

Reader, Please Follow Me Fan Fiction, Author Instructions, and Feedback

Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, Department of Language Studies, Umeå University

*The article examines forms of communication surrounding the publication and reception of fan fiction: on-line published stories working from an existing fictional universe. At focus are two fanfics that have Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as a starting point, and their publication on the large site *FanFiction.net*. Already published in their entirety elsewhere, the daily chapter installments of the fanfics are designed to initiate contact with a new group of readers, reciprocated through readers leaving comments. This communication enables examinations of three aspects. Firstly, attention is paid to increasingly private conversations, indicative of a blend between several contemporary social practices. Secondly, the reception of the story's logic and its downplaying of Austen's complex renditions of cognitive processes is analyzed. Thirdly, more problematic ramifications of extended author commentary are interrogated, specifically how explicit instructions attempting to guide the approach to and reception of the fanfic result in forms of audience resistance.*

Keywords: author instructions, Author Notes, fan fiction, reader feedback, weblogs

“Thank you for your constant dedication to this story” writes Lady Forest, addressing the author of *The Sister She Always Wanted*, a fan fiction published in chapter installments and working from Jane Austen’s 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*. She continues: “I really love your insights on our favorite literary characters AND your take on this classic story!” This reader feedback encapsulates several aspects that are key to a specific form of contemporary engagement with fiction and the communication enabled in online spaces. Firstly, the comment highlights serial publication (the ‘constant dedication’), which sets up particular reader expectations. Secondly, the shared, deep interest in the source text (‘our favorite literary characters’) entails a specific way of writing in which readers’ extensive source text knowledge can be both liberating and restrictive. Thirdly, the comment draws attention to the coexistence of source text and fan interpretation (‘AND’), meaning that several versions of plot and characters occupy sites of meaning-making. Finally, in its form of a comment to chapter 28 of the novel-length fanfic, it illustrates how several online archives (here, the large *FanFiction.net*) enable readers to contact the author directly to offer both praise and contesting interpretations.

Fan fiction authors situate themselves clearly in relation to a source text, referred to as canon, and their stories bear close resemblances to printed continuations when it comes to what elements are seized upon and what strategies are used for re-presenting plot and characters. The narrative arc is expanded in prequels and sequels, perspectives are shifted, the fictional universe is crossed with texts from other genres, and alternative romantic character pairings question the fated aspect of Regency romance, along with its monogamous, heteronormative ethos.¹ However, the text form comes with its own particularities, such as fanfic-specific genres and categories, and an overt intertextual relationship with the canon it works from. Published and stored at large, collective sites or canon-specific digital venues, JAFF (Jane Austen Fan Fiction) is in the main produced and consumed within a fandom—the group of fans

coming together around Austen's entire production or individual works within it—in which participants share a committed interest. Writing and reading fan fiction in this way become two activities among many centered on exploring aspects of the canon.

In the introduction to *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, editors Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington argue that “the emotionally involved and invested” nature of fan engagement entails that “[s]tudies of fan audiences” illuminate “the way in which we relate to those around us, as well as the way we read the mediated texts that constitute an ever larger part of our horizon of experience” (2007, 10).² Interactions within the affinity space constituted by a fanfic community enable studies of particular kinds of participatory practices, tied both to the consumption of texts and to interpersonal relations between participants. As Rebecca W. Black demonstrates, exchanges between a fanfic author and her readers can contribute to the development of the former's language, style, and storytelling; the author can in various ways frame the story, and readers may influence its progression (see Black 2007; 2008). Fandom, in this context, becomes a relatively safe environment where ideas can be tested and debated, and a learning space in which many amateur authors develop different forms of literacies through readers' participation. However, there are also processes of empowerment at work that highlight individual authorship, paradoxically by enforcing postmodern conceptions of the “death of the Author” (Barthes 1977, 148) and of the “‘author’ as a function of discourse” (Foucault 1969, 1475). Fanfic inherently entails a view of the canon creator as having an excessively limited determinative role: any number of transformations of the canon plot and characters are imaginable. At the same time, the fanfic author can be invested with an increased authorial power when it comes to interpretations of her own stories, and use paratextual commentary in the form of Author Notes (A/Ns) and End Notes (E/Ns) to forcefully guide the reception of her text (see Herzog 2012, and Lindgren Leavenworth 2015). There are, in

this way, various allocations of power within fan communities that may at times be at odds with what is otherwise a social practice.

In this article, I analyze forms and effects of communication between author and reader, and examine the competing functions of the author in contemporary fanfic practices, as a collaborative participant in a fandom and as attempting to forcefully steer the reception of her own text. I focus on the publication and reception of two fanfics: the above-mentioned *The Sister She Always Wanted* (henceforth *Sister*) and *No More Tears* (*Tears*). Both have a publication history that complicates audience participation, they have received extensive commentary in the form of feedback from readers, and they are framed by unusually detailed A/Ns and E/Ns. The fanfics are written by an author who, depending on publishing venue, can be identified as desertrat68, Linnea Eileen, or Linnea Eileen Smith. The pseudonym is used on *FanFiction.net*, Linnea Eileen on the JAFF-specific *The Derbyshire Writers' Guild* (DWG), and the full name on the author's blog *Desert Musings*.³ Throughout, I will refer to the author as Linnea, since this short form is more or less consistently used in her communication with readers.

