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12 December 2023

The Mary Sue: Rejecting, Reclaiming, Revitalizing

In 1726, writer Jonathan Swift published *Gulliver's Travels*. At the time, travel literature was a popular genre, as seen with the success of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. Swift penned *Gulliver's Travels* as a satirical take on the trend, using protagonist Lemuel Gulliver to illustrate the absurdity of the adventure. Public reception was positive, generating intense discussion about its literary themes and views on humanity, with new critical analyses published to this day. One intriguing area of study is how *Gulliver's Travels* marked a new movement in the world of writing: fan fiction.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, fan fiction (also stylized as *fanfiction* or *fanfic*) is "fiction, usually fantasy or science fiction, written by a fan rather than a professional author, *esp.* based on already-existing characters from a television series, book, film, etc." Identified as a term in 1939, though not officially included in the glossary until 2004, fan fiction has in fact been around since stories first took shape through spoken word performances. Following the *OED*'s definition, it can be argued "some of the greatest literary classics are technically expansions of earlier characters and narratives," like interpreting Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* from his *Divine Comedy* as "Biblical fanfic" (Chamberlain).

Thus, when *Gulliver's Travels* continued to interest fans and critics alike, "recognizably contemporary fan fiction" simply but more definitively took shape:

> Not long after its publication, readers started to imagine its hero, Lemuel Gulliver, in circumstances that either were only briefly alluded to in the text or they themselves invented; the more shocking the revisions, the better. . . . Hundreds more fan-authored

> works followed, including a touching if bawdy series of poems by Alexander Pope in which the shipwrecked adventurer's wife — barely mentioned in the original — complains that her husband is never at home to do his duties by her. When Gulliver returns from his final adventure . . . he hides from his family. The fan-written Mary Gulliver was, understandably, put out by her husband's newfound abstinence. (Chamberlain)

Gulliver's Travels inspired readers "to continue the adventures of their favorite characters and share those stories with other enthusiasts" (Chamberlain). As this new fan storytelling movement progressed, readers more freely identified with "characters who [they knew weren't] real, but who [seemed] like they *could* be. . . . [trying] them on for size. . . . vicariously experiencing new forms of being or feeling" (Chamberlain).

Today, *Merriam-Webster* describes modern fan fiction as "involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted *on the Internet*" (emphasis mine). With technological advancements, the "cultural practice" of writing and reading fan fiction has grown "from a community-based form of social interaction to a globally [recognized] form of narrative world-building" (Geraghty et al.). This creative subculture, creating what is colloquially known as a *fandom*, "has reshaped the traditional literary landscape by providing a broadly visible, alternative space for literary creation and criticism," one "outside [both] the market" and "the not-for-profit world" (Geraghty et al.).

As described in Cat Webling's "The Fandom Dictionary," fandoms have created an extensive vocabulary of "the things that come up most often in their discussions about their base media," from words "that are specific to individual fandoms" to "terms most often used in wider fan culture across media." Some examples include *OOC*, or "Out of Character, meaning that the

character . . . is acting in a way that is contrary to their usual characterization or doesn't make sense for their usual personality," and *OC*, or an "Original Character . . . created by a fan that does not appear in the original canon but generally follows the rules of the canon's world." Fandoms also include "a very specific kind of OC" known as the *Mary Sue*: a character who is "generally female" and "perfect in every way," "[loved] unconditionally, regardless of their behavior."

According to Jackie Mansky in "The Women Who Coined the Term 'Mary Sue,'" *Star Trek* fans Paula Smith and Sharon Ferraro named the trope in 1973 after opening up fan fiction submissions for *Menagerie*, "one of the earliest 'Star Trek' fanzines." Though working within a male-dominated space, they were quick to see an influx of impeccable female leads charting the narrative: "Each [fan fic] began the same way: a young woman would board the starship *Enterprise*. 'And because she was just so sweet, and good, and beautiful and cute,' Smith recounts, 'everybody would just fall all over her.'" Thus, they created a parody titled "A Trekkie's Tale" and introduced "the youngest lieutenant ever in the history of the Federation, a 15-and-a-half-year-old, half-Vulcan named Mary Sue." While a biting take on writing "placeholder fantasies" (Mansky), the Mary Sue still "came to represent a specific class of character that was slotted clumsily into the existing canon and gained the spotlight that canon characters had," providing a means of creating representation where most needed (Stitch).

