University of Alberta

Audiences and Adaptation:
Self, Story, and the Privilege of Un/Knowing

by

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Abstract

Anthony Giddens writes that self-identity is constructed by the individual from the details of her own life. The individual arranges these details into a reflexive understanding of self that both accounts for her present circumstances and orients her in the social world.

This process is much like that of textual adaptation: from the available information, the writer selects a cohesive set of details that reflects a current perspective. Using Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and theories of fandom as starting points, this thesis examines the audiences – knowing and unknowing – of different types of adaptation, including *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Coleman Barks's adaptations of Rumi, narrative videogames, and fanfiction. In these adaptations, the palimpsests of the originals allow the reader to participate in the creation of meaning, and through her interaction with these texts, the reader returns to her own process of identity construction.

Preface

While my interest in and initial contact with *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Coleman Barks's work on Rumi's poetry was academic, speculative fiction and gaming have interested me since childhood. My experience of *Dragon Age* and fanfiction was initially as fan and participant. I was playing *Dragon Age* as I was conceptualizing this thesis, and I began to see how my knowledge of the game and the drive to expand that knowledge were integral parts of my pleasure. The game also seemed reminiscent of my adolescent interest in fanfiction. In both these interactive mediums, there is an emphasis on the personalization of fictional characters and the opportunity for interaction between that personalized character and the other characters.

My experience of popular culture has mostly closely resembled that of Henry Jenkins: revisionist and participatory. Electronic and tabletop gaming have always cemented and sustained my relationships. To use a specific example of how *Dragon Age* has done so, while playing the game, I was in an email conversation with a friend, comparing our experiences and opinions of the game. Romantic relationships are a secondary concern of the game and when we began a lighthearted comparison of the romances offered by the different characters, our conversation progressed to a frank discussion of our very new marriages. We also play *Dungeons and Dragons* together, and in that same conversation, we re-imagined one of the game's settings and political structures into a setting and narrative for our D&D game, which would transition from the narrative I had already constructed and was telling. We have been cooperatively running that

game in weekly “chapters” for our friends for over a year now. The materials of *Dragon Age* were firstly an opening to more personal revelations and secondly became co-opted for our and our friends’ extra-narrative enjoyment.

As I have already mentioned, fanfiction was an adolescent interest of mine. Reading the varied characterizations of female characters by adult women became a way for me to “try out” various perspectives and behaviours. When I approached fanfiction again for this thesis, I was forcibly reminded of that function and found myself drawn to stories in which the protagonists were struggling with issues of personal interest to me. I read and enjoyed more fanfiction that I could legitimately claim was for research purposes. I was also struck – again – by the supportive and inclusive nature of fanfiction writers. Young writers and second-language speakers were encouraged by their readers and suggestions for improvement were made gently, in contrast to much anonymous internet interaction.

Because this has been my experience of pop culture, my second and third chapters rely on Jenkins’s analysis of popular culture and that of his contemporary, Camille Bacon-Smith. Both were also participant-researchers, and both were writing to reclaim pop culture and pop culture fans from academic contempt. My thesis as a whole may be read by some as too admiring of pop culture in general. This focus is not intended to discredit or ignore other perspectives on popular culture – its hegemonic force and its role in shaping culture and considerable are problematic. While I allude, more-or-less briefly, to these concerns in my chapters, my focus remains on the productive possibilities

that these bodies of adaptation provide for their readers/viewers/players/writers (fans). These particular texts all grant agency to their fans in different ways. While readers' agency can never entirely negate the power of the author and even less so the power of the structures that shape author, text, and reader, it is necessarily a force in the construction of meaning. The unusual textual constructions examined here lend a particular insight into the construction of meaning by their users. These chapters are an analysis of one possible reading of the texts. This reading is not the only reading, but it is one suggested by the texts' relationship to their originals and by their forms.

Another comment would perhaps be of use to the reader of this thesis. Throughout it, I use exclusively female pronouns. Partially, this choice was made to reflect the gendered interests of the first and third chapters. *Bridget Jones's Diary* has been of most interest to female readers and feminist scholars. While I did no ethnographic research into the fanfiction writers I was reading, both Jenkins and Bacon-Smith found that the vast majority of fan writers were female, and I found no evidence to suggest that this had changed. This considered, it seemed most consistent to use a single gender of pronoun throughout. Lastly, this choice was made to reflect my gender. I recognize my inability to divorce my own perspectives from my analysis, and my gender undoubtedly plays some role as I imagine the impact of form and knowledge on a hypothetical reader.

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Introduction

Self and Story

Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which has already generated its own sequel and a genre of monsters-in-classics novels, demonstrates both the ubiquity of adaptation in popular culture and the degree of power that readers desire over their texts. Grahame-Smith uses Austen's setting, characters, and words, but he adds a zombie intrusion into England during the novel's plot. Elizabeth is the most accomplished of the five martially trained Bennet sisters. The book's back blurb pokes fun at the culture of adaptation and director's editions, describing the book as "an expanded edition of the beloved Jane Austen novel featuring all-new scenes of bone-crunching zombie mayhem." It also addresses the inadequacy of the usual academic response to adaption of classic literature: "*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* transforms a masterpiece of world literature into something you'd actually want to read."

There is an exaggerated contrast between Austen's literary tone and Grahame-Smith's violence and sexual humour. The repetitive "and" and non-alliterative noun "zombies" in the novel's title emphasizes Grahame-Smith's contribution as a crudely tacked on addition to Austen's text. His lack of authority is also emphasized on the book's back jacket: "Jane Austen is the author of . . . masterpieces of English literature. Seth Grahame-Smith once took a class in English literature." By focusing on his consumption of story rather than his production of story, Seth Grahame-Smith is introduced to the reader as a fellow

reader, not as a writer. Despite his lack of credentials, Grahame-Smith has the ability to co-write Austen's text. This delights the reader because it proves her own potential power, despite her lack of credentials, over the texts she reads.

Just as the reader's delight in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is ultimately about what the text suggests about her – in this case, the text asserts her ability to engage without deference because of her lack of credentials – most of the texts examined here are ultimately rewarding to the reader because of what they say about her, rather than about any other topic. Readers, it seems, cannot get enough of themselves. Anthony Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991) sheds some light on this narcissistic tendency. While his study is far-ranging, only a few points will be considered here as a start to understanding the role of adaptation in popular culture.

In this text, Giddens discusses reflexivity as the major difference between late modernity and previous time periods. He writes that "modernity's reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity . . . to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge" (20). This reflexivity applies equally to the organizations of modernity and to individuals. He begins his text by describing a sociological study *Second Chances*. The study was concerned with how recent divorcees establish a "new sense of self, a new sense of identity" (Wallerstein and Blakesee qtd in Giddens 10) after their marriages end. The subject of this study demonstrates one of Giddens's key points: that identities are constructed by individuals who select and arrange the details of their lives into narratives that provide a stable sense of self. The divorcee, whose "sense of self-

identity had become tied to [his or her partner] and to the marriage itself," must "reach back into his or her early experience and find other images and roots for independence, for being able to live alone" (11). This study is a description of processes that are already taking place, and it can also be used by people looking for a way to cope with their changed circumstances (either directly or through their therapists). This bilateral direction indicates the mutual interaction of individuals and the material provided to them by their culture.

For Giddens, identity in late modernity is reliant on self-narrative. Therapy and self-help, whether after a divorce, in response to some other life event, or simply to address a lingering sense of disquiet, are ultimately experiences "which involve the individual in systematic reflection about the course of their life's development" through "autobiographical thinking" (Rainwater qtd in Giddens 71). The fluidity of autobiography and its tenuous grasp on truth are not problematic during this process, but deliberately exploited, as in the "corrective emotional experience exercise" suggested by Rainwater. In one version of this exercise, the individual writes the story of a past event, then rewrites it as he or she "would have liked it to happen" (72). Self identity stems from this constructed narrative just as meaning stems from textual narratives, and like any other narrative, the narrative of self requires work and creativity.

While the act of constructing identity through a story of self may not be unique to late modernity, the collapse of tradition and the variety of legitimate life choices both heighten its importance and complicate its stability. In a post-traditional culture, there is no single way to be in the world, but a huge variety.

Giddens points out that while most traditional choices are still viable, they are no longer required, so that adherence to tradition now exists as a choice alongside other options. Traditional authority has become "essentially equivalent to specialist advice" (195). Individuals are free to bestow their trust on whichever specialists they like: tradition is one option. Because specialists and their areas of specialties are prone to the same chronic reflexivity that individuals are, their authority is circumspect; as Giddens puts it, "even the most reliable authorities can be trusted 'until further notice'" (84). Individuals, both in their major life choices and in their day-to-day activities are confronted "with a complex diversity of choices and . . . [offered] little help as to which options should be selected" (80). Because "the reflexivity of modernity operates, not in a situation of greater and greater certainty, but in one of methodological doubt" (Giddens 84), individuals increasingly rely on lifestyle: "a more or less completely integrated set of practices which the individual embraces" (81) in an effort to both shorthand and routinize the selection of options. The selection of lifestyle is active: individuals chose with reference to their identity, as constructed through narrative.

Because individuals subject their self-narratives to chronic revision, the narrative becomes weaker. Both the studies already mentioned here – Rainwater's and *Second Chances* – guide individuals through a process by which major changes in their identity and narrative can be made. Giddens writes that the questions of "What to do? How to act? Who to be? . . . are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which . . . all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour" (70), and that

a coherent and rewarding sense of self is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours that the individual engages in (75). Because of changes in personal circumstance and because of changes in the options afforded to individuals by society, the autobiography must be continually altered. Giddens writes that identity relies on the individual's ability to "*keep a particular narrative going*" (54, italics in original). This narrative must continually integrate "events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (54). These revisions require a robustness to the personal narrative that can "weather tensions and transitions" (55).

The anxiety of modernity lies in the individual's awareness that the narrative she has constructed is only "one story among many other potential stories that could be told about her development as a self" (55). The individual must continually push against these different stories by actively maintaining her chosen narrative. Another study referenced in *Modernity and Self-Identity* describes individuals with no sense of self – their inability to sustain a cohesive biographical narrative precludes the feeling that they exist. Events are experienced as discrete from one another, with no connective tissue or narrative, and the individual experiences anxiety about being overwhelmed by external events (53). Adapting a personal narrative becomes a fraught activity, given the consequences of its failure. Underlying the importance about personal narrative is the knowledge that the narrative is constructed and internally referential. The individual has no higher authority than herself to validate her own interpretation.

Given this anxiety about changing narratives, Grahame-Smith's irreverent treatment of the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* is humourous and soothing. The obviousness of the changes that have been made to the original draws attention to the flexibility inherent in narrative. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is not the first adaptation of Austen's novel, nor will it be the last, and it does nothing that other adaptations have not done, which is to highlight those elements of the text that are of interest to the reader and downplay those which are not. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, what is of interest is the flexibility of story. An adapted narrative must be flexible enough to incorporate new meanings while retaining enough of its previous qualities to be recognizably the same story. The similarity of textual and personal narrative adaptations grants greater consequence to textual adaptation. Adaptations are of interest to audiences, because adaptation is a familiar and necessary skill, and watching and evaluating the success of adapted narratives allows readers to practice that skill in play. Just as a child learns to read by repeating the same stories again and again, the individual becomes more proficient at manipulating narrative by experiencing a similar story again and again.

The similarity of personal and textual adaptations does lend textual adaptations an echo of the dread that drives the manipulation of personal narratives and identity. This also lends a different explanation of the so-called fidelity criticism of adaptation. Imbuing the constructed original text with an objective existence that can be betrayed by misappropriation in later manifestations indicates a desire for narratives, textual or personal, to have an

objective reality, rather than admit the inherent fictitiousness of story. The desire for continuity in textual narratives and the shaming language used to describe a perceived failure of fidelity indicates a limit on the stretch that a personal narrative has before the continuity that security rests on is broken.

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as product (the new text) and two processes: the creativity of the adapter, and the intertextual experience of the audience (15). This thesis is interested primarily in the experience of the audience, but a brief description of the other two aspects of her analysis would be useful to set the perspective with which adaptation is viewed here.

Rather than insisting on a hierarchal relationship between original and adaptation, Hutcheon suggests that adaptations can have a lateral relationships with their originals (16). She compares adaptation to several other processes: translation, transposition to a new medium, re-mediating, and paraphrasing, and she suggests that adaptation is a process of change rather than loss (16-8). An adapter may have several motivations for creating a secondary work based on a primary one. She may be interested in "taking possession of another's story, and filtering it through [her] own sensibility, interests, and talents" (19). She may wish to supplant or contest the artistic or political meanings in the original, or she may be economically motivated (20). In any of these cases, the adapter is both interpreter of the original and the creative force behind the new text.

For the audience, the features of adaptation as product and the producer's process contribute to the extended engagement between adaptation and original.

The familiarity of an adaptation is simultaneously pleasurable and frustrating (21). Hutcheon writes that "audience members need memory in order to experience difference as well as similarity" (22). The adaptation's breaks with genre and story will receive more attention from the knowing audience than the ways in which it is "faithful." In this, adaptation functions more like genre than like intertextuality. Knowledge of the original creates expectations for the knowing audience, and the fulfillment of some of those expectations creates pleasure while the text's refusal to fulfill other expectations becomes a point for cognitive engagement. In this way, adaptation highlights differences over similarities. The successful adaptation ties its theme to the points at which it fails to fulfill expectation, so that the audience's pleasure in their fulfilled expectations draws them into the creation of new meaning suggested by the adaptation's deviations. Thus, the pleasure of repetition is combined with the pleasure of using previously acquired knowledge to negotiate the new circumstances that the adaptation is presenting.

Aside from the elements already discussed, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* anticipates this importance of knowing as a source of pleasure. The most altered character of the novel is Elizabeth Bennet. Her overseas martial training has made her more worldly than Austen's Elizabeth (and other gentlewomen of Grahame-Smith's novel) and it is the gap between them and Grahame-Smith's Elizabeth that provides much of the crass humour of the text. Mr. Darcy's annoyed snipe at Miss Bingley – that she "should like balls infinitely better if [she] knew what they were" (45) is a joke understood by only Mr. Darcy,

Elizabeth, and the reader. This privileged knowledge, though it comes from knowledge gained outside the text rather than knowledge gained from the original, not only heightens the reader's sense of authority over the fictional characters, it includes her in the growing attraction between the two main characters.

There are limits to this approach to adaptation. Adaptation predates the circumstances of late modernity that Giddens describes, and his description of identity in late modernity presumes some degree of freedom from political, personal, and economic pressures. He is describing the process of self for individuals in the most privileged portion of modernity's society. The intention of this thesis is not to describe all of adaptation, or all of the interactions between the narratives of self and textual narratives, but to examine a few texts in which adaptation, self, and story intersect – *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Coleman Barks's trans-lingual adaptations of Rumi, the narrative video game *Dragon Age*, and fanfiction. This thesis is a study in different ways that audiences can interact with texts: as a knowing audience, an unknowing audience, and as a (narratively) interactive audience. It proposes how the readers' relationships – familiarity, ignorance, or participatory – to the originals are likely to impact the meanings that they create from the adaptation. These texts are adaptations that work, in the sense that each has been a success in some sphere.

The first chapter is an analysis of Helen Fielding's 1996 novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Fielding recontextualizes the story of *Pride and Prejudice* and makes substantial changes to plot and character, Elizabeth's in particular. While

one can never credit a single text with the establishment of a genre, *Bridget Jones's Diary* was one of the first texts which combined many of the features now used to identify "Chick Lit" in novels and screen. The novel was published in the wake of the very popular BBC miniseries of *Pride and Prejudice*, and it highlights its relationship to that production by comparing its Mark Darcy to Mr. Darcy in the first chapter. While knowledge of *Pride and Prejudice* is not necessary to understand or enjoy *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the thematic elements that later become staples of chick lit are more accessible to the knowing reader.

One feature of chick lit is the reader's ability to identify with the flawed heroine. Bridget Jones struggles with creating an identity for herself that can consistently guide her behaviour as she searches for romantic happiness and career success. Bridget does not possess the confidence or social awareness of Elizabeth, but their unmistakable parallels allow the reader to make assumptions about Bridget's perceptions and the appropriateness of other character's behaviours. The reader's privileged knowledge of the story allows her to engage cognitively, just as the reader's desire to see more of Mr. Darcy ensures her emotional engagement. Viewers have specific emotional expectations of adaptations, just as they have a specific body of knowledge about the adapted text which they can use to make meanings of it.

The subjects of chapters two and three are closely related. In each, a common original text – the programming of *Dragon Age: Origins* – is narratively manipulated by its players and fans to yield different stories, including the alternative endings made possible by the game's ability to track player choices

and the stories written by fans that take place in that fictional space. While Hutcheon addresses interactive stories, she addresses interactivity as a way of telling a story, rather than as a positioning of reader and text, and focuses largely on the immersive qualities of that method of storytelling. By viewing the interactive audience member as a type of reader in a continuum between the knowing and the unknowing reader, an examination of the interests and strategies of the interactive audience further demonstrates the importance of knowledge in the experience of the reader.

In both types of interactive narrative, the video game and the fanfiction, knowledge of the world in which the narrative takes place and the characters that populate it allow the reader to have a more rewarding experience of the story they are experiencing. The game's tension stems from the possibility of the protagonist's failure (Hutcheon 50), though this failure is not limited to the combat encounters. In *Dragon Age*, the possibility of the player's failure to understand the social world or character motivations can be of equal or greater consequence, depending on the interests of the player. In contemporary fanfiction culture, which exists almost exclusively online, the stories which can meaningfully and knowingly interact with the given truths of the original narrative earn more reads and compliments. The fanfiction stories also inform each other, so the experienced and knowing readers will be able to extract more information from the stories that they do read.

The interactive audience is also of interest to the questions of self that this examination of adaptation has raised. The interactive audience member and her

relationship to the story closely resemble a real individual and her interaction with her personal narrative. *Dragon Age* is an avatar game – the player's input into the narrative is enacted exclusively through the actions of her avatar. While the relationship between the player and her character is a difficult space to study, the player must construct her avatar's personality within the social reality of the game, a process which involves choosing sides in several conflicting grand narratives. This has clear similarities to the process by which individuals construct their identity – by exploring their pasts and borrowing from the larger social narratives available to them. Most fanfiction based on *Dragon Age* is an extension of that process, and its appeal is in the greater freedom from the "fixed rules" (Hutcheon 51) of the game's offered interactions. In both examples, the alternative stories of self do not carry the same threat to personal integrity that an individual's unselected and repressed personal stories do, so the alternative stories can exist simultaneously and together gesture towards a wholeness that the reader will never experience.

Chapter four is an examination of a third type of audience interaction: the interaction of an unknowing audience with a text they know is an adaptation. Hutcheon's claim that an unknowing reader approaches an adaptation as she would an original text is only true if she is unaware that the text she is viewing is an adaptation. While this may be likely in many cases, it cannot always be. Viewers of any of the *Harry Potter* movies would be extremely unlikely to be unaware of the existence of the books that are their originals, even if they had not read them. Whatever the motivations of the unknowing viewer are when she

walks into the movie theatre – curiosity or capitulation to a companion – she will know that the rest of the audience has a greater emotional stake in the narrative and that they will have greater knowledge about the world, plot, and characters and that the creators of the film may have presupposed or relied on that knowledge. She will be aware of her lack of emotional and cognitive ties to the film. Similarly, a creator of an adapted text who emphasizes that text as the adaptation of another will influence the way that readers interact with it. Coleman Barks reminds his readers that his texts are adaptations of Rumi's original: on his front covers, in his introduction, in chapter prefaces within the main text, and in his endnotes.

