



# Chocolate Frogs for My Betas!: Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website

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## Abstract

In the past decade, digital technologies have become more and more ubiquitous and accessible, making them seem seductively “democratic.” This cultural moment evokes Yancey’s (2004) call for a re-evaluation of the work of rhetoric and composition, because “this moment *right* now... is like none other” (p. 297) as it marks a major shift in reading, writing, and participation in new, digitized economies. I argue that online fanfiction practices demonstrate to us, as literacy scholars and teachers, how digital tools have affected one writing community. These tools have allowed fans to develop an alternative to the “commodity culture” that we live in, a “gift economy,” where affect and emotion play integral roles. In this article, I explore “good writing” and community features at one Harry Potter fanfiction website, *Sycophant Hex*. In addition, I explore some tensions of *Sycophant Hex*’s literacy practices in depth through a case study of one prolific fanwriter, *Chivalric*. I argue that investigation of these kinds of online writing spaces is especially valuable for literacy scholars and compositionists because they highlight how writing is a deeply embodied and emotional, life-long process.

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A young man shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He was slightly podgy, slightly bald although obviously not much older than twenty years old, and he chewed his lower lip out of sheer nervousness. “Mrs. Snape,” he began, but Hermione interrupted him angrily.

“Granger,” she snapped. “I kept my maiden name. I saw no reason to take the name of the man I was forced to marry. You are here to divorce us?”

He nodded.

“Get inside so we can finish this farce. Kitchen. Second door on the left.”

([Chivalric, 2008](#))

These few lines appear in the one-shot fanfiction story, “Divorce,” by writer [Chivalric \(2008\)](#), and can be found at the *Harry Potter* fanfiction website—*SycophantHex.com*. In it, Hermione Granger has been forcibly married to Severus Snape in the wake of Harry Potter’s defeat of Voldemort. The Ministry of Magic was eager to join magical couples that would produce what they considered to be “strong magical stock.” Several years later, however, the Ministry of Magic passes a new law that will forcibly dissolve all Marriage Law unions. This story focuses on Hermione Granger’s and

Severus Snape’s reactions to the rescinded law. The story is a top-rated fiction within the *Sycophant Hex* community, and resides within the *Ashwinder* archive, which is geared toward “SS/HG shipper fics,” or stories dealing with a romantic and/or sexual relationship between Severus Snape and Hermione Granger.

Fanfiction is a literacy practice whereby a fan takes the plot features, characters, and settings from a favored text—which can be anything from the *Harry Potter* books and movies to the popular television series *WWE RAW* (wrestling)—and the fan uses those features to write original stories about that text. Multiple websites exist to host online fanfiction, including *Fanfiction.net*, *Live Journal*, and *Archive of Our Own*. The much smaller *Sycophant Hex* presents itself as “a site for quality Harry Potter fanfiction,” and contains five fanfiction archives: *Ashwinder*<sup>1</sup> (“SS/HG shipper fics”), *Occlumency* (Severus Snape-centric stories), *Lumos* (“general” *Harry Potter* stories), *Eros & Sappho* (“slash” and “femmeslash” fics<sup>2</sup>), and *Chaos* (a general archive). *Ashwinder* is by far the most popular archive on the website<sup>3</sup>, making Severus Snape the most popular character and “SS/HG” one of the most popular pairings on this site. The initial question, at this point, is what do these practices have to tell us, as literacy scholars and teachers?

In the past decade, digital technologies have become more ubiquitous and accessible. These digital technologies seem to carry with them the very seductive dream of the democratic—where “democratic” seems to mean “agency,” “self-determination,” and “cooperation.” In fact, “digital citizenship” became the phrase of future promise at the Conference on College Composition and Communication 2014. This cultural moment evoked Yancey’s (2004) call for a re-evaluation of the work of rhetoric and composition. In “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” Yancey famously stated: “Sometimes, you know, you have a moment” (2004, p. 297), and that, “for compositionists, of this time and of this place, this moment—this moment *right now*—is like none other” (Yancey, 2004, p. 297). It is a moment of a major shift in reading, writing, and participation in new, digitized economies. With the rising ubiquity of digital technologies, I would argue that “this moment right now” is raising important questions about what it means to be, to read, and to write in our current, highly digitized world. A great deal of recent work in rhetoric and composition has focused on how digital technologies can advance classroom practices (see for example Black, 2005; Black, 2009; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). And while it is true that many studies have explored online writing—such as blogs and discussion forums—not many, besides Black (2005), Black (2009) have looked into the writing practices of online fanfiction communities. However, I argue that online fanfiction practices demonstrate to us, as literacy scholars and teachers, how digital tools have affected one writing community. Specifically, the affordances of digital technology have allowed fan communities to develop an alternative to the “commodity culture” in which we live—a “gift economy” in which affect and emotion play integral roles.

In this article, I investigate the literacy and community practices of online fanfiction. I choose fanfiction because, upon first glance, it appears to maintain a “democratizing dream” of the digital frontier. However, upon further inspection, the literacy practices of online fanfiction are much more complex. I explore *Harry Potter* fanfiction, specifically, because of *Harry Potter*’s long-standing status among United States educators as being uniquely capable of inspiring literacy in American youth. Online fanfiction practices provide a distinctive space for us to explore how we understand identity, digital technologies, and writing. First, a close inspection of fanfiction practices can demonstrate quite insightfully the complex ways in which identity features are coded and performed into readings of “source texts,” and certainly fan texts such as stories, author’s notes, administrator “how to” guides, and even writer-editor interactions. In addition, digital technologies have changed the ways in which fans participate in their favored fandoms. Therefore, fanfiction practices can provide us with an insight into how digital technologies interact with literacy practices—especially in terms of how these technologies change the ways in which texts are produced, circulated, and received.

In this article, I first address previous scholarship on fanfiction practices, and I focus particularly on the distinctive economies of operation within fanfiction. Then, I will explore “good writing” and community features at one *Harry Potter* fanfiction website, *Sycophant Hex*. Within this exploration of “good writing,” I will argue that, while online fanfiction practices include both gatekeeping practices and a strong position towards plagiarism—they deeply support an individual fan’s “right” over fanfiction stories—these practices are more accurately defined by the affective economy

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that this archive takes its name from the Ashwinder egg, a Potions ingredient from the *Harry Potter* Universe (Severus Snape is the Potions Master and professor at Hogwarts school). Importantly, too, according to the *Harry Potter Lexicon*, these eggs are typically used in love potions. The name, therefore, is a sign of a widely-accepted fan interpretation of the source text, or “fanon.”

<sup>2</sup> Stories focusing exclusively on LGBTQ relationships.

<sup>3</sup> Ashwinder boasts 3,878 stories, compared to: Lumos, 1,874; Occlumency, 1,144; Eros & Sappho, 650; and Chaos, 325 (as of 11 July 2015).

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