

**A STORY OF MAN'S GREAT LOVE  
FOR HIS FELLOW MAN:  
SLASH FAN FICTION, A LITERARY GENRE**

by  
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**Husband:** “Good evening all, my love. I have returned safe from the Low Countries.” [*His wife hurriedly hides the book she is reading under some knitting and starts whistling.*] “What are thou reading, fair one?”

**Wife:** “Oh, ‘tis nothing, husband.”

**Husband:** “I can see ‘tis *something*.”

**Wife:** “‘Tis one of Shakespeare’s latest works.”

**Husband:** [*picks up the book and reads the title*] “Oh... ‘Gay Boys in Bondage’. What, is’t - tragedy? Comedy?”

**Wife:** “‘Tis a... er... ‘tis a story of a man’s great love for his... fellow men.”

**Husband:** “How fortunate we are indeed to have such a poet on these shores.”

**Wife:** “Indeed. How was the war, my lord?”

**Husband:** “The Spaniards were defeated thrice. Six dozen chests of hardcore captured.”

**Wife** [*trying to look innocent*] “Hast thou brought home any spoils of war?”

**Husband:** “Yes, my good wife, this fair coat trimmed with ermine.”

**Wife:** [*without enthusiasm*] “Oh, lovely, nowt else?”

**Husband:** “No, no, fair lady. The rest was too smutty.”

Elizabethan Pornography Smugglers Sketch, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*

## ABSTRACT

Slash fan fiction is a “genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between [...] protagonists” who are “expropriated male media characters”, and which are “written almost exclusively by and for women”. Slash is distinctive for its exploration of homoerotic relationships between men written from a female perspective. This thesis analyzes the genre with a particular focus on the process of creation of slash stories, including a stage-by-stage breakdown of the slash writing process. It also focuses on the properties of the slash text, and presents a description of the elements that create the essence of any slash story. This was performed through a close reading of both the source text and the slash text, with supplementary data collected through e-mail interviews with slash fans. Queer theory and narrative theory were applied as they lend themselves to the analysis and have not previously been thoroughly considered in this context.

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## INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

In my thesis, I will explore slash fan fiction, a “genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between [...] protagonists” (H. Jenkins 186) who are “expropriated male media characters”, and which are “written almost exclusively by and for women” (Salmon and Symons, “Warrior Lovers” 70). Slash comprises a subgenre of the more general field of fan fiction, or unofficial stories written by fans of various media sources such as television series, films and books, using their characters and settings. Slash is distinctive for its exploration of homoerotic relationships between men written from a female perspective, which can be seen in the attentiveness to intimacy and emotion between the characters as well as how the depicted sex acts reflect female sexual desires and experience. By suggesting a more fluid sexual identity for many well-known (and some little-known) media characters, it raises our awareness to the rigid portrayal of sexuality, both in media and in society. Slash also provides commentary on how male intimacy is discouraged by the hegemonic model of masculinity. As Kimmel notes in his discussion of how hegemonic masculinity is inherently homophobic, displays of male intimacy and vulnerability compromise the constructed male identity of strength and power (124-126, 130). By exploring close, deep male relationships, slash offers a female perspective on how these relationships might be structured if not subject to societal expectations.

Whereas previous studies have tended to focus on the community aspects of the genre such as social organization, how stories are distributed, how newcomers are initiated, and the importance of conventions<sup>1</sup> as a meeting place for like-minded fans, this study will

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary.

explore the slash text in particular, with a view to answer the following questions: What are the reasons women enjoy slash? How is a slash story created, from source text to slash text? What “hints” do slash readers and writers perceive in the source material that inspire the investigation of homoerotic relationships? How do they expand upon these hints in the writing? How have slash stories been categorized and what are the shortcomings of these approaches? What are the characteristics of the written product? By asking these questions I hope to gain insight into how and why slash is written, and which elements differentiate and which unite the diverse stories that exist within the genre.

In order to provide a complete picture of slash, it is necessary to use multiple methods - as H. Jenkins correctly observes, the “meaning of slash resides as much in the social ties created by the exchange of narratives, the sharing of gossip, and the play with identity as it does with the words on the page” (222). Therefore, to supplement my critical analysis of the existing work on slash, I have chosen to use the lived experience of community members along with a close reading of both the source text and the slash text. It is also important to point out that although I am attempting to make an objective, balanced study, I am an insider, and the possible biases stemming from this status must be taken into account. My personal interest in the topic comes from being a participating member of the slash community for ten years. Over this time period, I have been involved in reading, writing, and discussing stories with other slash fans, and have also attended several slash conventions where community members gather to socialize and discuss the genre. I have both a broad understanding of its reaches, as well as comprehensive in-depth knowledge of the stories in a variety of fandoms<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See Glossary.



There have been several criticisms made about being an insider researcher. In his discussion about research with Maori and indigenous people Bishop notes that there are often concerns that “that insiders are inherently biased, or that they are too close to the [studied] culture to ask critical questions” (111). Mitchell contends that insider researchers’ data can be “influenced by [their] insider status from the beginning”, and he admits that he selected “who [he] was going to interview according to [his] preconceptions and contacts” and he “could have obtained a very different picture by interviewing different [people]” (42). He also remarks that “[there] is always a danger that an informant will fill in little detail of a subject or incident if they are aware the interviewer has similar knowledge” (42). On the other hand, Rosecrance states in his study of horse betting that the “a priori assumption that a member is an automatic advocate of his or her group frequently is inaccurate”, adding that as an insider, he is “fully aware of the problems that can result from [horse betting]” and that in his study he desires to “demystify and portray adequately the world of horse race gambling, not to be its champion” (354).

It is often assumed that having an insider bias will cause one to focus overly on the positive while glossing over the shortcomings, but in my opinion having this pre-existing knowledge will allow me to offer a balanced view, because people who are closely involved with something become acutely aware of its reality. Being an insider has clear positive benefits for researching the slash community, which is can be quite guarded and distrustful of outsiders. My common knowledge and background with the subjects will be an asset rather than a disadvantage, as I will not have to struggle to gain their trust and establish a rapport with them. While older works on slash made a point of dissociating the researcher and the fan to avoid accusations of researcher bias, working under the

“assumption that a necessarily detached standpoint was required in the search for objective truths” (Mitchell 37), recent studies have embraced insider knowledge as a valuable tool that can lead to deeper insight if used appropriately. Busse and Hellekson declare that “being embedded in a community – which we nevertheless study critically – can provide a useful approach” that is gaining validity due to the “trend in academic discourse to the personal and the realization that no subject position is completely outside the field of study” (24).

Using experience as a research method has many benefits, including the ability to gain new perspectives that had been previously unexplored, the ability to make inferences that the experience of some individuals applies to others and the proximity of the researcher and researched can allow for more in-depth understanding of the topic being studied. The “giving voice” to the previously unheard groups leads to the discovery of new angles from which to look at existing topics, and uncovers areas of study that had previously not been considered. Another dimension of the use of experience exists in the interactions between the researcher and the subject(s) being researched. These are subject to the concepts of intersubjectivity and self-reflexivity; the researcher and the researched are working together to find a common understanding, and both can introspectively evaluate the research methods to develop an awareness of its shortcomings. Prus, a theorist on intersubjectivity, suggests that for the best results when dealing with experience, researchers should immerse themselves “in the research process, [respect their] research participants and their worlds, and [share] their lived experience” (Charmaz xi). The ability to generate a deeper understanding of and shared knowledge with the research subject(s) is cited as an advantage because it allows the researcher to reject the “strict dichotomy between

researcher and researched” and be self-reflexive with a “careful consideration of the consequences of the researcher's interactions with those they research” (England 2009). I have described some positive and useful roles for the use of experience, however, there are several drawbacks that must be taken into consideration. These include the potential lack of objectivity, its questionable authenticity due to its constructed and unreliable nature, and the difficulty in assigning a group to which inferences based on experience can apply. A further issue that is commonly encountered by researchers is the question of how much interpretation to apply to the raw material gathered from the subjects. It is important to strike a balance between over-interpreting and possibly distorting the message thereby silencing the very people that need to be heard, and failing to interpret enough, leaving the source material possibly confusing and not situated in context.

In order to document the experience of slash fans, I conducted e-mail interviews with nine female fans (all them readers and some of them also writers of slash), aged between 18 and 65, with about half of respondents being in their twenties. Four of them are from United States, and the others are from Canada, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Germany, and Serbia. I knew all but one of them through my participation in *From Eroica With Love*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Sharpe*, *Stargate Atlantis* and *Starsky & Hutch* fandoms. I asked the interviewees to choose a pseudonym, either their current one (as pseudonyms are very common in the slash community) or one created for this study. One drawback of previous studies was the uniformity of the sample, which tended to consist of American women in their late thirties (Bacon-Smith 332), as they were the most accessible source of information about slash in the pre-Internet era, when conventions were the easiest way to meet a large sample of slash fans. Although this demographic still participates in the slash

community, since the proliferation of the Internet as a primary distribution medium slash readership has become substantially more diverse. I have attempted to capture this in my sample, which features two non-native English speakers, a wide range of nationalities and age groups as well as different levels of participation in fandom.

The sample was limited to women as slash fans tend to be overwhelmingly female; while including men would give another perspective, it would not be representative of the demographics of the community. E-mail interviews were selected because they allow access to such a diverse sample, and permit the respondents to answer the questions on their own time. The advantage of this method is that it gives the respondents time to contemplate the interview questions and construct a fully thought-out answer. A potential disadvantage is that it could miss an initial reaction to a question that would be evident in a live interview setting, because the respondent may, after some thought, decide they desire to respond differently. Another possible drawback lies in the elective nature of responses, as this is likely to capture the more opinionated subset of the fan community and leave some voices unheard. After reviewing the responses I received, I believe that the interviews were successful because of the variety of opinions expressed by the respondents, within which patterns of agreement and dissention could be detected.

Another method that I will use is a close reading of the source texts and the slash texts. By referencing and analyzing specific examples from various source texts, I will attempt to identify characteristics among these that serve as inspiration for slash writing. I would also perform a close reading of three slash stories written in English<sup>3</sup>, obtained from the Internet and representing a cross-section of the genre. Selecting a number of stories to analyze involved considering the trade-off between the breadth and depth with which to

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<sup>3</sup> I will only be looking at fictional person slash stories, as I am unfamiliar with real person slash (RPS).

perform my study. In my opinion, a sample of three stories allows for more in-depth analysis of the specific text of those stories, at the expense of getting a more complete picture of the genre. A possible disadvantage of the sample is that it can be potentially judged to be too small. Furthermore, no matter how many or few stories are chosen for the sample, I can still be criticized by someone within the slash community for leaving out what they may consider to be important.

In Chapter One, I will examine the history of slash, and the body of research studying it. The historical overview will explain the origins of the genre and the important distinctions between pre-Internet and Internet eras. I will thematically examine the prior academic work on slash to identify trends in the research and areas of agreement and disagreement amongst scholars. I will also evaluate the fan perspective to see how slash is viewed by its own audience.