While the effect of an audience member's awareness that she is unknowing is more likely to be an increased distance and a less motivated engagement between her and the text, in the case of Barks's adaptations of Rumi, the distance becomes an enticingly open space. Much like the presentation of the relationship between Seth Grahame-Smith and Jane Austen, Barks refuses to accept any privileged understanding of Rumi's work. He does, at times, present short explanations of Sufi ideas, but he retreats from these explanations, claiming that his understanding is still limited. This retreat puts his unknowing reader in an interesting position. By refusing to value objective knowledge, he undermines the importance of a cognitive understanding of narratives and permits the unknowing reader to approach the adaptation without the deference of unknowing. In its place, Barks offers assertations of Rumi's universality, which he claims shines through in the adaptations, despite Barks's ignorance. This universality functions

similarly to prior knowledge – it allows the reader to bring whatever prior experiences or impressions she has of "spirituality" to the poetry that she is about to read.

Each of these texts exists within a larger related body of work. *Bridget Jones's Diary* relates most obviously to the BBC miniseries which it references. That text, of course, is also related to all the movie adaptations that came before it, to Austen's original text, and to the newest movie adaptation starring Keira Knightly, and to Grahame-Smith's novel. *Bridget Jones's Diary* also exists in three separate forms: a newspaper column, a novel, and a movie. Its sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* exists as both book and film, and work on a third movie has begun. *Dragon Age: Origins* was the first installment of what has already become two full-length games, numerous short games, two novels, a comic series, and a web-released television series all set in the same narrative space. There are also over 7000 *Dragon Age* titles on fanfiction.net. Coleman Barks has released numerous collections of his adaptations of Rumi, though many of them contain the same words, broken into different lines and poems. In every case, the reader has a large variety of material to choose from.

That these texts are not merely adaptations, but adaptations within a body of adaptation, strengthens the claim that adaptation functions as genre. Lay-readers can deliberately gather experience and expertise in any of the larger spheres of these texts, just as a reader could be attracted to a formula of genre fiction. The term for a non-professional reader who focuses her attention on the smaller sphere of a particular narrative universe is fan. Just as a fan continually

seeks to reinvigorate her connection to and engagement with a narrative by re-watching and by exchanging interpretations with other fans, the knowing reader uses the adaptations at her disposal to put her emotional and cognitive engagement with the original to use. Arguments over the difference in the value of a fan's engagement over a more casual reader's or an academic's have been made in other places, and will not be repeated here, but the comments of early fan theorists, such as Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith will be useful. For each of these theorists there was an explicit connection between the social worlds of the fiction and the social worlds of the fans. The tone of that connection varied between the two theorists. While Jenkins's fans were using the fictional narratives as points from which they leapt into radical re-conceptualizations of a better social world, Bacon-Smith's fans were articulating present dilemmas. While this difference may be merely one of tense – Jenkins's fans in the future and Bacon-Smith's in the present – both were convinced of the relevance of the fiction to the lives of the fans, and vice versa.

In the final chapter of *Enterprising Women*, Bacon-Smith writes that imaginative play "may have some profound effect on some cultural institutions, [or] those ideas may make no impact at all . . . . Playfulness, which may be defined as action based upon the perception of fluid boundaries between imaginative play, the nonreal, and 'real life,' may be in fact be the most serious, and certainly the most dangerous activity arising within a culture" (288). This indicates a mutual exchange of meaning between the superstructure of narratives and the experienced real. It should come as little surprise then that the

interrelatedness of narrative and reality, particularly in narratives where readers are willing to remain engaged for extended periods of time, exists in its form (examined here as the relationship between text and reader, via the reader's knowledge) as well as in its content.

The pleasure of adaptation is as much the privilege of knowledge that the reader enjoys as it is the delight of repetition. Just as revisiting a previously experienced text allows the reader to notice formerly missed details that foreshadow plot or character developments, the authority of knowledge allows the knowing reader to participate in the creation of meaning while she views the adaptation. This participation lends adaptation well to stories that place the reader at the forefront of its interests, such as the texts examined here. The knowing reader of *Bridget Jones's Diary* not only has to make sense of Bridget's missteps themselves, but she shares Bridget's challenges. Interactive narratives, such as *Dragon Age* or the fanfiction based on it, place the reader in the narrative through the avatar, and the successful negotiation of the game's challenges or the successful creation of fanfiction depends on the reader's understanding of the narrative information provided by the text. Coleman Barks's audiences are encouraged to use their own understanding of spirituality to make sense of the poems they are about to read. The ability to project a self into the narratives that they are reading and the invitation to participate in the creation of that narrative's meaning both addresses and practices the necessary process of self that late modernity requires.

Chapter One

Repetition, Repetition:

Knowing Audiences in Unknown Territory; Or,

***Pride and Prejudice*, Reloaded.**

The knowing audience is the most common and most discussed interaction between audience and adaptation. The knowing audience views the adaptation as if it were written on a palimpsest, so that the original colours the new version (Hutcheon 116). This allows the reader to bring her knowledge of and engagement with the original text to her understanding of and engagement with the new text. At its most basic, an adaptation is the re-creation of a single story in a medium other than the one it was originally created in. This process of adaptation necessitates a certain amount of alteration, since information is conveyed differently in different media. Just as in the effort of translation – where information is both gained and lost – theme, meaning, and emphasis are altered as the story is changed (Hutcheon 16-7), usually to reflect the interests of the new audience. The example of adaptation analyzed in this chapter is looser and further ranging than a simple change of medium. *Bridget Jones's Diary* changes the setting of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice.* The novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* is set in contemporary London and is concerned with the efforts of a single woman to find happiness. While the text can be read as an original, the knowing reader will find delight in the repetition of character in Mark Darcy and will be able to anticipate and more quickly grasp Bridget Jones's

failures of understanding as she narrates her challenges. Because this adaptation emphasizes the change of social as well as physical space, the pleasure of the reader is also heightened by her ability to use her existing knowledge to more quickly understand the nuances of character and plot in the new space that she is confronted with. This is particularly relevant in the analysis of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, since the popularity of the work is so closely tied to the rise in recognition and popularity of chick lit, a popular genre that is primarily concerned with an individual's personal renegotiation of feminism.

Five Texts, One Story

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the best loved and most adapted novels in English history. It is a very rich text, engaging with issues of class, gender, inheritance, family, propriety, femininity, psychology, courtship, and cultural conventions within an appealing romantic plot. Many of Austen's other texts deal with similar issues. Austen was popular in her day, inspired Virginia Woolf a hundred years later, and has not waned in influence in contemporary society. There have been several historical film adaptations (the first in 1940 and the most recent in 2005), films that change the context, and novels written as sequels or prequels to the text. The text has become influential in popular genres; a 1980 tip sheet from Silhouette Romances (later purchased by Harlequin) lists *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Darcy as one of two examples on a spectrum of ideal male leads for a romance novel (Kaplan 177).

Literature is often defined by its ability to function with a number of different sets of referents. Austen's novel has always been what Cohen calls a "bilateral work" (141) – though in this case, the term 'multilateral work' might be more appropriate – in that it appeals to more than one audience. A comparison of the two introductions included in the most recent Penguin Classics edition of the novel, one written in 1972 and one in 1996, demonstrates two successful reads of the same text. The novel has yielded itself to scholarly analyses from a variety of perspectives, and so new generations and new approaches continue to find value in it. Likewise, new generations of popular adaptations have found aspects in the original to speak to their particular concerns. Ellen Belton's analysis of the 1940 and 1995 motion picture adaptations of the novel reveals great differences in emphasis and tone, despite the fact that neither version alters the setting or general plot of the novel. Both of these versions, along with the other Austen adaptations analyzed by Kaplan and Hopkins, drop some of the referents specific to Austen's time and place and either expand on or introduce themes that will resonate with the concerns of the time.

This chapter will treat Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* as an adaptation of the 1995 BBC miniseries, rather than of Austen's original novel. At the time, this miniseries was the most popular and well known adaptation of Austen's text. The experience of most contemporary non-academic readers began with or consists entirely of their viewing of the miniseries. As Deborah Kaplan argues, there is a tendency in contemporary film adaptations of Austen to emphasize the romantic plot to the detriment of Austen's subtle social critiques.

The BBC effort is no exception; Mr. Darcy's representation was so successful a heartthrob that 'Darcy parties' were popular through the summer of 1996 in the UK. Much academic criticism has been a discussion of this limitation of popular adaptation, bemoaning the loss of complexity to a cash-grabbing pandering to the popular (Woodworth; Belton 187). In this case, the simplified and easily understood romantic concern of the BBC miniseries allows the text that followed it to reintroduce an element of complexity and social commentary that was muted in the primary adaptation.

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* exists as three separate texts with varying degrees of difference from the miniseries. The character Bridget Jones first appeared in a fictional newspaper column, and her popularity led Fielding to rework the text and release it as a novel in 1996. Fielding later adapted the novel into a film by the same title released in 2001. Both the newspaper column and the novel are written in first-person, and the film utilizes voice-overs to mimic the privileged communication between reader and Bridget that the first person narration grants. Each of Fielding's texts focuses on the character of Bridget Jones and narrates her romantic and professional concerns, but the specific plot varies between the three versions. In the newspaper column, the character of Mr. Darcy does not appear until its second year of publication (Troost and Greenfield), but in the novel, Bridget and Mark Darcy's meeting and the beginning of their relationship bookends the story. The film further strengthens the relationship between the BBC miniseries and Bridget's story by more closely

mirroring the former's plot as well as by casting Colin Firth, who played the BBC's Mr. Darcy, to play Fielding's Mark Darcy.

Despite the familiarity of both plot and setting, the novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* was part of a new genre of literature that attempted to articulate a changing relationship between contemporary women and feminism, and it is in understanding that new relationship that the knowing reader's familiarity with character is most necessary. While one can never point to a single text as the sole catalyst for a movement, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is the first clear example of 'chick lit' (Ferriss and Young 4). Chick lit is a genre of popular women's writing which is heavily engaged with what Angela McRobbie describes as post-feminism. Both chick lit and post-feminism have been criticized for making feminism appear aged and irrelevant (McRobbie 255), passing it over to focus on romantic success, consumerism, career, and the "everyday lives" (Mazza 24) of women.

There has been a great deal of scholarship written on Fielding's texts, though it has tended to focus either on the film or on the film and novel together (Troost and Greenfield, McRobbie, Ferriss). This chapter will concentrate its analysis on the book. It is a more interesting example of the play that Fielding makes on the reader's knowledge of plot and character in order to introduce post-feminist ideas that were much newer in popular literature at the time of that publication (1996) than they were at the time of the film's release five years later. Chick lit as a genre and its concerns were familiar to audiences by then. Since the novel and film are titled identically, please assume that *Bridget Jones's Diary* refers to the book.

Running Hot and Cold

The analysis of how a popular audience interacts with an adaptation must move beyond a comparative analysis of media and themes - it must also address the alteration in the reader and the way she interacts with and makes sense of the new text's themes. The reader's awareness of and familiarity with the original text will affect her cognitive and emotional interaction with the new text. A knowing reader will always be more critical of an adaptation than she will be of a new text. She will want prior knowledge of the original to be corroborated, and her emotional attachment to the original to be renewed. Marshall McLuhan described the effect of a medium's quality on type of interaction that it solicits:

> a hot medium is one that extends a single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is the state of being well filled-in with data. A photograph is, visually, "high definition." A cartoon is visually "low-definition," simply because very little visual information is provided . . . . hot media does not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. (162)

For a knowing audience, the adaptation invites its audience's participation and completion – as a story, it is cooler in the minds of the reader or viewer than its quality would otherwise indicate. This combination of a cooler medium and the reader's opportunity to use the knowledge that she already possesses bears some similarity to the engagement of a fan. In the following chapter, there is a discussion of a fan's sense of a separate and inaccessible world in which the

franchise's stories take place, so it will suffice to say here that just as fans value a coolness in which they can manipulate meaning, knowing readers will appreciate room in the adaptations in which their knowledge can be of use.

Adaptations also promise to renew the emotional investment and satisfaction that the knowing reader first experienced in the original. The "almost but not quite repetition" re-creates this emotional excitement (Hutcheon 114-5). This expectation of emotional fulfillment is unique to adaptations, since audiences approach them with a greater anticipation of pleasure and a clearer idea of the form that pleasure will take than they can bring to a new story. The existence of these expectations – the sense that the adaptation owes something, not to its original, but to each viewer's experience of the original – is another driving force behind the long preoccupation with "fidelity" (Hutcheon 6) in the criticism of adaptation. Emphasizing and moralizing fidelity acknowledges a greater burden of adaptation to not disappoint the viewers and betray their emotional connection to the original text. *Bridget Jones's Diary* does deliver a renewal of the Darcy-mania that drove the popular preoccupation with the miniseries, and the anticipation of this pleasure gives the creators of adaptations more room to introduce new themes and ideas to their audiences. The appeal of repetition attracts an audience who will be more accepting of themes new to them, because the text promises to fulfill their emotional expectations.

The sections of the novel which deliver this emotional renewal more closely resemble a novel than a diary. In these sections, sentences are complete and punctuated and are in the more novelistic past tense. Here, the reader is given

enough information to visualize the scene being described (Fielding 9-15, 85-91, 199-207). Most of these hotter scenes of the text involve Mark Darcy, the romance with whom drives the plot and interest of the readers, though it is only marginally related to the thematic concerns of the novel. The novel satisfies its reader's desire to revisit the romance by filling in more of those scenes than it does the scenes which deviate from the original. Just as in the mini-series, the romantic pleasure drives the audience's engagement.

Other than in these moments, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a "low definition" text, especially in comparison to the BBC production that it adapts, and this difference elicits a different kind of interaction between reader and text. Writing inherently contains a lower density of information than a movie or television show. Most adaptations move in the other direction by providing more visual and aural information, but less nuance of meaning and interpretation than the texts they adapt. This is another cause of the longstanding resentment, popular and academic, against adaptation; while the audience or critic comes to an adaptation with a greater degree of knowledge, there are fewer opportunities to utilize it. By retelling the story in a cooler medium than the original was, Fielding's text leaves more room for the reader to fill in the blanks left in her retelling. These gaps in information allow the palimpsest of the original to show more clearly.

Bridget Jones's Diary is also cooler than most novels, including Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. As the title indicates, the novel is written as a series of first-person diary entries. All first person narrators are unreliable to some extent, and the absence of an authorial narrator places a greater burden of interpretation on

the reader. In this novel, all the diary entries are either in present tense or describe the very recent past. Bridget rarely records events more than a day or two old, which exacerbates her often complete lack of insight or interpretation about her life. This leaves the job of interpretation to a reader who has already come to the text prepared to know something about it by virtue of her familiarity with the original.

The language of Bridget's diary entries is similarly cool. Some entries are made while she is drunk and words are slurred and misspelled (Fielding 125), further removing the narrator as a figure of authority in the text. Deciphering the literal meaning of the entries encourages the reader to continue her scrutiny of text and the meanings it suggests. Other entries consist of only a rushed suggestion of what immediately preceded or followed them (Fielding 67), forcing the reader to imagine those scarcely described times themselves. For most of the book, Bridget uses a combination of abbreviations and dropped pronouns to compress as much information into as few characters as is possible. The most commonly dropped pronoun is also the most commonly used: 'I', which leaves the reader placing her own 'I' in the place of the character. This coolness invites the reader to participate by filling out the information and interpretation that is omitted from the text. The difference between the reader and Bridget is blurred and the omission of the 'I' lends an indefinite and universal quality to the character. As Bridget misses opportunities to understand something new about herself, the text invites the reader to participate, not only by filling in the missing

parts of the sentence and taking action with the heroine, but also by leaving that space of understanding open for the reader to walk into alone.

This filling out is essential for the reader's identification with Bridget that the book's blurb promises. Near the end of the novel, Bridget, herself a fan of the BBC miniseries that her story is based on, comments on the relationship between herself and Elizabeth Bennet: "Men's obsession with football is not vicarious. The testosterone-crazed fans do not wish themselves on the pitch, claims Hornby, instead seeing their team as their chosen representatives, rather like parliament. This is precisely my feeling about Darcy and Elizabeth. They are my chosen representatives on the field of shagging, or, rather, courtship" (215). The "hot" quality of the miniseries, which was recorded on high definition cinema-quality film and included many long, visually intense shots (Hutcheon 134), encourages this kind of identity displacement, rather than the identification of "Bridget Jones is me!" (jacket blurb) that is encouraged by the text's missing first person pronoun and the lack of authorial interpretation. The comedic and fictional distancing (Mabry 196), as well as its status as adaptation and a cool text, allows the text to explore the reader's immediate social reality and invites the application of Bridget's realizations to the reader's own life.

Bridget then goes on to compare Mr. Darcy and Mark Darcy and concludes that "being imaginary was a disadvantage that could not be overlooked" (215). For the reader, of course, Mark Darcy is as fictional as Mr. Darcy, and Bridget is almost as fictional as Elizabeth Bennet. Bridget is made more real by having to grapple with same variety of choices that befuddle women

at this point in history, while the viewer of the miniseries cannot help but admire Elizabeth. Bridget's admiration of the confident Elizabeth highlights Bridget's inability to conduct herself with the same surety. It also emphasizes Elizabeth's greater degree of fictionality. A fictional character which is aware of another fictional character, and can comment on her meaning, occupies a greater degree of reality than the character she is aware of. Bridget cannot be real, but by planting her awareness of fictional characters in her own fictional world, the space of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its characters slide closer to reality.

Bridget's lack of awareness grants the reader the agency to interpret for herself and create her own meanings from the cultural material the book presents her with. Bridget becomes a fictional, hypothetical 'I' for the reader. When chick lit claims to be "by women for women," (Woolston) this is the crux of what they mean: by women for the use of other women. It becomes a communal female space where women can compare notes about men and strategies for the negotiation of their lives. Because it is an adaptation, *Bridget Jones's Diary* sets the stage for chick lit being used in this way.

Bridget Jones's Diary: (Post) Feminism and Austen

It is appropriate to stop here and recognize that the criticisms leveled at post-feminism and chick lit – specifically, the superficiality of its concerns – can also be leveled at Austen. Vivien Jones's introduction to the latest Penguin Classics edition (written the same year as *Bridget Jones's Diary*) emphasizes Austen's engagement with the feminist concerns of her day. Jones argues that

while Austen seems to endorse one aspect of Mary Wollstonecraft's vision of a new femininity – "the promotion of an active feminine identity" (xx), Elizabeth Bennet's liveliness is not rewarded by a professional career (nor does Elizabeth give any indication of wanting one) but by "the most dazzling of all" (xi) marriages awarded to any of Austen's heroines. Mr. Darcy admits that Elizabeth's "liveliness of mind" was the basis of his attraction to her (Austen 359), but Austen also employs the more conservative element of checking Elizabeth's confidence and independence of mind by having her make some serious errors of judgement (Jones xx). By doing so, Austen appropriates a suggestion made to all women by the then well-known evangelical writer Hannah More (Jones xxi) to curb too great a reliance on their own independence of mind. Austen employs a shorthand version of competing feminist ideals to help illuminate Elizabeth's negotiation through the labyrinth of class and gender roles in the social space of courtship. The novel's feminist concerns are elements in the story of one woman's journey to a happy future, rather than the driving force or primary concern. *Bridget Jones's Diary* also calls attention to contemporary feminist debate – Bridget mentions the then-recently published *Backlash* by Susan Faludi to Mark Darcy in a bit of social strategizing, but hasn't read it (Fielding 13). The novel remains, as does *Pride and Prejudice*, the story of one woman making sense of her world without more than passing references to the more academic debates around women and femininity.

