

## **Becoming The Monster: Queer Monstrosity and the Reclamation of the Werewolf in Slash Fandom**

**Jaquelin Elliott, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA**

### Abstract:

This article examines LGBTQ fans' on-going frustration with the appropriation of queer narratives, or 'queer-coding', in contemporary depictions of werewolves in popular media and fans' attempts to reclaim the werewolf as an explicitly queer figure through the medium of same-sex fanfiction. Focusing on two of the most popular fandoms featuring lycanthropic characters, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and MTV's *Teen Wolf*, this article explores both fan reactions to canonical developments within these texts and statements from the texts' author(s) pertaining to queerness, as well as pieces of slash fiction from both fandoms featuring werewolves. In hopes of better articulating and unveiling fans' frustrated desire not only for better queer representation in fantasy texts, but also for more complex re-articulations of queer monstrosity, this article will interrogate the interplay between fan and author and look at the cultural work lycanthropic slash fiction performs.

### Keywords:

Werewolves, fandom studies, fan fiction, MTV, Harry Potter, queer studies, queer monstrosity, Teen Wolf, television, children's literature, LGBTQ

While queerness and monstrosity have long been interwoven, the werewolf, in particular, carries with it a queer legacy well-entrenched in popular culture and which has been examined by scholars like Harry Benshoff, Chantal Bourgault Du Coudray, and Phillip A. Bernhardt-House. Indeed, the werewolf seems an obvious choice as a queer monster with its identity-disrupting hybridity, as well as its atavistic, and, thus, disallowable sexuality. In ‘The Werewolf as Queer, the Queer as Werewolf, and Queer Werewolves’ (2008), Bernhardt-House points to the werewolf’s ‘transgression of species’ boundaries in a unified figure’ as partial explanation for its frequent adoption as a metaphor for queerness (2008: 159). He writes:

the werewolf’s form changes constantly and unexpectedly, and the promise of immortality is generally not a feature of the lycanthropic life. Werewolves, thus, are a much greater threat to any enduring sense of identity, even for those who might be queer-identified; they can be queers even amongst the queers. (2008: 165)

Queer lycanthropes, these ‘queers even amongst the queers’, have long been a slash fiction staple in online fandom spaces with some fans clearly not feeling threatened by queer lycanthropy, but instead regarding it as a conceit full of creative and even radical potential for queer readings. It is an embracing borne out of a number of factors affecting the discourse of fantasy fandoms, particularly those surrounding werewolf media. First, the influence of postmodern Gothicism, which, as Jack Halberstam notes, has encouraged media consumers to suspect the monster hunters and rarely the monster (1995: 27), and, thus, helped engender a desire for sympathetic representations of queer monstrosity. Second, the meteoric rise in popularity of paranormal romance, particularly in the Young Adult genre, which has normalized human/monster pairings as a heterosexual romance ideal and pushed queers out of even the liminal spaces of monstrosity. It is in response to this second factor, in particular, that has spurred slash fans (queer and straight alike) to push for more representations of monsters who are explicitly queer and not merely queer-coded.

This article will examine the ways fans have used and are using fan productions, such as slash fan fiction, to talk back to texts and reclaim the werewolf as a queer figure. It will focus on two prevalent fandoms featuring lycanthropic characters, examining both fan reactions to canonical developments within the text and statements from the texts’ author(s), as well as pieces of slash fiction featuring queer werewolves. The first case study will be Remus Lupin from the

*Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series, whose status as a werewolf condemns him to a life of discrimination and who has long been read as queer by many Potter fans. Long-standing frustration with the lack of confirmation of Remus's queerness has recently flared up again in the Potter fandom with the publication of a J. K. Rowling-penned biography for Remus on the website Pottermore.com. This biography and Rowling's accompanying author's note stated that Remus's lycanthropy was indeed intended to be a metaphor for HIV and revealed that Remus's father was a vehement anti-werewolf legislator. While many fans were pleased to, at last, have confirmation from Rowling herself that Remus's so-called 'furry little problem' was an analogy for HIV, others expressed exasperation at this continued mapping of a queer narrative onto a presumably heterosexual character.

Similar issues have arisen in the fandom for MTV's *Teen Wolf* (2011 -), this article's second case study, which, upon its premiere, garnered attention from LGBTQ media outlets and fans for the attention it paid to the queer male gaze. Since then, however, there has been a mass exodus of fans from the show due to the alienation engendered by show-runner Jeff Davis and the show's official social media outlets with chief offenses including sexism, biphobia, and teasing at the possibility of more LGBTQ representation without ever delivering. A large number of fans responded by simply no longer watching the show, instead contenting themselves with online fan productions like slash fan fiction, making it clear that if a show will not provide the desired queer representation, then fans will create it for themselves, and that if writers will not explicitly explore the interplay of animality and queer sexuality inherent to the werewolf, then fans will, again, be more than happy to take up the task.