Prior to publication on *FanFiction.net*, the stories were uploaded in their entirety on both DWG and *Desert Musings*, but Linnea nevertheless chooses to publish both in almost daily chapter instalments at the large archive. Serial publication means possibilities for consistent feedback, relayed as reviews to each chapter, and Linnea creates a partly new following, highly valuing her readers' engagement. The finished state of the stories precludes readers' active participation in meaning-making, otherwise common in connection with unfolding stories, and I examine an increasingly personal communication between author and reader, which is partly an effect of the impossibility of influencing the story's progression. Instead, the author/reader dialogues demonstrate a conflation of social media practices and how the fanfic becomes a conduit between individuals in a fandom.

Both stories present alternatives to the plot in *Pride and Prejudice* but whereas *Sister* is a lighthearted romance, *Tears* takes a considerably darker turn. The differences between the fanfics have implications for the stories' reception and for Linnea's use of author commentary. My analyses of the reception of the story logic of *Sister* demonstrate how readers welcome two particular narrative strategies: Linnea's downplaying of Austen's complex renderings of character intersubjectivity and her insertion of moments of contemporary emotional realism. Differences between canon and fanfic produced by these strategies lead to both implicit and explicit forms of critique of Austen, evinced through reader comments. *Tears* allows for an interrogation of more problematic ramifications of Linnea's use of extended author commentary, and her explicit instructions attempting to guide the approach to and reception of the fanfic instead result in forms of audience resistance. The oscillation between resisting the authority of the canon and enforcing how the fanfic is to be interpreted thus demonstrates how meaning and authorial power are variously negotiated in the consumption, production and distribution of fiction.

New Platforms, New Readers?

When written and published in a chapter-by-chapter fashion, fan fiction holds great potential for collaborative efforts as readers can offer inspiration and suggestions or protest against plot and character developments (comments that the author may or may not take onboard). Dissemination of the text in this way also brings with it opportunities for social interplay; a day-to-day or week-to-week interaction between authors and readers. Although Linnea publishes both *Tears* and *Sister* in chapter installments on *FanFiction.net*; between February and March, and May and August 2014, respectively, the fanfics already exist in their entirety elsewhere. *Tears* was finished on the blog in 2008, and uploaded on DWG in December 2009, and *Sister* follows the opposite migratory

pattern by appearing in its finished state on DWG already in 2005 and on *Desert Musings* in 2009.⁴ Both stories, that is, have potentially reached readerships twice, but publication at the extensive *FanFiction.net*, archiving fan fiction from a vast number of fandoms, means an opportunity for Linnea to connect with new readers who still belong to the Austen fandom.

On DWG, the fanfics are unaccompanied by author commentary and only brief prefatory remarks are made on *Desert Musings*: in connection with *Sister*, Linnea merely points out that this is her “first story” and that cautions the reader that it contains “bad Regency non-facts” (Smith 2009, n. pag.). Contact with the potentially new following on *FanFiction.net*, who can reciprocate by giving immediate feedback in the comment field, however, is initiated by longer A/Ns. When introducing *Sister*, Linnea alerts readers to the fact that *Sister* is an old, already finished story; in the chapter’s End Note (E/N) she adds that her posting pace will consequently be quick. Similarly, she informs readers of *Tears* that although the “story will not be new to many [she has] decided it was time to give it a new audience” (A/N Ch. 1). Importantly, however, she does not specify where on the vast web the fanfics can be found in their entirety.⁵ Her design with serial publication at *FanFiction.net* is to initiate contact with new readers who consider the site as primary when retrieving stories and to uphold contact with those who have begun to follow her production.

A/Ns and E/Ns appear as paragraphs preceding and following the narrative proper and Linnea mainly uses the same text formatting as in the narrative parts of the fanfic. The close proximity and formal similarity to the story suggest the equal importance of informational non-fiction and fiction, and this almost seamless integration make the notes difficult (but not impossible) for a reader to bypass. Comments to the first chapter of each fanfic evince how readers respond to Linnea’s initiated contact, and although the majority signals interest in and appreciation of the fanfics’ contents, some demonstrate that factual

information relayed through the author commentary has been taken onboard. Reader Defincupark, for example, appreciates the promised speedy updates: “Waiting for tomorrow’s post!” (*Sister*, comment to Ch. 1) whereas a comment from nina1999 replies to Linnea’s mentioning of the previous publication: “I’m excited to see this story being posted here. I’ve read it before, but I’m going to enjoy reading it again” (*Tears*, comment to Ch. 1). In different ways, then, readers positively respond to Linnea’s introduction to the story’s history, the way it will subsequently be disseminated, and to her decision to publish at this new venue.

Many readers who are already familiar with Linnea’s publications at *Desert Musings* or DWG consequently appreciate them appearing unchanged but in a new context. YepItsMe, for example, has “read [*Tears*] lots of times elsewhere” and later comments that it is “fun reading this a chapter at a time, as if I don’t know what will happen!” (*Tears*, comments to Ch. 1, 3). Serial publication in this way rewards followers who eagerly await their “daily fix,” also when re-reading (*Sister*, A/N Ch. 23) and several formulations attest to that Linnea takes pleasure in the praise she receives after each chapter and in the sustained contact with both old and new readers; she creates her own following because readers are compelled by the story, and is able to maintain it because of the mode of publication and the affordances of the digital environment in terms of immediate dialogic exchanges. In the A/N to the third chapter of *Sister* Linnea tongue-in-cheek refers to her followers as “my fans” and later comments that the overwhelming amount of email notifications she gets when feedback has been posted means getting her “vanity stroked” (A/N Ch. 4). In these contexts, communication and serial publication entail a win-win situation, and the ‘daily fix’ pertains to both author and reader.