In Chapter Two, I will study the process of slash writing by looking at the progression from source to slash. This includes which sources lend themselves to being slashed, what clues slash writers see in the source that inspire their writing, and how the writing elaborates upon these. Dhaenens, Van Bauwel and Biltreyst argue that slash “seems to have been overlooked in queer studies” (345), a field that studies the flexibility of identity. I will reference queer theory as it offers an explanation for how the characters’ identities are changed by the process of “slashing”. Further, I will examine the various interactions between source texts and slash texts, which include the question of authorship and the aspect of commentary through parody.

In Chapter Three, I will direct my focus to the slash text as a unit of study. Stasi notes that “slash has not been adequately studied as a textual artifact” (118) due to the

overwhelming emphasis by previous researchers on the social organization of slash fans, which often took place at the expense of performing detailed analysis of the text. I will discuss the problem of categorization, look at how narrative theory can help to identify common trends in the slash text, and conclude with a close reading and comparison of three slash stories which will identify how they take differing approaches to the important elements of mimicry and sexuality.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “CAPTAIN SODOM AND CAPTAIN GOMORRAH”: SLASH FAN FICTION FROM KIRK TO HARKNESS

**Henry Blake:** *[introducing the MASH staff to Radar O'Reilly dressed as General MacArthur]* “Two of my captains...”

**Hawkeye Pierce:** “Captain Sodom and Captain Gomorrah.” *[points to Trapper MacIntyre]*  
“He’s Gomorrah.”

“Big Mac”, *M\*A\*S\*H*

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In this chapter, I will present a brief historical outline of the origin and development of slash fan fiction, review the relevant literature on the topic and outline how fans self-assess the genre and explain their involvement in it. The history of slash can be divided into two distinct eras: pre-Internet, characterized by ‘zine<sup>4</sup> distribution of stories and a smaller, tight-knit community; and the Internet era, featuring increasing quantity and availability of slash stories, as since the early 1990s, online sources have become the primary means of distribution and community organization. Most existing academic sources study the former era, as they were compiled and written in the 1980s and early 1990s and because of the strong social aspects of this period they tend to focus on the community aspects rather than the writing itself, although there are now several recent studies which begin to address the changes brought about by the Internet. Fans, when questioned about their motivation for reading and/or writing slash, do not always agree on their reasons, but provide responses consistent with several common themes.

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<sup>4</sup> See Glossary.

### 1.1. “We’re by no means setting a precedent”<sup>5</sup>: A Brief History of Slash

Slash fan fiction, so named after the slash mark (/) used to “join the two characters’ names or initials, the emblem of the union at the heart of the genre” (Decarnin 1233), is thought to have originated in the *Star Trek* (1966-1969) fandom, although some fans have asserted that *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968) fandom could also be a viable candidate. Private slash stories circulated among fans in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but the first known published slash story is thought to be Diane Marchant’s *A Fragment Out of Time*, published in the fanzine *Grup III* in September 1974. It depicted “two nameless people (one male, one whose gender was not revealed) making love”, with the author later clarifying that she intended them to be Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* (Coppa 48). During the late seventies and eighties, slash became more common and diversified, although it was not without opposition from those who regarded it as “character rape” (Kendra Hunter qtd. in H. Jenkins 187). Busse and Hellekson note that during this time, “fandom was transmitted from person to person through enculturation. Fan artifacts were physical, and geographical boundaries were often an issue” (13). Some other important sources<sup>6</sup> for pre-Internet slash fandoms include television series *Starsky & Hutch* (1975-1979), *Blake’s 7* (1977-1981), *The Professionals* (1977-1983), *Miami Vice* (1984-1990), and *Wiseguy* (1987-1991); as well as *From Eroica With Love* (*Eroika yori ai o komete*) (1976-), a Japanese shōjo manga<sup>7</sup> by Aoike Yasuko, which entered the Western slash community in the 1980s after several volumes were translated into English and circulated amongst fans (Thorn 172).

<sup>5</sup> The first words of the first known published slash story. See Decarnin, 1233.

<sup>6</sup> I am naming sources that are important either because of their size or their significance to slash fandom.

<sup>7</sup> Japanese girls’ and women’s comics.



The advent of the Internet was very important for slash - Busse and Hellekson observe that it “has changed the size of fandom and its demographics and has created new forms of reader-author interaction” (2), as it allowed like-minded fans to communicate and post stories with relative ease. In the new era, “financial resources have become less of a concern because access to a computer is the only pre-requisite; and national boundaries and time zones have ceased to limit fannish interaction” (13). Fans (including slash fans) used bulletin boards, forums and mailing lists throughout most of the nineties, which were generally geared toward one main topic. In recent years, many fans have also adopted blogs as a preferred method of communication, especially LiveJournal.com, although recently fans have begun to move to LiveJournal clone sites due to the disagreement with new policies instituted by the site. Some important slash fandoms of the Internet era include television series *Highlander* (1992-1998), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), *Due South* (1994-1999), *The Sentinel* (1996-1999), *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007), *Smallville* (2001-), *Stargate Atlantis* (2004-2009), *House M.D.* (2004-) and *Supernatural* (2005-) as well as the screen adaptations of *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) and *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) along with *Star Wars: Phantom Menace* (1999). An important current debate in the fandom is whether stories written for fandoms which feature queer characters in canon<sup>8</sup>, such as *Queer as Folk* (US) (2000-2005), or *Torchwood* (2006-) (the latter featuring the omnisexual character of Jack Harkness), are slash. Some think that “bending the canon is an element of slash” (noctuabunda), and thus stories based on these series would not qualify, but others think that it still is slash, albeit not in a “typical fandom” (Cein).

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<sup>8</sup> See Glossary.

## 1.2. Literature Review

In my literature review, I will examine the body of work that explores slash fan fiction and describe the theories that have been put forth by various writers. When looking at individual sources, I will focus on their treatment of several topics: firstly, their definitions of slash, including what works constitute the body of slash literature and which key features unite them; secondly, their theories on what motivates women to be involved in reading and writing slash; thirdly, the methodology that they use to study slash; and finally, where they locate slash in the greater context of literature, and specifically which other genres they use as a basis for comparison. The main sources have varying responses to these questions, which are perhaps affected by the gradual shift in the academic perception of slash from a sociological phenomenon to an object of study in its own right.

### 1.2.1. Defining Slash

After reviewing the available literature, I concur with Salmon and Symons, who state that “[a]cademic students of slash, while always interesting and often insightful, have sometimes reached erroneous conclusions because they did not cast their nets widely enough, even within the genre of slash itself” (“Warrior Lovers” 81). A common weakness of the early studies of fan fiction and slash has been the overt focus on *Star Trek*, commonly thought to be the fandom where slash originated, even late into the 1990s when the original series had been over for 30 years. Salmon and Symons pointedly observe that “some theorists have written about slash as if it consisted only of Kirk/Spock, assuming that certain features of K/S, such as its utopian aspects, characterize all slash” (“Warrior Lovers” 81-82). Specific works that exhibit this problem include Joanna Russ’ “Pornography By Women For Women, With Love”, Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L.

Veith's "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines". While these works provide insightful commentary on Star Trek slash in particular and provide a good basis for subsequent works, they suffer from the problem of essentializing when they suggest that their conclusions are valid for all slash stories.

Newer studies have attempted to overcome this limitation by giving attention to multiple fandoms, be they old or new, well-known or rare. While this better represents the breadth of slash writing as a whole, they still fall into the trap of generalizing from too few examples. Although Pugh sardonically declares that anyone "who has read many studies of fan fiction has spent long enough on the bridge of the Enterprise to last them a lifetime" (27), she is also guilty of the same sweeping statements as those writers who have presupposed K/S stories to represent all slash, as her conclusions about slash are often drawn from very particular examples in lesser-known fandoms. While the discussion so far has centered on the problem with reaching conclusions about all of slash based on too few examples, Woledge has warned of the dangers of going too far in the opposite direction, as slash has become so diverse that it is unfeasible to consider more than a subset in a single study (99) – as Driscoll notes,

"[...] every fandom is a web of communities distinguished by type, pairing, and/or genre, with varied degrees of overlapping or interlocking membership. In turn, every community is a field of subcommunities shaped by friendship groups, specific projects, geographic location, the contingencies of the Internet or other meeting places, and real-life conjunctions. Even this complicated assemblage is striated by internal hierarchies. (93)

Pugh reasserts the diversity of slash when she states that it is "probable that the genre has gone beyond the point where the people can agree on exactly what constitutes it" (109).

Although the breadth of sources used in each study varies, the basic definition of slash remains similar in the vast majority of sources. It has been defined in various texts as "a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists" (H. Jenkins

186), “a story in which any two male characters from the full range of source products recognized in the community engage in a sexual/romantic relationship” (Bacon-Smith 53) and “romantic/erotic narratives, written almost exclusively by and for women, in which both protagonists are expropriated male media characters” (Salmon and Symons, “Warrior Lovers” 70). In general, although there are many theories and disagreements about how to interpret slash, at least there is a consensus on what it is. Still, where slash begins and ends is more complicated than it seems, as there is debate within the fan community about whether fan fiction about queer television characters (which are becoming increasingly common) is still slash, as mentioned in section 1.1.

Another contentious issue in defining slash is the question the characters’ sexuality, as there is disagreement within the slash community about whether the “slashed” characters are straight, gay or bisexual. This sometimes results in a “refusal of sexual identity” for the “slashed” couple in a “large number of stories which explicitly deny previous homosexual experiences or gay orientations” (H. Jenkins 220). Penley posits that as “non-homosexuals, [the “slashed” characters] are not unavailable to women” (qtd. in H. Jenkins 198), and H. Jenkins suggests that “this conception of their sexuality may [...] allow the women to reconcile their reworkings with the [...] ample evidence of previous heterosexual encounters” in the source (198). One fan explains why she does not think of the characters in slash stories as gay:

“There is the infamous... ‘we are not gay we just love each other’ aspect of [slash] that I actually like. I, personally, am not fond of the thought that the character I am interested was part of the gay culture because I cannot see them translating from what my personal prejudices of gay life is to what slash portrays. It is not logical since promiscuity with women is acceptable but bath houses and anonymous cruising is not, in my mind.” (Ash-Leigh)

### 1.2.2. What motivates involvement in slash?

Many outsiders are unable to “imagine why any woman would want to read or write [slash]” (Salmon and Symons, “Warrior Lovers” 2) It is not intuitive why some women have an interest in stories about homoerotic male relationships, and so the majority of sources attempt to explain the phenomenon through various theories. These tend to fall into two categories: theories about how slash provides some insight into women’s nature, and theories about how portrayals of characters in the media lead to certain trends in how the viewers identify with them. Another possible explanation, proposed by Pugh, is that slash fans want “more from” the source material, as opposed to “more of” it. She contends that “there is canon material which, though it draws its readers or viewers in, strikes them as being far from perfect or fully realized; they see possibilities in it which were never explored as they might have been. They want “more from” their canon, and again, who else will give them that if not themselves?” (43)

A number of scholars see slash as “a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity” (H. Jenkins 191), allowing women to re-write men as they would like to see them – as Russ puts it, slash can be read as “not a homosexual love affair between two men, but love and sex as women want them” (83). Penley believes that slash writing sets out to retool masculinity (127) and H. Jenkins maintains that it allows for “exploration of alternatives to traditional masculinity” (186). Some scholars, like Lamb and Vieth, emphasize the androgynous properties of slash stories and contend that by “combining elements of masculinity and femininity into a satisfactorily whole yet constantly fluid identity” (H. Jenkins 193) for their characters, slash fans transcend the binary category of male/female (Lamb and Vieth 243). Others, like Russ,

focus on the perceived equality of the slash couple and “the way responsibility, initiative, activity, passivity, strength and weakness shift constantly from one to the other” (83).

