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Still More Gilmore: How Online Fan Communities Remediate *Gilmore Girls*

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At the end of 2006, *Time* magazine, in a showy gesture, declared “You” its hallowed Person of the Year. The cover presented a computer monitor with a mirror as its screen. The nation’s newsweekly of record declared its solidarity with millions of online users and consumers over the mere “content-providers” who had given them something to use and consume. As Henry Jenkins, author of *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* and *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, put it on his blog, “Time’s cover suggests just how central the idea of participatory culture has been to popular discourse in 2006.” *Time*’s unusual interpellation may have represented something of a tipping point—or, in TVese, a jump-the-shark moment—of a paradigm that has been emerging at least since Roland Barthes announced the death of the author back in the 1960s. The nominal idea is that the reader’s—or viewer’s—interpretation of a text is just as valid, and perhaps more so, than the person(s) who created the text. In our current era of constant internet-supported remediation the meaning of art, apparently, lies with the

spectator, now more than ever.

For any longtime hit television show, this remediation exists primarily through two forms, really two fora—websites for fan fiction (often called fanfic) and websites for discussion, or message boards. It is important to distinguish between these two types of sites, a distinction that little extant scholarship has observed. The prevailing tone, prejudices, and dominant ideology of the two types of communities are somewhat different, at least in the case of *Gilmore Girls* communities. Herein I use *Gilmore Girls* as a case study, and contend that while fanfic sites tend to reinforce a show's ideology, the discussion sites, perhaps counter-intuitively, tend to be more subversive. I argue that the meaning of this art has not changed overmuch in its renegotiation.

Gilmore Girls matters because TV matters and women matter. In December of 2006, *Entertainment Weekly* wrote that, unlike the bygone era of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, and *Alice*, in 2006, *The New Adventures of Old Christine* was the only sitcom centered around a female character. Without getting into major questions of genre (is it a dramedy? what is it?) *Gilmore Girls* continuously provides a very rare, privileged space where women can be funny and human without having to serve the relentlessly plot-driven needs of, say, the police procedural. In the introduction of *Gilmore Girls*, the first four credited characters are women, and that doesn't even include Lorelai's mother. The show

was created and largely maintained by a woman, Amy Sherman-Palladino.

Henry Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers*, a foundational text for much of fan studies, demonstrated that he was well aware of the dangers of monolithic representations of fan communities. Even as he used the language of cultural studies to assert alternatives to authorial authority, even as he insisted on fans' complication of "dominant cultural hierarchies," he was still careful to agree with Stuart Hall, author of *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, that popular culture is "characterized by 'the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it'." Nonetheless, in practice, Jenkins' claims about the legitimacy of fan culture have served to valorize fanfic writers as challengers to the show's dominant ideology. In the case of *Gilmore Girls*, this view needs to be complicated somewhat.

Ideology

Gilmore Girls' ideology might be summarized in a single word: precious. This word well encapsulates the following litany of defining characteristics. Through six seasons, there have been no gay relationships and no one has suddenly come out of the closet. (Michel is swishy, but we don't know him to be gay.) The show's ethnic diversity is generally limited to Michel, Lane, and Mrs. Kim, with only the latter providing nuance to the show's nominal bourgeois-bohemian-friendly tone. (Through six seasons, Gypsy and

Caesar have appeared in a somewhat-marginal 18 episodes each, but were stuck in service economy jobs.) For a show that stars five fertile women (Lorelai, Rory, Lane, Paris, and Sookie), there has never been a genuine pregnancy scare—an episode where a character fretted about being pregnant. (Lorelai did wake up in Luke’s bed to some concerned thoughts once, but they were dismissed soon enough. Sookie’s pregnancies were quite planned.) Considering the show is premised upon an unplanned pregnancy from the 80s, perhaps that’s not so odd—but lesser writers might have used that premise as polarity.