### **The Werewolf as Queer**

In *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror, and the Primal Uncanny* (2005), Barbara Creed links the werewolf to the primal uncanny and, with it, woman, nature and death. The lycanthrope, Creed argues, is 'a creature who literally gives birth to himself: his fur covers the inside of his skin. Thus, like woman, he carries the signs of nature within his body at all times [...] The werewolf is a feminized male monster, a queer creature aligned to the primal uncanny' (2005: 140). It is a reading similar to the one Jack (Judith) Halberstam performs of Dr. Jekyll in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), a novel often named the possible urtext of modern depictions of the werewolf figure by horror scholars and writers such as

Stephen King (1983: 61). It is a novel published at the height of the Victorian Gothic Renaissance which, Harry Benshoff notes in his work *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (1997), coincided with the increasing pathologizing of sexuality and introduction of the term ‘homosexual’ in common English parlance (1997: 22). Halberstam argues that:

Jekyll describes Hyde as ‘knit closer to him than a wife’ (Stevenson: 101) and envisions the opposition between himself and his double in terms of the animal versus the spiritual. The relation between the two characters, then, is made explicitly sexual, a parody of both the maternal (Jekyll carries Hyde within him) and the marital relation (‘knit closer to him than a wife’) and it is explained as a primitive condition of the self. The (male) individual, in other words, carries within himself the germ of a primitive and animalistic sexuality which must be repressed for fear of endangering the very moral fabric of the civilization. (1995: 70-71)

This fear of atavistic sexuality is not only what secured the werewolf a place for itself in fiction and folklore, but particularly (and unsurprisingly) in horror texts dealing with adolescence, which have used lycanthropy as a stand-in for puberty and the anxiety of new, frightening, and even disallowable feelings of sexual desire. Often in these texts, particularly in the horror films and teen comedies of the 1980s, the queer and the disallowable are clearly linked. The hit comedy *Teen Wolf* (1985) makes use of the queer trappings of monstrosity while still repudiating queerness, most famously in Scott Howard’s ‘coming out’ scene to his friend Stiles:

**Scott Howard:** Stiles, I got something to tell you. It’s kind of hard, but...

**Stiles:** Look, are you gonna tell me you’re a fag because if you’re gonna tell me that you’re a fag, I don’t think I can handle it.

**Scott Howard:** I’m not a fag. I’m... a werewolf (Daniel 1985).

Stiles’ visible relief after Scott’s confession has been noted and explicated by scholars like Vito Russo, who, in his ground-breaking work *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), frankly but aptly summed up the unfortunate implication of this scene: ‘Better a werewolf than a faggot’ (1987: 252).

A direct inverse of this ‘coming out’ scene occurred more than ten years later in a season two episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). In the episode ‘Phases’, Buffy and the other Scoobies attempt to hunt down a werewolf that has been terrorizing Sunnydale so they may

detain him before he hurts anyone. Xander corners his prime suspect, the class bully Larry, in the boys' locker room and has the following discussion about Larry's 'secret':

**Xander:** I just wanna help!

**Larry:** What, you think you have a cure?

**Xander:** No, it's just... I know what you're going through because I've been there. That's why I know you should talk about it.

**Larry:** Yeah, that's easy for *you* to say. I mean, you're nobody. I've got a reputation here.

**Xander:** Larry, please, before someone else gets hurt.

**Larry:** Look, if this gets out, it's over for me. I mean, forget about playing football. They'll run me outta' this town. I mean, come on! How are people going to look at me... after they find out I'm gay.

**Xander:** [*stares at him, startled*]

**Larry:** [smiles] Oh, wow. I said it. And it felt... okay. I'm gay. ...I am gay.

**Xander:** I heard you the first time. (Whedon 2:15)

Not realizing that Xander had wrongly guessed his secret to be lycanthropy, Larry enthusiastically thanks him, sets about turning his life around, and comes to terms with his sexuality in a tertiary narrative that marks at least some progress since 1985. While this moment in *Buffy* flips the 'coming out' scene in *Teen Wolf*, both scenes mark an acknowledgement of the thematic connections between the closet of monstrosity and the queer closet, making this parallel explicit and not simply sub-text.