However, the problematic issues in women’s involvement with slash are not forgotten, with Penley querying “Why are the women fans so alienated from their own bodies that they can write erotic fantasies only in relation to a nonfemale body?” (125) Penley’s question of why women find it hard to identify with female characters and resort to re-writing male bodies is partially answered by H. Jenkins, who notes that often,

[the] media simply does not provide the autonomous female characters needed to create a heterosexual romance between equals [...] Forced to work within generic traditions created by and for men and already codified with patriarchal assumptions, female writers have often found it easier to rework or invert those assumptions than to create a totally alternative set of conventions or to find appropriate models for autonomous female characters. (194-6).

Penley agrees with H. Jenkins’ assessment that “mass media constructs more vivid and compelling male protagonists than female secondary characters”, noting that at least on *Star Trek*, “female characters ... [were] marginalized [...] by the sketchiness of their roles and the feminine stereotyping to which they were subjected.” (126-7), Thus, often, the female viewer tends to identify with “strong male characters” (Penley 126) and projects her “sexual fantasies, desires, and experiences onto the male bodies of the series characters” (H. Jenkins 191).

A final interpretation, typically put forth by the fan community is that slash fans enjoy slash and need no further justification; as Penley notes, “the fans [...] would say they are just having fun” (101). McLelland echoes this sentiment when he asks rhetorically “Why should men’s interest in ‘lesbianism’ be taken for granted whereas women’s interest in male homosexuality somehow be in need of interpretation?”, while Tennison asks “[Why] should anyone want to read about characters who aren’t anything they could ever be [...]? Why do we read (with relish) about space pirates, neurotic rock stars, or

melancholy Danish princes? Fiction isn't about reasonable wish-fulfillment or simple identity matches" (qtd. in Green, C. Jenkins and H. Jenkins).

### **1.2.3. How is slash approached?**

Researchers of slash have come from a wide range of academic backgrounds such as film and media studies, anthropology and psychology, which has strongly influenced their perceptions of the genre. Early studies sometimes treated it as a subversive social phenomenon that needed to be exposed for its supposed uniqueness, with the researchers, who were purportedly fans, maintaining a supposedly necessary air of objectivity and often studying the community rather than the text. Another trend amongst the early studies was that of using slash as a vehicle to support a broader argument in the researcher's area of expertise. Some specific examples of the old-style studies of slash include Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* and Penley's *NASA/TREK*: the former lets a "colder mind [prevail]" (3) and the latter states that she is called "one of the academic fans" (101) by the slash fans. Both writers almost completely remove themselves from the narrative and present themselves as outside observers who just happen to be fans.

Newer studies, on the other hand, use outside examples to support their arguments about slash, making slash the main object of focus. As already stated in the methodology section of my thesis, they tend to embrace their researchers' insider status, viewing it as an asset rather than a bias. For instance, Busse and Hellekson, the editors of a recent volume of essays on fan fiction, wanted to "situate it at the intersection of the fannish community and academic discourses on fan culture" and emphasized that all those who contributed were "fans as well as academics." (1) These studies tend to often focus on the slash text and its literary properties, with Kaplan arguing that fan fiction (including slash) "has not been

much studied *as fiction*, as text that, under a literary criticism lens, can be fascinating as nonfan-produced work” (135, author’s emphasis).

#### 1.2.4. Locating Slash

A significant trend amongst studies of slash is to attempt to identify the literary genres that are most closely related to it. Attempts are made to locate slash within several spheres of literature such as popular women’s literature and sexual-themed literature. There is little agreement amongst researchers, as each study proposes a different niche that is filled by slash. Earlier suggestions tended to be spin-offs of the romance genre, whereas more recent thinking is more diverse. Interestingly, two conflicting sentiments meet when trying to locate slash: its characterization as a unique phenomenon with no precedents in the literary world<sup>9</sup> versus its characterization as a genre with strong parallels to genres such as romance and erotica. Only by looking at the entire range of thinking on the issue across multiple studies do we start to get a complete picture of the similarities and differences between slash and similar genres.

Salmon and Symons note that “most academic interest in slash [...] has come from the areas of media studies and cultural studies, the former tending to emphasize the pornographic aspects of slash, the latter its romantic aspects” (“Warrior Lovers”, 74). Viewing slash as a part of romantic fiction for women is the most accepted, with Russ observing that the “endless hesitations and yearnings [in slash stories] resemble the manufactured misunderstandings of the female romance books” (82) and Salmon and Symons declaring slash to be “so similar to mainstream romances that it could reasonably

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<sup>9</sup> Woledge contends that many early studies emphasized the uniqueness of slash – “Henry Jenkins claimed that slash was the most “original contribution to popular literature” (1992); Constance Penley characterized slash as “a unique hybrid genre” (1992, 480); and Joanna Russ felt that slash was “the only sexual fantasy by women for women ... produced without the control ... of censorship” (1985, 95)” (98).



be classified as a species of that genre” (“Human Mating Psychology”). Others, like Russ, see slash as a “pornography for women, by women” (79), although Driscoll remarks “[that this] is important more for what it says about gendering of pornography than for any question of motivation or effect” and contends that these “genres are not poles at either end of a scale but axes between which every story can be plotted as more or less romance and more or less porn” (91).

There have also been attempts to locate slash fan fiction in other genres. Penley places slash in the category of feminist utopian fiction (which is perhaps true of *Star Trek* slash, which she is concentrating on in her study) and maintains that “[the slash writers’] work [...] embodies the same impulse as the female nineteenth-century popular novelists: to transform the public sphere by imaginatively demonstrating how it could be improved through making it more answerable to women’s interests” (134). In contrast, Woledge argues that a “subset of slash fiction [...] takes place in a fantasy world that [she dubs] *intimatopia*, because its central defining feature is the exploration of intimacy” (99). She describes it as a “homosocial world in which the social closeness of the male characters engenders intimacy” (100) and gives the work of Mary Renault, Mel Keegan and Marion Zimmer Bradley as mainstream examples of this genre.

### **1.3. The Fan Viewpoint**

Fans, when questioned, offer diverse reasons for reading and writing slash. Some of these correspond to the theories proposed in the literature, while some offer new explanations that have not been fully explored. One important factor is the lack of interest in/inability to identify with female characters: noctuabunda declares that she tends

“to identify far more with male characters than [she does] with females [... so she is] mostly attracted to series in which the main characters are men who have close relationships with other men”, while Cein states “I know that I’m never going to get the chance to make out with a character on a TV show, so the next best thing is if they get to make out with (and more!) an acceptable substitute for me. And most female characters don’t live up to that standard.” One fan suggests that is “romance in a form [she] can accept” (noctuabunda) as she dislikes popular romances, and another mentions that she enjoys “the equality in the relationships” (Katie Mariie) in slash due to the absence of power struggles. Another reason is wanting “more from” the canon, with fans liking “the challenge of building an entire relationship based on subtext” (Katie Mariie) and enjoying slash “because it gives [them] more than canon ever could. More interaction between certain characters. A deeper exploration of relationships than there’s time for on-screen. Alternate paths the show \*could’ve\* taken” (noctuabunda).

When asked to locate slash within the sex-themed literature, many fans thought that subsets of slash intersect with the genres of erotica and pornography, but that slash as a whole cannot be placed into another genre: “I think it is closer to erotica than to pornography or maybe falls somewhere in between but closer to erotica” (Ash-Leigh), “Some slash can be classed under erotica and/or porn [...]. But not all” (Debris K), “I think slash as a genre is different from erotica and straightforward porn. While these can be elements in a slash fic, they are not essential” (Margaret Price), “I think it depends on the story. Some slash is neither; it’s a relationship. But of the graphic stuff, some of it is erotica: meant to titillate, but also to be beautiful, artful. Some is more pornography: words painting a naughty, dirty picture, meant solely to arouse” (MASHFanficChick)

## Summary

In this chapter, I have examined the history of slash, the body of literature on the subject and the experience of the fans. Much of what the fans identify as the reason for their involvement is echoed in the various theories proposed in the academic literature. Because there is no general agreement among fans on why they enjoy slash, perhaps there is no universal explanation for why slash proliferates, but rather that there is some validity to each of the proposed theories, which describe different subsets of slash fans. It seems that the academic explanations often overlook the simplest answers in search of deeper meaning, as fans often cite straightforward reasons for their interest in slash. Perhaps the most common factor is simply their enjoyment of the stories.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “AND YOU’RE NOT EVEN A GOOD KISSER”: QUEERING THE (UN)SUB(TLE) TEXT

**Hutch:** “Starsk, would you consider that a man who spends seventy-five percent of his time with another man has got certain tendencies?” [...]

**Starsky:** “Yeah. Sure, why not. I mean, that was the case between John [a closeted policeman] and-”

**Hutch:** “No, no, that’s the case between you and me.”

**Starsky:** “What?”

**Hutch:** “Well, figure it out. In a five-day week there’s about eighty waking hours, right? [...] We work, eat and drink about twelve of those hours. Right, that’s sixty hours a week, seventy-five percent of the time we spend together and you’re not even a good kisser.”

**Starsky:** *[after a long pause]* “How do you know that?”

“Death in a Different Place”, *Starsky and Hutch*

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In this chapter, I will explore the assertions made by scholars of slash about it reflecting something that its fans have “found within the [original] material” (H. Jenkins 202), and that they “perceive a deep and loving relationship between characters [...because their] creators put it there” (Bacon-Smith 234). But what is this “something”, has it really been “put there”, and if it has, by whom? I will divide my analysis into two sections: the first describing the progression from the source material to the slash text, and the second analyzing the relationships between them. The former deals with the specific stages in the creation of the slash story: which source materials are most commonly “slashed”, the degree to which slash fans find an existing homoerotic subtext in them and how the act of writing explores the relationships perceived in the source. The latter examines the interrelations between these stages, which are evident in the complex chain of authorship and the paradoxical mimicry inherent to the genre.

## 2.1. From Source to Slash

### 2.1.1. Source Materials

Several types of source materials commonly form the basis for most slash. These include textual narratives (novels, plays), moving image narratives (television series, films, video games, cartoons, anime) as well as narratives (comic books/graphic novels, manga) which are based on a combination of both textual and visual narratives.<sup>10</sup> The moving images category is conceivably the one that brings the most slash stories into being. It often intersects with other categories, and is frequently not a primary source, as many popular textual sources (such as the *Sherlock Holmes* stories by Arthur Conan Doyle and the *Jeeves* books by P.G. Wodehouse) have been filmed and/or televised frequently. One prominent example of re-writing the original source was the case of the character Archie Kennedy in the *Hornblower* television movies, who “does not, beyond a name and a couple of lines, exist in [C.S.] Forester” novels but plays a prominent role in the movies (Pugh 22).