Through six seasons, no character has died. No one has been raped or killed, or been threatened with rape or murder. We’ve never seen a gun or even a crime on this show – Jess’s vandalisms and Rory’s boat theft weren’t televised. Nothing supernatural has ever occurred or even been slightly suggested. The two main characters had a total of seven lovers—Lorelai had Max, Christopher, Jason, and Luke, while Rory had Dean, Jess, and Logan. Lorelai and Rory have basically been serial monogamists. If the *Seinfeld* producers supposedly had a credo of “no hugging, no learning,” the *Gilmore Girls* producers might well have had a credo of “no cheap gimmicks.” *Gilmore Girls* is assiduously devoted to small-town life and relationships. The show is fundamentally about tensions between mothers and daughters, without (much) recourse to stunts, or what might be called “soap opera”-type plot devices.

Arguably, the show is fundamentally about non-urban female empowerment and protecting—about Lorelai protecting Rory and their way of life from the judgments of others, particularly but not exclusively her parents. Perhaps no other television show is more about the protecting of choices that were made in a year that happened about two decades before any of the events we see. On some level, this protective attitude seems to have found its way to many of the online forums.

In sum, it may be roughly claimed that the ideology of *Gilmore Girls* is both precious and protective – or, more accurately, protective of a specific kind of preciousness. This is the ideology that is most often replicated, and not complicated, on the internet.

Fanfic Sites

Online forums constitute a very particularized method of “owning” a show. Like all internet chat spaces that attract advertising dollars, they are governed by certain rules of etiquette. These include good manners and respect, as well as refraining from flaming, trolling, or pitching one’s product. They are intriguingly non-gendered (in the case of *Gilmore Girls*, they are thought to be heavily female-trafficked, but that presumption **can cut different ways**). At the same time, they are on the internet, which means that any sort of essentialist reading of them is bound to be problematic.

In her recent essay “Archontic Literature,” Abigail Derecho recognizes the importance of Barthes’ declaration that intertextuality is “the condition of any text whatsoever,” but distinguishes “archontic” texts as those that “generate variations that explicitly announce themselves.” Seeking freedom from the negative connotations of “derivative” and “appropriative,” Derecho asserts “archontic” because of its shared roots with “archive,” a never-ending extension of words and knowledge. She borrows the term from Derrida, who in *Archive Fever* delineated what might almost be seen as the original trauma of archives: “By incorporating the knowledge deployed in reference to it, the archive augments itself. . . but in the same stroke it loses the absolute and metatextual authority it might claim to have.” Derecho hews her idea of archontic literature most closely with the ideas of Edouard Glissant, who insisted that post-colonial trauma can only be ethically managed by respecting the concept of relation, which “gives equal privilege to parts and wholes.” Derecho finds that Deleuze’s assertion that repetition is not merely the first time said again, but “the first time to the ‘nth’ power,” is not merely relevant to scholarly commentary but also to fan fiction.

Gilmore Girls does not lack for archontic extensions. As of January 1, 2007—every internet reference in this article is dated at that date—fanfiction.net houses 10851 *Gilmore Girls* stories. Fanfiction.net sorts by category—romance, humor, drama, poetry, action/adventure, mystery, horror, parody, angst, supernatural, suspense, sci-fi, fantasy, spiritual, and tragedy. One can also sort by character—if a given canonical character is in

the piece. Stories are not ranked by users, only reviewed. Fanfiction.net makes up for in quantity whatever it lacks in quality. It is the Costco of fan fiction; occasional treasures may be unearthed. One such gem, by Ozfan, from November 22, 2006, puts Rory with Luke in light of recent show events: “‘I’m...’ she is about to say great, that is the word she always uses. Then she decides to downgrade it to good. Then she decides to be honest. ‘I think I have the Christmas blues. I don’t like being home. I don’t know why. It doesn’t feel like home anymore.’ There, she said it.” Like many fanfics, this story deepens the Luke-Rory relationship beyond anything seen on the show. One might speculate that this trend may be the result of daughters looking for a father figure, or just dirty old men.

More selective sites—more specialized archives—include the “Chilton Library” at chilton.smithereen.net/chilton, which has 120 stories by 73 authors. This site is distinguished by pretending to be the official site of the school that Rory attended for the first three years of the show, the Chilton Academy (though there are many Chilton Schools in the United States, none are in Connecticut). It is somewhat user-friendly but also serves to privilege the first three seasons of the show. The home page gives you over to a new student, Rory Gilmore, with a few opening remarks: “You probably don't need my help, but then again, this place can be scary with all the gargoyles and ivy and looming stone walls.” This tone, educated with slight colloquial character (e.g. “with all”), tends to characterize the best pieces.