As Linnea is engaged in a process of republication rather than revision, she will not attempt to fix either formal or factual mistakes, but details in her first paratextual commentary to *Sister* implicitly instruct readers to be lenient. She draws attention to that this is her first fanfic,

that she is “dyslexic,” and cautions readers not to “get too caught up in the grammar errors and typos” (*Sister*, A/N Ch. 1). These comments work to guide the reception of the text on the level of *form* but they correspond to attempts to frame the author’s individual interpretation of the canon, discussed in the coming sections of this article. Alexandra Herzog maintains that “A/Ns are ultimately about authority and control” and through them, authors “*attempt* to actively direct the story’s audience into a certain, premeditated reader position and thus to curtail the very sort of interpretive and agentive practice they themselves are engaged in while writing fan fiction” (Herzog 2012, § 1.5, 2.7, emphasis added). Fan fiction is inherently a product of criticism as even subtle changes aim to put right what is perceived as slightly faulty storylines, pairings or consequences in the canon. This agency is not awarded the fanfic reader to the same extent. Elsewhere, I have examined A/Ns as illocutionary paratexts, arguing that “it is no longer a sense of hinting at how the story is to be approached, it is a question of telling the reader precisely how to read it, or how *not* to read it [and] repeated instructions and insurances underscore that an authorial presence is effectively established and maintained” (Lindgren Leavenworth 2015, original emphasis). Serial publication is crucial in this context as each chapter brings with it the *opportunity* to reinforce authorial authority, to reign in unruly responses, and to put the reader back on the track the author intends.

Linnea’s use of paratextual commentary is unusually extensive, and it is not a given that all authors seize the opportunity to communicate with their readers in these ways. As Herzog notes, “intense battles [have been] waged” online concerning the appropriate length, placement, and content of A/Ns that “testify to their essential importance for the fannish community” but that also gesture to communal expectations and boundaries (Herzog § 2.4). Content-focused commentary works well in establishing the author’s position vis-à-vis the canon, and provide an informational entrance to the text, whereas personal comments such as

Linnea's references to her birthday (*Sister*, A/N Ch. 14), to disappointing results in the ongoing soccer World Cup (*Sister*, E/N Ch. 28) and to the centrality of cricket in her life (*Tears*, A/N Ch. 6) are mainly intended to shed more light on the author herself. This strategy is ambivalently received in many fandoms, but may constitute an important step in the fanfic author's self-representation and to foreground the author behind the pseudonymously published work.

In Linnea's case it appears relevant to relate the shift from public to private to her familiarity with the practices and discourses informing blog-writing; these may be seen as bleeding into the use of commentary and are also connected to serial publication. In her genre analysis of diary weblogs, Lena Karlsson argues that followers look "for some degree of sameness," and that enjoyment is to be had from "the serial consumption of the autobiographical text, [in particular] the rhythmical mode of consumption" (2013, 49, 8). Sameness in this context signifies how a blogger and her followers constitute a "[d]emographically ... rather homogenous group [in terms of] gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational level, profession, place of living" (Karlsson 2013, 19, 29). This type of homogeneity may very well be established in connection with *Desert Musings*, but is difficult to substantiate in relation to Linnea's readers on *Fan.Fiction.net*. However, another form of sameness emerges when fandoms are considered as "affinity spaces [in which] people interact and relate to each other around a common passion, proclivity, or endeavor" (Black 2007, 117). The joint interests in JAFF in general and *Pride and Prejudice* in particular thus work as binding agents, ensuring that each interpretation and comment is valid, and within the affinity space, the step between public and private may not be perceived as especially long. Used to the consistent, rhythmical "disseminati[ion] of traditionally personal, private information" (Stefanone & Jang 2008, 125) on her blog, Linnea repeats the structure in the A/Ns to the equally rhythmical daily updates of her fanfics. And readers gradually begin to reciprocate the intimacy as their comments move from being directed to the story

content to include congratulations, despair when their own favorite soccer teams are out of the tournament, and by referring to events in their daily life.⁶ Fan fiction in this way becomes a conduit between an author and her readers, crucial to the contact in the first place but also seen as one meaning-making practice out of many.