The most frequently “slashed” sources tend to have further common elements; in particular, an intense male relationship; either a friendship or a rivalry. The genres of science fiction and action/adventure (particularly police procedurals of the “buddy cop” variety) are the usual suspects, with fantasy, military exploits, espionage and medical dramas also featuring heavily. Interestingly, all of these genres often tend to have male characters who bond “because of their work or other circumstances [... often] in life-and-death situations” (Spangler 104, 107) which often lead to a high degree of either explicit or implied intimacy. Bacon-Smith also suggests that at least in the category of moving images, “actors [...] consistently break into each other’s spheres of intimate space” because

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<sup>10</sup> Although anime and manga are of Japanese origin, they have become very popular in Western culture.

if they “are shot in sufficient close-up for the viewer to read facial expressions clearly, they cannot maneuver appropriate social distances and still look at each other while they are speaking” (233). One fan termed this phenomenon the “Starsky & Hutch syndrome”, named after the eponymous duo of cops who “always look like they can’t stay away from each other” (Bacon-Smith 233).

### 2.1.2. “Slashing”

To continue my analysis of how the source text serves as an inspiration for a slash story it is worthwhile to consider why the sources that I have described lend themselves to this kind of subversion. Clues can be found in the homoerotic subtext perceived in the source text and the properties of the source genre, which can effect the intense male intimacy that slash fans pick up on. Queer theory provides an explanation for why these alleged hints noticed by slash fans serve as an inspiration for their writing; in fact, slash can be seen as its practical application given their shared focus on the flexibility of sexual identities and a distinct emphasis on breaking down stereotypes and challenging established categorizations. Hall describes queer theory as “wholly enmeshed in discussions of identity, multiple identities, and the possibilities of *changing* identity” (64). He also contends that queering is something that is dangerous to systems of classification, as classifications then become fluid and unpredictable, and suggests that this disrupts the “value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity, sexual identity in particular” (14). Dhaenens, Van Bauwel and Biltereyst argue that slash “embodies a transgression of the boundaries to practices of queer reading and the theory of queer” (345). That is, slash fans are in a sense performing a queer reading of the source text, but this has

gone unacknowledged by scholars of queer theory, since “in discussions on queer reading, the dominant voice is that of the queer scholar, [...] and audiences are often overlooked” (342).

Slash fans perform a queer reading by picking up on perceived hints, of which there are several types. One form is that of specific passages and/or scenes that make observant viewers re-evaluate their perceptions of what has come before and what will come after. Many such moments go unseen by those who are not looking for them. Penley describes such an instance in the movie *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (Fig. 1):

...Captain Kirk, thought to be dead but rescued finally by Spock and some exceptionally helpful Klingons, stands facing his first officer on the bridge of the Klingon ship. Glad to be alive, he moves toward Spock and reaches for him with both hands. Spock interrupts the embrace saying, “Please, Captain, not in front of the Klingons.” Kirk directs a brief glance toward the known universe’s most macho aliens, then turns back to Spock to exchange a complicitous look before lowering his hands. (100)



Fig. 1 - *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*

She posits that “[most] members of the audience probably took this teasing one-liner as just another instance of what actor and director William Shatner has called the “tongue-in-cheek” campiness of the original TV series” (100) For slash fans, such an exchange would

be something entirely different, with the text transgressing a prescribed heteronormative meaning by deviating from “normal” expectations.

Such moments of “textual transgression” (Robert McRuer qtd. in Kekki 301) wherein the text does something the viewer/reader does not expect it to, induce a re-evaluation of the events that have taken place up to that point, offering new perspectives which are then explored in the slash text, and posit new kinds of relationships based on this identified subtext, whether or not it was intended by the creator(s) of the original text. This brings to mind the queer theory concept of “the closet” which is a metaphor for concealment, invisibility and silence. Sedgwick speaks of “closetedness” as a “performance initiated as such by a speech act of a silence” (3). In a way, slash destroys the closet by rendering it ineffective - slash fans are opening doors and pulling “hidden” relationships from the closet out into the open, making the invisible subtext visible.

Many slash fans pick up on subtext in the source material, which can take various forms, most prominently dialogue and physical interactions. In moving images sources, the important clues include “the way the characters look at each other, or if there's a large amount of ‘casual’ touching” (m\_l\_h), “inside jokes between the characters, mentions of the two of them interacting outside of their normal working relationship, bits of knowledge that one character has about another, that maybe he/she wouldn't be expected to know” (Cein) and “missing between-scenes moments” (Debris K). In textual sources where body language does not come across as well, the fans look for “[the characters’] actions on behalf of, or for the object of their affection” (m\_l\_h) and “the chemistry and interaction between characters, things left unsaid” (Debris K). Some fans need the hints to be present in the source in order to write slash (m\_l\_h, Margaret Price), but others, however, do not



consider them essential – Ash-Leigh compares slash to “old radio serials... so much of which is created in the mind of the listener” and Cein notes that if she happens “to like two characters on the same show, [she is] going to wish them together, even if they hardly ever cross paths on screen”.

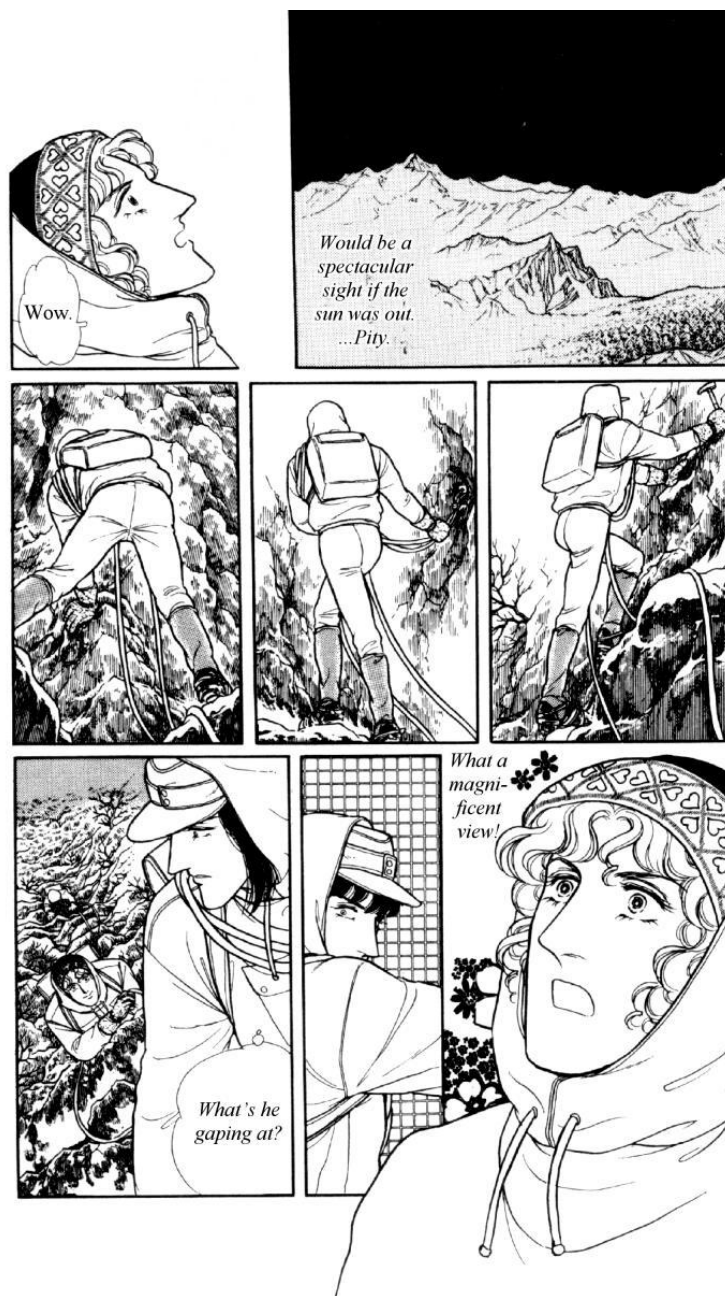


Fig. 2 - “The Laughing Cardinals”, *From Eroica With Love*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Manga should be read from right to left.

I will now examine three specific examples from different types of source text that also feature different levels of subtlety. The first example (Fig. 2) is a panel from the manga *From Eroica With Love*, which details the adventures of Dorian Red Gloria, “a flamboyant and unabashedly gay art thief, who goes by the nickname Eroica, and the rigidly masculine German intelligence officer” Major Klaus Heinz von dem Eberbach (Thorn 172). At first it seems like Dorian is admiring the mountain scenery, but soon the reader sees that he is quite unsubtly admiring scenery of quite a different kind, and understands that the observation “What a magnificent view!” has nothing to do with the mountains themselves, but rather with the way the object of his passion, Klaus, looks while climbing up the mountain in tight-fitting trousers.

Another example that has served as an inspiration for slash is the television series *Wiseguy* (CBS, 1987-1990), a crime drama about an undercover federal agent who infiltrates various criminal organizations. *Wiseguy* is prominent for pioneering the concept of story arc, in which a television series presents “several self-contained series within the series [...] throughout the season” (Thompson 132), which allows the characters’ relationships and identities to be explored in more depth. It can be placed into the category of *TV noir*, which just as *film noir* is distinguished by “its discontinuities, its distancing from conventional norms and sensibilities” (Sanders 3-4). Hatty argues that the topics *TV/film noir* deals with, like urban crime and corruption are seen as “quintessential masculine activities” (174), and Krutnik contends that it offers “an engagement with problematic, even illicit, potentialities within masculine identity” (xiii). The episode “No One Gets Out of Here Alive” is the conclusion of a “testosterone-drenched love story of aggressive men attracted to the manliness they recognize in each other” (Millman 20) and

offers suggestions of masculine intimacy and hints of longing and desire between the federal agent Vincent “Vinnie” Terranova and the mafia boss Salvatore “Sonny” Steelgrave, as their relationship culminates and Vinnie’s true identity as a government mole is revealed to Sonny.

The two of them spend most of the episode trapped together in a vacant cinema and their behavior, at first glance, consists of typical fighting, grandstanding and rowdiness between two fallen out, swaggering Italian-American men. In a fight between them where an average viewer would see only an angry, violent confrontation, a slash fan sees two disheveled men rolling around on the ground with their bodies touching and rubbing against one another, eventually collapsing almost post-orgasmically at the end of the fight (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 - “No One Gets Out of Here Alive”, *Wiseguy*

Later in the episode, an upset Sonny drunkenly sings the song “Good Lovin’” (Clark and Resnick), an aggressive, upbeat, one-sided entreaty for love (and sex). He leaps around the foyer of the cinema, using a broom as an improvised guitar and later as

drumsticks, singing the lyrics loudly and interspersing his performance with a rant about a sexual encounter he had in the very same cinema in his youth, which seems to be a rather unusual subject to talk about under the circumstances:

SONNY: "I got my first feel in the back row... Randolph Scott was shooting his way through Tombstone while I was working my way through Maria's wire-reinforced underwear...I can still feel it."

