandom for *Buffy the Vampire*

*Slayer*, a television show created and produced by Joss Whedon. *Buffy* centered around the titular protagonist, Buffy Summers, and her gang of friends as they fought vampires and other supernatural forces. The show was very popular across its seven seasons, and was especially notable for its progressive themes, including their trailblazing portrayal of main character Willow Rosenberg in a lesbian relationship. Not only was the content of the show ever-pushing towards modernity, the show's network pushed the fan community into what was then still new territory by having an "interactive comment zone" on the series' official web page (Jamison 131).

This forum was a dedicated place for fans to speak to one another, facilitated by the powers that be—the direct producers of *Buffy*. Indeed, Joss Whedon and other show executives were often on the forums, providing fans in this new frontier not only a way to talk among each other, but have direct access to the greater means of cultural production. Forum members expressed "a sense that fans, Joss and co., and Buffy herself were fighting common (metaphorical) demons," where even the creators and writers recursively participated in the ecosystem that flattened the writer and reader into a single body (Jamison 132). This calls back to Jacqueline Lichtenburg's quote, envisioning "a vision of an interactive world" (Jamison 99). There was a heightened sense of a fan's ability to take control of the reception of their own fandom, both through the increased interactivity among other fans and the greater ability to speak to the producers. Jamison posits that it was through fan feedback facilitated by the online forum that Whedon continued on specific plotlines, such as the aforementioned lesbian relationship with Willow (Jamison 133).

Of course, as Jenkins states, "controlling the means of cultural reception, while an important step, does not provide an adequate substitute for access to the means of cultural production and distribution" (Jenkins 28). The same is true for fan access to the producers; talking to Joss Whedon was still not the same as being able to write one's own "official"

*Buffy* story. Despite the incredible technological advances, fans were still in the same position as they were when writing letters to Doyle. In this space that had changed so much and so little, transformative works and literature continued to flourish. As discussed above, as zines began to lose their monopoly on the publishing of fan fiction, authors suddenly found themselves no longer vying for limited page space in specific magazines.

Transformative literature online was often lamented for decreasing quality as more and more people wrote more and more fic without any gatekeepers (Concrit). However, despite the equality of access and production that this stage of literature represents, human nature seemingly decrees that some will always declare themselves arbiters of taste and quality, and fans in transformative communities are no exception.

The wider field of created content creates fertile ground for these self-proclaimed arbiters to share their opinions, sometimes to dramatic results. Fans, noted for their capacity to organize into groups for writing and mutual interest, can equally organize into brigades interested in policing other fans' behavior. This infighting is sometimes referred to as "discourse," "fandom wank," or simply "wank" (Wank). The group Warriors for Innocence were one such group that targeted fans in a "purity wank" campaign on the online blogging platform Livejournal in the early 2000s (Warriors for Innocence). The organization took issue with "homosexuality, pedophilia and incest" in fandom spaces, and actively hunted and reported fans and communities deemed to be promoting such topics (Warriors for Innocence). While there is near universal agreement that pedophilia and incest are reprehensible, and I make no efforts to try to argue otherwise, the wank entered a state of discourse on two issues. Firstly, there is a long term discourse amongst fans about the connection between fiction and reality, and about whose responsibility it is to separate the two. Some take the position that to write fic with a topic such as incest is to condone it, while others argue that artistic expression is not the same as endorsement. The second issue

was that Warriors for Innocence reported things they deemed morally objectionable on the grounds of simply referencing the objectionable content. There was not always great care taken in evaluating the portrayal or discussion of the objectionable content before it was reported. Communities that wrote about their experiences surviving sexual abuse were reported for having content related to sexual abuse, despite the fact that they were absolutely in no way promoting it. The relative openness about sex and sexuality reflected in the zine era and remembered by Lichtenburg had hit the consequence of full openness once the zine editors were no longer there controlling what materials made it into the larger fandom ecosystem. With openness came vulnerability to backlash.

The campaign against content deemed objectionable came to a head with the event referred to by fans as “Strikethrough,” and the subsequent follow-up event “Boldthrough.” Some fans group the two events together due to their similarity and chronological proximity—for ease, I will be doing the same. Strikethrough occurred May 29th, 2007, and saw the Livejournal platform permanently suspend over five hundred users, particularly those who interacted in communities previously noted and campaigned against for objectionable content. As reported by Fanlore, “Among the deleted ljs were RPG journals, book discussion groups, rape survivor blogs, and fannish groups” (Strikethrough and Boldthrough). Fans directly connected the reporting and gatekeeping of other fans to the event, citing purity culture and “antis” who were opposed to certain content as the catalyst or perpetrator.

Almost immediately after Strikethrough came renewed calls for fans to take control of their platforms such that they could not be targeted for the works they create. Presciently, several weeks before Strikethrough on March 17th, 2007, the fan astolat posted about the need for “a central archive of our own... run BY fanfic readers FOR fanfic readers” (astolat). astolat would detail further their vision for this archive, with proposals such as the archive

being run without advertisers to preclude pressures on what could or could not be written, and a tagging system to empower the reader to find a written work and know general information about the contents. This post and the conversation it generated, with the near immediate impact of Strikethrough, dramatically underscored the need of fans to seize upon their fannish means of production for their own protection and perpetuity.

Thus, the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) was born. Officially filed as a U.S. nonprofit on September 5th, 2007, the OTW was created “by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms and to advocate for fans who need assistance when faced with legal issues or media interest due to their fannish pursuits” (Organization for Transformative Works). Projects of the OTW include Fanlore, the fannish wiki and encyclopedia where fans document fan history, culture, and events; *Transformative Works and Cultures*, a peer-reviewed academic journal for fan studies; and the Archive of Our Own (AO3), the fan fiction archive proposed by astolat that developed on their ideas and those of many other fans (Organization for Transformative Works). The work of the OTW continues to this day, and is a central pillar of modern online fan activity and transformative work.

For the purposes of this thesis, most of my academic work and sources will be using resources in some way connected to the Organization for Transformative Works. I view them at the forefront of fan culture for a variety of reasons. A search on the AO3 to sort all fics yields 8,479,536 results. Since the archive’s inception in 2007, that’s over half a million fics per year being written, indicating that fans have an active home at the AO3. This is not to discount other fan fiction and transformative work archives and websites like fanfiction.net or Wattpad. However, the projects of the OTW have an interconnectedness and intentionality that suits it for academic work. The tags and filters within the AO3 are sophisticated and informative, and the AO3 itself occasionally releases data dumps for fan

statisticians to be able to analyze trends. The existence of the *Transformative Works and Cultures* journal indicates the OTW's support of fan scholarship, and provides a framework for fans to both publish their work and engage in academia within communities. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* is published through support of the Organization for Transformative Works, edited by members of *Transformative Works and Cultures* to help make foundational fan studies works more accessible. Additionally, all of these initiatives are actively updated and maintained—still with the original decree of by fans for fans. This is the ultimate expression of my theory of transformative work being a platform for a sort of fandom Marxism—fans who lack the means of production of the media they like in traditional venues find ways to create their own means, keeping it in their own fannish ecosystem where the fans become producers and receivers.

