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The Archontic Holmes: Understanding adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories in the context of Jacques Derrida's "Archive"

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A consideration of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes detective stories and their subsequent adaptations reveals a complex web of interdependency, which is in keeping with Jacques Derrida's concept of the archive, and can be extended to describe the functions and relations of all texts, not just those that claim explicit inter-relations.

When seeking examples of repetition in literature, adaptations – specifically fanfiction – would seem to offer easy sites of comparison between texts demarcated as “sources” and subordinate texts created via the repetition of key features. However, rather than describing a definitive hierarchy between sources and subordinate texts, a consideration of the fanfiction surrounding one particular source reveals a complex web of interdependency, one that can be extended to describe the functions and relations of all texts, not just those that claim explicit inter-relations. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's series of Sherlock Holmes (SH) detective stories and their subsequent adaptations (including, but not limited to, works of criticism, screen adaptations, unofficial sequels in novel form, and fanfiction) provide a wealth of data in this vein. Between 1887 and 1927, Doyle wrote four novels and fifty-six short stories featuring the detective Holmes and Dr. John Watson. For clarity, these sixty, Doyle-penned texts will be referred to collectively as the SH Canon, and the sum of the SH Canon and all its adaptations as the SH Archive, for reasons that will become apparent. The SH fandom (from “fanatic domain”), as a microcosmic example of multiple intertexts, provides evidence of how sources and adaptations interact, and a model for the intertextual nature of all literary production. Jacques Derrida's concept of the archive will be used as a theoretical basis for the examination of the SH Archive, though concepts from theorists as diverse as Gilles Deleuze, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes are required to fully explicate the complexity of adaptations. Abigail Derecho, Daria Pimenova, Christopher Marlow and Barbara Johnson's applications of Derrida's theories will be used to analyse various adaptations of SH, with examples drawn from television adaptations, traditionally published texts and online fantexts.

Fanfiction has as many definitions as the scholars who engage with it have agendas, but can be broadly described as unauthorised, amateur texts written in response to a popular media text or series of texts. This definition takes in such various texts as the Homeric myths, folktales, the Jane Austen continuation *Old Friends and New Fancies* written by Sybil Brinton and published in 1914, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (which was originally written as an x-rated fanfiction of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels). Henry Jenkins has been influential in defining transmedia fiction and participatory culture, which he explores in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992) and

on his blog *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. He describes fanfiction as “an unauthorized expansion of these media franchises into new directions which reflect the reader's desire to 'fill in the gaps' they have discovered in commercially produced material” (*Confessions*), and thus positions fanfiction as an intertextual and supplementary activity. In this context, televisual or literary adaptations of SH – for example the series of 1940s SH films starring Basil Rathbone, which pitted him against the Nazi threat, Nicholas Meyer's 1974 interpretation *The Seven Per Cent Solution*, which altered the roles of key characters and introduced Sigmund Freud into the mix for a more psychoanalytical take on Holmes' adventures, and the 2010 BBC television series, *Sherlock*, created by Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss, which updated the action to contemporary London – all fall under this definition of fanfiction.

Fanfiction is a flourishing genre that has existed online since the inception of the Internet (and previously enjoyed a healthy life in print media)¹ with the *Sherlock* fandom one of the most prolific. *Fanfiction.net*, the largest online database of fanfiction, hosts over 21,000 works relating to *Sherlock*. *Archive of Our Own*, a new online archive for fanworks (texts, art, and audio) launched in 2009, lists over 19,000 works in “Sherlock Holmes and Related Fandoms”, which is its fifth most populated category and is growing rapidly². This conflation by *Archive of Our Own* of the Canon and adaptations of the Canon into one category hints at the intertextual interdependence of the Canon and its adaptations. SH fanfiction exists in response to the SH Canon, *Sherlock*, Guy Ritchie's 2009 film, *Sherlock Holmes*, and the 2011 sequel, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, starring Robert Downey Jr, and every possible combination of adaptations. Some authors make a feature of this intertextuality by having, for example, Watson from *Sherlock* meet Holmes from the 1984 Granada TV series, as in “Dream Kissing Sherlock... or Not?” by Random_Nexus. While many transformative works alter the focus to explore platonic, romantic or erotic relationships between the characters – a tendency that has generated the bulk of enquiries, scholarly and otherwise, into fanfiction as a phenomenon³ – the structure of fanfictions and the codes inscribed into them are equally illuminating.