Linnea's blog and the fanfic archive are separate platforms, but used to similar ends: to disseminate fan fiction and to communicate with followers and readers. The author's extended use of increasingly personal paratextual commentary highlights the social aspect of the communication, which in turn can work to strengthen the loyalty of the following she has gathered or maintained. Combined, the thirty-nine chapters of *Sister* have in August 2015 garnered over nine-hundred comments, by over two-hundred individual reviewers; *Tears* has received close to five hundred comments by 160-plus reviewers. Although the number of reviews fluctuates between chapters, and although some readers leave comments to only one or two, several readers illustrate their loyalty to the fanfic and its author by almost daily comments. SilverSentinal21, for example, comments on thirty-five chapters of *Sister* and *Dizzy Lizzy*.⁶⁰ skips but chapters seven and twenty-five, and their feedback illustrates a progressively personal relationship with Linnea. The majority of comments to the fanfics' last chapters are also highly emotive, suggesting that the daily engagement and interpersonal contacts will be sorely missed. Contrari Mari, for example, states that whereas she normally "dread[s] the Fourth of July" as it signals being half way through the summer, she has this year been apprehensive about the date "because it meant that the story was nearly over" (*Sister*, comment to Ch. 39). But all hope is not lost: in her final A/N to *Sister*, Linnea informs her old and new followers that another story of hers, *A Mother's Favorite Wish* (also found in its finished state on DWG and *Desert Musings*), will be republished on *FanFiction.net*. There is, consequently, a promise of a return of the daily social and story fix at the end of the summer.

Story Logic, Mind-Reading, and Cognitive Slippage

In itself, a fanfic is a communicative act as it forwards the author's individual interpretation of the canon, or aspects of it, to her readership. *Sister* builds on a different premise than Austen's novel since Elizabeth Bennet visits Fitzwilliam Darcy's estate Pemberley a year earlier than in the canon and establishes a close relationship with his sister Georgiana. This friendship makes both Elizabeth and Georgiana develop in new ways and helps deflect misunderstandings that could keep the romantic protagonists apart. Elizabeth early on helps Georgiana overcome her depression caused by Mr. Wickham's betrayal, and she forms a very sympathetic image of Darcy through the younger sister's descriptions. Darcy, in turn, appreciates the change in Georgiana and, influenced by the many positive comments from Pemberley's servants, says of Elizabeth that she "sounds like a nice young lady [and] I am sure I would like to meet her" (*Sister*, Ch. 3). The people Darcy loves and trusts are already taken with Miss Bennet and the first meeting between the protagonists is anything but hesitant. Several key elements are made known early on: Wickham's manipulations, Mrs. Bennet's habitual meddling, and Caroline Bingley's scheming mind, and the obstacles they constitute in the canon are consequently removed.

In addition to these alterations, playing out on the plot and character level, Linnea utilizes a narrative strategy that downplays the complex cognitive processes depicted in *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's novels generally foreground perception and observation, and her characters need to continuously monitor who thinks what about whom. Lisa Zunshine examines a number of works in Austen's *oeuvre*, drawing attention to how correct mind-readings compete with misreadings, and consequently how protagonists commonly emerge as those having a heightened "ability to reflect other people's states of mind" (Zunshine 2009, 112). Elizabeth in particular is portrayed as having mind-reading skills that allow her to, often correctly, read and keep track of what other characters think about themselves and others. Austen's protagonists, that is, have highly

developed competencies in identifying “level[s] of intentionality” which align them with compatible partners in the fictional world and separate them from others (Zunshine 2007, 283). The reader, in turn, is asked to follow these complicated processes and to mind-read the mind-reading characters.

Perhaps to be read as a sign of frustration stemming from this canon complexity, Linnea to a great extent removes the need to mind-read by inserting emotional reflections of both major and minor characters and by explicitly have them address their readings of each other. Elizabeth’s early positive image of Darcy, for example, results in a long speech in which she tells him that she regards him as “a man of honor [and] a loving brother [whom] it is an honor to know” (*Sister*, Ch. 10). The speech illustrates the subversion of most of the novel’s complications: Elizabeth does not conceive of Darcy as “extremely proud and disagreeable” because she can see through his “reserve,” and their openhearted conversations entail that she does not suspect him of misusing his influence over Mr. Bingley (*Sister*, Ch. 10). Character traits as attractive in Regency England as in a contemporary context—intelligence, consideration, respect, and brotherly love—are manifest reasons for Elizabeth’s good opinion of Darcy. She tells him and the reader exactly what she feels and why she feels it, and Darcy, consequently, has no need to mind-read the woman whose admiration he reciprocates.

The speech is predicated on Linnea’s invested interest in Austen’s novel and particularly in the characters as they emerge at its end when they have overcome their pride and prejudices. This character development thus follows Linnea in her rendition: even if the protagonists in *Sister* meet earlier than in the canon, they have already matured to the level they are at at the end of it. This alteration, in combination with the reduced need to mind-read, is positively received by many of Linnea’s readers, in fact, several comments illustrate that the trials and tribulations Austen put her characters through are perceived as

taxing. Dizzy Lizzy.60, for example, early and correctly anticipates a “more amicable” relationship between the protagonists (comment to Ch. 3), and gracie789 argues that Regency “[v]extions are highly overrated” (comment to Ch. 4). The distance from the canon resulting from the removal of complicated emotional and social maneuvering is lauded, that is, even by members of the *Pride and Prejudice* fandom who, like the fanfic author, conceive of the characters as they appear at the end of the canon novel.