Whereas the "normal" reading of this scene is of a drunk, angry man being somewhat odd, a slash fan would question the meaning of the words of the song and its performance and how it ties into the whole picture:

"Oh honey please, / squeeze me tight, / Don't you want your baby to be alright?"  
I said, "Baby ... now it's for sure / I got the fever, yeah, / and you got the cure..."

As the song continues, Sonny begins smashing and throwing anything he can get his hands on, continuing to belt out the song, emphasizing his need for love: "All I need is love / All I want is love". Is Vinnie the intended audience of the song, the "honey"/"baby" from whom the "good lovin'" is needed? Finally, the song ends, and Sonny collapses by the jukebox, exhausted. A slash fan might view this scene as a frustrated attempt by Sonny to communicate his unspoken feelings of love and sexual attraction to Vinnie, who either does not know how to respond to them or is afraid to.

The climax of the episode takes place without any dialogue, yet volumes are spoken. The two men sit silently, facing each other - the melancholy, longing love song "Nights in White Satin" playing on the jukebox in the background as the singer despondently croons the phrase "I love you" over and over again - their eyes lingering on each other for just a little too long (Fig. 4). Sonny continues to look at Vinnie, who keeps

glancing back, unable to look away.<sup>12</sup> These are not the actions and emotions that are expected from the supposedly heterosexual male characters.



Fig. 4 - “No One Gets Out of Here Alive”, *Wiseguy*

While the previously described scenes have relied on actions, imagery and the soundtrack to suggest a relationship, characters even discuss it at several points. Vinnie confesses to Sonny that he does not feel as repulsed by Sonny as he is expected to: “You know, it never occurred to me that we’d be friends... there’s a lot about who you are that I feel close to.” Sonny later references this moment, sniping “What about all those feelings you said you had for me?” at Vinnie. At the end of the episode, after finding out that he is captured and faces the death penalty, Sonny turns to Vinnie for a final look, and bitterly says “I loved you, man” before electrocuting himself.

A final, subtler, example comes from the *Sharpe* novels by Bernard Cornwell. These detail the adventures of Richard Sharpe, a British soldier in the Napoleonic Wars era. While it has been dramatized as a series of television movies, the novels also provide significant inspiration for slash writing, and in particular stories pairing the titular character with the fictionalized Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, a character who is more

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<sup>12</sup> I have described the episode as it aired originally on 12 November 1987. Millman notes that for “contractual reasons, “Nights in White Satin” has been removed from the DVD version” (20).

thoroughly explored in the books. One passage from *Sharpe's Sword*, for example, when pulled from its original context as an allusion to patronage, reads quite differently:

Wellington was angry, the officers about him nervous of his irritability. They watched Sharpe walk up to the General and salute.

Wellington scowled from the saddle. "By God, you took your time, Mr. Sharpe."

"I came as fast as I could, my lord."

"Dammit! Don't you have a horse?"

"I'm an infantryman, sir." It was an insolent reply, one that made the aristocratic aides-de-camp that Wellington liked look sharply at the dishevelled, hot Rifleman with the scarred face and battered weapons. Sharpe was not worried. He knew his man. He had saved the General's life in India and ever since there had been a strange bond between them. The bond was not of friendship, never that, but a bond of need. (71)

### 2.1.3. Slash Writing

Slash writers explore the hints towards a deeper underlying relationship that they perceived in the source material by creating stories in which this relationship is expanded upon and amplified. The characters being "slashed" are shown in situations of closeness and intimacy, perhaps confessing their feelings to one another (or struggling to keep them suppressed), and in general being put in circumstances which often in due course lead to sex. It is this relationship that is central to slash; while elements such as the plots, characters and presence and/or quantity of sex are quite flexible, all stories explore some aspect of a relationship between male characters. Flamingo, a well-known slash writer in the *Starsky & Hurch* fandom, states:

While the best slash stories also contain conflict, character development [...] and plot [...], the thing that makes it different from pro fic<sup>13</sup> or even gen fic<sup>14</sup>, is that the primary focus of the story should revolve around the relationship of the primary characters. If the relationship isn't the biggest issue in this story, then it's going to fail as a slash story. If I want to read a police procedural, I'll read pro fic or a gen story. When I go to slash, as a writer or reader, I want to see the relationship between these men be paramount. I want the conflict and the plot to revolve around that relationship, whether it is resolved for good or ill. If the relationship is just "one more thing" in the story, then it is extraneous and doesn't need to be there. I don't care if they solve another case. They damned well better be dealing with their relationship, or that writer isn't going to be getting me to read a lot of her stories.

<sup>13</sup> Professionally written fiction (as opposed to fan fiction).

<sup>14</sup> See Glossary.

Often more so than sex, it is intimacy that readers are looking for and writers are creating. Lamb and Vieth suggest that this may be because “intimate friendships require a willingness to reveal one’s deepest anxieties and greatest weaknesses. To be close psychologically is to be vulnerable. Trying to make a close friend of another man entails stripping oneself of one’s defenses, risking the appearance of weakness before a potential competitor” (239). Similarly, Foucault theorizes that it is this emotional side of the homosexual relationship rather than the sex that society finds hard to accept. He argues that a portrayal of homosexuality as “a kind of immediate pleasure [...] cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship” and posits that “what makes homosexuality “disturbing” [is] the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself” (136). It is exactly this emotional side of the relationship between two men that slash fans are most interested in. Slash fans are creating access to this type of relationship, which is not readily available in society; as Kimmel observes, male relationships in Western societies tend to focus on displays of power and suppression of emotion, among other things (125). This preference for intimacy and relationship-building over sex was a common theme amongst the fans I questioned, who stated that “for one character to admit their own feelings for someone else, or even admit them to that someone can be an excellent culmination to a story” (m\_l\_h), and “it’s seeing the full emotional fall-out or even development of a relationship and its changes that keeps [them] glued to the screen/paper/etc. every time” (Debris K).

## 2.2 Relationship with the Source

### 2.2.1. Slash and Authorship

Because of the laws of the genre, the slash writer, like any other fan fiction author, is in the paradoxical situation of being simultaneously the reader and the writer. As she reads the original text, she is also creating a new text. Derecho proposes using a modified version of the Derridean term *archontic* to refer to this process, instead of the previously common terms “*derivative* or *appropriative*” (64, author’s emphasis). Derecho contends that “when one reads a work of *archontic* writing [...] one is really reading two texts at once. The prior text is available and remains in the mind even as one reads the new version. The two texts resonate together in both the new text and the old one [...] and the reader thus notices the similarities and differences, however great or small, between them” (73). Her approach defines the visible dichotomy of slash, which exists in consciousness of its readers/writers as the source text and the slash text in the same time.

However, it is also necessary to understand the character of the sources used by slash authors, as many of them are not authorial products in the traditional sense of this word; in many cases, the source (e.g. television series) is a collective product created by actors, writers and producers. This reiterates Barthes’ argument that the text is a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash [...and] is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (149). To a great extent, fan fiction (along with slash) is also not a product of individual authorship - Penley notes that “there are no clear divisions among readers, writers, [...and] editors/publishers” (110). There is a lot of collective creativity in the fan fiction community, and in such situations, the concept of individual authorship is not significant.



For example, I once asked a friend to write a *From Eroica With Love* story with one of the characters, Dorian, wearing a dress. She proceeded to write a story that inspired another writer to write a continuation, which in turn inspired a fan artist to illustrate the story.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.2.2. Social Commentary Through Parody

Slash is dependent on its source, but it also constantly transforms the source through subverting it. It can be defined as a parody genre, a genre that cannot exist by itself without initial impulse given by the basic text/moving image/visual narrative. However, the relationship of the source and slash text is not an ironic parody: according to Hutcheon, the concept of parody is broader than the popular understanding of the term as a work that “imitates the characteristic style of an author [or a work] for comic effect or ridicule” (Stim 279). It accomplishes the wider goal of highlighting some aspect of the original by creating something similar but with highly contrasting differences. While often used for humorous purposes, parody can also be a valuable critical tool. Hutcheon cites Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a prime example of such an analytic parody; it clearly follows the story of Homer’s *Odyssey*, but by changing certain plot details, provides commentary on society at the time of its writing. The parallels between the works have an ironic difference, but the original “is not the one to be mocked or ridiculed; if anything, it is to be seen [...] as an ideal or at least as a norm from which the [...parody] departs” (5). The act of mimicry carries the meanings of the original source forward, but with a twist, as Hutcheon observes, “no integration into a new context can avoid altering meaning, and perhaps even value” (8).

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<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.fried-potatoes.com/fanfiction/viewstory.php?sid=115>

Slash is a parody of this critical variety. By transcribing the characters, settings and underlying tensions from the source and positing altered relationships, it highlights the characteristics of these relationships in the source; specifically, the “clues” described earlier that point towards male intimacy which is usually denied or defused. The potential homosexual relationships hinted at by this intimacy never emerge as the characters are consistently reaffirmed to be heterosexual even though their actions may cast doubt. Many television series suffer from what has been called “the dead girlfriend of the week” (H. Jenkins 176) or the “revolving bedroom door” syndrome, in which the male heroes seem to have a new female romantic interest nearly every episode. This promiscuity supposedly reaffirms their masculinity, although it also denies these characters the opportunity for a stable heterosexual relationship. As Nussbaum wryly noted about *Starsky & Hutch* – “no matter how many slinky 70’s dames crossed their path, nothing threatened the devotion between the two leather-clad cops. Any serious romantic prospect was promptly shot or shipped out of town” (21). The most stable relationships in such series are in fact often the homosocial bonds between the leading male characters. One fan observes that after the numerous trysts with “at best fleeting, and at worst evil” women, “who’s there to pick up the pieces? The male best friend. It’s made so clear that the characters will never let each other down, that they love each other, and lots of times, it’s canon that they’re even physically close: they touch, hug, and sometimes even hold each other through tears” (MASHFanficChick). Slash thus parodies the source material by amplifying these relationships and thereby highlighting the lack of stable relationships whether heterosexual or homosexual, for the principal characters.

By parodying the potential-but-never-realized homosexual relationships which occur surprisingly regularly in the popular media, slash turns our attention to the prevailing unrealistic depictions of homosexuality. At least on television, the ambiguous gays are never gay, and the canonical gays are often presented asexually and misleadingly. One fan remarks that in her opinion, slash is “a response to the lack of believable, compelling homosexual relationships in the media. [...] Even now when a handful of series have gay couples, the fans are still clamoring for more because those relationships aren’t as interesting or dynamic as their heterosexual counterparts” (Katie Mariie). Others concur, stating that the media “does not cater to the needs of an entire group of people who want what slash provides” (Ash-Leigh) and “is completely clueless when it comes to what people actually want. If they were not, there wouldn’t be such a huge amount of slash fiction on the Internet” (Margaret Price).