Analysing the SH Archive as a whole raises difficulties of approach. The Canon could be said to describe a textual boundary containing a series of related narratives by the same author. However, when it comes to discussing an adaptation it would seem remiss not to make recourse to the source of the adaptation. So, for example, while it can be argued that Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* forms a single, bounded text, the *Sherlock* episode “The Hounds of Baskerville” would invite a definition that encompasses Doyle's story. When attempting to describe the text, the artificiality of imposing boundaries must be acknowledged and, particularly in a discussion of adaptations, textual relations must be taken into consideration. A theoretical approach, drawing heavily on the deconstructionist work of Derrida, is outlined below and followed by two case studies, each examining the relationships between texts in the SH Archive.

The most appropriate theoretical paradigm for the inherent interdependency of adaptation is Derrida's concept of the archive. Abigail Derecho takes Derrida's definition of the “archontic text” and

assesses its suitability to her attempt to describe fanfiction as being derivative and relying on a conscious and explicit relation to its intertexts (65). She describes an archontic text as having four defining features: open-endedness, continually shifting boundaries, a drive to expand and a hierarchical structure (64). The first three criteria are easily satisfied. When looking at the example of the SH Archive, it is self-evident that subsequent adaptations may always be added and that their addition will alter the content, and therefore the boundaries, of the archive. The inevitability of future texts referencing or reminding a reader of an entry in the SH Archive are proof of its drive to expand. Derecho points out that “an archontic text's archive is not identical to the text but is a virtual construct surrounding the text, including it and all texts related to it” (65). As Derrida writes, “one will never be able to objectivize it with no remainder” (68). Thus, the archive does not stand alone, but is organised around the delimiting gaze of a reader who imposes boundaries on intertextual material that would otherwise form an archive of all existing texts. For the purposes of this article, any text referring to the SH Canon or any SH adaptation is considered to be part of the SH Archive.

Derecho's fourth feature, concerning hierarchy, is less easily determined and an examination of Daria Pimenova's criticism of Derecho on this matter can help to clarify the situation. To orient an archive around the SH Canon is to grant the Canon an originary power, since the Canon can be conceived of as existing separately from its adaptations but not vice versa. Pimenova – who subscribes to such a hierarchical model – describes Derecho as presenting an inconsistent argument. Pimenova emphasises the derivative aspect of fanfiction (45) and describes it as being cumulative yet preserving the source text as origin (51). She asserts that this is in contrast to Derecho's archontic model which, she believes, destroys or replaces the original by granting equivalence to all its entries (51), since Derecho claims that “all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source text” (64-65). But while Derecho describes an equivalence, by differentiating a “source” text from those that “build” on it, she tacitly admits their non-equivalence: one entry in the archive has been singled out as being a necessary condition for the other(s), even if only chronologically. Though Derecho makes a claim for the equivalence of source and adaptation, the language she uses exposes a reliance on hierarchy and a model similar to the one Pimenova proposes.

Derecho's apparent contradiction exposes the complex structure of the archive. In Derrida's description he does imply that interacting with and therefore adding to an archive reinforces the entries already in the archive but, in contrast to Derecho, he is referring to the archive as a whole rather than a single locatable source. For him, the structure is therefore not hierarchical but decentred, and works to disseminate its authority: “By incorporating the knowledge deployed in reference to it, the archive augments itself, engrosses itself, it gains in *auctoritas*” (68). This contradicts Derecho's claim that the boundary of the source text will not be violated; for Derrida, any addition to the archive recontextualises the preceding entries. Within the SH Archive, the Canon is therefore altered by each adaptation, with the result that each entry in the Archive exists in a web of complex, mutually constitutive relations with other entries. The Canon does not exist in any

accessible, originary, pre-archive state; it has been transformed by and can only be accessed via its adaptations.