What the feminist critique of chick lit fails to take into consideration is readers' agency; Hutcheon writes, "young women in particular need to be able to

appropriate cultural material to construct cultural meaning" (116). She describes adaptation as "the 'unfinished cultural business' of the 'continuing historical relevance (economic, cultural, psychological) of a particular narrative.' Part of this . . . creates the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest" (Hutcheon 116). Devoney Looser, in her article "Feminist Implications of the Silver Screen Austen," published in 1998, writes that

> Austen's re-emergence demonstrates progressive, feminist elements at work in popular culture . . . Austen's popularity has resonance with contemporary Western liberal feminisms, particularly as a result of the ways in which her texts have been consumed and interpreted anew by public intellectuals and mainstream critics alike. Most of the recent Austen adaptations are . . . relatively faithful (albeit decidedly more contemporary) interpretations of Austen's women and their feminist leanings . . . we can see precisely how the adaptations contribute to a 'mainstreaming' of feminism. (159)

Austen does not call readers to "flout matrimony or compulsory heterosexuality" (Looser 162), and neither does chick lit or post-feminism call their adherents to object to billboards (McRobbie 259) or reject all desire for romance or marriage (Ferriss and Young 9). What both post-feminism and Austen seem to be claiming is that "large portions of life cannot be dealt with rationally" (Mazza 19). The internalization of ideology is not rational; for the post-feminist, there is an emotional and psychological reorientation of one's self, a process which presumes agency.

Bridget is least rational about her weight. At her most vulnerable, she writes "Everything's fine. Am going to get down to 119 lbs. again and free thighs entirely of cellulite. Certain everything will be alright then," (Fielding 159), which the reader recognizes as an absurd reaction to discovering her boyfriend's infidelity. In many ways, Bridget's preoccupation with weight as an obstacle to happiness mirrors Elizabeth Bennet's knowledge that her lack of fortune will make a "good match" unlikely. The BBC miniseries cannot quite match the authorial sarcasm of Austen's first line, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (Austen 5). Instead, the line is withheld until the audience's sympathies (and sense of representation) are solidly with Elizabeth. The first face to dominate the screen is Elizabeth's, in what will become a characteristically knowing expression. Her calm confidence and solitary enjoyment of a walk is set in immediate contrast to her yelling mother and her two youngest sisters. Therefore, when Elizabeth finally delivers Austen's well-known line, it is clear that she is undermining the appropriateness of her mother's designs on Mr. Bingley: to "marry one of" her daughters. By the end of the miniseries, it is clear that neither Mr. Bingley nor Mr. Darcy had any intention of finding a wife in the vicinity of Netherfield.

Therefore when each entry of *Bridget Jones's Diary* begins with Bridget's weight and caloric consumption, the ironic assumption is maintained, despite the facts that Bridget intends none and that there is no author to imply that she should. The audience knows that these goals have some ring of truth, just as Elizabeth Bennet's lack of fortune will affect her marital prospects, but that the character's

fixation on them is ultimately detrimental, just as Mrs. Bennet's focus on wealth very nearly prevents her eldest daughter from marrying the man she loves. Bridget, unlike Elizabeth, is unaware of the error, but the audience is able to fill it in for her even as they are placing themselves in her shoes grammatically and emotionally, in their desire to re-possess Mr. Darcy. A woman's weight in the twenty-first century is a major factor in finding romantic partners, just as class and fortune were in the nineteenth century, but too close attention to either of these factors is not useful. Elizabeth's certainty that her fortune will prevent her and Jane from making good matches almost prevents her own good match, when she projects her own assumptions onto Mr. Darcy's behaviour. Elizabeth's realization of her error is the psychological climax of Austen's text, occurring near the middle of the novel.

Bridget's psychological climax comes when she realizes that attaining her ideal weight will not solve all her problems. Briefly, she attains her goal, but it does not go well. She is told she looks tired and she finds it difficult to engage with her friends. Her friend Tom tells her that she looked better before the weight loss. The entry that began with "Today is a joyous and historic day," continues with "Now I feel empty and bewildered – as if a rug has been pulled out from under my feet. Eighteen years – wasted. Eighteen years of calorie- and fat-unit-based arithmetic. Eighteen years of buying long shirts and sweaters and leaving the room backwards in intimate situations to hide my bottom . . . . I feel like the scientist who discovers that his life's work has been a total mistake" (Fielding 92-3). This realization is a deconstruction, at a personal level, of the emphasis placed

on the body by women themselves and admits that women "are part of the problem" (Mazza 18) of feminism's lack of success. This feature of the novel, which is continually taken up in later chick lit novels, is pulled directly from Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*: "women who now had the right to vote, to build careers and identities of their own, were frittering away these advances in pursuit of eternal youth and thin bodies" (Wolf qtd in Umminger 239). So while the novel seems to be preoccupied with weight and appearance, and while Bridget returns to the close monitoring of her weight and eating in an attempt to secure confidence and happiness, the reader is able to criticize Bridget's perception.

Bridget is never meant to be an ideal figure or a "chosen representative" for the reader in the same way that Elizabeth Bennet is for Bridget. The reader's prior knowledge of the plot privileges her knowing, and Bridget's lack of critical insight into her own situations forces the reader into becoming more critical of Bridget than Bridget is. This sense of privileged criticism encourages the reader to apply Bridget's missed lesson to herself. In the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy educates Elizabeth about her family's moral shortcomings, just as she educates him about "gentle-man like behaviour." In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget does not make the leap from evidence to conclusion, but the reader has been placed in an ideal position to take that lesson for herself.

Elizabeth Bennet, in her garden conversation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, claims that she is "only resolved to act in a manner which will constitute [her] own happiness." This is the goal of Elizabeth as well as Bridget. Just as Austen's Elizabeth conforms to neither Wollstonecraft's nor Moore's ideal

woman, the BBC's Elizabeth is also removed from an absolute prescription for happiness. Elizabeth is surrounded by competing examples of femininity in her own generation: Jane, whose goodness cannot allow her to see the bad in anyone else; Charlotte, whose unromantic nature leads her into a marriage with the "silliest man in all England"; Lydia, who never manages to comprehend the seriousness of her own actions; and humourless Mary. Elizabeth considers the two former women, if not as equals, then at least as women whose opinions are worth hearing and with whom she can speak freely and openly. These characterizations are copied from the novel rather than being contemporary inventions, and they provide practical options for women, rather than the more formal arguments of Wollstonecraft and More.

The BBC miniseries ends with the double wedding of Jane and Elizabeth to Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. While the preacher discusses marriage – that it is not "to be enterprised lightly or wantonly to satisfy man's carnal lusts" but is instead intended as a "remedy against sin," and that it ought to be entered into "discretely and advisedly" – the camera pans over couples that embody those failures of judgement: Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Lydia and Mr. Wickham, and Charlotte and Mr. Collins, respectively. As the preacher continues to explain that marriage is for the "mutual society, help, and comfort" of each partner, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy look meaningfully at each other, and the viewer feels certain about the success of their marriage. Jane and Mr. Bingley are also privileged with this hopefulness, which minimizes the novel's criticism of their placidness (Austen 366). This criticism in the novel, faint as it is, still privileges Elizabeth and Mr.

Darcy's relationship as the single best of their generation, placing it as an ideal. Because the miniseries does not minimize Jane and Mr. Bingley's timidity, that timidity becomes another, equally acceptable, option. The miniseries has more room for variety in good relationships and marriages than Austen's original.

Bridget Jones's Diary includes even more models for a woman's pursuit of happiness. Bridget has three close friends who share their fears and advise each other, sometimes in "emergency" situations. These three friends are very different from each other and often offer mutually exclusive advice. Shazzer is representative of a more combative brand of feminism and loudly denounces all men in restaurants, concluding at a bellow, "We women are only vulnerable because we are a pioneer generation daring to refuse to compromise in love and relying on our own economic power. In twenty years' time men won't even dare start" (18). Jude, despite being independently financially secure, is in a state of constant crisis over her boyfriend's refusal to commit to their relationship. Tom, who also dates men, advises Bridget that the best way to attract men is to pretend to be busy and ignore them (62). These alternatives are negative foils to the heroine's more successful negotiation of social interactions and are expected by the knowing reader. So while her friends are sources of advice that Bridget draws on, the readers are compelled to look to Bridget for a successful negotiation of these different approaches. When Bridget fails to demonstrate that negotiation, the reader is left to come to her own conclusions.

Bridget's friends are not her only source of advice. In one diary entry, Bridget summarizes a magazine article's advice on how to behave at parties:

> "Most importantly, one must never go to a party without a clear objective: whether it be to 'network,' thereby adding to your spread of contacts to improve your career; to make friends with someone specific; or simply to 'clinch' a top deal. Understand where have been going wrong by going to parties armed only with objective of not getting too pissed." (84).

Until the third word of the final sentence, where the pronoun is missing, the reader believes that Bridget is continuing her summary of the advice, which blurs the line between what she reads and what she thinks. This uncritical assumption of others' opinions is a recurring behaviour, and this is one of only several instances in which Bridget attempts to assimilate outside advice on how to achieve her goals (81, 169, 222). Most of these attempts are short-lived.

Bridget's friend Jude is also a compulsive reader of self-help books (17, 60) and, at one point, is convinced that her most recent quarrel with her boyfriend, Vile Richard, can be explained in terms of her own co-dependency. Her friends' insistence that "she must stop beating herself over the head with *Women Who Love Too Much* and instead think more toward *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*" (19) indicates to the reader that these outside and seemingly more official suggestions for behaviour and self-interpretation are not only contradictory, in that one can be used as an argument against the validity of another, but that they are also impractical. Even when the women agree to use *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* as a practical guide, Bridget and

Shazzer have differing opinions on what specific action Jude should carry out in her situation (19).

As an individual in late modernity, Bridget is surrounded by alternatives. Austen's Elizabeth was clearly intended to be seen as superior to her contemporaries, and the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* allows a little more room for variation, but only Bridget is left almost without authorial assertion of her quality. Bridget is surrounded by friends who spew different advice, but unlike Elizabeth, she has no quick retorts. Bridget absorbs advice and alternative ways of being in the abstract, but cannot integrate that material with her sense of identity or with her behaviour. Her diary is clearly an example of the "autobiographical thinking" that a successful sense of self requires, but Bridget lacks the ability to make permanent changes to her identity.

Despite these failures, Bridget never gives up on finding an ideal approach to any goal, and the reader is placed in a perfect position to understand the futility of her attempts. In the first quarter of the novel, Bridget also seeks advice from her friends on a romantic dilemma, and in the middle of attempting to execute all three "conflicting theories" (64), Bridget writes a seemingly unrelated entry on the failure of her diet(s). Having kept an usually detailed record of her daily food intake, Bridget realizes that "it has become too easy to find a diet to fit in with whatever you happen to feel like eating and that diets are not there to picked and mixed, but picked and stuck to" (65). The next entry details her "brimming over" from one theory of courtship to another (65). She does not notice the similarity of the two situations, but the reader, better prepared than Bridget to be critical of

Bridget, does easily. Bridget follows different advice at different times, but the outcomes of her efforts seem to have little to do with her actions. For example, when Bridget has a job interview with a news station, she spends several evenings attempting to memorize the names of the members of the Shadow Cabinet "to avoid [a] spiral of self-doubt" (165). When she arrives at the interview, she gets the job by making a joke (171). Despite the fact that Bridget's awareness of and engagement with popular culture helps her in pursuit of career (210) and relationship (89, 206), she never learns to value that awareness over more formal knowledge and behaviour. From the audience's perspective, the situation is a humorous reversal, but Bridget's most common emotional state is anxious and indecisive.

Tone is the greatest difference between *Pride and Prejudice* and Fielding's novel. The Bennet sisters' futures are in considerably more peril – their financial futures depend upon the unlikely possibility of marrying well, while all that Bridget is facing is an unmarried and childless future. The viewers of *Pride and Prejudice* know, because of the early visual cues that pair Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy and because of the conventions of genre, that Elizabeth is never in real danger. While Fielding's readers know that Bridget's future with Mark Darcy is similarly guaranteed, Elizabeth Bennet's calm, self-assured manner inspires confidence in a way that Bridget's mad careening through circumstance does not. Elizabeth Bennet may be presumptuous, and her ability to secure a husband (within the circumstances of the fictional world) may be in question, but there is never any question that she is able to affect her circumstances. She is an

object of desire and is able to dictate the terms of her engagement with people who are her social superiors, such as Lady Catherine, Miss Bingley, and Mr. Darcy. The contemporary woman can also watch Elizabeth contend with the social circumstances of her time with the knowledge of how those circumstances have changed. Even if Elizabeth had not managed to marry Mr. Darcy, the anxiety of that unhappy ending is impersonal. If it had come to pass, it would mean nothing to the contemporary viewer, whose circumstances vary so greatly from Elizabeth's.

It should be noted that the BBC miniseries Elizabeth is much less disadvantaged than the Elizabeth of Austen's novel. As Woodworth points out, the handicap of fortune and the distinctions and importance of social spheres are largely lost on a contemporary audience. Additionally, while the book makes note of Jane's superior beauty and Elizabeth's plainness (6), the Elizabeth of the BBC production is as beautiful as the convention of the visual romantic narrative requires. Nor does Elizabeth ever require the kind of advice that Bridget constantly requires from her friends. While Elizabeth has her foils in femininity, she never seriously considers adopting Charlotte's pragmatism or Jane's goodness. Bridget, terrified and fumbling at parties (85-90), prone to crying in the bathroom of her workplace (161-2), and generally incapable of anticipating and negotiating the space between her desires and her actions, does not inspire the same confidence.

Bridget's frantic search for, and constant failure to find, models of behaviour that will guarantee her desired outcomes is comedic, but it also

addresses the anxiety of readers who fear choosing the wrong models themselves. For Bridget and for contemporary women, femininity is "caught between competing demands to be strong and independent while retaining femininity" (Ferriss and Young 9), as well as between competing demands about how their behaviours can be interpreted by themselves as well as by others. Ferriss and Young go on to ask, "Is chick lit advancing the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences and featuring professional women? Or does it rehearse the same patriarchal narrative of romance and performance?" (9). It does neither – rather, it articulates the fumbling and practical efforts that women are making to negotiate the multitude of suggestions and options available to them. The fact that it does this within a narrative that is familiarly performative and romantic indicates a kind of nostalgia.

This element of nostalgia is not necessarily indicative of a conservative or anti-feminist resurgence (Looser), but is rather a longing for something that may have never really existed – a sure way to be. Elizabeth is surer in her convictions and less dread-filled in her mistakes than Bridget is. Immediately after Bridget discusses the difference between representation and identification, she writes that she does not "wish to see any actual [sex]" between the two characters" (Fielding 215). What she means is that she doesn't want to see the mess in Elizabeth's relationship that inevitably clouds Bridget's own accomplishments, such as the botched broadcast from the firehall (194-5) or the unfulfilling relationship with Daniel Cleaver (133). Nor is Bridget required to witness this mess – the miniseries ends before the question of how Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth solve the

discrepancies of their families is answered, because those questions are not present in the minds of the viewer. Elizabeth is a chosen representative for viewers because of her certainty and her skill in negotiating social spaces. Bridget, as a focus of identification, is a less competent heroine, but the comparison that the knowing reader can engage in does not compare Bridget and Elizabeth so much as it compares the misunderstood and simplified challenges of an early nineteenth century woman to the more immediate and less resolved challenges of a late twentieth century woman.

Conclusion

Bridget Jones's Diary is not as anti-feminist as it appears at first glance. While Bridget does spend an inordinate amount of energy on concern with and attempt to control her body's appearance and weight, the knowing reader is able to read a criticism of that attitude through Austen's more authorial criticism of Elizabeth's prejudice against Mr. Darcy. The novel also spends much less time on the romance than the miniseries did, instead using the lure of the romance to take the reader through the text's primary concern, which is the dilemma of creating self in late modernity. While Bridget's emotional life is characterized by the dread of failure, the tone of the novel is humourous, which undermines the threat of meaninglessness that the readers share with Bridget.

Despite the fact that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is an atypical adaptation, it is a fascinating example of the potential for the explosion of meaning in adaptation and multiple stories for a knowing audience. The text does not bombard its reader

with a hotter, more intense, or more invasive experience of a story that she feels that she has some authority over. Instead, it re-presents the same story in a format that invites the reader's knowledge of and participation with it. The text's ability to welcome its reader's participation is a necessary element in constructing a character in Bridget that so many women were able to identify with.

Participation is also a consistent, if unarticulated theme in the text itself. *Bridget Jones's Diary* is, at its most basic, the narrative of a woman's active and unconscious attempts to fashion a way to orient herself and her behaviour in a world that she finds bewildering and unresponsive to her efforts. Bridget is certain that a trick or approach to the way that she conceptualizes, disciplines, and presents herself will result in a materialization of her goals. Bridget and her friends' preoccupation with this endeavour suggests an anxiety about the rules which now govern social and professional interactions.

The multiplicity of options available to Bridget and to the reader, rather than being the source of expansive freedom and opportunity that early feminists imagined it, is a source of dread. Bridget's constant anxiety is a source of comedy in the novel, and comedy is often the effort to make a threat powerless. This gap between the reader's amusement and the character's dread is the single greatest difference between the adaptation and the original. The space between the tones of the two texts allows the knowing reader to enter more fully into the nostalgic space of the BBC miniseries, and compares the imagined simplicity of problems that have been more or less solved.

The success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* is indicative of the desire of contemporary readers to enter more fully into the imaginative space of the text, to be permitted a greater degree of agency in the creation of the text's meaning, and to continually renew an emotional connection to the text. In this sense, *Bridget Jones's Diary* anticipates the topics of this thesis's next chapters, in which the audiences of other texts take direct control not only over the meanings of the texts that they engage with, but the plots.

Chapter Two

Decisions, Decisions:

Interactive Stories as Adaptation; Or,

Mapping *Dragon Age*

In the previous chapter, readers were able to use their knowledge of the plot and characters of *Pride and Prejudice* to become more actively critical of and emotionally engaged with *Bridget Jones's Diary*. The readers were able to allow the versions to speak to each other and inform the reading of the text that they were engaging with at that moment. A more obvious type of interactive reading will be examined in this chapter: players of the narrative video game *Dragon Age: Origins*. This game is more interactive than just incorporating the player's tactile input. The player's choices also impact the plot and tone of the story as well as what information they are given about the social world of the game that they are navigating. Part of the pleasure of playing is the text's ability to adapt itself to this input. Essentially, the game is a narrative whose original is its programming, which can never be entirely expressed in a single instance. All that can be expressed is an individualized adaptation each time it is played.

Players value games' adaptive qualities. One of the criteria gamers use to evaluate games is their replayability: the extent to which the game can provide a different enough experience to a player's second or third full execution to retain her interest. This is another way of describing the extent to which the game can adapt itself to the player's differing input. In ways that will be explored, *Dragon*

Age: Origins is a highly replayable and adaptive videogame. It refuses to reveal complete knowledge of the game's social world or a complete experience of the supporting characters in a single experience. It also draws attention to this refusal in a variety of ways, which encourages the player to combine multiple adaptations to fill out her mental map of the entire set of programmed possibilities.

This active research and filling out of social, narrative, and character information is common in another set of popular readers: the fan, as described by Henry Jenkins. A fan is driven to compile as complete a set of information as possible about her beloved texts and characters. A fan's willingness to research and fill in the rough spots left by a text is analogous to the style of play that *Dragon Age: Origins* encourages. Besides this emphasis on research, the game has other features in common with texts that fans have selected as focal points to their activities. *Dragon Age: Origins* has a large variety of secondary interests: issues that are of concern to the characters and carry the possibility of being of concern to the player, but are secondary to the main narrative arc, and which could be ignored by a player uninterested in them. The game is immersive, in the sense that fans have the impression that it exists in a separate, but still fictional, world apart from the real one. The game's reluctance to reveal information and the uncertainty of the player's knowledge are of particular interest to the question of adaptation and the process by which fans create meaning while engaging with this text. Fans resolve the tension of their lack of knowledge by mapping the social world and the potential adaptive outcomes of the narrative. It is this map-making process that drives interest and engagement in *Dragon Age: Origins*.