### **Chapter III: The *Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles***

The *Iliad* inhabits a special place in the Western canon. It is one of our oldest stories, transmitted from Ancient Greece, centering on the legendary Trojan War, and more specifically, the hero Achilles and his actions in the tenth year of the war. The *Iliad* is unquestionably part of the Western literary landscape, and both its age and long shadow over the canon make it ripe for analysis under a transformative lens. While I will analyze the *Iliad* as a transformative piece itself—showing how histories of transformation are not modern trends—I will then contrast the *Iliad* to *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller's 2012 novel. *The Song of Achilles* centers around the relationship between Achilles, the *Iliad*'s ostensible protagonist, and Patroclus, a character whose impact in the initial *Iliad* is brief but great. By contrasting to two works, it becomes clear how transformative literature can center queer and feminist themes in a canon characterized by normative, usually heterosexual men. Transformative work can reveal the inherency of those themes, even when those same normative authors are blind to them in their own creation.

Setting the stage for the *Iliad*, the Trojan War was precipitated by the Trojan prince Paris' absconding with Helen, wife of Menelaus, one of the Greek kings. Menelaus vows to get Helen back, and he calls upon alliances to gather an army of Greeks under his brother, Agamemnon, himself the king of the Achaeans. The Greeks launch a fabled thousand ships for Troy, where they are met in combat by the Trojan warriors, chief among them the prince Hector, who is favored by the god Apollo, and Paris, favored by Aphrodite. However, the Greeks have their own epic heroes, with the most powerful being the demigod Achilles, born of the mortal man Peleus and the goddess Thetis. Achilles fights the Trojans until one day Chryseis, the daughter of the priest Chryses, is taken captive by the Greeks and given to Agamemnon as a war prize. Chryses appeals to Apollo, who sends a plague onto the Greeks. Achilles convinces Agamemnon to return Chryseis, but in return takes Achilles' own war

prize, a woman named Briseis. In anger, Achilles refuses to fight until Briseis is returned to him, and crucially, until Agamemnon has seen the arrogance of his ways paid in the blood of the Greeks. Achilles' absence gives Hector the opportunity to press the front lines until the Greeks are pinned against their own ships, leading Patroclus, Achilles' companion, to beg Achilles to relent. Seeing that he will not, Patroclus dons Achilles' armor to trick the Trojans into thinking that Achilles had rejoined the battle and scare them back to Troy. This works for a short time until Hector comes to confront who he thinks is Achilles, killing Patroclus. Enraged by the death of Patroclus, Achilles brutally slaughters his way to Troy, killing Hector and disgracing his body by dragging it in his chariot back to the Greek camp. Hosting elaborate funeral games for Patroclus, Achilles refuses to bury or honor Hector's body in any way, leaving it out as carrion. Distraught by this, Hector's father, King Priam of Troy, is navigated by the gods to Achilles' tent where he convinces the warrior to return his son's body.

Before discussing and understanding transformations born from the *Iliad*, it is worth discussing how the *Iliad* contains transformative qualities in itself. In the introduction of Robert Fagles' translation of the *Iliad*, Bernard Knox states that "Homer was thus at once contemporary in content and antique in form" (Knox 12). Knox states this in his foreword to Fagles' translation where he discusses Homeric Greek, the language in which the *Iliad* was originally composed—note, not necessarily written. Homeric Greek, as Knox states, is an "artificial, poetic language" that was created and used specifically for the epic poems (Knox 11). Homer used words, phrases, and grammar that were already old in his time, taking possession of them and putting them to themes and stories that would have been relevant to his audience. Knox states that "the language of Homer was one nobody, except epic bards, oracular priests or literary parodists would dream of using" (Knox 11). In other terms, there was a particular storytelling community that took previous conventions and turned them

into a new form, creating a new sort of storytelling culture held within themselves. This new storytelling culture then used these conventions to tell stories in new ways, even if the content of the stories may have been populated with familiar characters—the gods— or ideas—such as warnings against hubris. The language of Homer itself is utterly transformative.

As mentioned previously, it is important to understand the *Iliad* to have been composed, and not necessarily written. Walter Ong cites Robert Wood as “apparently the first” who believed and worked to demonstrate that Homer was not a literate writer, but rather an oral poet (Ong 19). Homer’s prose was recited verbally by the poet to their audience, with the delivery of the poem changing slightly each time. Albert Lord, an academic interested in the oral tradition, suggests that “bards never repeat a song exactly,” and this is especially true in the case of Homer (Lord 125). Milman Parry put forth that the structure of Homer’s verse, the recited hexameter line, was an essential part of how the poem was spoken and received. In Parry’s hypothesis, the oral poet would improvise and vary the epithets iconic to Homer—such as a wine dark sea—as needed to fit the line. This gives rise to the many descriptors populating Homer’s work—the oral poet could improvise as needed if their memory did not perfectly tell the story each time. Indeed, as Lord would argue, to lock the story—or as he calls it, the “song”— in a single form is to do it a disservice. When recited, the song is “a special performance... the singer who dictated it was its “author,” and it reflected a single moment in the tradition. It was unique” (Lord 124). In Parry’s words, “virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition” (Ong 21).

Clearly, the fact that Homer’s poetry is orally composed grounds it in a transformative framework. The poetry, or the song, or the story, is told over and over again with variations by the different authors. These authors take these stories as their own,

adding their own embellishments and flourishes to it, where this transformation is necessarily essential to the recitation of Homer's work. The story lives beyond Homer in a storytelling culture where the Death of the Author seems to be a necessary part of the recitation. Ultimately, even before authors such as Madeline Miller come to the *Iliad*, it is already a transformative text prime for further exploration.

Works such as *The Song of Achilles* continue to exploit the internal transformative potential of the *Iliad* for its storytelling. Seemingly self-evidently, the *Iliad* as a work is very concerned with the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. However, there is some division on how that relationship should be read. Madeline Miller was far from the first person to view Achilles' and Patroclus' relationship as something more than friends. Miller herself notes that she draws her ideas back to those of authors such as Plato, indicating a classical record of interpreting some sort of non-platonic connection between Achilles and Patroclus (Q&A with Madeline Miller). In Bernard Knox's forward to Robert Fagles' translation of the *Iliad*—the edition I am using for this thesis—Knox derides the idea that Achilles and Patroclus had a relationship as a “later Greek idea (for which the text gives no warrant)” (Knox 53). While this is Knox's belief, there is perhaps more within the text that he realizes, which fans are eager to poach a la Jenkins to create their new interpretations. The Death of the Author comes in here too, especially in the face of an authority figure trying to prescribe one meaning to the text—that Achilles and Patroclus were strictly platonic. Within the text, the strongest evidence—or material ripe for fan exploitation—comes from Achilles' reaction to and actions following Patroclus' death. As Achilles hunts down Hector and stands above him, Achilles invokes Patroclus as much as he does his own glory in defeating Hector. Achilles' pride and quest for respect and glory are central to the *Iliad*, and main drivers for his behavior—for him to place Patroclus in that same context suggests a great honoring of his friend. Achilles tells Hector that “the dogs and birds will

maul you, shame your corpse / while Achaeans bury my dear friend in glory,” further linking Achilles’ glory and greatness—by means of his defeat of Hector—with his opinion of Patroclus. Perhaps the most intimate scenes between the two of them, however, appear in the *Iliad* as Patroclus’ ghostly visitation upon Achilles, where he asks that he and Achilles have their bones buried together in a single urn, a request to which Achilles immediately agrees. This could be fertile enough ground for fan readings of a relationship between Achilles and Patroclus—relationships in transformative works can often exist simply for the perceived dynamic, or potential dynamic, of two characters. In this case, the extremity of the emotion displayed by Achilles—the same extreme emotion on to which Miller latched—could be read as enough dynamic potential to warrant a relationship in transformation.