### **Postmodern Gothic and Embracing the Queer Monster**

The desire to see explicit representations of queer monstrosity is, by no means, a new phenomenon with scholarship on the subject of queer readers/viewers embracing monstrous queer figures existing as early as the late 1980s. Halberstam locates this desire within the postmodern Gothic, which:

warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence. The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities. (1995: 27)

Benshoff proposes that this desire circulates around the figure of the monster and his/her relationship to normality; he identifies an 'opposing trend in cinematic horror, one that in some

cases actively overturns the genre's conventions to argue that monster queers are actually closer to desirable human "normality" than those patriarchal forces (religion, law, medicine) that had traditionally sought to demonize them' (1997: 231). Benschhoff contends, however, that this reclamation of queer monsters remains retrogressive, as non-queer viewers do not recognize or sympathize with the radical potential of such figures and see them, and thus LGBTQ people, only ever as monsters.

Since the publication of Benschhoff's *Monsters in Closet*, however, supernatural creatures have become sympathetic and even heroic in literature and on screen. Later that year would come the premiere of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* with its ensouled-vampire and lycanthropic love interests, followed two years later by the US publication of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999). Other works such as the *Twilight Saga* (2005-2008) and MTV's *Teen Wolf* have secured the supremacy of paranormal romance in popular culture with vampires and werewolves just as often fulfilling the role of romantic hero as the role of villain. In the wake of more and more sympathetic representations of the monstrous, the question of queer monstrosity itself transforms. When monsters and their (usually human) love interests are upheld as heterosexual romantic ideals, the lack of queer representation in paranormal romance becomes just that - a lack. And when the monsters in question have a long history of queer subtext (and nearly all of them do), this strict adherence to heteronormativity is read as both suspect and frustrating by queer media consumers. This adherence to heteronormativity in the case of werewolf fiction has been noted by Kimberley McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver who point out that 'while depictions of shapeshifters have slowly begun to move past 'purely heteronormative representations of sexuality and desire, [it is] perhaps not as much as one might reasonably expect of characters whose identity is not fixed' (2012: 68). While the number of depictions of queer monsters is slowly increasing thanks to shows like *True Blood* (2008-2014), readers/viewers interested in the queer potential of monsters and particularly the werewolf find the representative depictions they are looking for in fanfiction, a medium too often ascribed as solely the province of heterosexual women.

In their essay 'Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking' (1998), Henry Jenkins, Cynthia Jenkins and Shoshanna Green point out a number of ways that scholars discuss fanfiction that directly conflict with fandom as it actually operates. Among these is the academy's preoccupation with heterosexual women's interest in writing male/male erotica, which often

assumes fanfiction is solely queer appropriation. However, as Jenkins, Jenkins, and Green point out, ‘lesbian and bisexual women have always participated alongside straight women in slash fandom and people of all sexual orientations have found slash a place for exploring their differences and commonalities’ (1998: 11). Halberstam argues that, the ‘suppleness of monstrosity allows for numerous interventions in the business of interpretations. It is precisely on account of the interactive potential of the horror text that female viewership and readership becomes essential to the production of meaning’ (1995: 144). Halberstam argues further that ‘we must produce reevaluations of the horror film in terms of potential feminist or woman-positive readings which make horror available to the female viewer’ (1995: 144). Slash fiction dealing with paranormal romance is such an interactive reevaluation for not only woman-positive readings, but broader queer-positive readings. It is a reevaluation not solely for heterosexual women, as so much discourse on fanfiction wrongly assumes, but one for queer women, queer men and heterosexual women alike, granting space to their desires both for positive representation and for sex that has been deemed disallowable.

### **‘Furry Little Problem’: Remus Lupin, Wolfstar, and the Problem of Pottermore**

By far the most central figure in werewolf slash fiction for the past 17 years has been lycanthropic professor Remus Lupin from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. The significance of Remus’s lycanthropy has been a source of much examination from fans and scholars, with his stigma often given disability studies readings (lycanthropy as a blood-transmitted illness being equated with HIV/AIDS) and/or readings that analogize his lycanthropy to homosexuality. A friend of Harry’s deceased parents, James and Lily, Remus is revealed to have also been close friends with escaped criminal Sirius Black who, readers discover in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*’s climax, had been wrongly convicted of betraying James and Lily to Voldemort and murdering their friend Peter Pettigrew. At the end of the novel, after his lycanthropy has been revealed to the Wizarding World, Remus resigns from his teaching position because he knows that ‘This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents. ... They will not want a werewolf teaching their children’ (Rowling 1999: 423). In the adaptation of this scene in the 2004 film, ‘werewolf’ is noticeably changed to the more ambiguous ‘someone like me’ (Cuarón 2004), one of many subtle changes that underscore director Alfonso Cuarón’s choice to portray Remus as a metaphorical ‘queer junky [sp.]’ (Upton 2007).