Role Playing Games: Genre and Format

Dragon Age does not exist in a vacuum, but is preceded by a history of and co-exists with similar games. It is narrative game, in that there is a beginning, middle, and end to its story and that its characters develop as a result of the plot. It is a one-player game that can be picked up and put down like a novel, rather than a multiplayer online game, which is populated by other players and continues to evolve and change in the player's absence. *Dragon Age* is a role-playing game (RPG), which provides substantial opportunity for the interaction of the player's character (PC) with the social world and non-player characters (NPCs). This section will discuss the ways that this game differs from other one-player computer RPGs, as well as explain the general narrative arc and gaming format of fantasy adventure RPGs. As Jenkins points out in *Textual Poachers*, a fan is rarely only a fan of one show (Jenkins 37) but seems to value fandom as much as she enjoys the texts. The experience of being a fan is its own reward. Likewise, a gamer is only rarely a player of one game, but will have experienced many different games and formats. *Dragon Age* players will have chosen it over many other similar games, and so an examination of the ways that this game differs from others will indicate what its players value.

It is interesting to note that the genre of popular fantasy, in terms of "properties of a fictional narrative" (Rabinowitz qtd in Jenkins, 132) has not shifted very much since Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. (In that sense, most fantasy adventure narratives since Tolkien can be considered extensions or

adaptations of his texts.) Narratives are still primarily concerned with the triumph of good underdogs over evil hordes, still value the natural over the corrupted, and still privilege youth and inexperience over established authority. Characters have remained more or less in their classifications of mages, rogues, and fighters, and the action remains in ancient forests, underground dwarven kingdoms, and in human cities filled with brothels, taverns, and thieves' guilds.

Even the manner of accomplishing the games' objectives has remained fairly steady: find things, eliminate threats, gather allies, level up, and make money to buy better items. Players keep returning to the genre not for radical differences in narrative content, but the opportunity to learn and master new strategies for play. *Dragon Age* retains much of the format and setting of fantasy RPGs, but introduces three new mechanics that alter the way the player interacts with the game.

Fantasy adventure RPG narratives have a final goal, for which the player must prepare by completing several major and numerous minor quests. The major quests are usually directly related to the final goal, while the optional minor quests are more incidental. They exist so that the player can accumulate the experience points and wealth that she needs, as a break in the main narrative arc, and as a way of experiencing the world of the game. The goal of *Dragon Age* is ending the Blight of darkspawn by defeating the Archdemon that leads them. The Grey Wardens are an order of warriors and mages who exist for this sole purpose, but there are few Grey Wardens in Fereldan, the country in which the game takes place. The PC is inducted into this order early in the narrative, immediately

before the country's king suffers a military defeat which leaves the PC and one other non-player character (NPC) the sole surviving Wardens. The king also dies in this battle, and the regent's consequential grab at power incites a civil war that leaves Fereldan less able to defend itself. Three of the major quests of the game involve rallying allies – the underground dwarves, the elves in their ancient forest, and the mages – for the final battle against the Archdemon. The other three address the civil war. All six must be completed before the final quest – fighting the Archdemon – is possible. The game's minor quests include a variety of goals too large to be mentioned here.

One new mechanic that *Dragon Age* introduces is the origin stories for which the game is named. While the players of other RPGs are limited to a single narrative beginning, the *Dragon Age* player will first experience one of six unique prologues. The prologues are determined partially by the player's choice of race and class and partially by the player's preference. The origin story provides an explanation of how the PC became a Grey Warden and provides her with a specific social identity – Human Noble, Dwarf Noble, Dwarf Commoner, City (second class citizen) Elf, Dalish (wandering nomad) Elf, or Circle Mage – within the world of the game. The Blight is, at best, a secondary concern in the origin stories; in some, it plays no role at all. The origin stories give a clearer picture of the world as it exists without the threats of the Blight and the civil war, but only from a particular social perspective.

Another mechanic that *Dragon Age* offers its players is its multiple endings, not only for the game, but for each major quest. Before the player can

recruit each of her allies, she must solve that ally's crisis. The dwarven capital of Orzammar is locked in a political stalemate over the succession of the throne. The elves are dying of a werewolf-inflicted curse. Each of these problems has more than one solution that will get the PC what she needs. For example, the Circle of Magi is being beset by demons that have possessed several of the mages. The player can attempt to free these mages or side with the templars whose duty it is to protect the outside world from the demons. If she frees the mages, the mages will help her fight the Archdemon. If she destroys the mages, the templars will assist her. These multiple endings are the primary way in which the PC can affect the world's future, and the primary way in which the game adapts itself to the player's input. Neither choice is wrong in terms of the final goal, but the player's choice will affect the world after the completion of the game and will carry a different tone and moral charge. Other RPGs have allowed the player to choose what side she wishes to play for, such as *Fable* or *Knights of the Old Republic*, but morality in *Dragon Age* is more nuanced than the evil/good dichotomies of those games.

These features – the origin story, the multiple endings, and morality – are entwined. The conflicts of the origin stories are all revisited in the game's major quests. This gives the player a greater sense of personal involvement with the world and gives that quest greater narrative weight than the others. In some of the quests, the moral choice is not clear. When the PC arrives at Orzammar, King Aeducan has just died, and there is a deadlock between the two candidates seeking to replace him. Prince Bhelan, the king's third child, is brutal and

manipulative, but wants to open Orzammar to increased interaction with the surface and values the generally despised and poverty-stricken casteless. Lord Harrowmont is more honest, more modest, more socially conservative, and less able to obtain the political capital required to govern. Both of the dwarf origin stories will grant greater insight into the dwarven social and political structure, and that information will make the choice more meaningful. The dwarf commoner PC is casteless, and her sister is pregnant with Prince Bhelan's child. Bhelan wishes to marry the sister, but cannot do so without power. The dwarf noble PC is a sibling of Prince Bhelan and was framed by him for the murder of King Aeducan's eldest son. Lord Harrowmont had been her unsuccessful defender at the trial, but only Prince Bhelan promises her a pardon.

This moral relativism is also made apparent in the third unique mechanic of *Dragon Age*, which is the separate approval scores of each companion. Companions in RPGs are very common. Early computer games allowed the player to control a team of PCs in an effort to mimic the team dynamic that existed in a tabletop RPG like *Dungeons and Dragons*. Later computer RPGs gave the player one PC, who could hire or inspire help from the computer-controlled population of the world. Those PCs could converse with her companions and get them to reveal more about themselves and their histories as the game went on. *Dragon Age* grants the player one PC and ten different companions. Just like the PC, each companion has a specific position in the world of the game and has subjective opinions and values based on that position. The companions will evaluate the PC's decisions and dialogue choices based on

their personal opinions and approve or disapprove of her actions. The game will record each companion's 'approval' score separately. These sliding scales of approval resemble the sliding scale of good/evil or Jedi/Sith that earlier games employed, but in *Dragon Age*, there are as many scales as there are companions, and a single decision from the PC may have both positive and negative reactions.

Players will adjust their execution of the game based on their interests. There are many ways to play a videogame; players may value the complexity or difficulty of combat, the immersion in an alternative social world, or the possibilities of their avatar. *Dragon Age* offers all of these opportunities, but its unique mechanics – the origin story, the alternative endings, and the subjective morality of the companions – lend it to a fan's interaction. Fans have slightly different interests than other consumers of popular culture, as will be examined in the following section.

What Fans Want

Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith, along with others in the early nineties, describe the ways that fans engage with their beloved texts. Both theorists assume that a fan's engagement is active, rather than a passive reception of meanings inscribed into the text by its producers, writers, directors, and actors. This lends their analyses well to the fan's obviously active engagement with *Dragon Age*. Although Jenkins and Bacon-Smith were primarily working with television shows, videogames provide the same auditory and visual engagement as other screen viewing, rather than the more imaginative engagement of reading.

The time commitment of a videogamer is comparable to the time commitment of a viewer who has seen several seasons of a single show. The total time to complete *Dragon Age* is approximately sixty-five hours (total time, excluding sections that are replayed, either by choice or because of character death). In comparison, a single season of an hour long television show includes approximately 16 hours of programming, excluding commercials and reruns. This extended and active engagement in both audiences makes television fandom a good place to begin a discussion of gamer fandom.

Jenkins writes that a fan "treats [the story] as if its narrative world were a real place that can be inhabited and explored and as if the characters maintained a life beyond what was represented on the screen" (115). Within texts valued by fans, there are suggestions of information and narrative that are never expressed by the show. This "roughness" (Jenkins 74) in the canon implies that the texts are not a complete representation of the reality of that world. In *Star Trek*, which is central in both Jenkins's and Bacon-Smith's studies on fandom, an example of textual roughness is the friendship between Captain Kirk and his first officer, Spock, which is never made clear. Fans were free to image how this idealized homosocial relationship began and how it is maintained. This roughness leaves the fan to fill in the blank spaces from her imagination and from her knowledge of the clues scattered through the seasons and movies.

There are similar rough spots in the narratives the companions tell of their pasts. The PC must rely on the companion to tell his or her story. Most of the companions will not be completely forthcoming with their pasts until their trusts

are won, as indicated by their approval score. Even after the companion is persuaded into being more revealing, the PC can only experience these stories second-hand, rather than experiencing them the way she does the rest of the game. The companions lie and keep secrets until some narrative or interpersonal requirement has been met. Alistair will not reveal that he is the bastard son of King Maric and the half-brother of the recently deceased king until circumstances are about to make the revelation for him. Leliana maintains that she came to Fereldan and became a lay sister out of a desire for peace, until she is attacked by mercenaries who would have no interest in a lay sister. The player's continued engagement in the game and with her companions is rewarded by a developing relationship between her PC and the companion, but the PC must rely on her companions' versions of events in the meantime.

The companions also reference moments in which the PC was a participant, but which the player did not view or experience, such as catching the stoic Sten playing with a kitten. This encourages the sense that the characters, including the PC, have a life outside the text, and that the fan can experience those moments only imaginatively. Many of the unexperienced moments mentioned by the companions involve the PC's romantic relationship with one of her companions. Romantic entanglements are one of the most common ways that fans imaginatively engage with their texts and characters. Of the ten possible companions, four are romance options. There is a bisexual man, a bisexual woman, a heterosexual man, and a heterosexual woman, and if the PC is able to

boost their approval scores high enough, they will attempt to initiate a relationship with the PC.

Likewise, the world of *Dragon Age* seems larger than the narrative the player experiences. A fan will note the existence of the alternative origin stories, and when she reaches the part of the narrative that speaks directly to her PC's concerns, she will contrast the information that she has about that quest with the lack of information that she has about other quests. Since fans are compelled to research their texts, the fan will attempt to fill in this gap in knowledge. One way that she can do that is through discussion with her companions. Alistair and Wynne are particularly knowledgeable about magic, as Wynne is a Circle mage and Alistair was trained as a templar, who are the mages' keepers. Often though, these conversations are not available until after the pertinent parts of the narrative are over. Wynne is recruited as a companion only after the Circle's fate has been decided, and Oghren, a dwarf with useful information on dwarven culture, becomes more forthcoming only after the PC has selected a successor to the throne of Orzammar. For much of the narrative, the player has only partial knowledge of the social world that her PC is engaging in.

It is usually the secondary interests of a text that remain rough, rather than the primary narrative concern. To continue using *Star Trek* as an example, while the show is mostly about the exploration of space, several sub-themes exist. Friendship is one, the interdependence of emotion and rationality another, and the place of women is yet another. Fans chose their texts based not on their primary characteristics, but on their secondary. A fan interested in the Kirk-Spock

relationship would be more likely to become a fan of a crime show that featured a pair of detectives who always worked together over another science fiction program that lacked a strong friendship, becoming, as one fan put it, "a sucker for 'partnership' shows" (Jenkins 93). This combination of roughness, or coolness, and the existence of a secondary characteristic of interest to a fan leaves the fan free to read her own meanings into those rough spots. The fan's imagined or researched explanations of the text's rough spots "revitalizes" (Jenkins 76) her interest. The only primary interest in *Dragon Age* is the defeat of the Archdemon. The questions of dwarven politics, the fate of possessed mages at the Circle, the romantic entanglements of the PC with one or more of her companions, and the many other secondary concerns of the text do not need to be negotiated for the game to reach its narrative conclusion. That so much of the game's programming is devoted to exploring these alternatives suggests that a player enthusiastic about *Dragon Age* is interested in exploring these concerns, much as a fan is interested in her extended and active engagement with a text that could be watched with less engagement.

The secondary characteristics that entice a fan are often areas of concern in their lives or mirror their concerns about the larger social world, which leads some fans to cite emotional realism as a factor in their choice of text. This criterion is intensely subjective and uses the viewer's personal life as a baseline for evaluation (Ang qtd. in Jenkins 107). As Jenkins writes, "what counts as 'plausible' in such a story is a general conformity to the ideological norms by which the [fans] makes sense of everyday life" (107). In *Dragon Age*, the scope

of secondary concerns varies greatly. The dilemma of the mages in "Broken Circle" centers around the idea of whether the safety of the many, in this case the majority non-magical population of Fereldan, warrants the effective imprisonment of the innocent few. The dwarven quest "A Paragon of Her Kind," is centered around questions of caste and political compromise: kindly conservatism or tyrannical progressivism?

More personal interests exist in *Dragon Age* as well. Wynne's conversations with the PC rotate around duty and the balance of privilege and responsibility. She becomes especially pedantic when the PC becomes romantically involved with one of the companions, worrying that the selfish nature of love will compromise the PC's ability to do her duty. Alistair, a bastard raised by an emotionally distant uncle, expresses a desire for a family, but it is not until a disastrous meeting with a long-lost sister that he realizes that he projected a longing for unconditional acceptance onto his longing for family. Morrigan, a witch raised away from civilization in the Korcari Wilds, believes only in power and refuses to acknowledge the value of compassion until she discovers that her mother is planning to possess Morrigan's body to prolong her own life. The bard-turned-lay-sister Leliana is preoccupied with the question of religion and whether an individual can experience the Maker directly. The PC has the opportunity to discuss these issues with her companions, and in the cases of Alistair and Leliana, she has the option to permanently alter their perspectives on these topics. Those changes in perspective are saved by the game's programming and later alter the narrative potential of the story.

Fans are not restricted to a show's inconsistent interpretations of the issues; in fact, many fans admit that reading a show "against its grain" (Jenkins 63) is a source of pleasure. For example, *Star Trek*'s Uhura seems to oscillate between demonstrating a progressive feminist identity and more "stereotypical feminine conduct" (Jenkins 167), but each fan can choose which behaviour speaks more to her idea of the "real" Uhura behind the represented episodes, and which episodes portrayed her incorrectly. Since this active re-construction is most clearly demonstrated in fanfiction, this element will be discussed more in the following chapter.

These two seemingly opposite sources of fan pleasure – reading with and reading against – are related to another seemingly opposite set of relationships between fan and text. While the fan tries to gather as much information as the text will yield, she also engages in several behaviours that highlight the constructed nature of the source text. These behaviours include "excessive" (Jenkins 53) rewatching and freezing frames to catch details that later prove inconsistent (such as the cabin number of Captain Kirk's quarters). Jenkin's interpretation of this behaviour is that the imagined world must "maintain both credibility and coherence" (115) and that this is dependent on the accuracy of details. This does not explain, though, why fans subject the text to a degree of scrutiny that its fictional nature cannot withstand. If the fan's concern is the text's ability to sustain credibility and coherence, then why look for and delight in the ways that it fails?

Rather than threatening the integrity of the text, these activities highlight the constructed nature of the texts. If a text is a construction, it can be a faulty or imperfect construction, making it open to manipulation and giving individuals more freedom to interpret it, both with the grain and against it. Paradoxically, these mistakes make the world of the text more immediate to the fan as the text becomes a mere representation of the fictional world that the it's roughness, its unexplained and unexperienced information, suggests exists outside its representation and which can be imaginatively inhabited. An episode of *Star Trek* becomes an adaptation of this space; it becomes a representation of the world and can be more or less faithful to what that world is really like. The flaws allow the fans to double their viewing (Jenkins 66) of the text and see it simultaneously as real and constructed. This leaves the fan free to engage with what is presented to her as a hypothetical and malleable reality and to negotiate her own understanding of the concerns of the text.

A *Dragon Age* fan need not do a minute examination of the text in order to prove its constructed nature to herself. She knows that the game is a construction, because her input and narrative choices are helping construct it. Each time she selects an option, she is aware that there is another option and that the game is adapting itself to her input. Like the television fan who can never directly experience that other place, the player cannot directly experience the game's entirety either.

In some ways, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" anticipated Jenkins's analysis. Benjamin claimed that

by removing art from the cults of ritual meaning and privileged viewing, the audience would be able to "take the position of the critic" (740). Benjamin's hope was that the elimination of art's aura and the democratization of critique would politicize art, but instead he observed that aura had shifted to personality (742) and spectacle (743). Theodore Adorno's perspective of popular culture focused on its charming and distracting qualities (271). Adorno wrote that the pleasure offered by "partial moments" of popular music distracted listeners from contemplation of the whole, which they learnt to ignore (273). What was already familiar became popular, and what was already popular became increasingly familiar (276). For him, the democratization of music meant pandering to disinterested non-listeners and a divorce of art and meaning. It was to become one more hegemonic commodity (280).

Jenkins's response to Adorno's claim that overconsumption "eats away at the body of the whole" (Adorno 281, qtd in Jenkins 51) was that "songs, like other [popular] texts, assume increased significance as they are fragmented and reworked" (Jenkins 51). The worth of popular culture products is not their inherent meaning, but in fans' refitting of that product to their own interests; that the popular culture product "was transformed by [the fans'] interaction with it. Perhaps, the newness of the individual stories was worn away, the aura of the unique text was eroded, yet [it] gained resonance, accrued significance, through the social interactions and creative re-workings" of the fan (Jenkins 52).

Popular culture products, by their flaws and incompleteness, present themselves as putty to be explored and manipulated by the fans. Not only does

this leave the fan free to manipulate, it also allows the fan to imagine the particular representation of the game or the show as an imperfect representation of a fictional world and allows her to fill in that world as she pleases. The text, by virtue of its roughness and the fan's imaginative completion, begins to gesture to itself as a hypothetical but perfect cultural product for each fan who engages with it. The fan's inability to directly experience that space lends it a new kind of aura. This aura is not based on personality or spectacle, but on the user's imaginative process and personalized meaning. Like earlier auras, it is still dependent on the consumption (albeit an active consumption) of popular products, rather than on participation in the process of initial creation, but the meanings that surround the text are increasingly the fan's.

Mental Mapping: Play, Research, Know

Jochen Venus, in his article "Beyond Play and Narration," points out that most video games occupy a nebulous space between game and narrative, and that to analyze one solely from either perspective does a great disservice to the text (427). His example was the mental mapping of the virtual space of *Grand Theft Auto* as part of the player's interactive experience of playing. This game has little narrative imperative to guide the player's actions, so she is left to explore and exploit the possibilities of the spaces open to her. Successful mapping of the virtual space of the cities' streets will allow the player to explore all areas of the map in an efficient way and unlock the next area, and her familiarity when she returns to a previously visited city gives her the sense of returning home. Because

Dragon Age's narrative is more interactive than the narratives of other RPGs, the fan requires a certain amount of information about the world to satisfyingly solve the narrative situations posed in-text. The mental mapping of *Dragon Age* is not of the physical world (though proficiency at this will avoid a certain amount of frustration), but of social space. Because *Dragon Age* is not forthcoming with much of this information, the tension between the fan's desire to make good choices and lack of the information that she needs to make those choices is heightened.