Indeed, many depictions of gay characters in visual media tend to be strongly stereotyped and restricted to the periphery. In “The Celluloid Closet”, a study of the portrayal of queer characters in the movies, Russo identified two persistent stereotypes of male queer characters which have prevailed until today: the comic, harmless sissy who is a sidekick at best, “used to suggest homosexuality and to serve as yardstick for the masculinity of the men around [him]” (59), and the tragic homosexual whose sexuality often leads to his demise, given that “homosexual subculture [was seen as equaling] violence”, generally cast as a villain or a deserving victim (91). Additionally, explicitly homosexual physical affection is rarely shown visually on television. There are certainly exceptions, such as *Torchwood*, whose Captain Jack will “shag anything if it’s gorgeous enough” (“Day One”) and is shown frequently kissing, touching or dancing with other men

(and women) onscreen. Nonetheless, *Will & Grace*, a recent US television series with major gay characters provided “virtually no visual display of same-sex affection [...] and certainly no suggestive hugging or kissing [appeared] on the small screen for either of the show’s two “gay” characters” (Provencher 180).

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have reviewed the chain of connections that exists between the source material and the slash story. This takes several forms: the process of “slashing”, in which the homoerotic subtext perceived in the source material is amplified to become the basis of a slash story; the chain of authorship, which describes the cumulative influences of the various sources on the slash story; and the reflexive commentary which slash provides on portrayals of queer characters in the media. I have shown examples of how subtext can exist in many aspects of the source material, including its visuals (whether on screen or on page), the character dialogue, the relationship structures, and the dramatic presentation. Queer theory helps to explain how readers and viewers, upon picking up on this subtext, can review the same material with new meaning. Writing slash is a way to express these deeper relationships and explore them in the company of others who see them similarly. While the writing is often sexual in nature, it is the portrayal of caring and intimate relationships between men which slash readers state they find most compelling. Slash therefore provides commentary on the lack of visibility of such relationships both in the media and the “real world”.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “INNOVATIVE DABBLING”: ANALYZING THE SLASH TEXT

**Martha Jones:** “So, am I right in thinking that you and [Jack]...”

**Ianto Jones:** “We... dabble.” [...]

**Martha Jones:** “So what's his ‘dabbling’ like?”

**Ianto Jones:** “Innovative.”

**Martha Jones:** “Really!”

**Ianto Jones:** “Bordering on the avant-garde.”

“Reset”, *Torchwood*

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In this chapter, I will study the categorizations that have been applied to slash fan fiction, look at slash writing through the lens of narrative theory to identify common trends, and perform a close reading and analysis of selected slash stories. I will examine these in order to find out what common elements are shared by all slash stories, and what properties are allowed to vary, in an attempt to define the essence of slash. Specifically, I will first critically analyze the existing categorizations, both in the academic literature and by slash fans themselves. There have been many such attempts to classify slash stories according to their content, with varying degrees of success. I will then follow up with a close reading of several slash stories, and use my observations to explore the diversity of the genre while identifying the common underlying bonds. This will aid me in proposing an improved model of the key elements of slash based on my observations.

### 3.1. “Quaint Little Categories”<sup>16</sup>: Problems of Classification

Although slash may initially seem easy to classify as a monolithic entity, the diverse range of stories that exist within the genre suggest that further sub-classification is possible and perhaps even necessary. This is a specific case of the general problem of classification, about which Propp cautions in “Morphology of the Folktale”:

Since the [material] is exceptionally diverse, and evidently cannot be studied at once in its full extent, [it] must be divided into sections, ie, it must be classified. Correct classification is one of the first steps in a scientific description. The accuracy of all further study depends upon the accuracy of classification. But although classification serves as the foundation of all investigation, it must itself be the result of certain preliminary study. What we see, however, is precisely the reverse: the majority of researchers begin with classification, imposing it upon the material from without and not extracting it from the material itself. (5)

The most common fan-produced classifications of slash are those based on its relationship to other forms of fan fiction (slash vs. het<sup>17</sup> or gen); on fandom (e.g. *Star Trek*), by pairings (e.g. McKay/Sheppard vs. Beckett/Sheppard in *Stargate Atlantis*), on explicitness (most commonly based on film ratings used by MPAA<sup>18</sup>), on types of relationships (e.g. “first time”<sup>19</sup>, established relationship); and on plots (fandom- or genre-specific) or lack thereof (e.g. PWP<sup>20</sup>). Some other possible classifications include those based on style (prose/poetry) or on setting (e.g. AU<sup>21</sup>). Another categorizing approach that is gaining popularity is cross-site thematic indices that have been set up to collect links to stories with a common theme - for example, an index for the McKay/Sheppard pairing from *Stargate Atlantis* contains fandom-specific themes like “After Atlantis”, the more common sci-fi themes like “Aliens Made Them Do It”, and universal themes like “Jealousy”.

<sup>16</sup> Owen Harper: [in response to Gwen Cooper kissing a woman] “I thought she said she had a boyfriend?” Captain Jack Harkness: “You people and your quaint little categories.” (“Day One”, *Torchwood*)

<sup>17</sup> See Glossary.

<sup>18</sup> Such as PG, R, NC-17 (previously known as X).

<sup>19</sup> See Glossary.

<sup>20</sup> See Glossary.

<sup>21</sup> See Glossary.

All of the above categories are problematic, as they emphasize one characteristic over another and do not manage to convey the full meaning of the story. The strict separation of slash from gen and het is not always useful, especially since some gen hurt-comfort<sup>22</sup> stories is occasionally quite close to slash, and it is also not always possible to separate slash and het neatly. Some fan fiction archives, like Wraithbait, resolve the latter issue by putting stories that “contain both same sex relationships and relationships between people of opposite genders” into the “bitextual” category.<sup>23</sup> Categorization by genre, plot, setting or theme can be challenging as well, as there is no agreement what these terms represent – one person’s genre might be another’s plot or theme.

Categorizing slash by explicitness is challenging as well, since this categorization is dependent on a ratings system that is not necessary suited to it. The use of the MPAA rating system is common (see Lamb & Vieth 237, Russ 80), but it has declined since 2005 after a number of fans received cease-and-desist letters alleging trademark infringement<sup>24</sup>, leading various archives to switch to other systems, such as Fiction Ratings or The Fan Rated Rating System. Some fans have created categorization systems based on explicitness that subtly subvert the process of categorization by being purposefully odd. An example is the Cortina rating system by starlaces used for *Life on Mars* (UK) fandom, in which various degrees of explicitness are represented by a color-coded picture of the Ford Cortina car from the show. It is based on Chris Smith’s tongue-in-cheek “A Proposed New Slashers All-Purpose Ratings System featuring Angry Wombats!” in which there are five levels of explicitness that are more fitting for fan fiction with sexual content than the MPAA ratings, and which differentiates between happy and disturbing stories.

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<sup>22</sup> See Glossary.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.wraithbait.com/browse.php?type=categories>

<sup>24</sup> See “The Fan Rated Rating System”.

Of the academic studies, H. Jenkins' is the only one to deeply explore the question of categorization. His focus was on the different ways in which fan fiction as a whole could re-write its source, and included the following categories:

- 1) Recontextualization [*filling in gaps in the original source*]
- 2) Expanding the Series Timeline [*either to the past or to the future*]
- 3) Refocalization [*focusing on secondary characters*]
- 4) Moral Realignment [*turning villains into protagonists*]
- 5) Genre Shifting [*shifting the balance between plot action and characterization*]
- 6) Cross Overs [*blurring the boundaries between different texts*]
- 7) Character Dislocation [*removing characters from their original situations*]
- 8) Personalization [*Mary Sue stories*]<sup>25</sup>
- 9) Emotional Intensification [*emphasizing moments of narrative crisis*]
- 10) Eroticization [*exploring the erotic dimensions of characters' lives*] (162-177)

He mentions that “no single work of fan literature encompasses the full range of rewriting strategies” (177) and discusses slash in-depth only in the context of eroticization. In actuality, a single slash story, like all fan fiction, can and usually does belong to several of his listed categories.

### 3.2. Narrative Structure

Slash stories, like all stories, conform to a general narrative structure. By looking at slash through the lens of narrative theory, we can begin to identify which story elements are necessary and which are at the author's discretion, as well as which elements of the source must be preserved and which are flexible. In general terms, a narrative is a “form of communication which presents a sequence of events caused and experienced by characters” (Jahn N1.2). By looking at story models, going from the most general case (applies to almost all stories) to a very specific case (a typical slash plot), we can break down the key plot elements of a slash story. This abstraction allows us to map plot elements between slash stories and find common themes. At the most basic level, a narrative is situation(s)

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<sup>25</sup> See Glossary.



transformed by events. Todorov suggests that “the basis of conventional narrative structure consists of initial situation; a problem which disrupts the situation; a resolution of the problem which allows a reinstatement of initial situation, perhaps with slight changes” (Lacey 27) (Fig. 5). In Todorov’s model it is clear that the disruption is the point of the transition between situations. He also proposed an even further refinement to the model with the aim of clarifying how these transitions occur. (Fig. 5)

In studies of slash, a similar attempt was made by H. Jenkins (Fig. 5). He noted that in a typical “first time” story, “the narrative formula [...] involves a series of movements from an initial partnership, through a crisis in communication that threatens to disrupt that union, toward its reconfirmation through sexual intimacy” (206). He described these phases as the initial relationship, masculine dystopia, confession and masculine utopia. These map very neatly to Todorov’s formulas, with the same obvious progression through the phases, where H. Jenkins’ version has more specificity because it refers to a specific story type. In a “first time” story, the characters return to an equilibrium that is different from the initial state, because they have acknowledged their mutual desire. One fan, Katie Mariie, independently suggested another model for a “first time” story (Fig. 5). Her model is similar to H. Jenkins’, but it expands upon the nature of the dystopia/disruption and describes in more detail how these phases typically play out. Of course, since her model is so specific, not all “first time” stories adhere rigidly to it, as there may be further setbacks or the characters may not fully resolve the question of their sexuality. While H. Jenkins’ model provides universality as it applies to basically all “first time” stories, Katie Mariie’s model provides more detail.

	General narrative	Slash narrative
Less specific	<p><b>Todorov:</b> (qtd. in Lacey)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Initial situation</li> <li>2. Disruption</li> <li>3. Resolution</li> </ol>	<p><b>H. Jenkins:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Initial Relationship</li> <li>2. Masculine Dystopia</li> <li>3. Confession</li> <li>4. Masculine Utopia</li> </ol>
More Specific	<p><b>Todorov:</b> (qtd. in Lacey)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A state of equilibrium at the outset</li> <li>2. A disruption of the equilibrium by some action</li> <li>3. A recognition that there has been a disruption</li> <li>4. An attempt to repair the disruption</li> <li>5. A reinstatement of the equilibrium</li> </ol>	<p><b>Katie Mariie:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Unspoken sexual attraction and deep friendship/enmity</li> <li>2. Conflict that makes one or both of the men lose inhibitions (i.e. alcohol, personal trauma, physical injury)</li> <li>3. First sexual contact (i.e. kiss, sexual intercourse)</li> <li>4. Panic over “change” in sexuality</li> <li>5. Resolution: acceptance of sexuality and beginning of a relationship</li> </ol>

Fig. 5 – Narrative Models

Slash narratives, like all fan fiction, often differ from traditional narratives in the amount of exposition devoted to the initial situation. Because they are based on pre-existing works and borrowing existing settings and characters, the initial situation is often partly or largely implied by the source. The characters, locations and situations do not need to be introduced if the reader is already familiar with them. Some stories do change the initial situation, for example by putting characters in an alternate universe, so in these cases, more attention must be given to establishing the setting. Therefore, in many cases the disruption can occur almost immediately in fan fiction, with the majority of the story devoted to how it plays out and how the resolution is achieved. In the case of slash in particular, stories often start with a disruption in the form of intense feelings which upset the order established in the source.