Even deeper than the textual level, evidence for a queer reading of Achilles and Patroclus can be found even in the grammar of the text, providing a lens to examine translation as an act of transformation. As pointed out by the scholar James Davidson, in the scenes where Achilles promises to Patroclus that he will have them buried together, Achilles uses the plural form in Homeric Greek, something Davidson notes is “used to refer to things that come in pairs, like ears, and hands and feet” continuing to imply there is a fundamental inevitability to their relationship, a natural and embodied truth to their being together (Davidson 316). Of course, there is difficulty in carrying over that grammatical, essential paired nature from Homeric Greek to English, as the English language lacks a dual form comparable to that used by Homer. Here, translation as a site of transformation becomes even more valuable to understand. Translation involves preserving nuance and subtleties of a work just as much as it requires general adaptation from one language to another. Professor Shannon Farley suggests that not only is translation a way transformation is enacted upon a text, translation is bound up in the cultural system of its time, influencing how it’s transformed. Farley details her systems theory, where she posits

that all literature exists in “a system of both the texts and the humans who read, write, rewrite, edit, and publish those texts” (Farley). Going further, Farley notes that “when a text is rewritten, it is rewritten to satisfy the requirements of a particular system, in form or in ideology—and often these two things are intertwined” (Farley). This is to say, literature does not exist in a vacuum, and the transformation being done to a work reflects the culture and values of the author doing the transformation. This could begin to explain how Knox, working with Fagles on this translation, could declare that there is no textual evidence for a relationship between Patroclus and Achilles even as there is ample grounds in the text—they translated the *Iliad* in a culture that would not acknowledge the homoeroticism, while a contemporary reader takes it in a context that does permit a more overtly homoerotic reading. One way to translate the relationship out of its grammatical subtext is to merely consign the relationship to other forms of subtext as Fagles did, whether he knew it or not. Or, an author may take the approach Miller did, taking the subtext and making it explicit outside of the grammar.

Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* takes *The Iliad* and domesticates it, grounding the sweeping narrative of epic heroes and deathless gods in a story about two men’s love. From its inception, *The Song of Achilles* was deeply rooted in an ethos of transformative literature. Miller, a classicist out of Brown University, stated that she very deliberately wrote *The Song of Achilles* so that “readers didn’t have to know anything about the *Iliad* to enjoy it” (Q&A with Madeline Miller). This intention, ingrained in the writing by Miller from the beginning, grounds *The Song of Achilles* in one of the chief virtues of transformative writing—increasing accessibility. In her discussion of why she wanted to write *The Song of Achilles* and what motivated her, Miller also states “although Homer tells us *what* his characters do, he doesn’t tell us much of *why* they do it” (Q&A with Madeline Miller). This gap between the stated actions and the psychological depth of the characters

has been a long-recognized source of inspiration for transformative interventions. Of course, one does not need Miller to tell the reader these things—these principles are so ingrained in the work that they are deceptively obvious. In Miller’s reading of the *Iliad* and of Achilles’ relationship with Patroclus, she notes that “the most compelling piece of evidence, aside from the depth of Achilles’ grief, is how he grieves.” This explicit recognition that there greater meaning in actions that can be extrapolated from within the text is deeply transformative, creating a space where an author can create their own understanding of the situation.

Miller buries these transformative principles through the way she structures *The Song of Achilles*, regarding both the organization and content of chapters and the story’s central character. Miller notes that she drew her primary inspiration for *The Song of Achilles* from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but also drew from other ancient writers (Alter). This drawing from other writers was necessary because the events of the *Iliad* are only described from Chapters 25 to 32. Notably, even within that range, the point of view is still limited to Patroclus and his personal experiences, nearly always still in regards to Achilles, who himself is absent for a large part of the *Iliad* after refusing to fight. The larger details and exploits of other warriors detailed in the *Iliad* are concealed from the reader as Miller refuses the omniscient view Homer takes. This continues smaller perspective centers on the sort of domestic life the two built in the war camp, building on the relationship Miller depicts in the preceding chapters. The twenty four chapters before concern themselves with Achilles’ and Patroclus’ meeting, maturation, falling in love, and their decision to go to Troy to fight. Chapter 33, the final chapter, deals with the arrival of Neoptolemus, Achilles’ son, and spans the end of the Trojan War and Achilles’ and Patroclus’ ultimate reuniting in the Underworld. Here, Miller demonstrates the necessary weaving of many different stories and authors into a single coherent narrative—again paralleling many common aspects of

transformative work. Miller makes transformative choices through acts like including the myths of other authors in the novel, and through the referencing of characters by their many names—notably, Neptolemus is often referred to as Pyrrhus. If she was doing a “pure” adaptation, Miller would work near-exclusively with the single text and only include outside detail as necessary. Here, the site of the story has been transformed—now that it is a love story, while Troy and the events of the *Iliad* are the ultimate destination, the plot itself has more room to unfold and exist elsewhere. Miller has taken these stories and made them into her own through her retelling, and she describes her active negotiation of which ones to keep and which ones to not include. Notably, Miller’s Achilles lacks his invincibility and famously fatal heel—Miller cites the absence of this in the *Iliad*, instead noting that in that context “he wasn’t really invincible, just extraordinarily gifted in battle” (Q&A with Madeline Miller). This removal of the heel echoes a larger theme in *The Song of Achilles*—a sort of stripping away of the divine to focus on the more human.

One of *The Song of Achilles*’ running threads is that of humanity and its inherent virtues. This theme of humanity is first and foremost grounded in Miller’s choice of main character: Patroclus. Patroclus, in Miller’s own words, “is not an epic person, the way Achilles is. He’s an ‘ordinary’ man” (Q&A with Madeline Miller). In the context of the story, Patroclus is noted to not be able to achieve greatness, in the way others—like Achilles—can. Chiron, the centaur teacher of Achilles and Patroclus, notes that Patroclus “will never gain fame from [his] fighting... yet it is not beyond [him] to be a competent soldier” (Miller 91). In the *Iliad*, Patroclus is merely that, he is Achilles’ close companion and a soldier who wears Achilles’ armor to deceive the Trojans into thinking that Achilles has rejoined the fighting. Patroclus is not as skilled as Achilles, and is most notable in the *Iliad* for dying and inciting Achilles’ grief and rage such that he actually does rejoin the battle and kills Hector, the Trojan champion and Patroclus’ killer. The fact that Miller makes Patroclus the point of

view character for *The Song of Achilles* speaks then to transformative notions, though this too is bound up in the movement from oral poem to novel.