This tension between what the player knows and what the player doesn't know is demonstrated immediately, in the cut scene the player views before creating her character. This cut scene introduces the major conflict of the game: the darkspawn and the threat that they pose to Fereldan through a voiced-over narration. The story explains how darkspawn originated and how their threat to the world was forgotten. Powerful mages wished to see the Maker's Golden City, but by entering, corrupted it and became darkspawn. This is a classic myth of human ambition endangering human wellbeing. Visually, parts of the cut scenes mirror the story of the ring that begins Peter Jackson's film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly the battle scenes. Of course, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the myth of the ring is true. Myth and religion in fantasy adventure are usually sources of useful narrative information, but *Dragon Age* does not treat myth quite as simply as other popular fantasy narratives do. The deep and authoritative voice of the narrator encourages the player to accept the information being presented,

but much of the visual information undermines that surety. The story begins with an unnarrated text representation of the "Canticle of Threnodies 8:13":

> "And so is the Golden City blackened
> with each step you take into my Hall.
> Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting.
> You have brought Sin to Heaven
> And doom upon all the world."

After this, the camera pans over unmoving two-dimensional representations of the story being told. The pictures are in the style of European medieval religious texts – anatomically imprecise cloaked human figures on a cracked parchment-like material. By so clearly evoking the medieval church and medieval understanding, the accuracy of the myth is called into question. Early in the game, a companion repeats the story to the PC, adding that it "may be nothing more than a warning against human hubris." It also becomes clear early in the game that the Chantry that tells this story also uses it as a justification for their continued imprisonment and control of mages. While the genre suggests that the narrative be treated as historic fact, these elements undermine that. The story cannot be read as either history or myth, but occupies some status between the two, leaving the player in a state of uncertain knowledge.

The PC's subjective perspective of the world heightens that sense of uncertainty. From this cut scene, during which the player has no opportunity for input, the player is taken to the character creation screen. In addition to adjusting the usual options for an RPG PC – class, race, gender, and the minute

customization of appearance – it is here that the player selects her origin and begins her origin story. As has already been mentioned, this origin story gives the player a detailed understanding of one aspect of the social world that she will then be negotiating. The Dalish Origin story begins with the PC and a non-player-character (NPC) coming across a band of humans wandering too close to their camp. Though the dialogue here is short, the player learns several things about the Dalish and their relationship to the dominant humans. She learns that the Dalish are nomadic and avoid human settlements, that some humans hunt Dalish for sport, but that many are afraid of the elves, and that the Dalish have largely lost knowledge of their ancient kingdom of Arlathan, which fell to human colonization. During the rest of this origin story, the player also learns about Dalish culture, including their death rites, social organization, history of enslavement, their betrayal by the Chantry, and their refusal to live as city elves and second-class citizens, working as servants in the humans' cities.

After the origin story is resolved, the common narrative of the game begins. The impact of the character's origin on the game's narrative does not end here, though it now becomes less central. In Ostagar, the army's quartermaster will mistake the Dalish PC for one of the city elves, who are servants, which reminds the player of elves' status in the world. If the PC clarifies the mistake to the quartermaster, he then treats her with wary respect. The specialized knowledge that the player of a Dalish PC has about the Dalish and their relationship to and history with humans becomes useful during the major quest "The Nature of the Beast." In this quest, the PC discovers that Zathrian, the most

respected leader of the Dalish, transformed an entire community of humans into werewolves because some of them raped his daughter centuries ago. Ending the spell will end Zathrian's life, and with it, the Dalish's best hope of regaining a piece of the magical power that they lost during their enslavement. Though the main narrative elements of this quest are understandable to any of the origin stories, the impact of what the Dalish will lose in Zathrian and the context of his choice are more obvious to the player familiar with the Dalish origin story. In contrast, the player familiar with only the Dalish origin story will not have any knowledge of the dangers mages pose or the relationship between the Chantry's templars and the mages. She will not understand dwarven political structures or caste tensions.

The specialized knowledge granted by each origin story increases the sense that the game world is more complete than a single adaptation of it and cannot be fully understood from the perspective offered by a single experience. The player has privileged knowledge of one space and a correspondingly increased stake in the outcome of the quest that takes place there. Just as television fans are compelled to rewatch episodes in order to glean as much information as is possible from the text, gamer fans are compelled to gather all the information that the text has to offer in order to gain that sense of privileged knowing and competent interaction in all aspects of the game.

While speaking to her companions can reveal some information about the social world of *Dragon Age* beyond the PC's own sphere, this information does not match the quantity of the information included in the origin stories. Neither

does it include the opportunity for the information to become a lived experience, as the origin story allows. The only way for a fan to become fully familiar with the world of the game is to become an active researcher. This research can be done first-hand, by playing each origin story and the quest related to that origin story, or second-hand, by communicating with other fans directly, or by consulting the *Dragon Age* wiki: a database of information about the game created by fans for other fans. Gaining this knowledge makes the game more meaningful as an interactive experience. The player will be able to negotiate the choices and conversations open to her during the quests in a more rewarding and successful way. The most satisfying adaptation of the game, for a fan, would be one during which she has access to the knowledge offered by all the possible adaptations and can act with reference to it. The desire to know creates a tension between the whole and the experienced, in much the same way that the television fan has a sense of a whole world beyond the experienced episodes.

Another set of maps that the completist fan must fill out are the characters of her companions. This is primarily achieved through the PC's conversations with them. Conversations are usually initiated by the PC; clicking on the companion changes the camera's angle, so that the companion's face is visible beyond the PC's back in the foreground. A list of dialogue options appears at the bottom of the screen from which the player selects a topic of conversation. Most of the topics can only be explored once. After the topic has been selected, the option disappears. Within each topic of conversation, the player again chooses her PC's responses from a list of options at the bottom of the screen, experiences

the companion's response, and selects her next response. These dialogues are organized as "trees" with branches that diverge and converge dependent on the PC's responses. The entirety of a tree cannot be experienced in a single adaptation, and so that information about the character's perspective or response is lost. The conversations the PC has with her companions are a source of information about both the world and their characters, but they are also one of the primary ways that the player increases her approval scores. Increasing a character's approval score is a game in itself. Because companions with high approval ratings gain bonuses to their abilities, rewards for high approval scores are built into the tactical mechanics of the game. Warm or friendly (approval scores above twenty-six and seventy-six, respectively, on a scale between negative one hundred and one hundred) companions will make a personal request or revelation about their background, which unlocks their companion quest.

In these conversations, the companions generally approve of the PC mirroring their opinions back to them, but the only way that the player has of certain knowledge of those opinions is the conversations. Some characters resent too emphatic an agreement from the PC; Morrigan interprets it as toadying, and Sten sees it as indicative of a weak character. Managing the companions' perspectives of the PC is finicky business, and the unknowing player is unlikely to always be successful on the first attempt. She can, however, employ her mapping strategies to achieve greater success. Unlike the larger narrative choices in the major quests, the conversations take only a few minutes to execute, and if the game is reloaded immediately afterwards, the same conversation can be

experienced and the reward (or penalty) that it incurs replaces the previous one. Eventually, the player's map of the companion's character includes the information she amassed during all of her experiences, while the computer stores only the last attempt. The player can also research the companion's preferred dialogue options online or use what she already knows of the character to predict what he or she wants to hear. Regardless of her method, a map of the character's interactions is created that is richer and more complete than any given instance.

Conclusion

The relationship between the whole and the experienced is similar for fans of television and narrative games; like the television fan, a *Dragon Age* fan constructs her sense of the whole by combining different adaptations of that whole. It is the tension between knowing and unknowing that drives the player's mapping of *Dragon Age*. In order to interact with the social space of the game with confidence and proficiency, the player must map the space – become knowing – by combining several experiences. In *Dragon Age*, there is not a clear division between knowing and unknowing; rather there are degrees of knowing, and the game rewards the knowing player with the opportunity to perform her increased competency and by giving her more narrative (through the companions).

Dragon Age, by virtue of its highly adaptive quality, is able to satisfy a fan's requirement that the text gestures toward a larger, inaccessible world. These adaptations can become highly individualized, allowing the player to manipulate

the text into her own version of the most satisfying conclusion. The text is more malleable in its secondary concerns of race and politics, rather than its primary concern of the Blight. This too is common of fans' texts, since it is the rougher secondary concerns that leave the most room for fan interpretation. The fan's imaginative manipulation of the textual content of the game is most clearly visible in the body of fanfiction, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Two other aspects of the appeal of *Dragon Age* that have not been addressed in this chapter are the player's opportunity to be someone else through her avatar and the existence of more personal secondary concerns. The existence of and pleasure in the avatar and the shared personal concerns of the player and the PC are central to the themes of adaptation, mapping, roughness, and secondary concerns that this chapter addresses, but both these features are more clearly visible through the fanfiction. Likewise, the fanfiction is of more interest to the themes of adaptation and self with these two elements, so both are left for the following chapter, where the fan's tactics of mapping potential and of exploiting the text's rough edges for her own pleasure will be of continuing importance.

Chapter Three

Me, Me, Me:

Avatars in Games and Fanfiction; Or,

The Adaptable Mary Sue

The relationship between an avatar and the person who controls or is represented by it is a largely invisible space, and undoubtedly subject to personal differences. A single person would relate to each avatar she has differently, and different people would have differing relationships to the same avatar. Consequently, avatars are represented differently. In the 2009 movie *Avatar*, the paraplegic main character comes to regard the body and life he experiences through his avatar as more authentic than his original body and life and finally casts aside his human form to permanently inhabit his avatar. The reference to this popular movie is made more significant by the resemblance of the elves in the first full-length *Dragon Age* sequel to the Na'vi of *Avatar*. More distant relationships exist as well. In the fanfiction novel *Shades of Grey*, author Mirr's PC makes morally reprehensible choices. The novel is the story of his companions wresting control of Fereldan away from him. That PC's position as the unambiguous antagonist of the novel indicates a lesser degree of identification between writer and avatar. Innumerable variations between these extremes undoubtedly exist.

Regardless of the level of identification that exists between the player and her avatar, *Dragon Age* insists that choices be made and performed in the origin

stories, in minor quests, at the conclusions of major quests, and in her interactions with her companions. Some choices are not morally clear, but dependent on subjective judgment: either the player's or the player's idea of her PC's. The degree to which this distinction is made by the player is beyond the scope of this thesis. This subjectivity (subjectivity here being the quality that impacts a subjective judgement) is constructed within the game's narrative by placing the PC in situations where she must perform her position. In other moments, the game does not perform her choices, despite providing the opportunity for the player's input. This variation in the performative level of the avatar allows the player to think of the PC simultaneously as a character with a specific identity and as a character with a variety of possible identities.

The body of *Dragon Age* fanfiction indicates that, at least among fanfiction writers, there is a tendency to personalize the PC. *Shades of Grey*'s evil PC is an anomaly, although a popular one. Most of the PCs in *Dragon Age* fanfiction fulfill at least some of Camille Bacon-Smith's description of a Mary Sue: "in her teens, possessing genius-level intelligence, great beauty, and a charmingly impish personality" (312). In most fandoms, a Mary Sue is an original character whom the writer presumably wishes she was, and Mary Sues are generally despised by fanfiction readers, because her immediate appeal to the fictional characters of the original text precludes the possibility of dialogue between reader and canon character (McGee 168). In *Dragon Age*, the PC is in her late teens or early twenties, brave, capable, intelligent, martially formidable, beautiful, and as charming as the player wants. This allows the fanfiction

character to be both canonical and a Mary Sue. More significantly, the game allows the PC to be both who the writer wishes she was and who the reader wishes she was. This communal identity in the many fan adaptations of *Dragon Age* lends a particular resonance to the "collective creativity" (Jenkins 54) as fans work to fill in the rough spots inherent in the game. Just as the PC's presentation in the game allowed the reader to hold the PC's specificity and her generality simultaneously in mind, the variations in the communal self of that same PC in fanfiction work together to gesture to an identity and identification that encompasses and informs each particular manifestation of that PC.

Constructing the Self

Claudia Nelson in her article "Writing the Reader: The Literary Child in and Beyond the Book" examines the intrusion fantasy in children's literature. Intrusion fantasies involve the direct interaction of characters from a realistic fictional world with characters from the embedded magical world. The characters from the more real world are often either omnipotent or omniscient in the embedded world, and they must learn to use their omniscience in a way that is respectful of the characters and world they find themselves in, while still ensuring their own well-being. The bibliophilic child characters, through their love of stories and their competence as readers, are able to usurp authority (and author-ity) and turn the text into "an elaborate form of play, that is, a game with linguistic and narrative codes and conventions" (McCallum qtd in Nelson 226). They are able to be both reader and participant in the places where reality and

fiction slip over each other, and the act of reading becomes a "co-operative, interpretative experience" (Hutcheon qtd in Nelson 226). The didactic element of these stories – the celebration of bibliophilia – is dependent on this particularly engaged form of reading (Nelson 226). A similar type of interactive reading also exists in *Dragon Age* – where the player is both reader and, through the actions of her PC, participant in the same narrative.

This feature in child metafiction accomplishes what Nelson acknowledges is a feature of adult metafiction: an exploration of "the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (Waugh qtd. in Nelson 222), though she does not examine the implications of this being a feature of children's metafiction. The confluence of roles that intrusion narratives demonstrates is a fictional representation of the confluence of writer and actor in an individual's self-narrative, as Giddens describes the process. It mirrors the task of the individual as she integrates an interpretation of the world with a selection of autobiographical details in a way that respects both external validity and personal well-being. The pleasure in these stories, for the child who is just learning how to narrate the life that she is participant in, is the successful and pleasurable execution of this skill by the child heroes.

Childhood is the space set aside for answering questions of ontological existence: questions that begin with the infant's separation of external and internal reality and end with the adult's ability to say who she is in her social context (Giddens 48-52), but this work cannot end in childhood, though it may decrease in intensity. Self narratives must be revisited and maintained through the

individual's lifespan. Children's metafictional stories are called intrusion stories, while similar stories for adults are "narcissistic" (Hutcheon qtd in Nelson 226). The maintenance that the narrative of self requires – pushing away alternative versions and reinforcing belief in the chosen interpretation – reveals the fragility and fictionality of self-identity, and therefore the engagement with stories whose processes mirror the construction of self carry a charge of dread and shame.

Dragon Age differs from other fantasy adventure RPGs by its multiple endings, subjective approval scores, and the origin stories. All three of these mechanics make the PC more individual than the PCs of other fantasy adventure RPGs. The origin stories are of particular interest in this chapter, since it is from these narratives that the player begins the construction of her PC's identity. Since the fan often has some degree of identification with her PC, this mirrors the child hero in intrusion fantasies. While the player is powerless over her PC's social reality at the beginning of the game, she is required to construct the PC's social identity and personality within that reality. The game gives each PC an unalterable last name to indicate that given social position. Mahariel, the Dalish elf, begins her origin story with a chance encounter between herself, Tamlen (a fellow Dalish Clansman), and three humans who have stumbled too near the Dalish camp. Mahariel can choose to slay the humans out of fear for being persecuted by their larger group, express confidence that the humans mean them no harm, agree to let the humans go with a warning, or question them to discover their intentions. Tamlen acts as an informant to the player in this conflict; he is reluctant to let the humans leave and scornful of too compassionate a view of

them. In response to Mahariel's assumption that they are harmless, he says, "You are too soft. How many injustices must our people suffer before you resent them properly?" His response to her desire to question them is, "What does it matter? Hunting or banditry, we'll have to move camp if we let them live." He will not, however, make the decision to kill them. The tension in *Dragon Age* is not only between what the player knows and what she doesn't know but also stems from the pressure to perform a perspective based on that sometimes limited knowledge. This performance has many viewers: the NPCs of the game, the player herself, and the player's gaming friends (through the public gamer profiles).

The opportunities to affect the social structure of the world come later in the narrative and are influenced by the player's choices during the origin story. Mahariel's opinions regarding the interactions between humans and the Dalish in her origin story are revisited when Zathrian's spell is revealed to the PC. Her decision to allow him to continue punishing the humans may be motivated by what Tamlen previously called a "proper resentment." A decision to force him to end the spell may be influenced by her early insistence on an effort at peace, by her Clan leader's disappointed reaction to the decision to slay the humans, or by her increased exposure to humans. The player is free to revise her earlier positioning, but the game remains insistent that she choose and perform a position. Her companions will remind the player of the morality of her choices by awarding or retracting approval points and of the variety of views possible in the world by refusing to agree on whether a choice was a good one or not.

This pressure to position the PC within the social world requires the player to read the information the game presents to her about the world and to participate, in this case by selecting an appropriate response. Just as Nelson's child heroes, the player must be both reader and actor in the same story. Modernity's emphasis on the manipulation of personal narratives makes these kinds of stories particularly resonant. Fantasy novels, intrusive or not, have always included an element of delight at the differences between the reader's world and the fictional world. Readers must build their understanding of this new world while they follow the story of a fictional character. In interactive fantasy adventure, the reader can pretend to be that fictional character and build her understanding of both world and character by controlling the engagement between the two. While the PC's options are straightforward and preconceived in a way that an individual's are not, the process is similar to the construction of identity. In the cases of both the avatar and the player, identity is selected and consciously maintained to the exclusion of other options.

The choices and performances of the player are not binding. The player, if she is dissatisfied with her choices or with the outcome of her choices, can always reload an earlier saved game and replay that section of narrative, carrying the knowledge from her previous attempt into the current one. Testing a variety of responses before committing to any one outcome is a common tactic which fans use to research and map the game's possibilities before selecting the one she finds most satisfying and leaving its selection saved while she moves on to the next section of narrative. For a player who uses this strategy, there is little to privilege

her chosen performance from all the options she experienced before moving on, and all the experienced possibilities add to the player's knowledge, not only of the world but of the possible personalities and perspectives of the PC: in short, her identity.

Another way in which the player explores her PC's social perspective on the game is in her conversations with her companions. Because the companions value the player's ability to mirror their own social perspectives and because the game rewards the player's success at this, she is compelled to select and express opinions that may be contrary to the player's conception of her PC's feelings and opinions. There is a gap between the performative level of the PC and that of her companions in these conversations. The companions speak with a variety of tones and inflections in their voices, and their facial features express matching emotions, but the PC's half of the conversation is not performed by voice actors or through animation. The player chooses her PC's next response from a numbered list that appears at the bottom of the screen and the companion responds to the comment that the player never hears. Even if the player only attempts each conversation once (though the fan is likely to repeat them in order to maximize her approval scores), there is nothing to privilege the selected response over the others. All the options exist with equal reality in the player's mind. Therefore, the experience of the conversation adds to the map of potential characterizations of the PC, rather than limiting her manifestations. While a character's thoughts, words, or actions in prose must be considered or argued away in the reader's concept of that character, the alternatives presented by the

game's dialogue options can be included or ignored by the player when she constructs the character's personality, regardless of which option she selected. Mapping the PC's potential anticipates the fan's experience of reading fanfiction, where she will encounter many different versions of the character. Despite the appeal of performing a sense of the PC's self, the player has been prepared to enjoy the diversity of personalities that she will encounter in the fanfiction. The heightened identification with the PC that the player brings to the fanfiction is tempered by the map of potential that has been created by the unselected dialogue options and by any re-playing the player has done.

There are six origin stories in *Dragon Age*, but one origin story is disproportionally represented in the fanfiction: Cousland, the human noble. The human noble origin story has fewer performative options than the other origin stories, so the customization of the PC is more reliant on her unperformed dialogue choices. The human noble story is more concerned with the PC's conception of herself. The NPCs she encounters in her origin story all have different expectations about what her primary concern should be: securing a good marriage, learning to govern the family Teyrnir, or fighting for her country. The player has the option of allying herself with any of these perspectives, but only through dialogue. Regardless of those choices, the same narrative is experienced, which forces the young Cousland to flee her family's besieged castle and leave her parents to certain death. The room left by these non-performative choices and the easily recognizable tension between traditional and non-traditional goals for a young woman explain the fan writers' preoccupation with the Cousland PC. In

the following section, several of her stories will be examined. These stories were chosen for their engagement with topics related to the lives of real women and are demonstrative of the possibility that fanfiction has to negotiate self-narrative, rather than being representative.