### 3.3. Analysis of a Set of Stories

Slash stories are written by people of all talent levels and thus vary in quality as anyone can present their work to a wide audience; this can be both good and bad. The inclusive nature of slash means that no specific qualifications are necessary to contribute to this body of work, so everyone has the chance to be heard and play around with the concept of identity. However, there is no quality control which often leads to poor writing and bad characterizations, often humorously referred to as “any two guys” stories as one can replace the names of the protagonists without repercussions; the context of the source text has been lost (Pugh 110). I will attempt to choose stories of a high quality, paying attention to the clarity of writing and proper spelling as well as attempts to write in a style appropriate to original source where it is important. Well-written stories will be best for relating to the theory because the writing itself is clear and not serving as another obstacle. While the theories should also apply to poorly written stories, the analysis of these would prove more difficult as there would be the added challenge of extricating their underlying meaning from the muddled presentation. I have chosen stories which highlight two main features of slash: the relationships with the source material and how the homoerotic bonds are presented and amplified in the slash text. The former is characterized by the aspect of mimicry and the transference of content, and the latter deals with how the subtext becomes a sexual relationship in the slash story.

#### 3.3.1. Stylistic Mimicry

I have chosen three examples to demonstrate the different ways in which slash can reflect various sources, and will focus first on the concept of stylistic mimicry. Salmon and

Symons state that “any given instance of slash necessarily possesses idiosyncratic features of the [source] from which it was derived” (“Warrior Lovers” 82) which can include both stylistic elements and content. Which of these features and to what degree they are used can vary significantly between slash stories. In the *Jeeves & Wooster* story “The Matter of Mr Wooster’s Headaches”, Sky Blue Reverie pairs up the titular characters while maintaining the language of P.G. Wodehouse’s novels. Interestingly, she writes from the point of view of Jeeves, whose thoughts go unvoiced in the originals, which are almost universally narrated by his employer, Bertram Wilberforce “Bertie” Wooster. The author acknowledges her audience through Jeeves’ explanation of how his relationship with his employer is deeper than it may appear:

Mr Wooster has written extensively about his adventures, and has been kind enough to include many of my actions and words in his memoirs. An observant reader will have noticed the depth of regard between Mr Wooster and myself; however, he has never explicitly discussed the exact nature of our relationship, due to the potentially catastrophic legal and social consequences associated with such a revelation. I have therefore taken it upon myself to describe how we came to our current understanding, although these pages can, of course, never be published.

This introduction, due to its reflective nature as a memoir, lets the reader know from the outset what the possible resolution to the story will be.

This story very closely mimics the writing style of P.G. Wodehouse, and is particularly similar in tone to the only Jeeves-narrated story in canon, “Bertie Changes His Mind” in which Jeeves defends their “cosy bachelor establishment” (Wodehouse 230). Even the title of this story would not look out of place when listed next to some of the titles of Wodehouse’s short stories (such as “The Rummy Affair of Old Biffy” or “The Ordeal of Young Tuppy”). The language maintains the proper dignified tone befitting of the upper-class setting that is established in the original, with formality remaining at the forefront. Even after they become romantically involved, Jeeves continues to refer to Bertie as “sir”

out of habit. A lot of the humor, both in the original stories and in this slash story, derives from the circuitous language that is used to explain simple situations:

"[...] Would you like your tea now?" I asked, beginning to rise.

He stopped me with a hand on my arm. "Well, I didn't mean for you to make the arrangements this very moment," he said. "And stuff the tea. Tea can wait."

"Very good, sir," I said.

"I mean to say, I was hoping you could show me this consummation whatsit that you had in mind," he said, his eyes glimmering with interest.

"Very good, sir," I said again.

Without going into unnecessary detail, I will report that our union was then consummated with great enthusiasm, and that it was quite some time before either of us got any tea.

The last line in particular is a very humorously euphemistic way to describe their sexual deeds.

Another example is Speranza's *Stargate Atlantis* story "Written by the Victors", which details a relationship between two of the main characters, John Sheppard and Rodney McKay. This story uses an interesting narrative technique which intertwines the events of the story with the interpretation of these events by future historians, shown in the form of excerpts from hypothesized scholarly works:

Otherwise sensible historians continue to spill ink debating how Rodney McKay—a scientist, and a Canadian one at that!—could possibly have given control of Atlantis to an American military officer. I shall save these historians any further wear on their quills: Rodney McKay didn't think of John Sheppard as an American military officer. Sheppard was his friend, his team leader for four years, and, if later events are any indication, very likely his lover. To see McKay's decision as pro-military rather than as an expression of the depth of his feelings for Sheppard is to mistake the situation entirely.

—Paul Dugan, *A Political History of Atlantis*, p. 105

Paul Dugan's claim that McKay took Sheppard's side over Weir's because they were sleeping together is as offensive and wrongheaded as the argument that he is trying to counter: that McKay somehow betrayed his civilian principles in his support of Sheppard. What this fails to take into account is that, in this particular contest, *it was John Sheppard who represented the civilian interest*. McKay's siding with Sheppard is therefore not an abandonment of his principles but a demonstration of them: McKay, no less than Sheppard, was ideologically committed to protecting the peoples of Pegasus. It was this that drew them together, not some imagined and unlikely sexual bond.

—Ronald Koble, *From Rising to Uprising*, p. 24

Although the future scholars debate the nature of the relationship between the characters, the reader knows they are sexually involved because it is shown in the narrative of events as they happen. The quoted passage can be seen as commentary on how slash fans interpret the original source as containing clues to a relationship. The stylistic mimicry in this story therefore is not of the original television series, but of another source, namely academic historical writing. This story shows the flexibility which slash writers employ when creating a story; whereas the previous story remained very faithful to the source material, this story maintains some of the content while largely replacing the stylistic elements.

“To Take By Force”, a *From Eroica With Love* story by Margaret Price, provides an interesting commentary on the use of clichés. From the beginning of the story, the identities of the “torturer” and the “captive” are left unstated until the end of the following passage:

“And here I thought you’d enjoy this.”

This was the final straw. The captive started to thrash violently, straining at the ropes holding him in place, and making some very impressive angry noises. [...]

“You *don’t* like this, do you?” The tone actually sounded surprised.

*Isn’t it fucking obvious by now?* The captive shook his head vigorously. To his surprise, the blindfold was removed, followed by the gag.

“Better?”

“Just finish torturing me and have done with it!” Dorian spat, pulling at his bindings. “Bloody sadist.”

To a reader familiar with this fandom, it is surprising to find that Dorian is the “captive” and Klaus is the “torturer”, because they are typically portrayed in the opposite roles when it comes to this type of story. The author even intentionally misleads the reader by giving false clues about the identity of the characters. In the source material, Klaus is more foul-

mouthed and angry, and in this story, it is the “captive” that is swearing and struggling, so it is easy for the reader to make assumptions based on this. Similarly, what the “torturer” says is more easily identifiable with Dorian. The stylistic mimicry of this story is not of the original source, but rather of clichéd slash stories. Only the characters are maintained from the original; the presentation here is completely unlike the original manga, both because it is textual rather than visual and because the conventional plot is completely dropped. What is being borrowed from is a typical overused plot in this fandom which the writer twists in a form of parody-based commentary.

### 3.3.2. Content Mimicry

In addition to stylistic mimicry, the stories also borrow much content from their sources. The characters in all three stories are attempts to reproduce to the habits and mannerisms, style of speech, and general demeanor of their originals. The situations and plots vary somewhat more; “The Matter of Mr Wooster’s Headaches” echoes very closely the domestic situation typical of Wodehouse’s short stories. “Written by the Victors” departs somewhat from the established plot in the television series, as the described rebellion eventually breaks the continuity of the original. Towards the end of the story, the consequences of this become apparent as the language gradually shifts from contemporary English to an alien tongue, with the last intelligible passage being from future Atlantean historians trying to interpret routine aspects of modern Earth:

And those who knew him said that sometimes he still grieved for that lost world and its simple pleasures: its county fairs and FERRIS WHEELS, its temples and MOVIE PALACES, its games of chance and its AUTOMOBILES that rolled along the ground. Those days seem impossibly far from us now, swept away by history. Perhaps some day we shall discover EARTH again, but for now, we must make do with the quotidian realities of Atlantis.

— Hannor Janettan, *Earth: The Lost Empire*

Because of its significant departure from the plots and routines established in the original series by this envisioning of an alternate future, by the end the content in this story is not compatible with the original. Perhaps, because of its long-term story arc, it could be seen as comparable to another season of the series or a spin-off show, rather than as comparable to any individual episodes. “To Take by Force” departs completely from the plots and settings described in the manga. The characters are maintained, and the relationship is plausible as there is unresolved sexual tension in the original, but characters have been placed in a completely new setting. As much as Dorian would probably enjoy, there are no sexy dungeons in the source. In this story, the plot and setting have been newly created to allow an exploration of the relationship as well as the slash author’s commentary on clichéd writing.

By looking at these stories we can see that while good slash writers try to reproduce the characterizations from the source as faithfully as possible, they are much more flexible with plot and setting. Some slash stories maintain almost all facets of the original content, whereas others almost completely replace these with the author’s own creations. This flexibility, creating diverse content out of the already diverse content provided by the many possible sources, contributes to the versatility of the slash genre.

### 3.3.3. “You Can’t Spell Subtext...”<sup>26</sup>

Another of dimension of slash writing is its sexual nature, which comprises both how the subtext perceived in the original is amplified, and the amount of sexual content that is added by the writer. For instance, the subtext in the original Jeeves stories is largely a result of the close master-servant relationship between Jeeves and his employer

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<sup>26</sup> “You can’t spell subtext without buttsex” – an anonymous Internet saying.



Bertie Wooster. They live together, and Jeeves takes care of Wooster both in the domestic sense of cooking, cleaning, and dressing, as well as regularly going beyond the call of duty to rescue him from awkward situations (such as engagements with many a young lady), all the while allowing him to feel in charge. This is not a typical relationship between two men, and for slash fans it is not a huge stretch to transform Jeeves' professional devotion into a romantic devotion.



Fig. 6 - "Tuppy and the Terrier", *Jeeves & Wooster*



Fig. 7 - “Before I Sleep”, *Stargate Atlantis*

In the television series *Stargate Atlantis*, the characters of John Sheppard and Rodney McKay are both high-ranking personnel on Atlantis, and therefore spend much time together both professionally and as friends. The Sheppard/McKay pairing is overwhelmingly the most popular in the fandom;<sup>27</sup> in the show, they are constantly bantering, bickering and teasing each other during downtime, but when danger arises they show faith in each other’s abilities and strong concern when the other is in peril. regann notes that the level of trust between them “is almost a sign of a vulnerability existing between them and points to an emotional closeness that’s appealing to explore further”.