Another selective site is blah-mah-gah.net/fanfic, where, bannered “Dante’s

Inferno,” they provide a home for 54 authors, 145 stories, and 137 members. The site includes all the requisite photos but isn’t overly distinctive. There are 394 fanfic stories at the clearing-house-style fanforum.net. “Proud & Prejudiced” is the way that the maintainers at gilmorepnp.spiralingdownward.com banner their site, claiming they don’t mind being called elitist fic snobs. They have about 100 stories. Unlike other sites, “Proud & Prejudiced” presents Lorelai and Rory as formally dressed, perhaps giving more “class” to the surroundings. This site has a section for mature readers, labeled “Behind the Rory Curtain.” One sample is “Scrabble” by mafiaprincess731, about a board game night between Luke and Lorelai, where one thing leads to another: “She lowered herself onto his large member and both let out a long moan as he filled her completely.” Healthy “fantasies” about *Gilmore Girls* characters probably offer the same psychological benefits that such fantasies do in real life.

“Proud & Prejudiced” also connects to another version of itself at livejournal.com – namely community.livejournal.com/proudprejudiced. Livejournal.com has various fan fiction sites, in particular community.livejournal.com/gg_fic, but if the Chilton Library suffers from reminiscence about the past, gg_fic is perhaps too late to the party. The site only began in 2005, and has a scant 300 posts, not many of which are actual fan fiction. It should be noted that any list of web authors is not as singular as, say, a comparison of literary agencies’ roll calls might be. Authors can and certainly do post to multiple sites, and may well post at one site under multiple noms de plume.

Perhaps *Gilmore Girls* fan fiction's best compromise between selectiveness and all-inclusiveness lies at gilmore-fiction.net, which is bannered as "Black & White & Read." The site claims: "We are the home of 342 authors from among our 1690 members. There have been 24947 reviews written about our 1254 stories." Its listed genres are action/adventure, angst, alternate universe, crossover, drama, general, humor, missing scene, parody, post-ep, romance, series, and vignette.

General fan fiction challenges and "ficathons" are regularly sponsored by many sites, including those named above. They do not always simply solicit stories; the site (or its members) will often ask for a specific fictional construct, for example, Jess eating at Richard and Emily Gilmore's house. (There is no need to ask for Tristan/Rory pairings; they are already so popular, they are generally known by their own category: Trory.)

The top-ranked story on Black & White & Read is called "Variation on a Theme" by an author called KinoFille. It was first published on May 27, 2005, and totals 51,294 words, not an unusual length by any means. It is an AU story, fanfic code for Alternate Universe. It projects a world where Lorelai married Christopher shortly after learning she was pregnant with Rory. The story describes AU Lorelai and Rory's first encounter with Stars Hollow, shortly after Rory has turned sixteen. Unlike many fanfic stories, it generally follows not only the rules of grammar but also the rules of the show's level of wit, insisting

on one-liners and witty asides. The website's quote from the story, to draw in the casual reader, is: "It was just that sometimes, especially when she met someone new, she felt as if she was spending her whole life doing penance for a mistake she made on the balcony of her bedroom when she was a kid." A story like this represents the deployment of Barthes' writerly hermeneutic codes. This is the old story, revealing more of its themes in a renegotiation that the canon could not have supported. Yet it is typical of *Gilmore Girls* fan fiction in that it does not break from the show's preciousness and protectiveness as explained in the introduction.