The deep intersubjectivity which Austen depicted makes her novels challenging to readers but it also makes her characters straddle the line between fictional constructs and almost perceptibly existing minds. The reactions to developments in *Sister* well illustrate the consequences of what Zunshine refers to as “cognitive slippage” occurring because “*on some level* our evolved cognitive architecture indeed does not fully distinguish between real and fictional people” (Zunshine 2006, 19, original emphasis). She exemplifies this slippage with her own emotive and cognitive engagement with *Pride and Prejudice*: “I begin to feel that there is much more to Elizabeth Bennet than meets my eye on the page” (Zunshine 2006, 18). Readers may consequently assign to characters an existence that goes beyond what is narrated, but fan fiction complicates matters because two representations of characters (in the canon and in the fanfic) need to be considered simultaneously. Comments then illustrate that Linnea’s fanfic creates an even more powerful cognitive slippage that brings with it an implicit critique of Austen’s work. Feedback from Contrari Mari provides a succinct example. Already at the start of the fanfic she writes that “[w]e are meeting the real Elizabeth, and hopefully will also be meeting the real Darcy sometime soon,” later she comments that Jane “actually seems like a real person” and that the entire *dramatis personae* “have really come alive, and seem like people we want to know” (comments to Ch. 2, 36, 33). Linnea’s downplaying of complicated intersubjectivity thus seems to have little impact on how readers conceive of characters as autonomous beings. Rather, the relayed

impression is that Austen's Elizabeth is not 'real' to this extent, that her Jane is unrealistically portrayed, and that the way she has depicted the neighborhoods in Hertfordshire and Derbyshire has inspired little desire for a more intimate relationship.

Working in tandem with the reduced need to mind-read is Linnea's renditions of responses and reactions that are in line with 21st-century "emotional realism." Henry Jenkins argues that "fans ... draw upon their own personal backgrounds as one means of extrapolating beyond the information explicitly found within the [text]" and that the "interpolation of the personal and the experiential [furthers] identification" (Jenkins 1992, 107, 108). These processes are then made manifest in fan fiction and in this case, Linnea's Elizabeth expresses herself in terms that may resonate more strongly with contemporary readers: her Mr. Bennet is a loving father who used to climb trees with his daughters, and her Lady Catherine de Bourgh is unpleasant simply because she never had the courage to marry for love. Along with understatements and suppressed emotions characteristic of Regency writing, Austen's characters are altered or given motivations or pasts that help explain what they are like in the present of the fanfic. Similar to the effects of explicated emotions and reactions, these alterations working towards a heightened emotional realism may consequently result in characters seeming more 'real' in a contemporary context.

A third narrative strategy by which the 'realness' of the fanfic is enhanced, is to focus on minor characters and their transformation from static to dynamic. The limited access to information about minor characters' past and to their internal musings make them difficult to mind-read as wholly sympathetic in the canon novel and a returning aspect in reader commentary is that Austen's characters in Linnea's version "have room to grow, and to develop into *better* people" (Contrari Mari, comment to Ch. 11, emphasis added). This is especially evident in the enlarged role of Elizabeth's sister Mary, a canon character who has also drawn the attention of cognitive critics. Building on Zunshine's

discussions, Natalie Phillips argues that a limited minor character such as Mary is necessary in the creation of “the psychological richness of the central character” and consequently maintains that “an imaginary mind worthy of complex mentalizing [mind-reading] may not only rely upon but arise from our awareness of other ‘simpler’ minds” (Phillips 2011, 106, 108). It is thus not only Elizabeth’s centrality in the canon that establishes her as rounder and more fully developed. Rather, her lively mind is contrasted to the “hyperfocus” of Mary; the latter’s absorption in “reading books and playing piano” in the context of this juxtaposition produces a “static” character against which Elizabeth’s “cognitive complexity” stands out (Phillips 2011, 111, 118).

Elizabeth is a central and perceptive character also in *Sister*, but the fanfic’s altered premise entails somewhat of a chain-reaction that some reviewers correctly foresee. MoonFaith, for example, notes that following the story logic “[i]t would seem weird for Lizzy to so intuitively and kindly navigate Georgiana’s shyness without having done the same for/with her own sister” (comment to Ch. 3). Linnea, then, does not disappoint readers who anticipate this development, instead Elizabeth’s, and later Jane’s, protection make Mary both thoughtful and outspoken, and she becomes a new favorite of her father’s when reading and reflecting on literature in his company. In a letter to Elizabeth Mary also notes that Jane’s “*inability to see anything but the good in people can become annoying at times,*” which suggests a heightened awareness of the minds around her, and an ability to negotiate others’ self-constructions (*Sister* Ch. 26, original italics). These developments are positively received and comments again bear traces of Austen criticism. Spriggan writes that Linnea has “made Mary into a sensible person” which makes her more “interesting than [in] the original tale” (comment to Ch. 13), and Contrari Mari is of the opinion that “[u]nder Lizzie’s guidance [Mary] has a chance at a real life and being the person she should be, instead of the person she thinks she should be” (comment to Ch. 12). The perceptions of Mary’s static canon character and her life as a charade

are overturned by the fanfic's augmentation of her character, arguably achieved because readers do not have to spend a lot of energy intuiting Elizabeth's cognitive complexity. In other words, by reducing the need to read the minds of her protagonist, making her thought processes explicitly part of the narrative, Linnea can focus on lessening the static nature of her minor characters.