Fanfiction and Social Narratives

The women fans in Camille Bacon-Smith's studies on fan culture seem under siege. Their families resent or are bewildered by their participation in fan culture, and the women feel ashamed and embarrassed. Bacon-Smith refutes Jenkins's conclusion that women are articulating a new vision of femininity through fanfiction. Collectively, the women in Bacon-Smith's study are verbalizing needs for friendship and community (147) and for emotionally intense romantic relationships (146) through the male characters. The focus on male homosocial relationships, homoerotic or not, in fanfiction indicates a wish on the part of the writers for relationships between equal and equally valued individuals (195-7). In her conclusion, Bacon-Smith writes that "these were women who did not feel like insiders in their homes and lives – for them, their identity lay elsewhere" (289). Even if their identities do not become exclusively 'fan,' then they at least find community in their otherness. Bacon-Smith finds few strong female characters in the stories and a general mistrust of original female characters in the community (144). She partially attributes this absence to the lack of independent women in the source materials with which the writers are working. In her conclusion, she writes that imaginative activity cannot be truly solitary;

instead it must be populated by "a host of characters from real life, television, and other media, with which characters the imaginative player interacts according to the rules of her culture or in deliberate inversion of those rules" (287). She also claims that "structures should build on where people are, not the reverse" (294).

Dragon Age fanfiction feels much more like Jenkins's version, where there is less discussion of fan writers' fears of discovery (Bacon-Smith 207) and of the conflicts that can arise in a co-operative community (Bacon-Smith 220-1). Instead, Jenkins focuses on the productive and "interpretive" (156) side of fan writing: for example, its active challenge of gender roles (181-2). For Jenkins, writers are attempting to "to efface the gap that separates the realm of their own experience and the fictional space of their favourite programs" (171) through the content of the stories. The most salient way in which *Dragon Age* fanfiction differs from the fanfiction described in Bacon-Smith's work and corroborates Jenkins's description is the presence of strong female characters. *Dragon Age* fan writers have strong female characters in the source text with which to work, and they have a culture in which there are more examples of strong, competent, independent female characters to act as models for variations on the material present in the game. Fans have always "stretched [texts'] boundaries to incorporate their own concerns" (Jenkins 156), and the limitations on that stretch that the fans of Bacon-Smith's study kept running up against do not exist in the *Dragon Age* fanfiction of today.

Fanfiction in both studies tends to expand on the roughness of the source text's secondary concerns, especially as they touch the lives of the characters. It

usually, though not always, focuses on emotional, sexual, or formative moments in character arcs. It provides back-story and explores alternatives and possible futures for the characters. Jenkins lists several overlapping types of fanfiction: contextualizing an unexplained moment in the text, expansion of the text's timeline, re-focalization on minor characters, moral realignment, genre shifting, crossovers, character dislocation, personalization, emotional intensification, and eroticization (162-184). Of these categories, the personalizing fanfiction is ubiquitous and is most often combined with contextualization, expansion, emotional intensification, and eroticization. Fan writers expand on the moments where *Dragon Age* touches on an area of interest to them. The brevity with which these issues are dramatized in the source text often begs the question of their context and resolution. Fanfiction is the expression of a fan's filling in of these questions.

Some fanfiction challenges the allegedly genderless world of the game. At the character creation screen, players are told that "Men and women are generally regarded as equals. Both genders are evenly represented in most organizations, noble houses, and military forces." This indicates that the gender that the player chooses will not affect the game's adaptation, and for the most part, this is true. The female character has all the options that a male character does, and NPCs generally treat male and female PCs alike – the only exceptions are in the areas of sexuality and biology. Unlike the feudal system on which the game's culture is loosely based, women can rule countries and be warriors. Fereldan's genderless structure is emphasized in a conversation with the

companion Sten. Sten's home nation is more authoritarian, and he disapproves of personal freedoms that Fereldans possess, including the freedom from gendered responsibilities and limitations. Despite this hypothetical freedom, there are few women in powerful positions in Fereldan. The previous human monarch was male, and after his death, power is usurped from his wife by her father. Almost all of the human nobles with voting privileges are male. The leaders of the Grey Wardens, the Circle of Magi, and the templars are all human men. The current dwarven monarch is male, as are both of his potential successors. Only the obviously marginalized elves have women in positions of power.

In the unfinished long novel *The Keening Blade*, Arsinoe de Blassenville's PC Maude Cousland is single-handedly responsible for ending the Blight; she gathers the armies, duels the popular hero-turned-evil-regent Teyrn Loghain, convinces him that the Blight's threat was real, marries him, and leads the battle against the Archdemon. Blassenville breaks with the in-game falling action, and her Fereldan names Teyrn Loghain the "Hero of Fereldan" and selects him Warden-Commander rather than the Maude. While Loghain generally defers to his wife's experience, Maude is continually confronted with the public's perception of her. In a marketplace puppet show, Maude is the damsel in distress whom Loghain rescues, and in their adventures, both villains and allies mistake her for Loghain's subordinate. Maude is frustrated by her inability to change her public persona and seeks out situations in which she is the unquestioned leader. Like many other fanfiction writers, Blassenville is clear about her intention to

write a story dealing with the themes she does. In the end note of chapter thirteen she writes,

> I've always found it odd, and a bit implausible, that in the scenario in which Loghain kills the Archdemon, the PC is hailed as the 'Hero of Ferelden.' . . . People being people, I can't help but think there would be a great deal of gossip and ambivalence about the PC. . . . If the PC is a woman, I'm absolutely certain there would be even more lurid gossip. Maude's achievements are being quite overshadowed by those of the Great Loghain, and that is an issue I will explore further. It will be ironic (and a test of character) for her to accept that for most people she is just the girl in Loghain's story.

Willowstead's *Duty's Journey* hypothesizes that Fereldan's equality is unique on the continent. After the Blight ends, Elinora Cousland travels abroad and encounters an unexpected hostility to her status as a warrior and a Grey Warden. This resistance culminates in an act of sexual violence, which polarizes the opinions of her male colleagues and allows her to find allies, one of which she then becomes intimate with. Fereldan women's lack of sexual equality is also emphasized when the foreign lover proves to be more concerned with her pleasure than her Fereldan lover was.

In both these stories, the writers are borrowing from the text and from other cultural materials (in one chapter of *The Keening Blade*, Maude Cousland is reading *Pride and Prejudice*, and Loghain's dislike of Mr. Darcy draws attention

to the similarity of their personalities) to create a strong female character who then grapples with the hidden discrimination in her social space. Each character – Elinora and Maude – grapples with that reality in her own way.

Other fanfiction addresses more personal choices that are raised by the game. The most common romantic partner in the fanfiction generally, and in the Cousland stories particularly, is the bastard prince Alistair. In the game, the PC has the option of putting him on the throne of Fereldan after power is regained from the regent and can attempt to convince the nobility to accept her as Queen. This apparently happy ending is undermined by the fact that becoming Grey Wardens has compromised the fertility of them both, and the Cousland PC Queen's inability to bear his child will compromise the stability of the country. Alternatively, she can attempt to convince the more conventional Alistair to keep her as mistress.

This dilemma has prompted several stories which address the increased variety of family structures in modernity and their complications. In "Bloodlines," Elissa Cousland and Alistair adopt a child, and Alistair struggles to feel the same affection for the adopted infant that he feels in an instant for the "simple" child that he was forced to give up. Because this story seems to have been abandoned by its author, there is no successful resolution to this tension. Like Blassenville, the author is explicit about her motivation for the story:

> This story is going to address a rather disturbing trend in fanfiction. There are a lot of authors out there that believe their characters cannot truly love each other unless there is issue from their union .

> . . . As one-half of a childless couple, I find these fics insulting. . . . Childless couples (and those that adopt) can and will love each other as deeply as couples with blood-tied children can. I'm really glad that Dragon Age touches on this subject, and does so with grace and dignity. (kissychan chapter one)

Willowstead's sequel to *Duty's Journey*, entitled *The Bastards of Fereldan*, indicates the flexibility of fanfiction even within the same narrative. Her previous concern of full gender equality is entirely dropped in the sequel, in which Elinora Cousland and Alistair attempt to integrate Alistair's two biological children (not Elinor's), the son of his (conveniently) deceased first wife, and his orphaned bastard nephew into a cohesive family unit. The story is hopeful: despite Elinora's hesitations about the children, her step-nephew comes to see her as his mother.

The Arrangement by Addai addresses modern hesitations of marriage. In this alternative universe fanfiction, Elissa Cousland marries Loghain before the Blight begins. The story is more heavily engaged with the information in one of the two *Dragon Age* novels: *The Stolen Crown*. In it, Loghain watches his best friend be manipulated by love into trusting a spy and then insists the woman he loves marry that same friend, for political reasons. His reluctance to emotionally engage with Elissa – their marriage was also politically motivated – resonates both with the canon of the world, which the knowing reader will recognize and appreciate, and with the fears that plague many people when they enter marriage: that only "bad can come of marriage" (Addai). Elissa's sentiment, when she says

she was not “open to the idea of marriage” but then “realized that [she] did want someone to hold and to take walks with and who would wake up next to [her]” and that she was willing to take the “chance that [they] might be able to leave each other alone where it mattered” (Addai), is more modern than of the world of the game. When the two characters are able to drop their reservations about each other, she “would come to think of it as their true wedding night, when they married each other not for what everyone else wanted of them but for what they chose for themselves. . . . It was a night she would hold on to.” That the value of a marriage is not in its legal or religious implications but in the way that it is conceptualized by the people who are in it resonates in a post-traditional world.

In almost every *Dragon Age* fanfiction, the successful love relationship is central. Unlike the fanfiction of Bacon-Smith’s study, the relationship is usually heterosexual, and its challenges are explicitly rooted in the lives of the authors. To return to a question asked earlier, whether chick lit is merely “rehearsing the same patriarchal narrative of romance” (Ferriss and Young 9), the heroines of *Dragon Age* fanfiction are not passively performing feminine roles and are rarely as uncertain and apologetic as Bridget Jones. In *Dragon Age* fanfiction, women are almost always the more active partner, making decisions in and setting the tones of the relationships that they are in. For most of the heroines, the romantic relationship is something that happens to them while they are pursuing the more primary goal of ending the Blight. Because most fanfiction writers have unambiguously interested male heroes for their heroines, their narratives must contain some other tension to drive the plot. The selection of that source of

tension may be primary in the writer's decision to write the kind of story she does, or she may have to find a source of tension in order to successfully start or complete a story about the romantic object that she wants to "revitalize" (Jenkins 76) her attachment to.

The centrality of the romantic relationship is not the only way that fanfiction resembles chick lit. Both chick lit and fanfiction are written primarily by women for women and have become spaces in which women discuss the alternatives that feminism has made possible for them and the limitations of feminism's success as they are experienced personally, rather than discussing feminism itself. The love relationship's centrality to the stories, rather than being indicative of a desire to find fulfillment primarily through romance, is indicative of the types of stories women are given, particularly as children. As Bacon-Smith suggested twenty years ago,

> Women in fandom need ways of organizing the information about their experience structurally, according to a grammar that is aesthetically satisfying. . . . the search for expression feeds the struggle for social organization and vice versa, but always both are founded *not* upon an ideal of how things might be if they were different, but upon how women feel right now, and how they can sanely hold on to what they are. (294)

Fanfiction then was not the place where new feminist ground was being broken, nor was it the place where strong and independent female characters broke into popular culture. Today, fanfiction includes these kinds of female characters, most

of which still want husbands and families and use predicable, hetero-normative tactics to get these things. Stories for and about women have historically been focused on the love relationship, and it is from these materials, as much as from the fan's text and the fan's desires, that fanfiction writers draw their structure and grammar. It could be that the women writers, despite their predominantly female and always anonymous audience, have not yet freed themselves from their "internalized fears of being and saying themselves" (Rich 20) and it could be that this is what women, when freed by anonymity from the pressure to express an expected feminist discourse, still have to say about their lives.

If fanfiction fails to deliver on Jenkins's claim that it is used to formulate alternatives to pop culture norms, and the easily accessible platform of the internet has transformed the fanfiction community into a virtual, rather than physical, assembly of near-anonymity, then the appeal of fanfiction seems elusive. Talented and intelligent women writers are creating fanfiction instead of or in addition to creating their "own" fiction, and readers are sifting through countless terribly written, melodramatic stories in order to find good ones. What draws fans to stories and characters that they already know, when those characters and stories aren't saying anything that they don't already know?

Myriad Possibilities

Bridget Jones's Diary draws attention to its constructed status by mirroring the plot of a widely known popular narrative and by having its main character discuss that narrative. *Dragon Age*, as well as relying on its player input

in order to construct each adaptation from the whole of its potential, also reminds its player of its constructed status by allowing the PC to overhear conversations between standers-by that discuss the possibility of the unreality of their world. (The most memorable of these ends with one character complaining to the other that the discomfort of his boils exists for the amusement of some "higher being.") Nelson also noted the often lighthearted stabs at fictional unreality in children's intrusion narratives.

Fanfiction draws attention to its constructed nature in several ways. It is always secondary to its original cultural product, and its reader is almost certain to be familiar with the original. She is equally likely to have read more than one fanfiction, so the different stories and writers can inform and speak to each other (both explicitly, in the author's notes that precede or follow many of the chapters; and implicitly in the reader's mind). The author's ability to communicate directly to her readers and the reader's ability to communicate directly with the writer by reviewing her story highlights the impossibility of divorcing the text from the people who give it meaning. Addai's story is addressing a "rather disturbing trend in fanfiction," rather than a disturbing cultural trend. In "Lulzy Letters," one character expresses a desire to avoid the awkwardness that characterized her interactions with her future husband in another fanfiction, "Love and Levirate."

Other writers address perceived flaws in the community through humour. In "Why Can't I Be Queen?" the author criticizes other writers who fail to take into consideration the political reality of the game in their desire to write a pat narrative that fulfills all their wishes. In the story, one of the NPCs painstakingly

explains to Mary Sue Cousland why she can't have what she wants. The heroine of "Nobody Knows" fears the discovery of her unexpected genitals by her love interest, which pokes fun at the multitude of fanfiction stories in which a teenaged PC fears romantic rejection over some trivial concern. Bacon-Smith wrote that experienced writers occasionally used "humour to comment indirectly upon the less well-developed competence of others" (154). She speculates that these stories are humourous for humour's sake, as well as to "remind the community of its own shortcomings and teach newcomers to pay attention" (155). These didactic elements are certainly their own motivation, but they also heighten the reader's awareness of the constructed nature of the stories.

The ability of stories and authors to speak to each other through stories is reliant on the non-competitive nature of fanfiction. If the real world is primary, and the textual world is secondary, then each fanfiction is necessarily tertiary. No matter how many times a fan reads or writes about the solution of a problem or the explanation of a textual incongruity, it has never really happened; it is forever a hypothetical possibility. When a particular fanfiction gestures to the body of fanfiction in which it exists, it draws attention to its tertiary status. A *Dragon Age* player, having already constructed a map of the character's potential manifestations during her experience of the game, will combine the characters, narratives, and interpretations found in fanfiction into a map of hypothetical possibility. The existence and popularity of alternative universe stories highlights the readers' greater interest in possibility than in the reality or mere repetition of the original text.

The appeal of fanfiction as a tertiary space separate from the space of *Dragon Age* is most clearly apparent in the most common type of fanfiction: the erotic short story that narrates the break of romantic tension between the PC and her romantic object. These short stories often address nothing more than the culmination of desire, sometimes coupled with one or both parties' fear of rejection. No matter how many times a reader experiences the consummation of the relationship in fanfiction, it has never really happened, and for as long as the reader stays engaged in the original story, each new fanfiction narrative still carries all its impetus. Most of the longer stories, whose primary concern may be family organization or gender equality, also include chapters or scenes that fit this description. This is a common feature of the fanfiction of many texts, most commonly in the ones that utilize sexual tension as a device to keep fans' interest, such as *The X-Files*. *Dragon Age* does include cut scenes in which the player can observe strongly suggestive content, but these scenes have none of the explicitness that fanfiction writers routinely include.

The representations of sexuality in fanfiction usually focus on its emotional aspect: how sex will change the relationship between two characters or what it means for the individual's identity (Jenkins 190). Giddens writes that the experience of falling in love and the loving sexual relationship is one of the ways that the repressed threat of meaninglessness in modernity returns to individuals (201). Love and sex cannot help but carry the "moral charge and generalised significance which separate it from the egotistical concerns of the partners" (206), despite its separateness from procreation. Intimate relationships are the primary

source of moral satisfaction for individuals in modernity (205) and the "means by which life explores the frontiers of the possible, the horizons of the imaginary and of nature" (206). Relationships force the partners to share and entwine their narratives in an accommodating and mutually satisfying way. They open the process of identity construction to the participation of another person. Even as traditional pornography – short films that privilege the male gaze and which rarely include any kind of emotional relationship between its characters – becomes more acceptable, fanfiction, and especially erotic fanfiction, continues to be a source of shame for its readers. The kind of eroticism in fanfiction, existing between two characters that the reader has an emotional attachment to (and who usually have an emotional attachment to each other), brings the repressed awareness of the threat of meaninglessness into the stories. In contrast, traditional pornography allows the sexual partners and the viewer to keep their stories and selves private. The sex in fanfiction lends an increased awareness of that threat, albeit a fictional one.

Whether through the dilemmas of choice or the threat of exposure, fanfiction addresses the same concerns of the self that individuals struggle with. Just as the different fanfiction stories inform each other, the different versions of a single character combine in the reader's mind into a map of potential ways to be. While it can be difficult for the reader to find the good fanfiction among the bad, it is very easy to find fanfiction which centers around the character that most interests the reader. Fanfiction.net allows readers to set search parameters, including character name. Searching under Cousland will bring up all of the

stories mentioned in this chapter, strengthening their connection to each other. Readers can also select a second character's name and genre of story to assist them in finding a story which deals with a particular secondary concern brought up by the text. The map of potential that a fan would get from reading fanfiction is both larger and more detailed than what she would get from the game. Most fanfiction is concerned primarily with character and identity, where *Dragon Age* is primarily concerned with constructing a narrative gaming experience, albeit with an individualized avatar.

In each fanfiction, the avatar is committed to a particular variation of herself, just as a person's identity is committed to a particular version of her life story. For both the fanfiction character and the individual, the process of selecting a narrative is as much a process of selecting out as selecting in – for every narrative choice she makes, she is necessarily turning away from other choices. For the individual, different interpretations of same life story compete, each threatening the validity of the others. Because fanfiction is non-competitive, alternative stories do not invoke this same dread for the reader. Instead, each new version of the character and her story adds to, rather than takes from, possibility. It is significant that fanfiction writers and readers are equally drawn to fanfiction that is interestingly original as to ones that are interestingly faithful. It is not only revisitation and renewal that draws readers, but variety. The rewriting that is done in fanfiction is a "corrective intervention" (Giddens 72), but this corrective intervention has little to do with the narcissistic expression of the classically personalized Mary Sue. There are plenty of these in *Dragon Age* fanfiction, but

the most valued stories reflect the PC's varied challenges and solutions. The intervention in fanfiction is of the process which fractures self and story into variations that must be selected from, rather than variations which add to wholeness. In the communal personalization of the character, the reader can construct a map of the chararcter's whole in a way that she cannot for herself. Moving from the parts to the whole in a fictional character suggests a similar potential wholeness behind the individual's personal narrative that, in every other circumstance, is threatening.