Critical, as well as fictional, texts become part of the archives they reference and must be acknowledged in any theoretical approach. Following this logic, it is not possible to appeal to an originary Derrida, for example, as being the source of his theories. Rather, Derrida's work is approached with respect for the supplementary interpretations provided by Derecho, Pimenova and others. This article will not appeal to Derrida as holding the authority over his own meaning, but will instead utilise the Derridean Archive, in which each entry is equivalent and modifies other entries in a complex intertextual relationship. The texts within the SH Archive seem to be explained most accurately by Pimenova's (mis)reading of Derecho's interpretation of Derrida's archontic model, i.e. that it erodes the concept and authority of a source to instead describe a non-linear series of non-hierarchical relations.

Christopher Marlow draws on Derrida for his examination of the *Doctor Who* (DW) Archive and provides a comparable model for examining the relationship between two entries in the SH Archive. The science-fiction television series DW has a similar history to the SH Archive. It originated as an adaptation of Poul Anderson's novel *Guardians of Time* and *The Time Machine* film (47) and canon episodes were broadcast from 1963 to 1989. When it went off air, official tie-in novels and fanfictions were written by professionals and fans, who opted to change the focus to relationships, emotions and romance (51). When DW was brought back to the small screen in 2005, it was with writers of these non-canonical novels and fantexts at the helm: first Russell T Davies, then Stephen Moffat.⁴ Marlow, like Derecho, appeals to Derrida to explain how the constituent parts of the DW Archive relate to each other. Though he does not reference *Archive Fever* directly, he heavily alludes to it by defining the "DW text" as the sum of all published and non-published fiction dealing with the character of The Doctor (47). Drawing from Derrida's *Living On: Border Lines*, he makes use of the idea of textual folding, in which "specific narrative traits or sequences are adapted from one medium to another" (47), and offers examples of how characters (such as the Daleks and Sarah Jane Smith) are (re-)presented in each medium with regard for the level of familiarity different audiences can be assumed to have with them (49).

A consideration of the reception of Mark Gatiss' televisual adaptation of Doyle's novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (HOTB) provides an example of textual folding. HOTB has been frequently adapted, to the extent that many people have at least a passing knowledge of it. Hence the title of Gatiss' *Sherlock* episode "The Hounds of Baskerville" can be assumed to raise certain preconceived notions in the mind of the viewer. In Doyle's original story, the prevalent fog ("a dense, white fog... low but thick and well defined... looked like a great shimmering ice-field", Doyle 289) adds a sense of concealment and danger that has become so familiar to the viewer in subsequent adaptations that its presence has become expected. In *Sherlock*, Gatiss is able to cleverly retool it into a clue concealed in plain sight. Rather than a natural weather phenomenon concealing and revealing Doyle's large dog with phosphorous painted on its jaws, it becomes, in Gatiss' hands, a hallucinogenic gas causing the

characters to envision a monstrous beast. In this way Gatiss “folds” (manipulates, recontextualises) aspects of Doyle's story, relying on the viewer's shared understanding of genre conventions to provide those familiar with HOTTB with a new mystery. He plays with the fact that the viewer belongs to a different cultural background from Doyle's contemporaneous readers, one that, crucially, includes knowledge of previous SH adaptations. He also utilises the fact that linguistic norms have shifted in the intervening century by making much of the fact that “hound” would now be an anachronistic way of referring to a stray dog. Thus, hinted at by the title of the episode, there are two “hounds” – the memory of Doyle's slaving beast and the new interpretation of a bio-chemical military research group with the acronym H.O.U.N.D. – which the viewer has to read in parallel and constantly negotiate.

