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Symposium

Playing [with] multiple roles: Readers, authors, and characters in "Who Is Blaise Zabini?"

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[0.1] Abstract—Fans who produce fan works in genres such as fiction, music, and music video take on dual roles in the process, as readers of the original canon and as creators of their own products. These roles—and more—are creatively explored in the Parselmouths' wizard rock composition "Who Is Blaise Zabini?". Like many works of fan fiction, the Parselmouths' songs move beyond a reader's ordinary role, taking on an authorial role to generate new characters and events in the Harry Potter universe. What makes this particular work unusual is that at the same time that they are adopting the roles of authors, and even of participants, the Parselmouths also restrict their own authorial and participatory power, claiming that the Slytherin characters they portray could not perceive their classmate Blaise Zabini until J. K. Rowling provided a complete description of him. To untangle their multiple roles and to recognize the creativity exercised by the Parselmouths in collapsing the boundaries among them, it will be helpful to turn to a theory of audience response that delineates specific roles and that specifies the limitations and the powers inherent in them.

[0.2] Keywords—Harry Potter; Philosophy of literature; Wizard rock

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Fans who produce fan works in genres such as fiction, music, and music video take on dual roles in the process, as readers of the original canon and as creators of their own products. These roles—and more—are creatively explored in the Parselmouths' wizard rock composition "Who Is Blaise Zabini?" ([note 1](#)). Like many works of fan fiction, the Parselmouths' songs move beyond a reader's ordinary role, taking on an authorial role to generate new characters and events in the Harry Potter universe. What makes this particular work unusual is that at the same time that they are adopting the roles of authors, and even of participants, the Parselmouths also restrict their own authorial and participatory power, claiming that the Slytherin characters they portray could not perceive their classmate Blaise Zabini until J. K. Rowling provided a complete description of him. To untangle their multiple roles and to recognize the creativity exercised by the Parselmouths in collapsing the boundaries among them, it will be helpful to turn to a theory of audience response that delineates specific roles and that specifies the limitations and the powers inherent in them.

[1.2] In the course of considering the relationship of fiction to truth and the truth value of sentences describing fictional characters and events, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (2002) make some distinctions that are also useful in discussing audience response to literature. Using these distinctions, we can recognize the Parselmouths as creating and maintaining three distinct roles for themselves, and as crossing the boundaries of these roles in playful and imaginative ways. First, however, it will be helpful to situate the Parselmouths in a fannish context.

2. What is wizard rock?

[2.1] It is safe to say that the oldest form of fan work, and the form most written about in the scholarly and popular press, is fan fiction. Whether you trace it back to the unauthorized continuation of the *Pickwick Papers* in penny-dreadful publications ([note 2](#)) or prefer to restrict it to science fiction media fandom and date it to the 1967 publication of *Spockanalia*, the first *Star Trek* fanzine (Verba 1996:1), fan fiction has a long history indeed. There are, however, other forms of fan work, and one that has received little attention is the practice of filking, the writing, performing, and recording of songs based on fannish texts.

[2.2] Filking is a practice adopted by media fandom from earlier science fiction fandom ([note 3](#)); the term reportedly comes from a typo for "folk music" in an early science fiction convention program. Earlier forms of filk music, such as filks based on literary science fiction texts or describing original science fiction universes, continue to coexist with media-fandom filk music. As the name's origin suggests, most filk music is performed or recorded in a folk-based style, featuring primarily voices and acoustic guitars. Some works are original compositions, while others fit new words to well-known tunes. Some describe or comment upon events or characters from the fannish universe; others, like fan fiction, create new narratives within the fannish universe. Still others describe or comment upon fandom itself, offering insights into the ways that fans view and depict themselves.

[2.3] As a casual collector of media-based filk recordings, I have observed that they have been circulated in an underground fashion for years among media fans, originally in the form of cassette tapes, some made in studios, others at live performances; some of them are now available on CD. Like fanzines, they are usually sold at a cost designed to recoup the expenses of creating the recording without making a profit; their creators hope to stay under the radar of those who own the copyrights and trademarks of the commercial properties concerned. Filks are frequently performed at science fiction conventions; there are even conventions specifically devoted to the practice of filking. Some fantasy-based filkers also perform at Renaissance fairs. In my experience, however, traditional media-fandom filking rarely takes place outside these venues.

[2.4] Young Harry Potter fans have reconstructed filking in an exciting new way. Teenaged and young-adult musicians have formed bands on a rock 'n' roll, rather than a folk, pattern. They record and release music in genres ranging from garage-band rock to techno to rap. Their recordings are available on CDs and from iTunes; most of the bands have free samples available on their MySpace pages. Many also post videos of their performances on YouTube; more are posted there by their fans. While these bands do perform at conventions, they also stage concerts at libraries, schools, and other venues. Operating with the blessing of J. K. Rowling and openly supporting a number of charities with their revenue, these bands do not have to follow the same underground protocols as traditional filkers. The genre is known as wizard rock.