Since his introduction in 1999, Remus has been a popular figure in the *Harry Potter* slash fandom with the pairing of Remus/Sirius, colloquially dubbed ‘Wolfstar’, ranking only second to Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter for number of male/male slash fics. Fans cite Sirius and Remus’ curious canine compatibility (Sirius’ animagus form is that of a giant, black dog), as well as numerous moments in canon as evidence to support the pairing. For example, Remus spends long stretches staring at Sirius (Rowling 2003: 88-9), the two give Harry a joint birthday gift (501), and Remus is demonstrated as being the only person that Sirius seems to listen to when in a rage (90). The two are confirmed as having spent a great deal of time together after Dumbledore infamously tells Sirius to ‘lie low at Lupin’s’ during the summer between *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of The Phoenix* (Rowling 2000: 713), after which time Remus moves into 13 Grimmauld Place to live with Sirius for a time (Rowling 2003: 118). Additionally, given their long friendship, the two have a comprehensive knowledge of one another’s personalities with Severus Snape derisively chiding the two for ‘bickering like an old married couple’ in the film adaptation of *Prisoner of Azkaban*.

The description of Sirius and Remus as an ‘old married couple’ is an apt one for many of the pairing’s shippers who delight in both the pair’s comfortable intimacy with one another, but also the radical potential of a queer reading of two of Harry’s most forefront surrogate fathers. Fans arguing for a queer reading of Sirius/Remus’s relationship cite dozens of instances of their names appearing in the text together, often paired together in tandem with the series’ married couples, including Harry’s own mother and father. In one of the most commonly cited pieces of evidence for the pairing, Remus and Sirius appear together side-by-side as ghosts in the Resurrection Stone scene towards the end of *Deathly Hallows* (2007), directly mirroring the ghosts of Harry’s parents Lily and James (Rowling 2007: 701). This mirroring was not missed by Remus/Sirius fans who had long been espousing a reading of Remus and Sirius as Harry’s adoptive gay dads/uncles, both within the context of the canonical series and in alternate universe fanfiction.

One of the most popular of these was *Stealing Harry*, a massive series of multi-chapter fics that presented an alternative universe in which Sirius never went to Azkaban and enlists Remus’ help in stealing a young Harry away from the Dursleys after he discovers their abuse of the boy. First appearing online on multiple sites between 2003 and 2004, the fic, by male fanfiction author Sam Starbuck (samvimes), quickly gained popularity in the Potter slash



community and, given its publication date, it is perhaps easy to see why. After being granted custody, Sirius and Remus raise Harry together in a far happier home than he had with the Dursleys, a narrative that carried with it an inescapably radical message in the midst of the political atmosphere of the early 2000s, which unrelentingly besieged the queer community and same-sex adoption. In a series of novels that illustrated the ways in which found families can be built from friendships and often be a far healthier support system than blood relatives, an explicit queering of Remus and Sirius as Harry's father figures was understandably attractive to many readers and one, they argued, that was supported by the text.

For many fans, Remus' lycanthropy (and Sirius' status as a canine animagus) were central to their readings of the characters as queer, each man's human/animal hybridity heightening their respective positions as liminal figures with disallowable sexuality. In his exploration of the queer werewolf, Phillip A. Bernhardt-House points to modern expressions like 'doggy-style' for rear-entry sexual intercourse and 'the vague similarities of this position to anal sex (whether homosexual or heterosexual)' to help explain 'the rather obvious and yet ambiguous queer dimension attached to canine and lupine symbolism in a number of cultures' (2008: 161). It is a dimension many Remus/Sirius shippers are keen to explore. Part of the pairing's appeal and, indeed, the appeal of many other such 'monstrous' couples, is the potential for expressions of queer, disallowable, and even impossible sexual practices that their fantastical bodies allow. Common sexual tropes in Remus/Sirius fic that underscore their animality include 'mpreg' (in which werewolf biology allows for either Remus or Sirius to become pregnant), bestiality, 'heat fics' (in which Remus goes into a kind of male estrous), mating for life, and more.