Another notable change in the way that Miller centers the humanity of her characters in *The Song of Achilles* is by her removal of nearly all the god characters present in the *Iliad*. In the *Iliad*, the Trojan War is one between the gods just as much as it is between mortals, as the gods' interpersonal "overpowering strife broke out in massive war" (Homer 505). Gods such as Aphrodite and Apollo are firmly on the side of the Trojans, while others like Athena favor the Greeks. These gods make frequent appearances in the *Iliad*, impacting the plot directly; in *The Song of Achilles*, the only gods to appear are Thetis, Chiron, Apollo, and Scamander. Of those four, Chiron and Scamander's status as gods are arguably not actually necessary to the story. While it is a mythological fact that Achilles trained with Chiron, placing him in a lineage of Greek mythological heroes such as Heracles to train with the centaur, within the story Chiron could as easily be a human teacher without changing the plot. Scamander, the god of the river at Troy, is in the *Iliad* and Achilles does fight him, but in *The Song of Achilles* he more serves as a symbol for the reader to recognize of how powerful Achilles truly is, and how driven by his rage and grief in his desperate quest of vengeance for Patroclus. In the *Iliad* originally, Homer describes Athena and Poseidon "at [Achilles's] shoulder now and taking human form," helping him fight Scamander (Homer 529). The implication here seems to be that in the *Iliad* Achilles, great as he is, still needs the intervention of the gods to fight a god. However, in *The Song of Achilles*, Scamander's godhood seems nearly irrelevant. Rather, Scamander serves as a representation for Achilles' power overcoming that which should be impossible, defying the bounds of what is human in a way that is explicitly marked as being unsettling. Miller says that after Achilles defeats Scamander, "somewhere, the gods whisper," fearing Achilles' ability to defeat one of their own and the nearly unstoppable threat that represents (Miller 344). The fact that Miller

cites the gods as whispering “somewhere,” rather than citing Mount Olympus, the conventional home of the gods as depicted in the *Iliad*, continues in her pattern to remove the gods from her work and make explicit the divide between the human and divine. Again in his final fight with Hector, Athena is absent in *The Song of Achilles*, not shifting spears and casting illusions to benefit Achilles as she does in the *Iliad*. Here, the fight is decidedly personal. This transformation grounds the powerful, raw humanity of Achilles and makes him more accessible and less mythologized than he is depicted in the *Iliad*. This may be somewhat paradoxical, as his superhuman actions seek to humanize him, but his superhumanity is grounded in his love for Patroclus—something textually beyond the gods, as seen in Achilles’ and Patroclus’ thwarting of Thetis’ designs against them.

There are several instances where in the *Iliad*, the gods directly intervene in the affairs of the mortals and the reader is made aware of it. One such example is in the duel between Paris and Menelaus, two champions put forth to fight as champions for their entire army—the victor of the duel would end the war and bring victory to their respective side. In the *Iliad*, it is clearly shown that Aphrodite intervenes and saves Paris from being killed by the more skillful Menelaus. When Menelaus is choking Paris with the strap of his own helmet, Homer explicitly states that “Aphrodite... snapped the rawhide strap” rather than the strap breaking on its own accord (Homer 141). Paris’ escape from his impending defeat and death is then described such that “Aphrodite snatched Paris away, / easy work for a god, wrapped him in swirls of mist / and set him down in his bedroom” (Homer 141). However, as represented in *The Song of Achilles*, while Paris is still saved by Aphrodite, the mortals have no knowledge of the goddess’ intervention—the strap breaking is chance, and his disappearance is unexplainable. Paris is merely there one moment, gone the next, with no one having any idea of what happened to him. Another moment is when Athena pacifies Achilles to keep him from killing Agamemnon after he had claimed Briseis, a woman given

to Achilles as a war prize, as his own. In the *Iliad*, the scene is described as Athena directly coming down from Olympus and stopping Achilles from drawing his sword against Agamemnon. Athena is described as appearing behind Achilles and having “seized his fiery hair,” stating “I come to check your rage / if only you will yield... stop this fighting, now. Don’t lay hand to sword” (Homer 84). Achilles’ rage is checked by arguing with a god, and Athena’s insistence on not allowing Achilles to get carried away in the moment. Conversely, in *The Song of Achilles* Patroclus sees Achilles reach for his sword, but then states that “[Achilles] stopped himself” (Miller 282). Patroclus confesses that he does not know why Achilles did so—perhaps leaving the door open that Athena did still appear, but only to Achilles—though this is never discussed. Instead, it seems that the burden is placed on humans to live their lives with the knowledge that what they do they do for and to themselves. Though the plague the Greeks suffer early in the *Iliad* is brought in by Apollo, it is a result of their own human selfishness and cruelty. Achilles’ stopping himself from drawing his sword in *The Song of Achilles* is holding himself from murder, but Patroclus notes that “perhaps [Achilles] wanted greater punishment for the king than death” (Miller 282). In this way, Miller has both kept and transformed themes from the *Iliad* into her work—hubris remains a central enemy and precursor of suffering, but with the deliberate removal of the majority of the gods Miller transforms the message into one that even more forcefully drives home that these are human choices that cannot be easily blamed on greater forces. In the *Iliad*, gods do deliberately at times inspire humans to make poor decisions, such as when Zeus sends Agamemnon a dream that falsely promises that he could take Troy if the Greeks attack immediately. In *The Song of Achilles*, though, when Agamemnon claims that “a god must have snatched our wits from us to set us so at odds” (Miller 338). This quote by Agamemnon reads as an excuse for his own actions— while the gods have been absent, Agamemnon’s arrogance and thirst for power has been on full display. This

separation of the human from the divine then contrasts with what Fagles and Knox cite as a central theme of the *Iliad*, where there is a perpetual struggle between mortals and the divine. Some characters, like Achilles, are to embody both the human and superhuman, while others are left to muddle through what free will they have as the gods influence and use mortals for their own ends as often as not.

Perhaps the character transformed by Miller the most, outside of Achilles and Patroclus, is Briseis. In the *Iliad*, Briseis is treated more as a plot object than as a person. She is Achilles' war trophy, his concubine for his leisure. She is taken from him by Agamemnon after Achilles wounds Agamemnon's pride, and her loss incites Achilles' rage and his refusal to fight. Briseis is not given a choice on the matter, nor do the qualities of her character impact the plot in any significant way, save that she was Achilles' property and then was not. Much later in the *Iliad* she is returned to Agamemnon, who swears that "he never mounted her bed, never once made love with her," reinforcing the notion that her sexuality is her defining characteristic (Homer 494). Shortly before, Achilles had lamented "if only Artemis had cut [Briseis] down" so that he could not have claimed her as his prize (Homer 490). Here, Achilles seems to be hoping to shift the blame of the bloodshed caused by his refusal to fight to Briseis—if she had not been his slave, Agamemnon could not have taken her, and Achilles would not have become so enraged. This contrasts with Achilles' earlier assertion that he "loved [Briseis] with all [his] heart," though at the moment Achilles claims this, it is to refuse making up with Agamemnon (Homer 263). Still, Achilles is invoking Briseis to avoid his own culpability. Later, after Briseis has been returned to Achilles, she mourns Patroclus for the kindness that he showed her, but also for his promise that he would help make Briseis Achilles' "lawful, wedded wife" and take her home with him (Homer 498). Briseis' "happy ending" here seems still to be bound up in a relationship with Achilles, her abductor, the man who killed her family, as she recites over Patroclus' body. A

bizarre scene, when take in the single context of the *Iliad*, and one that would require more explanation than the original text offers.