[2.5] Like traditional filks, wizard rock compositions may describe or comment upon events or characters in the Harry Potter series, create new narratives within the Harry Potter universe, or comment upon Harry Potter fandom or upon the world of wizard rock itself. The wizard rock band known as the Parselmouths, founded by Brittany Vahlberg and Kristina Horner, engages in all of these practices. The philosophers Lamarque and Olsen shed an interesting light on the practice of fiction that can be brought to bear on the Parselmouths' approach.

3. What is the practice of fiction?

[3.1] According to Lamarque and Olsen, what makes a given work a work of fiction is the participation by both the storyteller and the audience in a social practice governed by rules that have arisen through custom (2002:33–34). The practice of fiction is therefore a collaboration between the storyteller and the audience, who mutually agree that the statements made by the storyteller are "fictive utterances," statements that both the storyteller and the audience recognize as creating a fiction.

[3.2] The ontological status of, and the truth-value of statements about, fictional entities are matters of concern to Lamarque and Olsen. For example, to what extent is it true that Harry Potter attends Hogwarts? Harry Potter does not exist. Neither does Hogwarts. Nonetheless, it is clear that the statement "Harry Potter attends Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry" is true in some sense, whereas the statement "Harry Potter attends St. Brutus's Academy for Incurably Criminal Boys" is not true in that sense.

[3.3] Lamarque and Olsen address this issue by establishing that "fictional content is such that *how things are (in the fiction) is determined by how they are described to be in a fictive utterance*" (2002:51, emphasis theirs). Thus events, settings, characters, and other objects described in a story have truth value within the story according to the author's descriptions of them. Statements about these objects are "the focus of a special kind of imaginative effort" made jointly by the author and the audience (2002:76). Although the characters and settings within a fiction, such as Harry Potter, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and St. Brutus's Academy for Incurably Criminal Boys, may not exist outside that fiction, "what we call fictional names refer *within a fiction* to actual objects...Only from the external perspective are the names 'fictional' or identify fictional characters" (2002:83).

[3.4] In an especially intriguing passage, speaking of a fictional character, Lamarque and Olsen state, "In the fiction, for her fellows, she is a person, an actual flesh-and-blood human being" (2002:87). Thus, within a story, the characters regard other characters and objects in the story as real, although for us, the audience, they are in fact fictional. Harry Potter is fictional to us, but to Ron and Hermione, he is quite real; Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is fictional to us, but to its students, it is their home ([note 4](#)). And, most important for the topic at hand, from the perspective of the other students at Hogwarts, Blaise Zabini is a real person.

4. Who is Blaise Zabini?

[4.1] Blaise Zabini is mentioned briefly in chapter 7 of *Sorcerer's Stone* as a student who is sorted into Slytherin by the Sorting Hat. No description is offered of this character, who does not appear in the books again until chapter 7 of *Half-Blood Prince*. Even Blaise Zabini's gender is undefined, although famous historical bearers of the name have been male ([note 5](#)). This indeterminacy presents a problem for readers. In their discussion of fictional characters, Lamarque and Olsen observe that "if a name were to be introduced in a fiction without any descriptive support a reader would not be able to make sense of sentences (in the fiction) using the name nor be able to make-believe that the name has a reference" (2002:84). This appears to be exactly what has happened here: lacking a description by the author, readers have no clear mental picture of Blaise Zabini.

[4.2] On the other hand, this indeterminacy also offers readers the opportunity to fill in the blank for themselves. According to this theory, as part of their collaborative role in the social practice of fiction, "readers 'fill in,' or just take for granted, an enormous amount of detail which is not explicitly given...Much of the pleasure of reading fiction derives from the imaginative 'filling in' of character and incident" (2002:89). The reader does not supplement willy-nilly; Lamarque and Olsen argue that the customary practice of fiction requires that the filling in be "authorized," that is, governed by a number of clues furnished by the author as well as external clues such as conventions associated with the author's choice of genre (2002:89–90). Readers of the Harry Potter series could safely assume from the context in which Blaise Zabini appears in *Sorcerer's Stone* that the character was a young person with some magical ability. Moreover, given that the series fell into the genre of children's fantasy rather than genres such as the cold war thriller, the science fiction novel, or the police procedural, Blaise Zabini was unlikely to turn out to be a communist spy, a cyborg from the future, or a serial murderer. Until the publication of the sixth book in the series, however, other details were left to the modified discretion of the individual reader. One paratextual factor that would somewhat inhibit the filling-in process for readers of the first five books in the series, prior to the publication of the sixth, was the knowledge that further books were yet to come, and any details formulated by the reader might turn out to be contradicted later on by the author ([note 6](#)).