The logic of Linnea's fanfic results in no less than four happy endings. Darcy and Elizabeth, and Jane and Bingley, marry as expected, but so do Anne De Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam and, most surprisingly, Lady Catherine and Mr. Bennet who is widowed as Mrs. Bennet "[o]ne day ... complained of her nerves, fainted, and never revived" (*Sister*, Ch. 39). Along the way, other complications have been dealt with in ways that clearly indicate the Alternate Universe nature of the story, the affordances of foregrounding of openness and explications of mind states, and the effects of a heightened emotional realism. Miss Bingley, for example, receives what is seen as a just punishment for her scheming: found out and directly confronted she is cut off from her family and her annual income. "I do like to see Caroline disciplined," Spriggan writes (comment to Ch. 18) and Belle453 finds it "nice seeing [Bingley] come into his own and put Caroline in her place" (comment to Ch. 28). The logic of the story resonates, that is, with the vast majority of Linnea's following, even though it is consistently compared to characterizations and plot developments in the canon narrative.

Show and Tell

Serial publication and online affordances enabling immediate feedback entail that the fanfic interpretation can be questioned, criticized, or commended, but each instalment also means a renewed opportunity for the author to remind her readers of her intentions, and instruct them in how to appropriately respond to the text. In relation to *Sister*, Linnea does not actively have to steer the story's reception, but a considerably different use of paratextual commentary emerges in relation to *Tears*.

Here, Linnea's instructions are more authoritative and detailed, and she tells the reader what to see in the story, rather than showing it through characterizations and plot developments. To an extent, this enlarged role of author instructions can be explained by the fact that the story takes a considerably darker turn that almost completely divorces it from the canon. Georgiana has already died when the narrative opens, the tragedy has left Darcy shattered and distrustful, his marriage to Elizabeth is one of convenience, and she suppresses aspects of her personality to survive in the relationship with an emotionally distant man. Linnea reassures her readers already in the first A/N that she "always bring[s] a happy ending to Darcy and Elizabeth" but she does not "promise that it will be a smooth road getting there." Many readers are willing to travel down this difficult road with her, and the vast majority of the close to five hundred reviews are positive to the altered canon conditions. In what follows, however, I will focus on a handful of comments that question both characterizations and Linnea's way of enforcing a particular line of interpretation, and discuss how lengthy explanations can lead to a complicated relation with the audience.

As Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse point out, fans productively engage with different limits posed by the canon and fandom expectations: the deeply intertextual connection with the canon "offer[s] both framework and challenge" whereas the "fan communities provide indirect constraints based on shared interpretations" (2009, 196, 197). Subgroups commonly form within larger communities, each with their own preferences; that is, shared interpretations can come to be exceedingly particularized. In the *Pride and Prejudice* fandom, such subgroups may, for example, come together around pairings with one championing the canon's heterosexual romance, another the homoerotic relationship between Darcy and Wickham. Stories depicting other romantic constellations will transgress the limits of the respective subgroup's reading, and readers of fanfic commonly navigate the vast output of stories to arrive at texts that at least to some extent correspond

to their own interpretive proclivities. Linnea's summary and initial A/N prepare the reader for the canon-compliant Elizabeth/Darcy pairing and signals a different treatment of the canon romance, but comments illustrate that some readers are not adequately readied for her portrayal of a weak and submissive Elizabeth and a bitter, resentful Darcy. These depictions, consequently, violate boundaries for some readers, unable to share Linnea's interpretation.⁷

Particularly strong reactions are expressed in formulations drawing attention to how Elizabeth especially is Out Of Character (OOC). Although an altered premise in itself may entail characters significantly changed in relation to the canon, some form of links need to remain for the fanfic not to be turned into an original piece of fiction. To Jacqs, for example, Elizabeth's "intelligence ... wit [and] independence" are crucial to the meaning of Austen's novel, and she complains that the character in *Tears* is "completely OOC in how she reacts and accepts things." Instead of being a *Pride and Prejudice* fanfic, Jacqs continues, it is "merely an original story based in the Regency period" (comment to Ch. 11, emphasis added). Although also highlighting that *Tears* has significant merits on its own, the comment signals that the distance from the canon is problematic; intertextual links deepen the meaning made of the fanfic, or even justify its existence in the first place, and the reader needs to be given the opportunity to recognize the canon characters.

In response to this comment, Linnea to an extent accepts criticism of her OOC rendering of Elizabeth, but undercuts it by referring to the story logic of *Tears*. "[Y]ou *should be* [...] frustrated with Elizabeth," she tells her readers, since the character has been placed in a situation that does not agree with her canon personality (A/N, Ch. 10, emphasis added). She continues:

please remember that in the book you see a single Elizabeth Bennet who is headstrong, opinionated, has been indulged by her father, and lives in a world where she is normally the smartest person in the

room. This Elizabeth Darcy is in a marriage of convenience and she is in over her head and she knows it. Right now she is in survival mode, trying to fit into a life for which she is unprepared. She doesn't have a loving husband doting on her and doing everything he can to shield her. The only time she can really be herself when she is alone with him, though. They are getting along famously when there are by themselves. [...] She even comments on how much she has changed at a point later on. However, it's her inner "Elizabeth Bennet" that helps her get out of her 'funk' and by the time the story is over, I hope that she's the Elizabeth we would recognize once again, just finally comfortable in her own skin and happily married to a man who realizes that's the woman he wanted to marry from the start. (A/N, Ch. 12)

I quote this passage at length because it contains several aspects that return in Linnea's paratextual commentary. Firstly, attention is somewhat superfluously drawn to the altered conditions that readers should keep in mind and consequently be lenient in their readings. Secondly, Linnea foregrounds aspects that she feels her readers have missed, such as Elizabeth and Darcy's successful interpersonal exchanges when alone: aspects that should then inform the critical reading of passages detailing the strain in their relationship. Thirdly, Linnea reminds readers of the finished state of the story; 'later on' Elizabeth will, like readers, realize that she has behaved OOC and that it has been detrimental. Thus pointing forwards, she indicates that the canon-Elizabeth, independent and headstrong, is still there as the 'true' self of the fanfic character and as the personality the character is working towards.