Briseis' total lack of agency and character actually worked in Miller's favor, as the author had a near blank slate to work with to create a compelling character in *The Song of Achilles*. Miller recognized that via transformation, readers could care about Agamemnon's taking of Briseis for Briseis' own sake, rather than for Achilles' wounded ego, and her relationship with Achilles and Patroclus could be further explored. In *The Song of Achilles*, it is Patroclus' idea to take Briseis as a prize when she is put up for claiming by the Greeks. Patroclus suggests this so that she is not taken by Agamemnon; Achilles uses his status to claim her—and later several other women—leaving them in their own tent while he and Patroclus share Achilles'. Though this does not eliminate Briseis' being men's property, Miller has already intervened to reduce the implication of a life of perpetual sexual violence. In this space and freedom Briseis has been granted, she develops a friendship with Patroclus, who makes an effort to know her. They exchange language, and she teaches him to forage for local plants and herbs that are useful for medicine. Rather than being in love with Achilles, after some time with Patroclus she develops some feelings for him, though he turns her down due to his relationship with Achilles. When Patroclus asks Achilles if he has ever found Briseis sexually desirable, Achilles is less than affirmative, thinking it "good" that she does not wish to have a child with him, but jealous that she may desire Patroclus (Miller 269). Briseis here is framed now as a woman with her own desires that are affected by Achilles and Patroclus' plot but not dictated by them—her feelings for Patroclus come from his genuine efforts at building a relationship, not from a promise that he would marry her to Achilles. As Briseis and Patroclus contemplate what it would mean if the Trojans overrun the Greek encampment, it is Briseis who offers to claim Patroclus as her husband in an attempt to spare him as Patroclus realizes "the Trojans are liberators to her, not invaders"

(Miller 312). This exchange acknowledges Briseis' culture and context before she was in the Greek camp, as well as provides the reminder that she is not powerless, merely held in a situation that decontextualizes her.

Briseis continues to have new agency in *The Song of Achilles* that was not present in the *Iliad* in the scenes after Patroclus' body is brought back. In *The Song of Achilles*, rather than immediately giving the speech on how she loved Patroclus as the "dearest joy of her heart," she instead silently sobs over the body (Homer 497). Briseis' personal grief simmers until Achilles finds her cleaning Patroclus' body, at which she explodes on Achilles, telling him that he was "the one who made him go... [Patroclus] fought to save you, and your darling reputation" (Miller 340). If the central theme of the *Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles* is a warning against the self-possessed hubris of caring too much for one's reputation and legacy, here is a character directly calling Achilles out for that hubris. Importantly, Miller gave this address to Briseis, the character who put the entire plot in motion. While in the *Iliad* she was objectified to an excuse to be invoked by Achilles and Agamemnon, in *The Song of Achilles* she is empowered to speak back against Achilles.

Reviewing *The Song of Achilles* with its transformations, one can begin to examine where transformation and notions of quality begin and end. It seems more than evident that *The Song of Achilles* is a transformative work, adapting the *Iliad* and other Greek sources for Miller's story. At the same time, *The Song of Achilles* was awarded the 2012 Women's Prize for Fiction, known previously as and awarded under the name of the Orange Prize. Under Dwight Macdonald's conceptions of Masscult and Midcult, Miller's work in *Song of Achilles* could be considered derivative, appealing to "greater" work and coasting on Homer's own achievement. Achilles and Patroclus are not her characters, and even she admits her debt to the homosexual readings done by other interpreters over time. One could make the argument that Miller's only achievement was putting other people's ideas in a new

order. But that achievement is artistry in of itself, the navigating and negotiating of the history of literature that has come before. As Farley points out, “the bulk of mainstream criticism of fan fiction—that it is “unoriginal” and “stealing”— could be, but never is, leveled at Vergil, Pope, or Fagles,” these translators who enact changes on the text and claim the work as their own through means of translation—another form of transformation, as discussed. The awarding of the Women’s Prize, a national British book award, goes to show that Miller’s work—transformative work—is recognized as its own achievement. There is recognition for the storytelling, the artistry of writing compelling characters grounded in rich history that evokes a broad and deep reader response. This reader response manifests in a variety of ways, but especially notable is Miller’s impact on how Homer’s work is continued to be perceived.

#### **Chapter IV: Fan Fiction and Transformative Literature**

In the introduction to this thesis, I stated that while the terms “transformative literature” and “fan fiction” may be used interchangeably, there is some difference in them. This difference is largely intuitive to those who exist in what Professor Farley notes is the “fandom subculture,” but it is enough to understand that there is a difference between the transformative writing of Madeline Miller and fan fiction of the *Iliad* published on the AO3 (Farley). On this subject, and particularly this gap between transformative work and fan fiction, Farley states

Commercial rewriters such as Madeleine Miller... had to write to please their publishers and their markets... Fan fiction is often written with the expectation that the audience is already intimately familiar with the source text in question, for example, and so little time is spent on introducing characters, setting, or background plot events. Fandom is a unique subculture... Because of this, I argue that while fan fiction is transformative rewriting, not all transformative rewriting is properly called “fan fiction” (Farley).

Under Farley’s conception, the difference between transformative work and fan fiction seems to be community and the intent—that the fan fiction exists for and within that community that has been built and exists around that media, while transformative work may appeal to those outside. This is in alignment with Miller’s assertions that she wrote *The Song of Achilles* to be accessible for anyone with no background in the *Iliad*—while transformative work may have that grace, fan fiction does not. A work like *The Song of Achilles* does notably differ from fics published on the AO3 such as *like a bird scared at an empty bush, trembling for nothing*, as Miller does have to satisfy the gatekeeper that internet fic has liberated an author from. This may result in her having to tailor her work to

meet conventional standards, be it in content or even more practical concerns like page length. To continue to dive into transformative literature, we must turn our attention even more specifically to fan fiction.

In specifically evaluating fan fiction—not just transformative work—one must dually acknowledge that fan fiction may not be afforded the same grace and prestige as other forms of literature, but that does not necessarily discount its literary achievement. Recalling Dwight Macdonald’s essay “Masscult and Midcult,” Macdonald asserts that “[Midcult] pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them” (Macdonald 38). Fan fiction may then be considered as the terminal end of Midcult, if it is not a lowbrow product, as it tears apart what may be considered High Culture to create something that is decidedly not received as such. Fan fiction is written with only the audience of other fans in mind, a smaller community than a broader understanding of transformative work may reach, and may make no attempt to appeal to anyone else. It is also fair to accept that some fan fiction may just be poorly written, because as discussed previously, there is no gatekeeper to make sure it is of any particular quality. However, despite the urge to pass by fan fiction’s potential failings in favor of market-polished and gatekeeper-approved work like *The Song of Achilles*, there is still value in looking at how fan fiction takes inspiration from source work and other transformations to create their own stories.