[4.3] Nonetheless, according to Lamarque and Olsen's theory, Blaise Zabini always existed within the fictional world of Harry Potter as a "flesh-and-blood human being" from the perspective of the other characters. The Parselmouths playfully imagine, however, that the fictional characters in the Harry Potter series could not initially perceive Blaise Zabini clearly. Speaking as fellow Slytherins, they report, "We all gave him second glances / But all we saw was fuzz." Their attempts to determine Zabini's gender by observing which dormitory he slept in proved fruitless: "Don't know where he sleeps at night / he just kind of disappears." In fact, the problem is not experienced only by Zabini's classmates; Zabini too is equally limited in knowledge, and has no idea what gender has been assigned by the author: "Poor Blaise was Confunded / about his gender role." This

was especially problematic when it came to using the restroom: "The biggest issue was the fact / he didn't know which room to use" (Parselmouths 2007).

[4.4] Once J. K. Rowling describes Blaise, however, the other characters are suddenly able to perceive him, and he becomes aware of his gender identity: "He's secure in being a boy now" (Parselmouths 2007). It is clear that Rowling's description of Zabini is the turning point, since the indeterminacy is described as persisting "until our sixth year." The narrators observe that "he would have been a nice girl as well," which emphasizes his earlier gender indeterminacy as a potentiality that could have gone in either direction. The comment may also be interpreted as an olive branch offered to fans who had previously imagined the character as female and were disappointed to have their version deauthorized.

5. The Parselmouths and the practice of fiction

[5.1] In describing the manner in which the audience "makes believe" with respect to a fictive utterance, Lamarque and Olsen describe an "internal perspective" that readers may choose to take. "In adopting the internal perspective of the fictive stance readers project themselves into imaginary 'worlds' and observe them, as it were, subjectively from the point of view of an observer or participant. In doing so they can acquire a sense...of 'what it is like to be' someone in a situation or world of that kind" (2002:153). The Parselmouths extend this internal perspective to the point of crafting fictional identities for themselves within the imaginary world of Harry Potter and writing narratives in the form of songs, usually told from their characters' points of view. Since their characters are students in Slytherin, the Parselmouths present the Slytherin perspective on various characters and events in the series with gusto and imagination, and also invent entire new episodes, such as a disastrous double date with Crabbe and Goyle in "Who Are These Boyz?" (Parselmouths 2007). This activity clearly has its roots in the reader's customary projection of the self into the imaginary world, but the Parselmouths' creation of original compositions describing their adventures goes beyond the ordinary practice of reader response to the point of creating a new work ([note 7](#)).

[5.2] The term *Parselmouths* itself, then, actually has three meanings in this context: it can refer to the groups' members as readers of Rowling's stories, as the authors of transformative works based on Rowling's stories, and as the fictional characters who narrate these works and take part in the events described therein. As readers, they are aided and hampered by textual and paratextual factors in their efforts to construct and enter into the imaginative world of the Harry Potter series. As authors of transformative works, they are free to reshape the original material to their own purposes, unconfined by the conventions of "authorized" make-believe. Finally, as fictional characters, they perceive the world described in the Harry Potter series as real.

[5.3] The Parselmouths playfully transgress the ordinary boundaries of these roles not once but twice. As authors of their own transformative works, they are free to imagine Blaise Zabini, and indeed any other character, however they please, but they ordinarily stick fairly close to a perspective authorized, in Lamarque and Olsen's sense, by the original author's descriptions ([note 8](#)). As fictional characters, they would ordinarily perceive Blaise Zabini as a real person, one perhaps not yet known to readers of the story, but real to them as characters within it. Lamarque and Olsen point out that although a narrative will never spell every detail out completely to the readers, "we can infer that 'In the fiction, these details are determinate' (normally internal to a fiction there will not be widespread vagueness of fact)" (2002:91). The Parselmouths take the indeterminacy that is presented to them as readers and pass it along to themselves as authors and even to themselves as fictional characters so that the vagueness seems to exist within the fiction itself. Conversely, they also give their version of the character of Blaise Zabini a readerlike stance so that he too perceives himself as undefined until the original author (J. K. Rowling) provides him with a more distinctive description.

[5.4] Part of what makes this indeterminacy especially interesting is that the audience (both of the original series and of the transformative work) knows that it was resolved in the sixth book. Absent a lucky guess, any speculation in which the audience engaged before the publication of that book was probably overturned as incorrect. In a sense, this makes Blaise Zabini more indeterminate from the readers' perspective because they were not free to create a specific Blaise Zabini for themselves. On the other hand, although Blaise Zabini was indeterminate during the first five books, readers can now engage in retroactive continuity: since they are now

familiar with his appearance, attitude, and family background, they can imagine him as a younger version of the boy they met in *Half-Blood Prince* while rereading the earlier books.