The top-ranked and most-reviewed story on Dante's *Inferno* is called "Next, on *Gilmore Girls*..." by an author calling him/herself Holly Gilmore. It was first published on October 18, 2004, and totals 125,434 words. It is about a world where Lorelai and Rory actually made it to their much-planned European trip. Beginning there, it takes us through many months of alternate Gilmore life, including a far longer Jess-Rory romance, culminating in Luke and Lorelai's decision to marry after they learn that she's pregnant by him. Quite untypically, it's told in the style of a stage play, e.g., "JESS: (smirking) That's the fun part. RORY: (chuckling) Getting caught? JESS: (kissing her neck) No. The possibility of getting caught." Authors like Holly Gilmore have taken it upon themselves to gratify the fans where the show has not seen fit to do so. (Should they have spent some of that energy on their own books, where they would have had to create the images in readers'

heads from scratch? Perhaps. Yet who would have read them?) This may be all the more reason they do not seriously veer from the show's worldview.

Of course research for this article has not included reading all of the more than 10,000 pieces of *Gilmore Girls* fan fiction that exist online. Yet this informal sampling, restricted to some of the higher-ranked and most-visited pieces, is striking in how little it challenges the show's basic tenets. For example, slash – fanfic code for same-sex relationships – is a category on gilmore-fiction.net, but when I sorted that way, exactly nothing came up. The only livejournal.com fanfic community to name itself as devoted to gay readings of *Gilmore Girls*, community.livejournal.com/rorytehgay, has all of two stories where any character—Rory—leans gay. tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/GilmoreGirlsSlash exists, but the site seems moribund. Heterosexual sex, on the other hand, happens all the time, but that's more of an exploration than a challenge to the show.

People in high-ranked *Gilmore Girls* fanfic don't seem to die very often. There are a few supernatural stories (mostly crossovers with other WB magic-inflected shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*) and a few pregnancies, but they are few and far between. Obviously, this is the internet, and one can find just about anything if one looks hard enough—and if it's not there, one can just create it. Nonetheless we can tentatively postulate that as of January 1, 2007, the lion's share of online *Gilmore Girls* fan fiction is

quite supportive—even protective—of the world that Amy Sherman-Palladino ostensibly created. Roberta Pearson wrote that fan fiction writers choose their shows precisely because they share some ideological affinity with the shows’ worldviews. This is particularly true with *Gilmore Girls*.

Message Board Sites

Compared with fan fiction sites, there has been very little scholarship on discussion sites that do not contain fan fiction. Academics have good reasons for this. For one thing, common message board sites are even more extensive and scattered than fanfic sites. For another, they call into question the identity of the fan. Anyone can post to a topical message board, while presumably only a true fan would bother to comment on and/or write fan fiction. This is where fan studies may merge with a branch of media studies that will someday perhaps be known as internet studies. The regular posters at given message board sites are, I venture to say, less united by the pleasures of extending a fictional universe than by the pleasures of like-minded company. This may be most apparent on televisionwithoutpity.com, which unashamedly labels at least one discussion thread for each of its (more than 30) regularly reviewed shows “The Meet Market” (the *Gilmore Girls* one is known as “Welcome to Luke’s: The Meet Market”). Sure enough, the Meet Market threads do not lack for activity.

Fan fiction theorists have been quick to lay claim to the idea of “extending the middle” from narrative theorists like Peter Brooks, but have mostly ignored message board sites in their paradigms. If the ideas of Barthes and Deleuze are too often liberally applied to fan fiction, they are not applied enough to simple discussion communities. Yet these posters are also adding something crucial to the process. While the comments on fanfic sites are almost exclusively related to the fanfic pieces, the comments on message boards on most TV-show sites are generally devoted to the show itself. By this author’s small sampling, fanfic posters tend to be more nurturing, while non-fanfic board posters tend to be saying whatever corrosive cleverness may get a rise out of someone. Non-fanfic board posters tend to be more deconstructive, critical, and less reverential than the commenters on fanfic sites. In the case of *Gilmore Girls*, through their snark and general pessimism, through more anarchic forms of archontic contributions, they may actually be making more of a Derridean *differance* than their peers on the fanfic sites.

The very functional, warehouse-like fanforum.com has 2,606 *Gilmore Girls* threads, many with hundreds of posts, and too many members to count. The similarly clearing-house-style Fanfiction.net, in addition to its above-mentioned fanfic, has 161 *Gilmore Girls* “communities” and 53 *Gilmore Girls* “forums” (one can’t really tell the difference). Gilmoregirls.org has a very active message board—well over 200,000 posts, and still going strong. One senses a singular maintainer who did well to jump in at the

outset and has kept a nice modest home. At livejournal.com, there are 35 separate communities (websites) that have “Gilmore” or “GG” (signifying the show) in their title. Community.livejournal.com/gilmore_girls has 3,552 members. Thedragonflyinn.org has a very handsome site but seems to suffer from lack of posts and members.