However, not all Remus/Sirius fanfiction concerns itself with these more hyper-animalistic forms of sex. Fanfiction for the pairing runs the gamut from the aforementioned explicit pornography to light, even saccharine, romance (or 'fluff') and it is crucial to recognize that fics not including these tropes are no less concerned with Remus' lycanthropy and, in many ways, no less radical. Remus' lycanthropy almost always features in Wolfstar fics precisely because it is his lycanthropy that brands his sexuality as disallowable. In a world where werewolves are pariahs who are expected not to 'breed' (Rowling 2007: 213), any and all expressions of Remus' sexuality are considered taboo, distasteful, and even dangerous. And in our own world in which queer sex, whether kinky, vanilla, monogamous, or non-monogamous, is

likewise considered taboo, distasteful, and even dangerous, fans have found power and solace in using Remus' condition as a reparative lens through which to explore and represent queerness.

Indeed, alongside these erotic narratives that explore the potential of lycanthropy for expressions of queer sex exist non-pornographic fics that make similar use of Remus' lycanthropy to explore queer issues like passing, the closet, and even internalized queerphobia. The wildly popular *The Shoebox Project* (2005), co-authored by Danielle Bennett and Jaida Jones, a 26-chapter-long prequel to Rowling's novels, focuses little on sex and predominantly on Remus and Sirius' day-to-day lives as teenage Hogwarts students and their respective coming to terms with their attraction to one another. *Shoebox's* Remus presents a startlingly sensitive and intersectional portrayal of a teenage boy riddled with anxiety that is as much to do with his queerness and physical disfigurement (thanks to his violent transformations) as with the stigma attached to his status as a werewolf. Remus' sense of alienation from his own body is ascribed to both his sexuality and his lycanthropy, both of which he tries to distance himself from and which are, at times, linked. In the *Shoebox Project* and, indeed, other reparative fanfics that address Remus' feelings of alienation and self-loathing, werewolves function in a way similar to how queer theorist Mel Y. Chen configures animals more broadly: as 'objects of almost fetishistic recuperation, recruited as signifiers of "nature", or "the real"' (2012: 100). Post-coital, Remus reflects:

[D]id he ever think he would be here, like this, skin and scars and all, completely relaxed and *completely* naked with someone else? With Sirius? It's all so easy. He doesn't even know why he over-thought anything, back when he was so wound-up and stupid and didn't know where to put his hands or how to let instinct connect with knowledge. (Bennett and Jones 2005)

Here Remus' concession to his body's impulses and desires, which he tries so hard to sublimate for fear of losing control, is portrayed as positive and necessary – in embracing his animal instincts, he embraces his humanity, too.

'Gen' (non-erotic) fics such as *The Shoebox Project* allowed Remus/Sirius as a pairing to also gain traction with non-slash fans and the pairing became ubiquitous in the fandom, labelled one of *Harry Potter's* more canon-compliant slash pairings. Many fans presumed that Remus' queer-coding in the Harry Potter novels had been deliberate; a presumption that turned sour when, after years, Rowling never acknowledged this to be the case. When Remus was given a

female love interest, Nymphadora Tonks, most Wolfstar shippers continued on with their queer readings of Remus' character as his marriage had not foreclosed the possibility that he might be bisexual, therefore demonstrating fans' tenacity in resisting the foreclosure of queer readings of the text.

Then came Pottermore.com. Launched in 2011, the site, which serves as a platform for Rowling to publish supplemental material about the Harry Potter series has enjoyed a mixed reception by Potter fans. Unpopular with many veteran fans of the series, Pottermore represents a fundamental misunderstanding of fandom and its methods of production, which, while respecting authorial intent, prioritize reader reception first. In her case study on Harry Potter, 'Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts' (2006), Ika Willis notes the way in which fanfiction 'intertwine[s] the pleasure of queer textuality with a deeply political project of resistance and insistence that people must have the right to make and circulate meanings outside the circuit of ideologically or institutionally guaranteed transparency, provability, and, ultimately, enforceability' (2006: 156). Pottermore is part of the ideological or institutional circuit of the series and many fans have expressed frustration with Rowling's continued foreclosing of possible readings nearly a decade after the finale of the series, particularly counter-cultural readings.

One such foreclosure came in July of 2015 with the publication of Remus' biography, which included more about his relationship with his love interest, Tonks: 'Remus, so often melancholy and lonely, was first amused, then impressed, then seriously smitten by the young witch. He had never fallen in love before' (Rowling 2015). Wolfstar shippers were stunned and disappointed that not only had Rowling foreclosed the possibility of Remus/Sirius, but that she had done so in a text that introduced Remus' lycanthropic father and at last acknowledged, in an author's note, that Remus' lycanthropy was indeed meant as a metaphor for HIV. Accusing Rowling of appropriating a queer narrative and of callousness in not acknowledging the decimating effect HIV/AIDS has had on the queer community, fans took to social media to voice their displeasure. Some fans, such as blogger Hope Rehak, were deeply disappointed and troubled:

[To] find out through the extra-textual resource of Pottermore, that not only was Professor Lupin's queerness a misreading of the text, but that its very author couldn't even permit room for ambiguity or alternate readings of the

kind that have been going on for years already in the spaces left for a queer story to assert itself (through a constructive reader's initiative) – was heartbreaking in the most serious literary sense for me. (Rehak 2013)

Rehak's key issue here is highly reflective of the fandom's discourse following the publication of Remus' biography. It was not merely that Rowling had not acknowledged the Wolfstar ship, but that she had foreclosed alternate readings and, in doing so, indeed filled in spaces where queer fans had been able to carve out a representative place for themselves. Further, that she had dashed hopes that, for once, a queer-coded monster might actually be queer, which would have granted queer fans one small piece of representation that was not only ever counter-textual. Further, an acknowledgement of the Wolfstar ship, or even Remus' inherent queerness as a character would have served as an explicit acknowledgment of the queerness of monstrosity itself, which, at present, feels to many queer fantasy fans as one more space without room for them.

While counter-textual readings are themselves powerful and necessary in their resistance, finding positive, well-developed queer representation only ever in the realm of fanfiction is, for many fans, a harsh reminder that there is little place for queer stories in mainstream media. And when alternate queer and feminist readings of a text are often dismissed, denigrated, or attacked by writers and other fans, this shutting out becomes even more demoralizing. Werewolf slash fiction finds much of its potency in the fact that it treats queer and feminist readings of paranormal texts and monstrous bodies as valid and not always counter-textual. As Alexander Doty notes in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993), '[q]ueer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along' (1993: 16). Doty also pinpoints the problem inherent in queer-coded monstrosity that so many fans struggle with: 'connotation has been the representational and interpretive closet of mass culture queerness for far too long... [This] shadowy realm of connotation [...] allows straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it' (1993: xi-xii). This issue, known in fandom as 'queer-baiting', has become a contentious issue with shows like the CW's *Supernatural* (2005 - ) and the BBC's *Sherlock* (2010 - ) accused of deliberately heightening homoerotic subtext in order to maintain the attention of the show's passionate slash fans, but

never permitting its protagonists to step outside the bounds of heteronormativity for fear of alienating general audiences. This has, understandably, created tension between slash fans who have been correctly interpreting homoerotic cues deliberately inserted by creators into a text, and anti-slash fans who laugh off these queer readings as ‘wishful thinking’ or ‘political correctness’. Queerbaiting as a tactic also engenders feelings of alienation and mistrust between the text’s creator(s) and queer fans who consider queer-baiting as an underhanded courting of queer consumers that manipulates an already vulnerable subset of fans by preying on their desire for LGBTQ representation in media.

### **‘Don’t Be Such a Sour Wolf:’ *Teen Wolf*, Queerbaiting, and Reparative Slash Fiction**

While displeasure with the use of the werewolf as a vehicle for appropriating queer narratives has a long history in the *Harry Potter* fandom, similar discontent exists in much younger fandoms as well. One of the most hotly debated cases of queer-baiting in the past several years has been MTV’s *Teen Wolf* and its characters Stiles Stilinski and werewolf Derek Hale, who, as a slash pairing, constitute not only the most popular pairing in the *Teen Wolf* fandom, but one of the largest pairings in contemporary online fandom overall. A televisual reboot of the 1985 film, MTV’s adaptation of *Teen Wolf* drew attention from queer media outlets, such as AfterEllen, in its first season for the surprisingly explicit attention it paid to the female/queer male gaze. Fitting McMahon-Coleman and Weaver’s category of contemporary texts that ‘characterize werewolves in glamorized ways more akin to male models than monsters’ (2012: 118), werewolves Scott McCall and Derek Hale, among others, are frequently depicted on-screen chiselled and shirtless and, often, looming over one another. The show’s resulting slash fandom seemed a natural outgrowth, particularly because of the ways the show itself seemed interested in queering traditional werewolf narratives. In a sly moment of gender-bending the traditional Little Red Riding Hood narrative, protagonist Scott receives the Bite from a male werewolf while wearing a Little Red Hoodie (‘Wolf Moon’). Additionally, the show features LGBTQ characters while Scott’s human best friend Stiles visits a gay bar and makes friends with a group of drag queens in startling contrast to the gay panic of the 1985 film’s version of Stiles.