On the Archive of Our Own, in the fandom “The Iliad-Homer,” 925 works are recorded. The earliest dated work within the Iliad “fandom” is December 20th, 2004, with the most recent being January 23rd, 2022 (as of 1/24/22). Within those 925 fics: 882 are in English, 131 are marked as Explicit, and 413 are directly marked as being a crossover with Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*. In terms of relationships—an ever popular fascination of fan fiction communities—361 are marked “Achilles/Patroclus,” 168 are

marked as “Achilles/Patroclus (Song of Achilles),” 126 are marked “Achilles/Patroclus of Opus (Ancient Greek Religion & Lore),” 85 are “Achilles & Patroclus (Song of Achilles),” and 42 are “Achilles/Patroclus (Hades Video Game).” Within the AO3 and fan communities in general, a slash is used to denote a romantic or sexual pairing. This comes, as many things in fandom do, from Star Trek, where “K/S” was representative of the relationship between Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock (Slash). The use of the slash has become so ubiquitous that transformative writing featuring two same sex characters in romantic or sexual situations can be referred to as “slashfic” or merely as “slash” (Slash). The ampersand in relationship tags, on the other hand, are used for people in platonic relationships, be it friendly or familial or other.

I offer these statistics before even discussing the transformative writings themselves because they demonstrate two things. The first is that so far as adaptations and transformative writings go, Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* demonstrates considerable influence on fic communities. Roughly 45% of all Iliad content on AO3 cites *The Song of Achilles* as a work that is drawn from and transformed, as well as *The Iliad* itself. This indicates that fan authors and their works can be influenced by Miller, her characterizations, and her work just as much as Homer and any translator’s. The second demonstrated point is that the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus has captured the minds of fic writers, with somewhere between 34%-85% of all fics featuring them in some form of relationship, be it platonic, romantic, or sexual. An issue in these statistics is that a fic author can tag multiple instances of the relationship on the same fic, such that a single fic could be tagged “Achilles/Patroclus” and “Achilles/Patroclus (Song of Achilles),” so without reviewing every fic for instances of each tag, it is hard to precisely know how many fics explore which manifestation of their relationship. All this held in tension with Fagles’ assertion that there is no textual evidence for any relationship between Achilles and

Patroclus, and Miller's carrying on the idea that there is, drawing from her own interpretation and those of others.

When finding fics to analyze in conversation with *The Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles*, I sorted all fics in "The Iliad-Homer" fandom by kudos, AO3's internal "like" mechanism, to reveal a sense of what the fan community values in its writing. The number one most kudosed fic in "The Iliad-Homer" is *like a bird scared at an empty bush, trembling for nothing*, written by author onibi in 2016. *like a bird* is tagged for both "The Iliad-Homer" and *The Song of Achilles* fandoms, and is an example of a Modern AU. In a Modern AU, characters from a historical or non-realistic context are put into a world or situation that is modern or mundane—in *like a bird*, various characters involved in *The Iliad* and the Trojan War are playing a game of spin the bottle, with the implication being that they are all teenagers or young adults. This of itself is a radical change to the text; these characters—Achilles, Patroclus, Odysseus, Penelope, Helen, Clytemnestra, and Cassandra—fundamentally and necessarily to the plot of *The Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles* do not and cannot all exist in the same space at the same time. Helen is the center of the Trojan War from whom Achilles, Patroclus, and Odysseys are fighting, the latter of whom's separation from his wife Penelope is the basis of the entire plot of *The Odyssey*, Homer's sequel work to *The Iliad*. But within the realm of fan fiction the author is free to poach these characters from their contexts to create a situation that is both familiar and new to the reader.

Familiar details and core elements to those readers who are knowledgeable about *The Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles* are preserved in *like a bird*. Two such grounding elements are Achilles' instant and powerful anger and the reference to his relationship with Deidamia. These two examples work to echo the other two stories, tie them together despite their radically different contexts and presentations, and develop the story within *like a bird* itself. Ultimately, *like a bird's* goal of realizing a romantic relationship between Achilles and

Patroclus grounds it as transformative of *The Song of Achilles* and *The Iliad*. The fic is transformative of *The Iliad* by way of making their relationship explicitly romantic, and transformative of *The Song of Achilles* by keeping the romance, but dramatically changing the context and way in which the romance is realized.

Regarding the first example of a connecting element, Achilles' anger is the central subject of *The Iliad*. The opening exhortation to the Muses is "rage— Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles;" Achilles' prideful anger at Agamemnon that cost countless lives, including Patroclus, is perhaps the defining thread through the *Iliad* (Homer 77). The author shows—before the story has even begun—their familiarity with the opening line and the theme of Achilles' anger by inserting the tag "sing goddess the rage of Achilles destroyer of pot plants" at the top of the fic (onibi). In *The Iliad*, this anger is provoked when Agamemnon insults his honor and demeans him, in *like a bird* Achilles' anger is provoked by his perception that Patroclus is keeping a secret from him and devaluing their friendship. In *like a bird* Achilles' rage is still disproportionate, though instead of refusing to fight against the Trojans, he reacts by angrily saying to Patroclus "I don't even know you. Who are you? Are you my best friend?" and smashing other people's potted plants outside (onibi). The author has preserved the key theme of the work and distilled it to something lower stakes, appropriate for the more mundane characters, while keeping the core flaws of Achilles intact even as they continue to transform who he is with respect to Patroclus.

The author also references Deidameia, who in Greek myth was the wife of Achilles and mother of their child, Phyrus. While Deidameia does not appear in *The Iliad*, and Phyrus will not join the Trojan War until after his father's death, Madeline Miller includes both of them in *The Song of Achilles*, which is cited as a fandom for *like a bird*. In the fic, Deidameia is referenced as Achilles' past girlfriend who attends a boarding school. *The Song of Achilles* takes care to contextualize the mythology of characters beyond just *The Iliad*,

and Miller tells the story of Achilles and Deidameia taking place before Achilles goes to Troy. In *The Song of Achilles* Deidameia is a princess of a distant nation where Achilles is sent to hide from the call to fighting by his mother, the minor goddess Thetis. There, Thetis marries Achilles and Deidameia as a way to try to guarantee Achilles' staying hidden, as well as furthering Thetis' own agenda against Patroclus, of whom she disapproves and resents for loving Achilles. Upon the revelation that Deidameia is pregnant, she is sent away so that her pregnancy can be hidden, as Achilles will not claim her as his wife. Deidameia's absence is referenced in *like a bird* in passing as having "got shipped off to boarding school because of [Achilles]," creating a connection to *The Song of Achilles* that does not make sense in the context of *The Iliad* alone, but relies on the reader's knowledge of the larger canon and adaptations for the full effect of reading. Of course, in the context of the fic, one does not even need to know this, as she can exist merely as an ex-girlfriend of Achilles' that he has told Patroclus about, been vulnerable with Patroclus about, then justifying his rage when he believes that Patroclus is keeping things from him and not honoring their friendship.