Some communities are on what might be called life support. Stars-hollow.org has 3,543 threads, 7,053 members, and 240,620 posts, but has now lapsed into ghost-town status. P079.ezboard.com/bgilmoregirls87533 is another site with much-diminished traffic. It’s not that people have stopped talking about *Gilmore Girls*. Part of the explanation may be a relatively new feature at the corporate website. When one goes to thewb.com/shows/gilmore-girls, one can link to lounge.cwtv.com/forumdisplay.php?f=8, which is 329 pages of approximately 20 linked threads each, totaling 6,574 threads. The networks, smelling advertising dollars, have barged in on fan territory, with all the cultural capital and institutional respect they command. Sure enough, many fans have followed.

Fans “add value” and “extend the middle” of beloved TV shows especially by patronizing spoiler sites and recap sites. (If you’ve been living under a rock: a spoiler is a piece of information to which regular viewers/readers are not yet privy; a recap is a blow-by-blow recount of the diegetic events of a show.) Both types of sites allow internet posters to make a slight temporal reach before making their declarations in the present. On a spoiler

site, people speculate about supposedly “leaked” information, representing the most material projections of fan desires about the future. On a recap site—well, on *the* recap site, televisionwithoutpity.com, always google’s first destination for such a thing—fans devote their energies to deconstructing recent episodes. The banner of televisionwithoutpity.com says “spare the snark, spoil the networks,” but this is probably meant ironically (or for myopic investors and advertisers), because most of the recaps are written in quite a skeptical style. As a typical example, Al Lowe, recapping the “I’d Rather Be in Philadelphia” episode from Season 7, wrote, “In fact, I cried throughout this episode, though at times, as you will come upon later in this recap, the crying was out of boredom.” Following the recappers’ lead, the posters on the message boards are more unsparing in their criticism.

On December 31, 2006, a user named nak3dqueen asked the livejournal.com gilmore_girls community to speculate on a supposed leak about a death of a character, rumored to be funny and “not anyone close to the show.” The invoking of Anna’s mother occasioned some argument about who came up with a “secret-daughter” plot first, *Desperate Housewives* or *Gilmore Girls*. A user called elegantelbow said “I bet you \$1 it will be Kirk.” Other speculated victims included Taylor, Mrs. Kim, Mrs. Huntzberger, and Richard (someone countered that such a plot could never be funny). In a nicely representative board message, a user named faery_fall responded to another guess: “I doubt

there's a large fanbase for dog Paul Anka, but dog-deaths are sad, and ubiquitous. GG's gotta be more creative, lest I bludgen [sic] them with my rocks and small tools." Though this fan recognizes his/her power limits, some attempt at humor is the chosen outlet.

On January 1, 2007, televisionwithoutpity.com's best-attended *Gilmore Girls* thread, The Spoiler Discussion, speculated about a Season 8 without Rory (not based on any actual leaked evidence—this forum's attendees don't need that, but they don't mind it when it comes). A user called domenica_marie suggested that Rory could be shipped off to a Rhodes scholarship or a job as a foreign correspondent. A user called juststandstill said the show could live without Rory because the show has been The Rory Show and The Lorelai Show since season 4, and without Rory, one loses nothing of Stars Hollow, but merely Rory and Logan and Paris. A user called bellamn16 chimed in that Lorelai could be stuck with Paris, as when they both "lost Rory" at the beginning of season 6. (Or perhaps, one might add, in the way Fonzie was stuck with Potsie after Richie and Ralph left.) Another user called funnyfriend said that if Rory isn't going to be in season 8, they should change the name of the series, as other shows have done. A reasonable last word on this topic—naturally surrounded by all sorts of other posts on other topics, e.g. the significance of Merchant of Venice references, and speculation on April moving to New Mexico—was from teajunkie, who said that if AB (née Alexis Bledel, the actor playing Rory, as any poster would know) is reluctant to commit to a full 22 episodes, the series could get by

with her doing perhaps half of that, considering how long it had been since her character had a compelling storyline.