By midway through the show’s second season, the slash pairing that had proved dominant in the fandom was Stiles and wannabe-Alpha Derek Hale. The two characters, who operate in the narrative as belligerent and begrudging allies, rapidly became a slash phenomenon,

due, in part, to the chemistry and comic timing between actors Tyler Hoechlin and Dylan O'Brien. The pairing, dubbed 'Sterek', won the fan-voted Ultimate Slash Madness Poll hosted by NewNowNext in both 2012 and 2013 (Ayers) and the amount of fanfiction written about the two continues to rise. At the time of writing this article, there are 41,712 fics that include the pairing on the current multi-fandom fanfiction epicenter ArchiveofOurOwn.org. To contrast, fanfics featuring the show's heterosexual romantic leads Scott McCall and Allison Argent number only 6370.

As with Sirius/Remus slash, slash fiction in the *Teen Wolf* fandom often makes erotic use of its lycanthropic characters' animality with popular tropes including mpreg and heat fics, as well as Alpha/Beta/Omega wolf dynamics heightening BDSM play. In another kink, known as 'knotting', a character's genitals resemble those of a wolf's (even if the character is in human form), including a bulbus glandis, or 'knot' ('Knotting'). The canid body in werewolf slash fiction, then, serves as one curious example of the ways that animals can be 'sources of reference for frighteningly indefinable or disallowable sexual practices (such as "bestly" rape or unctuous, multi-limbed octopus sex)' (Chen 2012: 99). *Teen Wolf* slash provides a space not only for fans to explore disallowable sexual practice in its extremes, but also in its more quotidian. Sterek fics have allowed fans to express and explore readings of Stiles as bisexual (something teased at, but never confirmed in the show), as well as attempt to articulate the reparative and affirmative potential of consensual sex.

This reparative mode, often taking on the form of 'hurt/comfort' fic (a sub-genre of erotic/romantic fan fiction that emphasizes the nurturance of one character by another), is of particular importance for the Sterek pairing. Derek was a victim of statutory rape at the hands of Kate Argent, a female werewolf hunter who seduced a then-teenaged Derek to get closer to his pack/family, whom she then killed ('Formality'). Derek and Kate's relationship is a double-inversion of traditional sexual endangerment narratives featuring werewolves, such as 'Little Red Riding Hood', in that here it is a young male who is raped by an adult female and the werewolf who is raped by the human. Understandably, his experience with Kate leaves Derek wary of intimacy, an issue picked up and explored in many Sterek fics that feature Derek reclaiming his sexual autonomy through his romantic relationship with Stiles, sometimes through hurt/comfort fluff and sometimes through positive and varying readings of Derek's sexual orientation (an asexual Derek, for example).

The extreme popularity of the pairing was such that it came to the attention of MTV, the show's creator, Jeff Davis, and the show's cast who maintained fairly close connections with the fandom through online platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In 2012, MTV released a video of Stiles and Derek's actors O'Brien and Hoechlin cuddling on a boat and asking fans to be sure to vote for *Teen Wolf* as that year's Choice Summer TV Show at the Teen Choice Awards. Sterek fans were delighted with the video and shocked that the show's network had so explicitly tipped its hat to a slash fandom. In a tumblr post shortly following the video's premiere, blogger saucefactory emphasized the perceived importance of the moment:

I've been in many fandoms, over the years. Many, many fandoms. And in many of them, I've been queer-baited, and in many others, my existence as a slash fan wasn't acknowledged, at all. But this? Is the first time in my entire fannish life, in *more than a decade*, that I've actually felt my slash OTP might become canon. That it has a real shot at becoming canon. (saucefactory 2012)

These hopes can, in part, be attributed to the amount of interplay between fans and the show's creators and cast, a level of access to the show's creative team that was, at the time, highly unusual for a fandom. Fans were excited by this blurring of lines between the creative team and the fans which promised to make *Teen Wolf* itself as much a hybrid as any of its characters.

However, this hybridity, which initially had skyrocketed the fandom to popularity, was ultimately its downfall as repeated fumbles by the show's marketing team and show runner on social media soon angered fans. In October of 2013, MTV released a video on the official Teen Wolf Facebook, this time featuring O'Brien asking fans to vote for *Teen Wolf* in a *TV Guide Poll*. O'Brien joked that if fans did not vote, then the show would kill off its sole remaining gay character and one of the few remaining non-white characters on the show, Danny. The *Teen Wolf* Facebook released the video with the following caption: 'Keep #TeenWolf in first place! Heed Dylan and Linden's advice or we might have to. #KillDanny' (*Teen Wolf*). The show's social media team then attempted to make the #KillDanny tag go viral on Facebook and twitter, but fans, understandably, were not amused, primarily using the tag for outraged tweets to MTV (Baker-Whitelaw).