Conclusion

Fanfiction characters need not be avatars to function in this way. While this chapter has focused on the variety of the PC's representations that exist in fanfiction, all of these PCs interact with representations of the companions and other NPCs, which are equally varied. In some of the stories mentioned here, such as *Shades of Grey* and "Love and Levirate," the reader is given more insight into and interaction with these other characters than the PC. Reading stories that present a more traditional fictional character (neither an avatar nor an interactive videogame character) in a variety of non-competitive manifestations would allow the reader to construct a similar map of that character's potential. Whether the relationship between fan and character is similar to the identification that existed between Bridget and reader or more closely resembles Bridget's idealization of Elizabeth, the reconstruction of the variety of possible selves that existed prior to the construction of identity would be equally soothing.

Dragon Age allows the player to participate in the construction of her PC's fictional identity in the original text, which lays the process of identity construction bare. The similarity of this process to the process of the construction of the identities of real people may be partially responsible for the stigma of these kinds of games, since this process calls up the dread of meaninglessness so common in modernity. The game allows its players to engage with these processes in play, which robs them of some of their power to elicit that dread.

The fan's ability to construct a map of a distant and inaccessible space from the materials she has will be of continuing importance in the next chapter. While a reader of Coleman Barks's trans-lingual adaptations of Rumi should feel that there is a separation between her world and the world of the text, the fan-like colonizing of that space for her own interests greatly adds to the appeal of the work. In both texts – *Dragon Age* and Rumi's poems – the fan is invited to fill in what is missing from her own experiences and perspectives.

Chapter Four

The Other Author:

Rumi, Barks, and cross-lingual adaptation; Or,

The Empty Space

The previous chapters on adaptations examined the ways that audiences fill the blanks in their knowledge with information gleaned from other adaptations of the same stories. In chapter one, readers were introduced to a new perspective on their own social space through their knowledge of and emotional engagement with the original. The audience's closeness to that earlier text was able to help them make cognitive sense of the new ideas and information that Helen Fielding was presenting while retaining their interest. Chapter two examined the importance of gathering and synthesizing information to the interactive audiences of videogames – a genre which inherently relies on its own adaptive qualities. In chapter three, audiences became even more productive, authoring their own adaptations and extensions of the original text; their pleasure was doubled, not only because they were able to view the original and the adaptation simultaneously, but because the hyperreal space of fanfiction enables versions of the same characters and stories to co-exist non-competitively. In this chapter, another type of audience and another type of space will be explored: the unknowing audience. This is not the same type of unknowing audience which merely approaches the new adaptation as if it is an original text and evaluates it based on its own criteria (Hutcheon 120). The unknowing audience examined

here is the audience which has been made aware of the existence of the original text, but has not and cannot gain any firsthand knowledge or experience of the original because of a language barrier.

Adaptation, not Translation; Barks, not Rumi

In his adaptations of Rumi, Coleman Barks is writing for a popular audience and is enjoying enormous success. On several jacket reviews, people have claimed that Rumi is the best selling poet in the English language, outdoing not only contemporary poets, but staples of English literature such as Shakespeare, Keats, or Wordsworth. Anecdotally, I've discovered at family gatherings and in casual conversations with acquaintances that people with little to no interest in literature recognize his name – Rumi is being read in churches and in therapy groups. Musicians are setting Barks's versions to music, his work is in "How to be a Writer" books (Lamott) and in meditation books (Easwaran, Douglas-Klotz, Dorgan), and there is an *Idiot's Guide to Rumi* (Emerick). Publishing houses that specialize in New Age spirituality such as Shambala Press, Inner Traditions, or The Light have all published books on Rumi. Coleman Barks is the most prolific and widely known personality associated with Rumi in popular Western readership. He has been doing "versions" (his term) of Rumi's work since 1976, and in the preface to his 2003 Rumi volume, he claims to have sold over half a million copies of Rumi books. His most recent Rumi book was released in October 2010.

A different study could easily criticize Coleman Barks for the way that he has (mis)used Rumi and his work: the art on the book covers is easily Orientalist; Barks represents Rumi in a very anecdotal, almost flippant manner; he intersperses the versions of Rumi's work with anecdotes and photos of himself; and he combines and separates original poems into new poems which do not have a single clear original in Rumi's work. At the root of these liberties is Barks's inability to speak Persian; he relies on the older translations done by the Orientalist scholars Reynold Nicholson and A.J. Arberry as well as on the assistance of Persian speakers and scholars. Barks's famous introduction to Rumi was when his friend Robert Bly handed him a copy of A.J. Arberry's translations and suggested that Barks "release [the poems] from their cages" (*Essential* 290). To his credit, Barks does not represent his work with Rumi as scholarship and resists defining the poetry as translation, and he gives credit for the books' success to Rumi.

The focus of this chapter is not that easy criticism, nor is it a description of the differences between Barks's versions and Rumi's. While these complaints are accurate and valuable, they do not explain why Barks would choose to present Rumi in the way he does, nor why he has been so successful doing so. As Edward Said points out to us, a Western representation of another culture "respond more to the culture that produced [them] than to its putative object" (22). Since a lack of knowing has historically been a part of the way Westerners make sense of other cultures, the space created by Barks to hold the audience's unknowing and the process by which it is filled or not filled is worth exploring.

This chapter is primarily concerned with how the absence of the reader's knowledge functions when she reads Coleman Barks's books. As such, it probably has very little in common with work being done on the Persian Rumi. For the purposes of clarity, "Rumi" in this paper refers to the persona or effigy that has been constructed by Barks.

While Barks is not alone in publishing adoring appropriations of alternative (to Christianity) spirituality as part of a popular post-religious new-age enlightenment movement or even alone in "translating" Rumi, his success is startling. At the root of it is his positioning of Rumi for his reader in a way that invites a particular type of reading and understanding that not only appeals to the reader but also mirrors the content of his books. Barks spends a good deal of time in his introductions, forewords, and prefaces teaching the reader how to think about and interact with the poetry. In these pages, he emphasizes the separation of time and space between Rumi and the reader. Almost in the same breath, he undermines the importance of this space. Rather than highlighting the incomprehensibility of the literature that Rumi produced, Barks lends the work an apocryphal tone that is difficult to argue with. Barks never explains, he alludes. Rather than clarifying, he mystifies. Embedded in this mystification is the idea that the text's secret will be recognized by the reader when she reaches the poetry and that the separation of space and time is of less importance than it seems. In these introductory pages, Barks highlights the Otherness of the original, devalues the impact of that difference, and hands the reader the capacity to make sense of

the text based on its universality, rather than on any particular knowledge she possesses.

Making the Gap

Despite the large differences between Barks's and Rumi's work, Barks emphasizes Rumi as the primary author of these texts, positioning himself as secondary, or at best equivalent, in the creation of the poems. In the editions of the three books examined for this chapter, Rumi's name is bigger and more prominent on the cover than Barks's, and there is a distinctly Oriental/Other feel to the art on each of the volumes that emphasizes its origin in another culture. Barks also uses a large amount of space in the books to position Rumi and his poetry for the reader and to direct the reader to a specific kind of reading. From 1995 on, Barks's books include sectioned introductions, as well as separate prefaces and afterwords. Inside the same volumes, the poetry is divided into sections between five and nine pages: shorter by far than the total amount of space that Barks spends introducing the books. Each of these sections is again prefaced by Barks. Together, Barks's prose represents a fairly large proportion of the book, and in it, the reader is provided with basic biographical information about Rumi, descriptions of key moments in Rumi's life, explanations of Persian terms and ideas represented in Rumi's work. Barks then retreats not only from authorship of the text, but also from the authority to introduce it adequately.

The inclusion of these aspects of the texts prevents readers from treating the text as "simply new" (Hutcheon 121), despite the absence of a direct

experience with the original. In place of the original, there is a space and an awareness of a gap in knowledge, and it is through this empty space, rather than through knowledge, that the reader sees the adaptation. This empty space must fill the function of the palimpsest of the original. It will multiply the reader's pleasure. Just as adaptations resonate from the meanings and emotions that knowing audiences bring from the original to the adaptation, Barks's introductions make his adaptations resonate with an unknowable, mythic space.

Of the three Barks books examined in this chapter, the longest description of Rumi's life is in the 2001 *The Soul of Rumi*. Barks begins by situating Rumi's time in world history, mentioning the crusades as well as more-or-less contemporary Western mystics such as Francis of Assisi and Meister Eckhart. While few details are given, the effect of the inclusion of such recognizable specificity is to contrast the apocryphal tone that Barks adopts as soon as he gets into details of Rumi's life: "The poet and teacher Fariduddin Attar recognized the teenaged Rumi as a great spirit. He is reported to have said, as he saw [Rumi's father] walking toward him with the young Rumi a little behind, 'Here comes a sea, followed by an ocean!'" (3). In *The Book of Love*, this tone is achieved when Barks reports that there were minor tremors when Rumi was on his deathbed (xxvii). This tone of myth indicates to the reader what kind of style of reading is required: one in which absolute knowledge is impossible, and knowing is conditional and subjective. This is a tone that Barks will continue in for some pages, such as when he describes Rumi's dervish community: "The great human questions arose. What is the purpose of desire? What is a dream? . . . What is it

to be a true human being? . . . This high level of question-and-answer permeated the poetry . . . and they knew the answers might not come in discursive form, but rather in music, in image, in dream" (*Soul* 4).

The most often represented biographical detail is Rumi's meeting with Shams, who becomes an important friend of Rumi. This detail is even more mysterious, clouded in obscure language, poor in detail, and reliant on unspecific, sometimes divine, actors and magic. The presentation in *The Essential Rumi* includes Shams's spoken wish for someone who could "endure his company." A disembodied voice answers, telling him to seek Rumi (xi). In *The Soul of Rumi*, Shams tumbles Rumi's books into a fountain during their first meeting;

> Rumi turned to the volumes on the bottom. 'We can retrieve them,' said Shams. 'They'll be as dry as they were.'
>
> Shams lifted one up to show him. Dry.
>
> 'Leave them,' said Rumi.
>
> With that relinquishment Rumi's deep life began, and the poetry. (6)

In this book, Barks takes the time to point out that there are several versions of this first meeting, of which the above is only one. In *The Essential Rumi*, Barks presents a different version of their initial meeting (xi), and in each book, he draws the reader's attention to the existence of other versions. The tone and variety of these alternative stories emphasize that the poetry does not require reading for absolute truth. Barks is not uneasy about this lack of certainty; instead

he celebrates the plurality that the variety of stories suggest, because it invites the possibility of plural readings of the text that will follow.

Another effect of Barks's consistent inclusion of the stories of Shams is that the relationship between those two men demonstrates the kind of relationship that can also exist between Rumi and the reader. In each story, Shams disappears from Rumi's life, though the details are again inconsistent. Barks quotes Rumi: "What I had thought of before as God I met today in a human being" (*Soul* 6), then emphasizes that this "human-becoming-God" (*Soul* 9) could be fully realized *only* in the absence of Shams. In *The Essential Rumi*, Barks reports that Rumi wrote, "Why should I seek? I am the same as / he. His essence speaks through me. / I have been looking for myself!"(xii) after unsuccessfully searching for Shams. In another book, "Rumi wandered for a time in search of Shams, until he realized . . . that Shams existed in the Friendship" and that "the poetry comes from there" (*Soul* 6). In *The Essential Rumi*, Barks comes to the same conclusion with "The union was complete . . . . Shams was writing the poems" (xii) rather than Rumi. This presence and union in absence serves Barks very well when it comes to selling books to an unknowing audience. The distance that was unbridgeable between the two men after Shams's disappearance led Rumi to his poetry, and his union with the absent Shams mirrors the "union with the divine" that Barks discusses on the very next page (*Soul* 7). The unspoken suggestion in the inclusion of this story is that distance – between two men, between man and God, or between writer and reader – need not be negative, nor does it necessarily preclude the possibility of understanding or relationship.

The style with which Barks describes Rumi continues in his explanation of Rumi's poetry. He also often uses water metaphors to describe the body of work: "poems easily splash over, slide from one overlay to another . . . they are a fluid, continually self-revising, self-interupting *medium*" (*Essential* xv, emphasis in original). In *The Soul of Rumi*, Barks writes "Readers of the *Masnavi* may dive in anywhere and swim around. It is a flow whose refrain is the ecstatic exclamation, 'This has no end!'" (*Soul* 7). By making Rumi's work a medium which can be sampled at will, Barks eliminates some of the anxiety readers may feel about approaching a text which has been made so distant from their own body of knowledge. Diving in and swimming around suggests that the contact between the reader and text is an introductory one. It suggests an immersion in a new medium, rather than a sustained engagement with the text. In *The Soul of Rumi*, Barks writes that poetry tries to describe the inner life of people, and that in its attempt, it becomes as indescribable as inner life itself (8). Barks describes Rumi's poetry in particular as doing "the work of icons; they connect us more deeply with our souls" (*Soul* 11). Describing Rumi in this way invites the reader to approach the poetry searching for an experience rather than for understanding. In Rumi's work, "the secular and the sacred are always mingling, the mythic and the ordinary, dream vision and street life" (*Soul* 11), and the effort to separate these things from each other is trivial, a "chew toy for the intellect" (*Essential* xvi). Rumi is an immersive and "not empirically verifiable" experience (*Soul* 5), rather than a cognitive one.

In *The Soul of Rumi*, Barks seems to provide the reader with some context for understanding the poetry when he introduces the Arabic words *fana* and *baqa*. He writes that they are "two major *streamings* in consciousness . . . and in Rumi's poetry" (8, emphasis in original). The inclusion of another water reference in the explanations emphasizes the evasiveness of the explanations. *Fana* is "a natural abundance of existence that identifies this state. Three hundred billion galaxies might seem a bit gaudy to some, but not to this awareness; in *fana* what is here can never be said extravagantly enough. *Fana* is what opens our wings, what makes boredom and hurt disappear. We break into pieces inside it" (9). Then *baqa* "goes the other way across the doorsill. The Arabic word means 'a living within': it is the walk back down Qaf Mountain, where the vision came, life lived with clarity and reason, the turning again toward what somehow always was. The concentration of a night of stars into one needle's eye" (*Soul* 9). These hazy and expansive definitions do not add in any meaningful way to the readers' understanding, but rather add to the space between the reader and the work. They also demonstrate the tone of readership best suited for the poetry

Despite the fact that all this information about Rumi, his poetry, and *fana* and *baqa* is more affective than informative, Barks still pulls back from it, undermining in a few words what he has spent many more words asserting. Immediately after the above descriptions, he writes "I may not be communicating . . . . I have much to learn in these matters" (*Soul* 9). He repeats this retraction of veracity in his descriptions later with, "No doubt I oversimplify or misrepresent what they are" (*Soul* 11). This prevents the reader from relying on the definitions

provided. Meaning is suggested, but can be no more factual than the myth of Rumi's life. The explanations may be useful, but never definitive, and Barks's retreat from the explanations that seemed so blithe earlier on the page suggests a style of reading in which the reader need not be concerned with truth but with a felt understanding of the text. If the author need not commit to a particular interpretation, then the reader certainly need not.

Another dichotomy that Barks creates in these sections is the absence of Rumi's personality and the presence of his own. Barks writes that "Rumi's poems are not personal" (*Soul* 11), but he includes a variety of details about his personal life, including the friendships that surround his work with Rumi (*Soul* 188-189), childhood memories that strengthen Barks's connection to Rumi (*Essential* 291), and the process of creating part of the visual component of the book (*Soul* 13). The first two biographical details address Barks's success in integrating Rumi's work and life into his own. The last draws attention to the constructed nature of the books, just as fans' rewatching makes apparent their shows' constructed nature. Barks writes that what he deeply wants is "for Rumi to become vitally present for the readers, part of what John Keats calls our *soul-making*: that process that is both collective and uniquely individual" (14), and creating this model of interactivity between Rumi and Barks demonstrates how a person might do that.

The mythic style of the information that Barks gives to his reader encourages a style of readership that abandons absolute truth and encourages the reader's expectation of finding spiritual fulfillment in the text. Barks's oscillation

between romanticizing Rumi and emphasizing his own lack of authority over the text encourages the reader to make her own meanings. Barks does for his reader what fans do for themselves; he creates an ideal existence of the text outside the representation that they are looking at. People are not just comfortable taking that much control over texts, they seek out and create texts that allow it. Barks's introductions actively invite reader's participation, and that invitation helps explain why Barks is a particularly popular "translator" of Rumi, despite the generally sub-standard quality of his poems, both as translation and as original poetry.

Swimming in Space

While there is not room in this section to analyze the entire body of Barks's adaptations of Rumi, there is space to discuss the ways that the poetry also gestures towards an ideal experience outside the space of the writing. The reader has idealized the inaccessible text and has been encouraged to personalize their interpretation of the text before them. In the body of the texts, she will now read poetry that also only gestures towards its intended topic. As advertised, the versions "splash and slide" (*Essential* xv) not only over the body of Rumi's work, but over themes and meaning. To borrow Barks's style: the versions are most like spoonfuls; they are often affective, but contain only a suggestion of the undescribed – or, as the authors would put it, the indescribable – whole. Barks's versions are not focused on style or language, but on a celebration of an experience that lies beyond words and poetry. Specifics are unimportant here as

well, just as Barks has suggested in the prose sections of his books. The suggestion that what is most valuable is not here encourages the reader to do as Barks did, and turn to the only other place that they can find this elusive experience – within. The poetry helps celebrate the interior experience of the reader by welcoming whatever form their awareness takes.

Silence is a recurring theme in the poetry. Just as Barks professed his inadequacy for the task of translating Rumi and then did it anyways, the poetry is full of lines like, "This poetry. I never know what I'm going to say. / I don't plan it. / When I'm outside the saying of it / I get very quiet and don't speak at all" (*Love* 57). Barks claimed that his translations came from a place of emotional or spiritual appreciation rather than a cognitive understanding of Rumi's language or context, and the subject of that poetry is similarly spontaneous and separate from the cognitive processes or understanding of the original writer. In *The Essential Rumi*, the lines "A great silence overcomes me, / and I wonder why I ever thought to use language" (20) suggest a division between the unsuccessful description of rapture and the more authentic experience of it. A few pages later, the same idea is expressed more metaphorically: "The speechless full moon / comes out now" (*Essential* 22). If Rumi's own words are a flawed representation of the more valuable interior experience, then Barks's potential mistakes are of much less consequence. For Barks, the perfect thing in Rumi's poetry is not the poetry, but the experience behind it; an idea inherent in both the poetry being adapted and in the adapter's description of his own process.

Not only is there a space between the reporting of experience and the actual experience, there is a constant longing in the former for the latter. The tone of this longing is more sweet than despondent: "with one note the nightingale / indicates the rose" (*Essential* 34). Lines such as "Every moment the sunlight is totally empty and / totally full" (*Soul* 45) and "A lover's food is the love of bread / not the bread" (*Essential* 29) suggest that longing is an inherent part of the fullness the individual is longing for. Rumi writes that the emptiness and the longing that it invites is a prerequisite for the experience of fullness: "I have / cleared this house, so that your work can, / when it comes, fill every room. I slide / like an empty boat pulled over the water" (*Soul* 76). Just as the narrator has cleared himself for the experience of God's work, the reader's unproblematic unknowing has cleared her for the poetry.

The poetry in Rumi's book is not merely concerned with the experience of the author(s), but also with those of the reader. The poetry is permeated with "you" and "we" that could easily indicate or include the reader. This invites the reader into the same silent experience that the poetry idealizes. With "emptiness is what your soul wants" (*Soul* 31), the reader is invited into the same emptiness that Rumi sits in while he waits for the immensity of feeling that he personifies, sometimes as God and sometimes as Shams. Rumi also directs his reader to "not be satisfied with stories, how things / have gone with others. Unfold / your myth" (*Essential* 41), encouraging her to seek her own experience, rather than rely on Rumi's stories. In case the reader feels apprehensive, Rumi also writes "when you look for God, / God is the look in your eyes, / in the thought of looking"

(*Essential* 13), which reassures the reader that the act of looking and the act of reading his book already contain some of the success that he is encouraging her toward. In another volume, the line "Remember, // the looking itself is a trace of what / we're looking for" (*Soul* 39) reiterates the same point. The distance that has been created between the poetry about the divine and the experience of the divine is bridgeable by the merest of human agency.