Linnea thus details not only how and why her fanfic deviates from the canon, demonstrating how her readers is supposed to read it, but attempts to buy time: readers are encouraged to stick with the story and be rewarded at its end, when characters are returned to 'normal.' Her

strategy does not pay off in regards to all readers. An anonymous commentator follows the story for another two chapters, but then complains that “Lizzie is still so OOC; where is her fire, her independence?” (Guest, comment to Ch. 14). Wilko is harsher; she abandons the story at chapter sixteen because Linnea has “destroyed Elizabeth’s character ... and turned her in to a simpering creature who lives only for a man” (comment to Ch. 16). These reviewers are not willing to wait and evaluate the character at the end of the story and they express a sense of difficulty in identifying with Elizabeth. As demonstrated, the narrative strategies Linnea employed in *Sister*, predominantly a less complex intersubjectivity and emotional frankness, distanced the fanfic from the canon but gave rise to a heightened emotional realism resulting in favorable readings. The comments above rather indicate a desire for a return to the canon depiction, and suggest that the alternative rendering of Elizabeth in *Tears* is perceived as emotionally unrealistic.

The explicit instructions for how to interpret radically altered characters are paralleled by Linnea’s detailed explanations to her own narrative strategies; explanations that are similarly intended to frame the reception of the fanfic and put readers back on the track she has intended. In the A/N to chapter 10, for example, she expounds on her decision to avoid “head-hop[ping]”, that is, to include multiple points-of-view in a story, a chapter, and even in single scenes, which is otherwise common in fanfic. At this point in the story, commentators have addressed how Darcy, like Elizabeth, is perceived to be OOC, and indicated that access to his thought processes might help explain why he acts the way he does. To change or add perspectives according to readers’ wishes are not viable options for Linnea since the story is re-published rather than unfolding, but rather than reminding her readers of this fact, she instructs them to think about the restricted access to minds in works they admire and to how authors thereby “allow the reader to use their imaginations to fill in the blanks.” This piece of advice is followed by a

seemingly counter-productive delineation of why she has not yet switched to Darcy's point-of-view: "he won't allow himself to question why he is acting the way he is." The explanation does not give any insights into what Darcy is thinking, rather it stresses that the blanks are literally blank and cannot be filled in no matter how hard the reader is trying. But Linnea continues: "That said, if I've done my job, I should have left enough clues for you to figure out the basics" (A/N Ch. 10). Linnea seems highly aware that an active audience demands some type of challenge to engage with a text and is reluctant to leave them empty-handed. Although Darcy is not yet ready to ponder his own situation, rendering access to his thoughts moot, other events, actions and reactions in the fanfic, although unspecified, may serve as pointers when decoding his mind-set. By actively looking for intentions elsewhere readers are encouraged to continue their engagement with the story.

Comments from two reviewers sum up reactions to two intertwined levels of explicitness at work, inside and outside of *Tears*. MayaLala's fairly early decision to stop reading stems from how the characters' emotions are not explored in compelling ways. "[Y]ou keep telling me how they're feeling but not showing me," she explains (MayaLala, comment to Ch. 5). The comment zeroes in on the contents of the fanfic itself, particularly on its character portrayals, and since "Regency is all about the subtle movements and eyes," Linnea's more literal and explicit rendering of emotional reactions is perceived to distance itself too far from the canon (MayaLala, comment to Ch. 5). It is not, consequently, the radically changed premise that does not agree with this reader, but the fact that she wants to be shown rather than told how the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy develops. This form of reaction may thus be a contributing reason for Linnea's use of extended paratextual commentary, which an anonymous reviewer then criticizes: "if your author's notes need to be that long to describe your reasoning behind certain decisions, you're not doing a very good job of explaining the actions of the characters within the story" (Guest comment to Ch. 20).

We are consequently dealing with another type of chain-reaction in which what is perceived as narrative flaws give rise to commentary and in which this commentary strengthens rather than lessens their impact.⁸ In the latter case especially, Linnea's A/Ns are perceived as interfering with the reading process, and her initiation and maintenance of an explicatory dialogue with readers as shifting focus away from the fictional text.

Although representing a clear minority among the comments, the negative responses and criticism may have affected Linnea's use of extended paratextual commentary of the telling-not-showing variety, since the chapters of *Sister* are not prefaced in this way. In connection with *Tears*, however, her instructions offer ample evidence of the sometimes conflicting authorial positions fanfic authors take up vis-à-vis their audience and that are paradoxical considering the fanfic form. While all A/Ns illustrate how "authors grant themselves the authority to provide lines of interpretation for their audience that they fiercely refuse to accept from the [canon] and its producers" (Herzog § 4.12), Linnea crosses a line with some of her followers by limiting their possibilities of engaging with the story by offering their own interpretations in their feedback. The difference between show and tell consequently illustrates two different conceptualizations of the author role: one which is used to further communal beliefs about creative freedom, one in which the authorial authority becomes akin to the type of power that fanfic authors protest against in the first place.