[5.5] This indeterminacy did in fact cause disagreements in fandom, not once but twice. Before the publication of *Half-Blood Prince*, some fans chose to portray Blaise Zabini as a girl in their fiction, others as a boy, which led to disputes. Moreover, many fans who used Blaise Zabini as a character in their fiction assumed that the character was white; Rowling's revelation that he was, in fact, black led to some very negative reactions and bitter online arguments ([note 9](#)). While "Who Is Blaise Zabini?" may easily be interpreted as referring indirectly to the first controversy, it appears to sidestep the second entirely, although its overall positive description of the revealed Blaise—"we knew that he was cool"—suggests a desire to maintain a positive standpoint on the character.

[5.6] Of course, the characters in the books are not capable of reading ahead and retroactively recognizing themselves. Thus, the Parselmouths-as-authors behave not only like readers (in imagining Blaise Zabini only to the extent authorized by Rowling's initially minimal description of the character and in recognizing that even authorized speculation will probably be overturned) but also like characters (in limiting their knowledge of Blaise Zabini chronologically) ([note 10](#)). Taking on these roles simultaneously renders them unable to perceive Zabini clearly, and also makes Zabini, as written by the Parselmouths-as-authors, unable to perceive himself.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Fan fiction authors take on dual roles as readers and as authors; each role carries its own limitations and privileges. As readers, their collaboration in the rule-governed practice of fiction limits their authorized filling in and making believe, which includes a possible third role, imagining their own participation in the world created by the original author. As authors of their own transformative works, however, they are not bound by these conventions, although they may freely choose to follow them. I would venture to say that a significant distinction between conventional fan fiction on the one hand, and professionally published transformative works such as *The Wind Done Gone* or *Wicked* on the other, lies in the respect that fans demonstrate for the conventions of authorized filling in and their tendency to follow these conventions despite the wider range of possibilities open to them as authors.

[6.2] In "Who Is Blaise Zabini?" the Parselmouths draw attention to these practices by choosing to stay within the confines of restrictions placed on them as readers that do not apply to them as authors, and by further projecting these restrictions directly onto the characters they imagine themselves to be, as well as onto other characters portrayed in their transformative work. By applying these restrictions across role boundaries, they generate a humorously absurd situation, producing a creative, playful, and thought-provoking reflection on the multiple roles enjoyed by fans as readers, authors, and participants.

6. Notes

[1.](#) A live performance of the song may be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mS_kT9Asn0o.

[2.](#) "Such was the voracious public appetite for anything Dickensian that some of the more imaginative pirates even began to lift the most popular characters such as Sam Weller and Mr Pickwick and transport them to different countries...for new and still more varied adventures" (Haining 1976:69).

[3.](#) An in-depth discussion and analysis of filking, as text and practice, may be found in the chapter "Strangers No More, We Sing: Filk Music, Folk Culture, and the Fan Community" in Jenkins (1992). The entries on "filk," "filker," and "filksing" in Rogow (1991) are also highly informative.

[4.](#) Lamarque and Olsen address as a separate issue the reality of extrafictional objects that make an appearance in fiction; for example, King's Cross Station exists outside as well as within the Harry Potter corpus. While fascinating, this issue is not relevant to the current topic.

5. Historical persons named Blaise include the philosopher-mathematician Blaise Pascal; St. Blaise, a fourth-century bishop and martyr; and Blaise, the legendary teacher of Merlin.
6. The popular term in fandom for fan speculation being proven wrong by later canonical revelations is *jossing*, after Joss Whedon, the creator of universes such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, whose fans often found their speculations overturned. Professional as well as fannish examples exist; Alan Dean Foster's Star Wars novel, *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* (1978), for example, hints at a romantic undercurrent between Luke and Leia that is frankly disturbing in light of later revelations about their true relationship.
7. Although they do not directly address participatory culture, Lamarque and Olsen do address cases in which an author transforms previously created material: "Material initially produced with one set of intentions can be appropriated by the fiction-maker under a different set of intentions. In that way a new work can come into being, not just an old work treated in a new way" (49). While their focus is on the transformation of nonfictional texts into fiction, this discussion appears to be applicable to other transformative works as well.
8. For example, when characters clearly defined in canon, such as Professor Slughorn, Rubeus Hagrid, Moaning Myrtle, Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle, appear in other works by the Parselmouths, they are portrayed in a manner consistent with their portrayal in the books.
9. Disputes over Blaise Zabini's gender are mentioned in the entry on the character in the Harry Potter wiki: http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Blaise_Zabini. Reactions to his race are described and linked at http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/855387.html and http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/764908.html.
10. The one concession to the possibility of applying the knowledge retroactively is the group's consistent use of a masculine pronoun to refer to the character.

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