Such blatant disregard for fans' concerns about queer representation on the show alienated a large number of fans, especially when coupled with Jeff Davis' more frequently

dismissive and condescending comments about the Sterek pairing where he had been enthusiastic and even encouraging of the ship. As seasons wore on without any indication that Sterek would indeed become canon, it became clear that MTV and Jeff Davis had been queer-baiting Sterek fans as a marketing technique and that the unique interplay that fans had enjoyed with Davis, which offered a new kind of truly interactive fandom had, in fact, been something of an illusion. Fans realized that what they had believed to be an actual dialogue between Davis and fans had, in fact, been no different than other interactions with creators in which not only were fans' voices not heard, but outright dismissed and derided. Fans on social media platforms such as tumblr and Wordpress expressed their continuing frustration with fan/writer interactions, penning quick posts and longer critical essays on the behaviour of the writers and, in doing so, building a community of solidarity amongst dissatisfied fans where their voices *would* be heard. Angered by the queerbaiting in the show and its promotional materials, posts like 'Teen Wolf – Suffering from borderline Queerbaiting because of Sterek?' by blogger A.J. Raven lambasted the practice:

Teen Wolf might not want to be queerbaiting it's [sic] fans but it's been feeling like that for a long time. The cast accepts questions concerning Sterek and they even joke about it but when the show airs the only signs of Sterek are interactions between Stiles and Derek that non-shippers don't pay attention to. What they do pay attention to is Derek sleeping with a woman and Stiles kissing his girl crush.

But when the TW team wants to win something, they bring out the Sterek flag. They will make fun videos starring Dylan and Tyler (the TV Guide boat video) and then offer a gift of outtakes if they won and then what? We all go back to shipping Sterek on Tumblr, fan fiction and hoping something...anything happens in the show. How long do you suppose they expect the fans to wait? If they are showing a slow-build Sterek (which a lot of fans think is happening on the show) don't you feel that's [sic] it's high time the fans get a confirmation?! (Raven 2013)

The fans did not get such confirmation and, in fact, later seasons of the show markedly featured fewer and fewer scenes with Derek and Stiles interacting, a narrative choice many fans believed to be Davis' attempt to dissuade fans from shipping the two. If this indeed was the intention, then it failed. Viewership of the show has fallen with ratings dropping to an all-time low in February of 2016 (Cantor), a drop partially attributed to disappointed Sterek fans abandoning the show. The Sterek fandom online, however, remains active, demonstrating that fandom, as a site of



production that prioritizes reader response over authorial intent and characters over narrative, does not require a sustained narrative in order to be generative. In other words, fans can, if denied the representation they seek, recede into a space that *will* offer it.

### **Shifting from Analogy to Representation**

The conversation about the reclamation of the werewolf as a queer figure folds into a larger consideration of simultaneously more sympathetic and more explicit representations of queer monstrosity in media, including television series like BBC Three's *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) and NBC's *Hannibal* (2013-2015). Unlike *Teen Wolf*, these series feature well-fleshed out, canonically queer 'monstrous' characters: serial killer Hannibal Lecter and his love interest Will Graham in *Hannibal*, and reanimated gay corpses Kieren, Simon, and Rick in *In the Flesh*. Notably, both series have received an overwhelmingly positive response from fans and critics who have applauded the series for taking their queer monsters beyond mere coding and into explicit text. The warm reception of *Hannibal* and *In the Flesh*'s handling of queer representation by fans, and the continuing frustration with *Teen Wolf*'s queer-baiting and the appropriative nature of Remus Lupin's narrative in *Harry Potter*, belie a desire not only for better queer representation, but also for more complex re-articulations of queer monstrosity. That is, a desire to put the 'queer' back into queer monstrosity. Depictions of monsters too often carry with them the trappings of queer identities while foreclosing the possibility for positive representations of queer sexual desire. A repudiation that, at its worst, carries the troubling and aforementioned suggestion that the belief '[b]etter a werewolf than a faggot' still rings as true now as it did in the era of the original *Teen Wolf* in 1985 (Russo 1987: 252). Werewolf slash fiction refuses to allow the foreclosure of queer monstrosity to occur, allowing queer fans to reclaim the symbolic and narrative trappings of the monsters so frequently trotted out as metaphors for queerness and carve out a place once more for themselves in the liminal spaces of monstrosity. Given the transformative nature of fan-generated media and its cultural work, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is the werewolf, that 'queer even amongst the queers', that fans find themselves inevitably drawn to again and again as though the moon were calling to their very bones.

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