Conclusions

The production and dissemination of fan fiction present contemporary amateur authors with opportunities for several forms of communication with their audience. A fanfic communicates a particular interpretation of the canon, A/Ns and E/Ns can be used to highlight aspects of this interpretation and guide readers, and this paratextual commentary can also be used to extend discussions outward to encompass personal and private information, at times pertinent to the text at hand, at times

wholly unconnected to it. Fan fiction archives then present visitors with different options for a reciprocal communication, most commonly in the form of comment fields; discussions here can similarly move in different, more or less personal, directions. To come together around a joint interest in a canon in the affinity space of a fandom, can consequently be seen as an intensely social practice, but as demonstrated, there are clear allocations of roles during the publication process that belie an otherwise seemingly equal distribution of power.

Different forms of instructions and responses effectively highlight how power in general is ambiguously perceived of in a fandom, and how this, in turn, affects the function of the author. Fan fiction inherently builds on subverting elements of the canon text, and although Austen unquestionably holds significant power on one level, as the venerated author of a work that has inspired a sustained engagement, her novel is open to appropriation: her version of events and characters is not seen as definitive. The fanfic text, then, presenting the author's take, could arguably be approached in the same manner. However, by utilizing A/Ns and E/Ns, particularly in the serial publication of a text, an authorial presence is effectively established that continuously can address readers and enforce intentions. By being present in the virtual space, and by carrying on a dialogue with readers, a fanfic author can counter what is perceived as faulty readings of her text. Two author roles thus exist simultaneously: one questioning authority, one enforcing it.

But as demonstrated, particular communication strategies introduce complexities and Linnea's paratextual commentary usefully illustrates how different approaches yield differing results. *Sister* is relatively unproblematic as far as plot developments go: although offering a different take on the canon, its romance and characterizations are retained. *Tears*, on the other hand, introduces readers to a considerably darker plot and to characterizations that are divorced from the canon. So far, we are simply dealing with two narrative strategies that may or may not resound with readers. It is rather the presentation of and discussion

about the fanfics that demonstrate the fine line authors thread between telling and showing and readers' protests against the former testify to their desire to take a more active part in meaning-making, and engage with fiction on their own terms.

Maria Lindgren Leavenworth is Associate Professor of English Literature at the Department of Language Studies, Umeå University, Sweden. Her research interests include travel writing, intertextuality, transmediality, and contemporary modifications of the paratext. Within the project FAN(G)S, funded by the Swedish Research Council 2011-2014 she has published extensively on fan fiction and is co-author of Fanged Fan Fiction: Variations on Twilight, True Blood, and The Vampire Diaries (McFarland 2013).

Contact: maria.lindgren@umu.se

<<http://www.sprak.umu.se/om-institutionen/personal/maria-lindgren-leavenworth>>

Notes

1. Among printed prequels and sequels we find Dorothy Alice Bonavia-Hunt's *Pemberley Shades* (1949) and Melanie Kerr's *Follies Past* (2014). Complementary viewpoints are added for example in Janet Aylmer's *Darcy's Story* (1996) and Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013), the latter supplying readers with the servants' perceptions of events. The heterosexual romance in the source text is overthrown, at least temporarily, in Ann Herendeen's *Pride/Prejudice* (2010), and a growing number of mashups couples Regency romance with the supernatural (see for example Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and Amanda Grange's *Mr Darcy, Vampyre*, both published in 2009).
2. For extended discussions about fan communities, see also Matt Hills' *Fan Cultures* (2002), and Karen Helleksen and Kristina Busse's *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006).
3. The usage of pseudonyms is an established convention in the world of fan fiction even when the canon, like *Pride and Prejudice*, no longer is copyright-protected.
4. In August 2009, *Tears* also appears as a self-published novel, under the name L. E. Smith, on the Amazon-run site *Create Space*.
5. Julianabr writes with some exasperation that she wishes that Linnea "would post the whole thing at once! [...] And to know that these chapters exist somewhere in the universe, yet not accessible to me—the horror!" (*Tears*, comment to Ch. 2).
6. It should be noted that even more intimate forms of communication may take place between Linnea and her readers since the interface allows her to contact her commentators directly: a registered user on *FanFiction.net* can receive private messages on her personal page. These exchanges are inaccessible to a visitor to the site.
7. Cross-referencing the reviewers' pseudonyms show that 45 readers have left comments for both *Sister* and *Tears* (not counting anonymous reviewers). The overlap demonstrates an appreciation for both fanfics, regardless of their different treatments of the canon, and commentary by, for example, 4leafclover0120 and Dizzy Lizzy.60 illustrates a faithful commitment: both reviewers have given

positive feedback to all chapters of *Tears*, and to 32 and 37 chapters of *Sister*, respectively.

8. There are also several examples of how Linnea's detailed A/Ns have the opposite effect. Reader hongkongphooey63, for example, writes: "I have ... appreciated your author's notes and explanations, you have allowed us inside your head" (comment to chapter 20).

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