While *like a bird scared at an empty bush, trembling for nothing* is the top fan fiction on the AO3 when sorting by kudos, the fan fiction *The Good Soul* is both the most commented upon and top hit—meaning the most clicked on—fan fiction in the "The Iliad-Homer" fandom. Comparing *The Good Soul* to *like a bird* renders some immediate similarities and differences, even before the text is broached. Both fan fictions were completed in 2016, though *The Good Soul* was begun over three years earlier, in 2013. Whereas *like a bird* is a single chapter fan fiction at 2,601 words, *The Good Soul* is a forty-eight chapter work of 236,285 words. To put this in perspective, the online education platform MasterClass indicates that a standard novel averages between 80,000 to 100,000 words, with the longest *Lord of the Rings* book reaching above 175,000 words (MasterClass

Staff). *The Good Soul*, an online fan fiction written and put out by author scarlett\_the\_seachild over the course of three years, is well over two novels' worth of words.

The passion here, in the project of transformative work, is evident. Fan fiction cannot, by its nature, ever be directly profitable for risk of violating the tenuous copyright agreements that permit transformation. The question then becomes what motivates the author to produce the work, if it cannot be money, which is the more typical incentive for writing and publishing narratives for entertainment. Community once again seems to be the answer, being enough positive reinforcement and reward to encourage the continued writing. This community engagement can be specifically reviewed in the way the author talks about, and to, the audience directly.

The author's notes section on AO3 allows the author the option to speak directly to the reader on a regular basis, as the author can choose to put notes at the beginning or end of any chapter. Here, they can provide commentary on their work, both at the chapter level or on the work as a whole. For *The Good Soul*, the author's notes provide an ongoing account of the process of writing the fan fiction, as well as some of the author's thoughts and ways they were influenced by the community. At the start of Chapter 14, the author states "thank you to all your lovely comments and reviews! They really do give me the motivation to continue" (scarlett\_the\_seachild). In Chapter 30 the sentiment is echoed, with the author stating "Thank you to all of you who commented on the last chapter and gave me such a warm welcome back. It's a constant reminder of how much I love writing this," commenting on how engagement persists even if there is a gap in publishing (scarlett\_the\_seachild). The author's notes in Chapter 38 sketch out both the internal and external motivations of writing fan fiction, with the author stating

I promise I won't let this wither and die, even if there's one person left still reading it as I've put too much of myself into it (not to mention 2 years!!) but

please, bear with me if it takes a little longer than I'd like. I promise there will always be an update in the end, even when you feel like quitting it forever. I don't know if that'll persuade you to stick with this but I hope it does, the support of you guys has meant more to me than I can articulate (scarlett\_the\_seachild).

Here, the author indicates that while the reviews and community aspect of fan fiction are a driving force for them, there is also an aspect of internal perseverance, that the author has put a part of themselves into the project and cannot allow it to end without their vision as author being fully executed. However, the community aspect cannot be understated. Especially for works published over long periods of time—*The Good Soul* being published over three years, with thirty eight chapters taking two years to be published—community engagement and feedback can be the positive social mechanism that allows authors to stick with the project. Regular support and engagement does not exist for the novel in the same way—a reader is highly unlikely to email Madeline Miller their live reactions to each chapter of *The Song of Achilles*—but this sort of interaction is possible, and perhaps even encouraged, with fan fiction and transformative literature.

This process of continual development also shows how fans can mutually engage with one another. In the author's note for Chapter 28, the author states that

“considering how long you've all been sticking with this, I think it's only fair that you yourselves have a stake in how this is going to go. I do have a plan for where I want this to end and it will take up to ten chapters at least to get where I want it. However, I will only continue writing if it's what you guys want. If you'd rather I just sort of stop hereabouts and turn it into a sort of epilogue then that's what I'll do. Otherwise I'll go right ahead and keep it up for as long as I can... The story is far from over, there are still many directions

I could head in but it's up to you on whether you want to read on or let things settle down here. Please let me know in the comments (scarlett\_the\_seachild).

This note comes less than two years into the three year project, though the author of course did not know how long the project would take. The overwhelming response from readers was that they wanted as much of the story as the author was willing to produce, and that they would support them in their endeavor. Of course, the author ended up doing much more than just ten chapters, going on to write another twenty. This continues to build on the communal storytelling styles that originated all the way back to Homer, and reached a modern manifestation with zine and internet fan cultures. The author will echo this notion in Chapter 42, stating “I have no idea how many of you guys are reading this for plot and how many of you are reading this for cutesey greek fluff, [sic]” but that “I'm really enjoying this bizarre trip because it's become sort of like an exercise in storytelling for me; I get to make up my own characters and play with them and give them irrelevant storylines but I don't know if you guys are cool with reading that” (scarlett\_the\_seachild). Again, the reader's comments bear out that they are enjoying what is being written, encouraging the author to continue on their path. This writing and active engagement continues to embody the relationship-centric nature of transformative work. The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus continues to be a central point of the work, with the author building plot around the characters and their relationship.

Like many fan fictions written in the *Iliad* fandom, *The Good Soul* also claims *The Song of Achilles* as a parent fandom. The opening scene of *The Good Soul* is Patroclus in the halls of Peleus, Achilles' father, the context that Miller created to ground the beginning of *The Song of Achilles*. From the beginning of *The Good Soul*, then, the reader cannot extricate it from the context of *The Song of Achilles*. The scenes and period in which

Patroclus lived in Phthia during *The Song of Achilles* was Miller's own contribution to the mythos, something that she included that was not originally referenced in the *Iliad*.

Therefore, it is not only that the fan fiction is starting in the middle of Miller's transformative work, but in the section that is most transformative. There is a direct lineage of transformation from the *Iliad* to *The Good Soul*, with the influence of each predecessor evident in the author's changes and actions.

The character of Leptine in *The Good Soul* is another prime example of the *Iliad* texts in transformative conversation with one another, as Leptine is a transformation of the Briseis character. More specifically, Leptine is a transformation of Miller's Briseis. As previously discussed, Miller gives Briseis a specific agency and characterization that is denied to her in the original text of the *Iliad*. Miller's Briseis develops a strong friendship with Patroclus, building out of the strange innuendo of the original text, and shares such things with him as her knowledge of plants and herbs. Leptine serves much of the same role. A slave in the palace of Peleus, Achilles' father, Leptine and Patroclus become close friends over the course of their story. As early as Chapter 7, Leptine is shown to be adept with plants, teaching Patroclus how to steam them to make a lotion. When Leptine is kidnapped from the palace late in the plot, Patroclus is distraught over the loss of his friend. However, he is consoled when he receives word that "[Leptine] managed to escape and secure passage aboard a merchant ship, headed for Anatolia where she is now working as a handmaid to that same merchant's daughter. His name is Briseus, I believe, of Lyrnessos, a town not so far from Troy" (scarlett\_the\_seachild). This deliberately links Leptine and Briseis, as Leptine is now heavily implied to be her handmaiden. When I claim that Leptine is a transformation of Briseis, I do not mean that they are the same character, that the author has devised a secret history and past name for the same woman, but that narratively the two serve similar roles. The author mirrors them and acknowledges their parallel with the

connection, but the author can only do this with the Briseis character that Miller developed. The works exist in conversation with one another, building collectively off of each step that has come before.