In *From Eroica With Love*, the relationship between Dorian and Klaus is highly adversarial, as Dorian is open about his attraction to Klaus, but Klaus rather vehemently does not share these feelings. Dorian frequently makes suggestive remarks that set Klaus off, as can be seen on the panel following the one seen in Chapter 2 (Fig. 8).

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<sup>27</sup> As of June 4, 2009, Sheppard/McKay stories comprise 3260 out of 4537 slash stories on the Wraithbait (a *Stargate Atlantis* fan fiction archive).



Fig. 8 - "The Laughing Cardinals", From *Eroica With Love*

Klaus always rejects Dorian's advances but is never shown to be seriously romantically interested in anyone, whether male or female, which allows for fans to view this constant tension as repressed attraction. As the author of "To Take By Force" notes, what attracted her "initially was the main characters' sarcastic bickering, which [she] later learned seems to be a big part of the sexual tension between them" (Margaret Price). Her story references the subtext perceived in the original when Klaus announces that he has given up resisting the relationship:

"I'm done fighting," Klaus announced, not without some difficulty.

"There...are... Th...th... Ooooh," Dorian was finding it hard to think coherently and had to struggle to say, "There are easier ways of telling me."

"Would you've believed me?"

Now there's a question. Dorian still didn't believe what was happening *now*. "I...don't know."  
*Christ, that feels fantastic!*

Klaus nodded, silently accepting the answer.

### 3.3.4. "...Without Buttsex"

All three stories feature explicit descriptions of sex, although these play a different role in each. In "The Matter of Mr Wooster's Headaches", it serves as the climax as the whole narrative establishes sexual tension which needs to be resolved in order to address the characters' sexual frustrations. In "Written by the Victors", the sex is much more matter of fact; the characters are already in a relationship and sex offers them an escape from the political tensions that dominate the plot. "To Take By Force" features the sex centrally, as it is sexually charged from beginning to end. It offers a resolution and release to many years' worth of obvious sexual tension. Unlike the Jeeves/Wooster pairing, Dorian and Klaus are both aware of the attraction, at least at Dorian's end, so the problem is not a confession of desire but rather finding an opportunity to act on it. Sex

therefore plays different roles in each of these three stories, and in general, can have varying prominence in slash. In fact, although these stories all feature sex scenes, they are not necessary in general. Although a lot of fans enjoy the sex scenes in slash, many admit that the presence of sex scenes is not crucial: “there has to be the possibility of sex between the main pairing, no matter how far in the future that possibility might be, but it doesn't have to be present in the story” (Ash-Leigh), “I enjoy unrequited slash, or just lots of UST<sup>28</sup> between two characters, constantly flirting along the edge of admitting they like each other, but never doing it or even acknowledging it.” (Das Mervin)

When sex is present, it often has characteristics different from real gay sex or sex scenes written by and for a primarily gay male audience, as the overwhelmingly female authorship tends to influence the sex writing. This comes through both in the emphasis on emotional closeness in sex, and in the technical details of the descriptions of intercourse. One fan notes that “the emotions [in slash writing] speak to [her] in a way that books written for a gay male audience just don't” (Ash-Leigh). Russ describes the “endless analyses of motives and scruples for pages and pages, a delay that is in itself sexually arousing” and notes that “Decarnin has suggested [...] that this waiting be taken metaphorically, as related to women's need for long “foreplay” in order to achieve orgasm” (86-87). Speaking of early slash stories, Russ contends that:

the “sexuality in [them] is only nominally male. (There are betraying details: the characters leap into anal intercourse with a blithe lack of lubrication that makes it clear that the authors are thinking of vaginal penetration, both approach orgasm with a speeded-up intensity of pelvic thrusting, and in many stories there is multiple orgasm.) (83)

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<sup>28</sup> Unresolved Sexual Tension.

Because women writers, especially in the early days of slash, did not have technical knowledge of the operational aspects of sex between men, early slash often featured unrealistic examples of sex writing.

More recently, with the availability of books such as “The Joy of Gay Sex” and the proliferation of the Internet where information is readily available, sex writing in slash has become significantly more realistic. One gay male slash writer, Minotaur, has even set up a website targeted at female slash writers after attending a convention and being “besieged with “can two guys...?” questions enough to show that there was a real need for someone willing and able to serve as a technical consultant”. Nonetheless, female slash writers cannot have had first-hand experience of the sex acts they are describing, and this sometimes shows through in continuing technical inaccuracies, as well as how the depictions of sex acts are often modeled on female sexual desires. This shows up in the dominant presence of penetrative sex over other forms of sex, and the strong emphasis on the experience of the orgasm; in particular the ubiquitous simultaneous orgasm. The prominence of these aspects of sex suggests that female slash writers are influenced by what they are familiar with experientially and their own sexual desires.

### **3.4. The Core Elements of Slash**

The previous section explored two themes which are integral to slash writing: mimicry and sexuality. Slash stories vary immensely in how they employ these elements, yet they are both always present. Mimicry is required to maintain the link to the source material; the attachment to the source characters and the excitement of seeing them in new situations is a significant attraction for many fans. Without this mimicry, stories enter the realm of original homoerotic fiction which slash fans often feel is a different entity. Same-

sex sexual tension in the form of subtext and often explicit sex scenes distinguish slash from other forms of fan fiction, such as het and gen. Interestingly, it is the subtext more so than the sex that is essential, as fans have pointed out. The subtext references the relationship that the “slashed” characters have in the source material, and the slash writer amplifies these sexual undertones to become central to the narrative of the slash story.

Therefore, I suggest that when analyzing slash stories, the degree to which and how they employ mimicry and sexuality be the main focus of study. The previous attempts of categorization, while sometimes good for specific purposes, fail to communicate the essence of the story due to their restriction to discrete categories and their limited scope that results from categorizing based on a particular property of the story. Unlike the previous attempts, this model allows for a continuous range of possibilities along two axes which is better suited for capturing the diverse range of possible stories.

## CONCLUSION

As a genre with overwhelmingly female authorship and readership, slash is interesting from a gender perspective, and provides insight into how a subset of women views relationships and sexuality. In this thesis, I have explored how the slash text is created from the source text and what some of the prevailing trends in slash writing are. By breaking down the process into individual steps, I have shown that the process of slash writing is more intricate than it is often portrayed.

I explored individually the stages of source text, “slashing”, and slash writing, which together comprise the continuum from source to slash. Source texts that lend themselves to “slashing” tend to feature strong male relationships with a homosocial element. Readers and viewers can then perceive these as having a deeper romantic meaning, both based upon the general depiction of the relationship and specific suggestive “clues”, whether visual or aural, that occur. Slash writing then extrapolates from this homoerotic subtext to explore scenarios in which the characters act on these feelings. The influence of the predominantly female authorship shows through in the focus on closeness and intimacy in the depicted relationships. The issues of authorship and social commentary through parody reflexively link the slash text back to the source text and explore their interrelation. Slash can be seen as a form of commentary on the inadequate depictions of queer characters in the popular media.

My analysis of the slash text involved a critical survey of existing methods of slash categorization, which each only capture a single element of the story. I examined the narrative structure of slash stories, and looked at three stories in particular in the areas



of stylistic mimicry, content mimicry, allusions to the subtext perceived in the source, and depictions of sexuality. These helped me to identify mimicry and sexuality as two concepts that unite all slash stories, although specific implementations of these vary greatly.

I have looked at slash through the lenses of queer theory and narrative theory, which had not been previously explored in detail in connection with it. Queer theory offers an explanation for how the subtext perceived in the source material moulds the fixed identity of the source characters into the flexible identity seen in the slash text. Slash as a body of literature has been under-studied, and even when the text has been examined it has been used as evidence of the social aspect of slash fandom. Narrative theory treats it as any other written work, and helps to break down how the stories are structurally composed. This helps with understanding of the breadth of the genre and identifying the elements that are common across stories and those that vary.

Slash has now been in existence for over four decades and its popularity has grown greatly over the last ten years. There is some debate in the slash community about what the future holds for it; some issues include the transition to mainstream, how the increasing visibility of positively depicted queer relationships in the media will affect slash and increasing acceptance of the often marginalized slash fans in the greater fan community. There is clearly legitimate long-term demand for slash stories – as many fans contend, slash “will carry on as long as there are fans of movies/television series to write it” (m\_l\_h), and “there will always be people not satisfied with what they see on the programmes they watch. Stories that don’t end the way [fans] want, don’t go far enough, don’t quite satisfy something inside will be rewritten to suit individual tastes and [...]

shared” (Ash-Leigh). One fan succinctly restates this as “as long as there are fangirls, there will be slash” (Margaret Price).

## APPENDIX

### E-MAIL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you personally read/write slash? What attracts you to it?
2. What makes slash slash? What are the main common elements amongst slash stories?
3. What type of hints/clues do you notice in TV series/books/movies/etc. that suggest that the characters may have a deeper relationship than is generally assumed by non-slash fans? How important are these clues in inspiring slash writing?
4. What do you think slash says about the portrayal of sexuality in the media?
5. What is the role of sex in slash?
6. How do you see slash in relation to erotica and/or pornography?
7. Do you see any common categories amongst slash stories, and if so, what are some of them?
8. In your opinion, what is the future of slash?

## GLOSSARY

**AU** - Short for Alternate Universe. A story where “familiar characters are dropped into a new setting (which depending on the media text may or may not be canonical)” (Busse and Hellekson 11).

**canon (fan fiction)** - “the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters” (Busse and Hellekson 9).

**con(vention)s** - “Organized gatherings of fans held at regular intervals throughout the year” (Bacon-Smith 308).

**fandom** - Bacon-Smith defines *fandom* as a “term used by members of the related groups self-identified by their interest” in something (309). Fandom can refer to the fan community as a whole, but can also mean the fans of a particular TV series/books/other media.

**fanzine/‘zine** – An “amateur, non-profit publication” (Bacon-Smith 309), the main distribution channel of fan fiction before the Internet.

**first time** - A typical slash plot that includes the first sexual encounter between a pairing.

**gen** - A “general story that posits no imposed romantic relationships among the characters” (Busse and Hellekson 10).

**het** - A story with “a heterosexual relationship, either one invented by the author or one presented in the primary source text” (Busse and Hellekson 10).

**hurt/comfort** - Stories that “revolve around a character being injured and another character comforting him” (Busse and Hellekson 10-11).

**Mary Sue** - A derogatory term for “...a very young heroine [...] possessing genius-level intelligence, great beauty, and a charmingly impish personality, [...] who] generally resolves the conflict of the story, [and] saves the lives of the protagonists who have grown to love her” (Bacon-Smith 313).

**PWP** - An abbreviation for either “porn without plot” or “plot, what plot?” (Busse and Hellekson 11). A story which “consists of little more than a sexual vignette” (H. Jenkins 191).

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