When considered together, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and “The Hounds of Baskerville” reject the concept of a source and derivative adaptation. Though each *can* be approached individually, the meaning and experience of each is enhanced by knowledge of the other. This is most obvious in the case of the adaptation, where knowledge of Doyle's plot grants the viewer multiple interpretations of the action, but it also works in the other direction, so that after viewing *Sherlock* the viewers bring with them an awareness of alternatives which can recontextualise aspects of Doyle's story. As Derrida claims, each additional entry results in the archive gaining in *auctoritas*, and so, when consumed in tandem, the two hound texts are cumulatively enhanced. Thus, these two archive entries circumvent chronology to achieve an a-historical equivalence in which the notion of a “source” is lost. Such non-linearity is challenged when considered from the perspective of a single reader for whom the chronology of the reading process must be taken into account and by whom each text encountered retroactively affects previously read texts and anticipatorily affects the future reading of texts. Recourse to an individual, circumstantial chronology (i.e. the idiosyncratic path a reader can take through an archive) evokes a series of shifting power interplays and could point to an endorsement of the source/adaptation model with the source being determined chronologically. However, it highlights the arbitrary designation of an entry in the archive as source or adaptation and also exposes the limitations of both positing an idiosyncratic reader and measuring only two texts in relation to each other.

This pattern of constant reinscribing evokes Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, which Derecho also uses to understand the relationship between two texts in an archive. Deleuze writes that commentaries have “a double existence and a corresponding ideal: the pure repetition of the former text and the present text *in one another*” (Deleuze xx, qtd in Derecho 73, emphasis in original) and Derecho uses this to claim that reading fanfiction is akin to simultaneously reading two texts which reciprocally affect each other (73). Limiting the scope of the investigation to two texts gives an incomplete picture, as an archive comprises many of these overlapping double existences so that it invites the simultaneous reading of *all* its entries. Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossia better helps to explain the interplay of multiple texts, voices and registers at inter- and intra-textual levels. Bakhtin describes the situation as a dialogism created by heteroglossia in which “everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole – there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which

have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of the utterance” (426). The context of a single entry in an archive is formed by multiple texts and discourses, and the reader's understanding of that entry will rely upon the entry's interaction with its context and the reader's familiarity with the context.

This can be seen clearly in “Second Verse, Same as the First” by Tyleet, a complex work of fanfiction that takes as its sources the Canon, Ritchie's films and *Sherlock*. As with many works of fanfiction, the plot concerns two characters realising the nature of their feelings for each other, in this case Holmes and Watson. It contains two alternating narratives. One is set in the Victorian era and is typical of fanfiction which aims to respond to the Canon, though the author prompts the reader that it can also be read as responding to Ritchie's period-set films: “The canon stuff has a distinctly 2009 flavor, but it could be read either way, I think”. It uses the conventional appellations of “Holmes” and “Watson”, follows Victorian social codes, and attempts to echo Doyle's writing style. The second responds to the present-day setting of *Sherlock* and follows more closely the dialogue style and conventions established by the television programme. It refers to the characters as “Sherlock” and “John” and accordingly assumes the appearances of the actors who play them (Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman). The reader is free to imagine the Victorian incarnations of Holmes and Watson as resembling the BBC actors, the Ritchie cast or any other incarnation. There are also direct quotations from Doyle. The text interacts not only with Doyle and adaptations of Doyle, but also with the entire bodies of both Victorian-set Holmes fanfiction and *Sherlock* fanfiction. The subject of the story is treated, in each strand, according to the style of the source text, but its suitability as subject matter belongs to the realm of contemporary fanfiction, since Holmes and Watson realising their romantic feelings for each other is not a feature of any of the canonical SH texts. Indeed, in the contemporary strand, the action is given meaning and impetus by Tyleet relying upon the reader's knowledge of the popular *Sherlock* fanfiction conceit that Sherlock identifies as asexual. In this way, “Second Verse...” dramatises the existence of multiple voices – heteroglossia – and the way in which the reader must be familiar with them to fully detect all the potential meanings of the text.

This intertextuality is not necessarily specific to texts that define themselves explicitly as fanfiction or adaptations, since any text of criticism or commentary enters into the archive of the text it is addressing. Roland Barthes sums up the inherent quotational and non-originary nature of all texts in “The Death of the Author” when he describes the text as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerate centres of culture” (1468). If then, all texts relate to all other texts, there is potentially only one archive and it contains every instance of writing. To avoid such unhelpful totalising, divisions must be (knowingly) imposed, such as placing an artificial boundary around what has been called the SH Archive, even though it is acknowledged that the Canon has no special originary power. The tension between the need to delimit a text for practical reasons and the realisation that any limit is artificially imposed gives rise to many of the features that shape fanfiction and extend to all texts.

Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse discuss this problem when they describe the tension between limits and freedom as being essential to the creation and understanding of fanfiction, defined by them as “pleasure play within limits” (195). They describe a model of source text and fantext (as the accumulation of fanworks related to a specific source) in which limits are imposed by the framework of the source text (195), the fantext (198) and the discourses that police the fantext, for example, regarding genre, length, subject matter and explicit content (200). Against this is the freedom that arises from the motivating impulse of adaptation: to deviate from the source. They explain how each new adaptation can achieve canonical status within an interpretive community (a tactic used to avoid the problems associated with addressing the idiosyncrasy of individual readers) and beget further adaptations in a linear chain that constantly reinforces the indeterminability of a source text (198). However, they do acknowledge the inaccuracy of such a linear progression comprised of cumulative binary relationships, but stop short of endorsing the more accurate model of a branching network: “By definition, fan fiction is in intertextual communication with the source text; however, in practice it also engages with a host of other texts, be they clearly stated requests, shared interpretive characterizations, or even particular instantiations of the universes that the fan writer chooses to expand upon” (199-200).

Stein and Busse's insistence on retaining the integrity of a source text, while acknowledging that no one or two texts can be divorced from the intertext or the dialogism the reader participates in, demonstrates the oppositional forces at work in defining the boundaries of a text. Derrida addresses the imposition of a limiting interpretive “frame” on a text, and cites it as a necessary condition of interpretation (and hence adaptation). Following Derrida's archontic approach, Barbara Johnson's adaptation of Derrida's reading of Jacques Lacan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's “The Purloined Letter” replicates Derrida's argument for the necessity of framing a text while also demonstrating the effects of the process of successive interpretations. Johnson explains how Derrida deliberately offers a misreading of Lacan to demonstrate how frames limit meaning but how without the imposition of an interpretive frame the text is unbounded, indistinct, has no definable inside and outside, and is subject to textual drifting since “no totalization of the border is even possible” (235). Derrida, she writes, refers to this as “the 'parergonal' logic of the 'frame'”, i.e. a supplement to the work or “ergon” (226). Johnson points to the paradoxical nature of the situation in which, for interpretation to exist, a knowingly fictitious frame must be imposed: “The total inclusion of the 'frame' is both mandatory and impossible. The 'frame' thus becomes not the borderline between the inside and the outside, but precisely what subverts the applicability of the inside/outside polarity to the act of interpretation” (235). Derrida insists that texts resist such (necessary) framing, resulting in textual drifting, in which any attempt to locate the text and its meaning result in both being deferred (Storey 98).

With text and meaning as continually evasive, the focus of attention becomes the processes and agendas at work in each attempt to locate or fix a text and its meaning: the “gaps” that Jenkins claims fanfiction is trying to fill. The archontic text's drive to proliferate and deviate, which is conducive to a rejection of totalising, singular definitions, renders adaptations conducive to discussions of boundaries, normativity and the politics at play in their creation. While the theoretical

paradigm outlined by the Derridean Archive is demonstrably applicable to works of adaptation, and fanfiction in particular, as texts that announce their literary forebears, it can be extended to all texts. As remarked above, Deleuze proclaims that a commentary (and hence adaptation) replicates its source to create a kind of “double text”. Echoed in Barthes' order in “Theory of the Text” to “*Let the commentary be itself a text*” (44, original emphasis), this creates an equivalence between all forms of writing as intertextual, whether their relationships are self-professed, exist in the mind of the reader or remain implicit.

Notes

- 1 Francesca Coppa provides a useful history of fanfiction in “A Brief History of Media Fandom”.
- 2 Data collected on 24 Sep. 2012.
- 3 For an investigation into fanfiction's focus on relationships, see Elizabeth Woledge's “Intimatopia: Genre Intersections Between Slash and the Mainstream.”
- 4 Highlighting the interrelations between the production of non-canonical SH and DW texts, Anderson was a member of the Sherlock Holmes fan society Baker Street Irregulars, and both Moffat and DW writer Mark Gatiss are responsible for *Sherlock*.

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