This piece has hardly exhausted the full internet presence of *Gilmore Girls*. (One does not exhaust internet possibilities.) For example, there are plenty of fan sites that don't have message boards, e.g. gilmoregirlsnews.com and gilmoregirlsshop.com. **These sites**, no doubt frequented by fans, also add cultural capital to the pre-existing ideological world of the show. The CW (formerly the WB) provides all sorts of links for merchandise. Amazon.com sells four official *Gilmore Girls* novelizations: *Like Mother, Like Daughter* by Catherine Clark, *I Love You, You Idiot* by Cathy East Dubowski, *I Do, Don't I?* by Catherine Clark, and *The Other Side of Summer* by Amy Sherman-Palladino. They all tell the show's exact stories from Rory's first-person perspective; they are not transgressive. Corporate-sponsored and corporate-friendly sites are unlikely to challenge the show's worldview.

Do Fans Affect the Show?

Network TV executives were probably not surprised by *Time*'s Person of the Year cover for 2006. After seeing the phenomenal online interest in shows like *Star Trek* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the successful solicitation of fan input by Peter Jackson for the *Lord of the Rings* films, producers seem to have concluded that fan cultivation may be a

lucrative endeavor. The last few years have seen an upsurge in online “components” for shows as well as “shout-outs” to fans; for example, *Lost* characters’ web-accessible journals contain plot information otherwise unavailable to viewers, while *Everwood* named a character after its televisionwithoutpity.com recapper and a *Buffy* character was seen carrying televisionwithoutpity.com merchandise. As of autumn 2006, *Gilmore Girls* features “fan discussion pieces”—ostensible teenage girl reactions to plotlines—during the commercial breaks. As previously noted, the network sponsors a *Gilmore Girls* fan message board.

Nonetheless, none of this seems to have affected the actual diegetic world of *Gilmore Girls*. In an interview the author conducted with Pamela Ribon, who recapped *Gilmore Girls* for five years for televisionwithoutpity.com, she said, “I’ve still yet to see any sign that they’re acknowledging what fans think. I don’t think that Amy Sherman-Palladino was the kind of person who would be swayed by online strangers.” Commenting on the Luke/Lorelai relationship in an interview with Amy Amatangelo of the *Boston Herald*, Lauren Graham, who plays Lorelai, recently said, “I mean, if everything had gone the way the fans wanted it to go in terms of that relationship, the show would be over, or I would just be calling Rory, like, ‘What are you doing tonight?’” Graham may be intentionally misreading the fans, but her tone of casual disregard is telling.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the show’s apparent indifference, hundreds of *Gilmore Girls* fan fiction writers soldier on, seemingly content not to subvert the precious, protective worldview of the show. Perhaps it is partly because Stars Hollow and the characters of Lorelai and Rory seem so immutable that online fan fiction writers do not often try to change them. The show’s conservative approach to fan intervention may well have contributed to a conservative tendency among fanfic authors. It seems to be left to the posters on the discussion boards to transgress—to perform the occasional metaphoric vandalizing of Barbie dolls. And perhaps there is something essentially precious and protective – *Gilmore*-like – about fan fiction in general, and something essentially subversive about message boards.

Conclusion

We live in the “You” era—a time when media content increasingly advertises itself as more user-friendly and even user-controlled than it ever was. At the same time, online authors have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to remediate storylines from their favorite shows. *Gilmore Girls*, unlike most TV shows, presents a fictional, precious, un-soap-opera-like world and a protective, female-empowering ideology that most of its many online fans do not seek to genuinely subvert. It is as though the fans have spoken and said: people like Lorelai and Rory and places like Stars Hollow are rare enough, let us not seek to radically remake them, but only to extend and illuminate their glory. We can appreciate

and thank them for their efforts, with but a moment's idle reflection of how differently their efforts might have been shaped in a world with more shows like *Gilmore Girls* – where its preciousness might not need to be protected.

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