The expansiveness of the experience that Rumi is encouraging his reader toward is set in contrast to very specific details that are sprinkled throughout the poetry. The lines "Cloth / for green robes has been cut / from pure absence. You're // the tailor, settled among his shop goods, quietly sewing" (*Soul* 33) demonstrate the comfort of this dichotomy. Earlier in *The Soul of Rumi*, Barks connects the colour green with a sensation of rapture, delight, and sanctuary (15), and the reappearance of the same colour eighteen pages later to describe absence again connects the divine with the longing and absence that must precede it. The word "cloth" connects the absence and the rapture with the tailor that comes in the next sentence. The tailor is given a setting and an action, which sets him securely in the observable world while he interacts with the unobservable absence. The least immediate "pure absence" exists almost alone in the same line as the most immediate: "you." In another book, the same effect is achieved through personification and the interaction of a person with the intangible: "Last night the moon came dropping its clothes in the street / I took it as a sign to start singing, / falling up into the bowl of the sky. / The bowl breaks. Everywhere is falling everywhere," (*Essential* 8). This interaction between personal pronouns and

abstract concepts is made more successful by the gap between the inaccuracy of Barks's explanations and Rumi's "master poetry" (*Soul* 12). While there is a line between the "paraphernalia" of Barks's prose (*Soul* 12) and the poetry that is quite obvious in the books' layouts, another line exists between the personal and the "enlightened" within the poetry, and this line is much more fluid and negotiable.

The negotiability of the line between the person and the abstract also makes the goal of Rumi's poetry, the indescribable experience, an easy achievement. On page 83 of *The Soul of Rumi*, the reader is instructed to spread her wings "as a tree lifts / in the orchard." Not only do the tree's branches resemble the arms of a person outstretched in an expression of joy, but the tree's natural movement is to spread itself in that way; the natural motion of the reader is to open herself. A poem in another volume begins with "I feel like the ground, astonished / at what the atmosphere has brought to it. What I know / is growing inside me. Rain makes / every molecule pregnant with a mystery" (*Essential* 39). The affected objects – the ground, the first person pronoun, the molecule – are not active in the processes that have changed them. The astonishment of the ground comes because of what has been brought to it. The growth within the speaker happens of its own accord, and the molecule is made pregnant simply by being rained on. The only required action is presence. A few pages previous, Rumi writes that "Mystics are experts in laziness . . . . they continually see God working all around them. / The harvest keeps coming in, yet they / never even did the plowing!" (*Essential* 30). Just as Barks's introductions remove the burden of

specialized knowledge from the reader, the content reaffirms the reader's inherent ability to achieve a more meaningful existence without any particular effort. Its inaccessibility renders each glimpse more valuable; even if a comment is "trivial or wrong, the listener hears the source" (*Essential* 30). This acceptance of incorrect or trivial expressions not only frees Barks, it also frees the reader – neither can go wrong in reading.

Given the lack of particular instruction in Rumi's writing, it is unsurprising that there is a great tolerance for variety in the achievement and expression of the intangible. Each person's interests are her own way to worship: "Let the beauty we love be what we do. / There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground" (*Essential* 36). While each person is free to choose the exact expression of her own worship, a commonality underlies all action: "Every forest branch moves differently / in the breeze, but as they sway, / they connect at the roots" (*Soul* 32). In another poem, each person's needs and wants are ways to find the ocean that is often Rumi's metaphor for the divine:

> Notice how everyone has just arrived here
>
> from a journey.
>
> Notice how each wants a different food.
>
> Notice how the stars vanish as the sun comes up,
>
> and how all streams stream toward the ocean.
>
> Look at the chefs preparing special plates
>
> for everyone, according to what they need.

> Look at this cup that can hold an ocean. (*Essential* 7)

The cup that holds an entire ocean is made specific with the adjective "this," but is also unspecific since it is an example of one cup that would be served at the table of individual dinners; it stands also for each cup and person there. This recalls the dichotomy between the specific and the expansive at the same time that it welcomes each varied instance of specificity. Coleman Barks celebrated his own subjective understanding of Rumi's poetry; likewise, Rumi validates his readers' subjective experiences as legitimate expressions of a universal urge.

Connecting to an eternal presence enables the readers to feel a part of its pervasive and persistent nature, which is separate from her usual self. The first stanza in Barks's first collection of Rumi poems reads

> All day I think about it, then at night, I say it.
> Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?
> I have no idea.
> My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,
> and I intend to end up there. (*Essential* 2)

Here, Rumi is dividing the self into at least two parts: the speaking I which thinks all day and speaks at night; and the soul from an "elsewhere" which can only be defined negatively (not here) and which the speaker intends to reach. Later in the same volume, Rumi writes "Every spoken word is a covering for the inner self. / A little curtain-flick no wider than a slice / of roast meat can reveal hundreds of exploding suns" (30), which endows this elsewhere beyond the speaking self with a radiance that can only be glimpsed incidentally. Elsewhere is described as a

mystery or secret in other poems. In *The Soul of Rumi*, Rumi is affirming and positive about the sentient, speaking self, but reverent about the unseen self; "There is a shimmering excitement in / being sentient and shaped . . . . Form / *is* ecstatic. Now imagine the inner: // soul, intelligence, the secret worlds!" (193, emphasis in original). Existence and sentience are no ordeals for Rumi, but the elsewhere, the inner secret world of the "spirit form we are" (194) is more appealing and unobservable.

The way that Rumi folds the universal and the specific into each other is very permissive. It celebrates the readers' individual experiences just as it idealizes a universal, if rarely named, religious experience. Barks refuses to claim a privileged understanding of Rumi's poetry, just as Rumi refuses to claim an understanding of the experiences he describes so the reader is twice removed from the subject of the poetry. These refusals allow the reader the space to insert her own experiences and understanding into the poetry. Because Rumi refuses to privilege his poetry with a direct description of the thing yearned for, no experience that the reader has can be wrong. The volumes celebrate of specificity, just as they suggest that each specific is merely a single instance of a larger, more permanent thing that can only be glimpsed at. The poems, repetitive and affective, are mouthfuls of Rumi's ocean; each tastes like the whole, yet none of them can contain its entirety. Because the poetry – at least as it exists in Barks's adaptations – is already constructed so as to lend itself to a reading that includes the reader's participation, it is well served by Barks's introductions, which claim to be familiar, though not intimately so, with the thing sought. Only

by stringing together many different expressions of this universal experience can the poetry and the scope of its subject be grasped.

Resisting Rumi

Barks has been honest about the relationship between his poems and Rumi's – he calls them versions and suggests "collaborative translation" as one possible term for his work on Rumi, and his emphasis on Rumi's universality has undoubtedly granted access to and awareness of Rumi's work to a readership that is unlikely to have come into contact with it without this approach. Increased communication between and awareness of other cultural contexts and literary traditions is increasingly important in an increasingly globalized and antagonistic world context. The question must be asked, though, to what extent Barks's work does that. Barks quite deliberately purges most of the Islamic references in Rumi's work, saying that "Rumi didn't care for the cultural categories that we are so often caught up in and blinded by" ("Poet of Divine Ecstasy"). While Rumi's work may be universal, in the sense that much literature is concerned with more-or-less universal experiences, its engagement with its context is part of its meaning. Barks writes that he "dislikes god-words" and avoids using them, but that choice ignores the fact that "god words" have specific and varied meanings across time and culture. These elements – the purging of a specific culture and a specific God, Allah, from the work, divorces the poems from a context that is alien to most of Barks's readers.

This choice is concurrent with another element underlying Barks's work, one which has been discussed from only one perspective. By privileging intuitive understanding over objective knowledge, Barks robs his readers of the opportunity to step beyond their own selves and their current understanding. In a early interview, Barks says that he is "innocent of all but this mother tongue" ("Poet of Divine Ecstasy"), and in the introduction to *The Essential Rumi*, Barks writes that "facts, dates, and chew-toys for the intellect are stashed in the Notes" (xvi). By being "innocent" rather than ignorant of other languages and by comparing facts to dogs' toys, Barks privileges anti-intellectualism in a style more common to a very different attitude to the Other, particularly a Muslim Other. Most tellingly, Barks refers to English as "this mother tongue" rather than *his* mother tongue, a distinction that would suggest an egalitarian regard for all languages, rather than privileging his own. The poems have a distinctly "New Age" feel to them, but Barks does not discuss his reliance on that vocabulary or style, which suggests that either he is unaware of its embeddedness with that system, or that he sees that system as somehow neutral or natural.

There is one other element of Barks's work that bears mentioning here. While three different anthologies of Barks's poetry were analyzed for this chapter, the texts varied most in their introductions. It has already been mentioned that Barks's poems have no clear or single counterpart in Rumi's work, but in each volume, whole poems are repeated with only superficial changes. It is as if Barks took out all the titles and breaks between poems, chosen new places to break the text into separate poems, then shuffled the newly constituted poems into a new

order and grouped them under different headings. He also changes the form of the poems – in *The Essential Rumi,* the free-form poems all have their own shape. *The Soul of Rumi* uses couplets almost exclusively, and *Rumi: The Book of Love* employs a combination of free form, couplets, and other variations. Of the three, only *The Essential Rumi* is readable poetry.

Barks's blindness to his own bias and refusal to engage with the context of Rumi's poetry undermine any possibility of actual understanding. While Barks should be credited with early and outspoken opposition to the 'War on Terror,' especially its Iraq manifestation ("From Coleman Barks"), there is an individualistic and anti-intellectual bias in his representation of Rumi that is no more palatable than the similarly uncritical and one-dimensional representations of the Other made from the other side of the political spectrum.

Conclusion

Barks's introductions do acquaint the reader with the text she is about to read, but their real significance is how they model a style of readership that is then rewarded by the body of the text. If the reader approaches Rumi's poetry in the way that Barks suggests, embracing a personal understanding of the text at hand, then Rumi's longing for divinity includes her. Her personal experience becomes a part of a larger community of longing. This approach to reading contains the same drawing together of individual experience and an inaccessible whole that exists in fanfiction. Fanfiction readers combine the various manifestations of a single character from different texts to construct a map of potential. In Barks's

poetry, the reader catches glimpses of the divine that she combines into a single sense of understanding that incorporates her own experience even as it reaches for what Barks describes as a universal awareness.

Her ability to engage with the text in this way is dependent on embracing her unknowing status. If she approaches the poetry believing that knowledge of the original is important, then there remains a constant restraint from full engagement, because of her unknowing status. Barks, whose place in space and history sets him much closer to the reader, cannot carry the same distant authority as the mythical figure that he presents as Rumi. Barks can be known in a way that Rumi cannot. If Barks did not draw so much attention to his status as an adapter and instead allowed the reader to believe that these poems were his original works, then the expansive tone of the poetry would rankle more. The sense of distance that Barks carves out for his reader is required to let that tone reverberate.

Handing the reader the power to make sense of the text by using her own experiences is not only comfortable for Barks's readers, but it makes the kind of interaction between text and reader that can be observed in other adaptations or multi-versioned stories more explicit. Because these poems are variations on a single elusive theme, the reader is given the opportunity to map the meaning that each poem suggests and the relationship the poems have to one another. For this subject – the elusive and indescribable God which lays hidden in all things – this method of reading and reward is particularly appropriate. The reader gains a sense of the sacred in the same way that Rumi describes it: in glances, which can

never describe the totality of the thing glimpsed. Her understanding of the thing being described grows incrementally, and eventually her map becomes larger than the poem she is experiencing and her sense of mastery grows.

Conclusion

From the Parts to the Whole

The reader's interest in these texts stems from her reliance on her knowledge and participation. An individual's ability to manage the multiple meanings of a story by changing details is a skill that late modernity's variety of choices and lifestyles has made necessary. The process of adapting story is common to both individual's self narratives and fictional stories, but because the individual's sense of self is reliant on her personal narrative, there is more anxiety inherent in manipulating it. Viewing and interacting with texts that suggest meaning through the difference between the original and the adaptation, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, reward the reader's competency at understanding the implications of differences. *Dragon Age* mimics the construction of identity by forcing the PC to perform a perspective with only partial knowledge of the social world in which she acts. Because *Dragon Age* is limited by its programmed possibilities, the player has the option of becoming knowing by researching and combining the various perspectives and information yielded by other characters and play-throughs. Imaginatively constructing and inhabiting that space allows the player to become omniscient in the world of the game in a way that an actual individual never can in the actual world. In fanfiction, specific variations on a character combine in the reader's mind into a generalized character that includes all her variations. The same thing happens in Barks's adaptations of Rumi's poetry: each description of a divine experience coalesces into a single

understanding. This reverses the process of construction – instead of starting with a range of possibility and ending at a specific interpretation, the reader begins with the specific and builds a sense of wholeness from there.

The palimpsest of the original – or the empty palimpsest of acknowledged unknowing – is crucial to the reader's engagement with these stories. Because her understanding of the text in front of her is as impacted by the palimpsest as it is by the adapted text, meaning exists outside the text, in the intersections of reader, original, and adaptation in the reader's mind. Being cognizant of her authority over that intersection, the reader feels freer to construct and manipulate meaning in the texts. The knowledge of the knowing reader guides her expectations of the adaptations and gives her greater authority over and participation in the text. The gamer's initial lack of knowledge drives the tension of interactive stories, where knowing is rewarded by the opportunity to perform with confidence. Barks's reader is forced to read Rumi through an awareness of her unknowing, which lends a simultaneous universality and specificity to the poems.

In the case of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the reader's familiarity with Elizabeth Bennet's failures of understanding compels the reader to make the critical leaps that Bridget refuses to make for herself. These leaps are essential for the novel's theme, which is a description of the challenges facing women at this stage of modernity. Bridget is unable to recognize when her beliefs, such as her preoccupation with weight and privileging formal knowledge over her proficiency with pop culture, are counterproductive to her goals, but the reader does not share that inability. Bridget struggles to negotiate the multitude of 'ways

of being' open to her and oscillates between different options, but the reader is able to see that the multitude of options is as much her problem as any outside circumstance.

Dragon Age makes a game of acquiring the information that the player needs to make satisfying narrative choices and to have the privileged knowledge that fans want over their texts. While understanding the world in which a narrative game takes place is not a unique feature of this game, the mechanics of *Dragon Age* – multiple endings, individual approval scores, and the prologues unique to each character – shift the player's focus onto narrative. Because the necessary information is not always given to the player in advance of the narrative choice that it informs, the player is compelled to replay either the entire game or large sections of the game in order to gather enough information to get the game right. The reader combines several adaptive experiences in order to gain an understanding of the whole "original" – the inexperienceable programming.

There is a similar dynamic of unknowing and inaccessibility at work in Coleman Barks's adaptations of Rumi. His readership cannot be unknowing in the sense that they can approach the poems as new works, since Barks draws attention to Rumi as the original poet. Despite the space Barks devotes to introducing Rumi and his work, he gives the reader very little information with which she can approach the text. Instead, she is taught to approach the work with a greater reliance on her own personal experience of the subject matter of the poetry.

The increased authority of the reader over adapted texts lends adaptation well to characters or stories that resemble the reader or her story. In each of these texts, the reader's sense of self plays a role in the ability of the text to appeal to them. Bridget is the only contemporary character in the texts here, and the similarity of her dilemmas and the reader's dilemmas is emphasized by the dropped first person pronoun through most of the novel. Bridget's inability to select one of the many models of femininity offered to her through her peers, mother, and other cultural sources is made less threatening by the reader's authority over Bridget, by the novel's humourous tone, and by the reader's certainty that Bridget will win happiness in the end. The novel's success at getting the reader to participate in the creation of the text's meaning, rather than explicitly demonstrating it, makes the commentary more pertinent to the reader, since the idea seems to originate with her.

In the other adaptations, the relevance of the text to the reader is less direct. Fans' activities – such as discussions or re-watching – allow the fan to construct a fictional world from which they can imagine the episodes are drawn. Their engagement becomes increasingly with the imaginary construction that they create of the text's world, rather than with the particular episodes that exist. Because each fan can focus on the concerns of most interest to her, that world becomes increasingly tailored to her interests. This fan activity is heightened in *Dragon Age*, which allows the reader to research and participate in in-text discussions on the topics of most interest to them.

The pleasure of avatar games is the obviously constructed nature of the avatar. Players can select and manipulate an alternative self with greater freedom from both sociological pressures and anxiety than is possible in real life. This ability to select and manipulate – to play – becomes a kind of homeopathic remedy, turning the anxiety of constructing an identity into a game. The appeal of continuing the avatar's existence beyond the text by writing fanfiction stems from fanfiction's freedom from the game's limitations. Reading fanfiction allows the fan to recombine the fractured possibilities of the avatar's self and reach towards a wholeness that is impossible in individual identities.

There is a similar dynamic of unknowing and inaccessibility at work in Coleman Barks's adaptations of Rumi. Rumi's Persian originals are even more inaccessible to the common Western reader than the programming of *Dragon Age*, which can be accessed and manipulated by fan-created patches. Barks's introductions address this gap of knowledge by emphasizing the apocryphal elements of Rumi's life and by suggesting, then retracting, explanations of several terms. He also emphasizes the universal nature of Rumi's work, saying that its soul speaks to people across time and space. This assertion of universality encourages the reader to do as Barks has done, which is start with her own understanding and trust that it will suffice.

Each of these texts makes it clear that it is not an original story – Bridget discusses the BBC miniseries, *Dragon Age* forces its players to select from plot and dialogue options, fanfiction is in dialogue with other fanfiction, and Barks persistently reminds his reader of Rumi. By connecting themselves to their larger

bodies of existence, the adaptations become dwarfed by the possibilities of variation that their other manifestations suggest. Eventually, if enough instances or adaptations of the story come into existence, such as the plethora of *Pride and Prejudice* stories, fanfiction stories on the same character, or poems about an indescribable encounter with God, then the body of adaptation starts to speak to a limitless whole. The readers of all these texts have the sense that their participation with the texts is rewarded by a clearer concept of that unlimited thing. *Bridget Jones's Diary*'s thematic concerns are clearer when the reader compares Bridget to her earlier form. *Dragon Age* and its fanfiction are most rewarding when several stories (either several experiences of the game or several fanfiction stories) are combined into a single understanding. The inclusivity of Rumi is made grander by stretching the poems through time, geography, and Barks's imperfect handling, and presenting them to the reader as a text to be explored through her own knowledge. By doing this, these adaptations start to suggest a unified and non-competitive master narrative that shines through all the different instances. By first fracturing story and then, through the audience's knowledge and participation, recombining the fractured stories, adaptation has become late modernity's answer to aura. While each story lacks the gleam of authority that has been lost – to modernity's narcissistic insistence on personal meaning, to mass production, or to some combination of the two – the individual reader can reproduce that sense of coming into contact with a piece of art that transcends the mundane.

It is significant that the reader can never experience that master narrative – it can only exist in the mind of the reader and only after she has done the work to create it. Its inaccessibility allows each reader to tailor it to her particular preferences by selecting only the details that interest her. Henry Jenkins wrote that "there is no sharp division between fans and other readers. Rather, I would insist upon continuities between fan readers and a more general audience" (54). While fans construct a detailed map of the world from which their texts come, adaptation audiences may construct only a sense that there is a textual truth behind the adaptations that they experience. The similarity of the process of adapting a textual story and adapting a personal narrative suggests that there is also a constant and inviolable truth that encompasses the variations that they must make to their own stories. It suggests a continuity that remains untouched, regardless of the extremity of changes to the current narrative.

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