This narrative conversation continues with Achilles, and how the author blends his characterization in *The Good Soul* to be something between and beyond the *Iliad* and *The Song of Achilles*. At the end of Chapter 39, the author states “my interpretation of [Achilles] is very different to Miller's. While her Achilles is much more sympathetic than Homer's, he's also much less complicated. I wanted to strike a balance... keeping his softness whilst also paying homage to the rather darker side of his character” (scarlett\_the\_seachild). This comment comes after Achilles has killed and mutilated a man who had attempted to kill Patroclus, tearing out the man's heart and threatening his followers with it. This act directly harkens to Achilles' treatment of Hector's body in the *Iliad*, after Achilles gains his bloody revenge for Patroclus's death at Hector's hands. In both cases, it is Achilles' fondness for Patroclus and his wrath incurred by Patroclus' harm that drives him to the edge of cruelty—an edge from which scarlett\_the\_seachild argues Miller shies away. If the *Iliad* shows the rage and hubris of Achilles in his refusing to fight and then treatment of Hector after Hector kills Patroclus, *The Song of Achilles* can be understood as Miller's attempt to show what primes Achilles to such actions. Miller showcases Achilles and Patroclus falling in love and becoming so meaningful to one another, to the point where Achilles' world would implode in anger and near-inhuman hate once Patroclus died. *The Good Soul* continues to walk in-between, suggesting that Achilles' capacity for such violence was always present and not exclusive to the ordeals of Troy, that the anger and pride were inherent in him and not just a quality that emerged in war. The three texts balance one another, each providing a potential window into the climax of the epic.

Ultimately, all transformative literature is understood as works in conversation, fan fiction especially. *The Good Soul* and *like a bird trembling at an empty bush, scared for nothing* are not, on the face, terribly similar texts. One is centered around the radical recontextualization of the characters of the *Iliad*, setting them in high school over a game of spin the bottle. The other reimagines the meeting of Achilles and Patroclus in mythic Greece, forging them into the characters that will one day go to Troy. The two texts, however, are inextricably linked in how they navigate the original text of the *Iliad*, negotiating out the central themes and concepts of Homer's work into something unique to each author. The story lives on in each telling, each appealing to a different notion of what the *Iliad* is, each equally important in how they reflect back upon the concepts being written.

## Conclusion

If there was a contest for the most famous—or perhaps, as it were, infamous—fan fiction, *My Immortal* would be a serious contender. The 2006-2007 Harry Potter fan fiction features a seventeen-year-old goth vampire witch with five names, who in her final year at Hogwarts must navigate teen angst and love triangles before understanding her true destiny: to go back in time using Marty McFly's DeLorean from *Back to the Future* and seduce Lord Voldemort before he can become evil from a lack of love. Excruciatingly poorly written, with the main character's name misspelled as often as it is correct, *My Immortal* is considered by many to be “the quintessential badfic” (My Immortal). Yet at the same time, others find it to be “a source of fandom nostalgia... a fandom classic” in of itself (My Immortal). While there is a certain amount of charm in a story that cannot help itself but jump the shark over and over again, a “so bad it's good” mentality, there is a serious contention that *My Immortal* was intentionally poorly written as satire, “an intentional badfic, crackfic, or parody” (My Immortal). Satire requires an author who knows what they are doing and a readership that they trust to pick up on their cues. Without those two crucial components, the satire risks being viewed as just another example of what it aims to critique. That the story's bad sex scenes and loose understanding of *Harry Potter's* general plot can be understood by a reader not just for what it is, but as satire, speaks to the community and culture that has grown around transformative literature. A group of people who see that which may be deemed trashy and transgressive and still claim it as their own, because it is written in their language for one another. In 2013 a group of people came together to film a web series based off of *My Immortal*, adapting the plot and creating what could be understood as their own transformation of the text. This web series is recognized on the AO3 as its own fandom, with one hundred and fifty stories written under it at the time of writing this sentence.

Transformative work must be understood first and foremost as a style and meta-genre defined by its relationships. The relationship between texts, with changes and variations from one incarnation to the next. The relationship between creators, where the community ties actively inform the writing and transformative process. If we accept Henry Jenkins' "Textual Poachers" as "discipline defining," as Hellekson and Busse state, then the academic gaze upon transformative work is still relatively new in its current incarnation (Hellekson and Busse 10). This is not due to transformative literature being a new trend—the history of transformative literature is long and storied. Springing from the late nineteenth century and the coalescence of modern fandoms with Sherlock Holmes, and bolstered by technological advances, people have been finding ways to tell and transform stories for centuries. They told these stories to one another, organizing in by mail and over zines, and then in cyberspace with the advent of the internet. The internet remains the current frontier for fan fiction, where every person is capable of being an author, unburdened by the need for any story they write to be marketable, palatable to a publisher's audience. In this way, the fans have created the fandom Marxism that liberates them and connects them.

The theory invoked in this thesis is by no means a comprehensive inventory of ways to apply an academic lens to transformative work. That would be impossible, both because of the breadth of academic theory in the world and the ever expanding nature of transformative literature. However, well established pieces such as "Death of the Author" shine a light on how transformative work can be theorized, putting it in conversation with other types of literature more formally recognized.

The persistence of a story means that it was important in some way: it may have taught an important lesson, or it may have been beloved by those who heard it. That the *Iliad* has persevered over the centuries to still hold the attention of readers attests to its

capacity to speak to the present, whenever that present may be. The story is inherently transformative and suited to adaptation, perpetually relevant to any audience and primed to be taken farther. Works like *The Song of Achilles* indicate that transformative literature is gaining ground, growing in commercial viability and reflecting society's appetite for stories retold. Perhaps this appetite had never abated, just briefly moved out of the spotlight in favor of a ravenous demand for "originality," as defined by whatever capricious audience. From there, works like *The Good Soul* and *like a bird scared at an empty bush, trembling for nothing* show the radical creativity of an author set free, but notably the stories still retain sparks of the original works—the themes and concepts that allow the stories to endure.

Of course, this thesis is primarily concerned with transformative literature, but literature is far from the only type of transformative content. In art, one could take a historic perspective and look at Marcel Duchamp and his readymades to begin to think of ways transformative art can look. Fans create parodies and remixes and original songs that come out of their favorite media properties. Translation is its own form of transformation, with authors making decisions on how to interpret and contextualize words and ideas that may have no perfect corollary, requiring a level of creativity. This thesis initially hoped to compare Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* to Maria Dahvana Headley's translation, then comparing both to Headley's novel *The Mere Wife*. This was obviously cut, though not for lack of content; *Beowulf*, like the *Iliad*, is a rich text deserving of the transformative lens and a thorough analysis.

Ultimately, there is nothing quite like transformative literature. It represents endless possibility, and offers a person the opportunity for anything they can conceive. Copyright cannot hold an author back, only the limits of the imagination and the recognition that its greatest reward is not in money, but in the community that defines transformative work. As

Anne Jamison states, “the author is not dead, the author is *legion*” (Jamison 13). If the question is who owns a story, or what a story can look like or say, the answer seems to be everyone and anything.

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