In writing, the Mary Sue is meant to be used as a literary device, shaped until individualized, cultivating the story. Yet, more often, the Mary Sue is "used to describe overly woman-centered or stereotypically feminine" writing and characters (Rowe 100), "unrealistic in the extreme" and typically "created as wish fulfillment for the author or artist," also known as a *self-insert* (Webling). A self-insert character is nothing new. As noted in "Self-Insert Fanfiction

as Digital Technology of the Self" by Effie Sapuridis and Maria Alberto, self-insert characters "indulge in their [creator's] own fondness, desire(s), and other affective experiences," "offering an inhabitable narrative self that makes such encounters available to . . . readers." Consequently, the Mary Sue character stemmed from fan fiction became a primary example of the self-insert character that can appear in any fiction.

"While Mary Sue characters can be self-inserts," Sapuridis and Alberto write, "they are not always so, or are not so by default." More importantly, Mary Sue characters are "beloved by the creators that wrote them" (Stitch), and "while the original meaning . . . referred to a stand-in character of any gender orientation," Mary Sue writers typically identified as women. Thus, utilizing the Mary Sue could "elevate the importance of female characters whose roles as wives and homemakers" often "sideline them" in adventures "concerned with heroism and war," giving women the opportunity to flourish in creative spaces typically closed off to them (Wallis-Thumma). As Manksy writes, "Mary Sues opened up a gateway for writers, particularly women and members of underrepresented communities, to see themselves in extraordinary characters."

However, the Mary Sue trope — coined by women, explored by women, and shared by women — was almost immediately weaponized against women. There is nothing inherently wrong with self-insert and Mary Sue characters, but due to being "particularly subjective," readers have come to criticize those creations "for their supposedly overly personal nature" (Sapuridis and Alberto). Despite deriving directly from fandoms and fan-created works, which fundamentally established a new kind of relationship between writers and readers with preexisting media, the Mary Sue trope became an indication of bad writing, which then meant those who wrote Mary Sues — primarily women — were bad writers. This was also in spite of the *Marty Sue*, or the male alternative, who arguably "could be brave and handsome and smart

without reproach" as pointed out by Smith herself: "'Characters like Superman were placeholders for the writers, too. . . . But those were boys. It was [okay] for [men] to have placeholder characters that were incredibly able'" (Mansky).

Today, what constitutes a Mary Sue character is divisive, in flux as a "gendered feminine identity that is shamed and policed" (Rowe 4). Sapuridis and Alberto describe them as "personal fantasies . . . particularly because these original female characters are often overly powerful, exaggeratedly knowledgeable, or 'too' impactful within a story." Mansky denotes them as "women . . . called out when their characters [veer] toward Icarus-level heights." Obviously, it is "clear that a lot of the pushback against Mary Sues . . . in media . . . is largely fueled by misogyny" (Stitch). Self-inserts are accepted as wish fulfillment on the part of the author, but on that same level, Mary Sues are unacceptable as wish fulfillment for the marginalized. The Mary Sue trope came to be "because when you aren't seeing women in roles that compel you, you make them yourself," and now, the term is liberally, if not maliciously, applied to any female character as they are seen as intruding on masculine spaces (Weekes).

In the drama *Game of Thrones*, based off the prolific series by George R. R. Martin, there is a character named Arya Stark. Arya is one of the many characters we follow from page to screen, watching her grow "from a scared, helpless waif to an assassin with steely resolve" who is "single-minded in her vengeance" (Toomer). Over the long series run, as Arya trained and persevered, she evolved into a fan-favorite character because of her captivating evolution. However, when the *Game of Thrones* finale featured Arya slaying the evil Night King in an intense battle, her abilities as a "trained warrior" were rejected to instead emphasize her status as "a female character" — "a Mary Sue" (Weekes).

Fans were outraged that Arya successfully made the killing blow, especially since Jon Snow — the male fan-favorite character "who looks like a younger, idealized version of the author, happens to be a lost heir, has been brought back from the dead, and is a leader loved by his people" — was right there and clearly represents a more "standard, believable hero" (Weekes). Up until that moment, Arya had been celebrated for her complex storyline, but once seizing ownership of such a climactic moment, she became unrelatable and therefore badly written, reinforcing the limiting "idea that women cannot be elevated to the 'hero status'" when, as a position of power, it is one "men so often assume" (Toomer).

In "Beyond Mary Sue: Fan Representation and the Complex Negotiation of Gendered Identity," Kristina Busse studies the "undesirability" of the Mary Sue and how its "diverging definitions" have been reduced to "an easy insult that shorthands a variety of criticisms" — all evidently due to the dangers of the "infallible female character who takes over the action" (160). Over time, the "unanimous derision" toward Mary Sue characters by audiences expanded until the majority of women represented in media became equated to Mary Sues under a mass condemnation (161). Ultimately, "Mary Sue stories" — notably stories by women — are dismissed as inferior creations, "ignoring the fact that various forms of self-insertions are a central feature of . . . fiction in general" (162). Simply put, when a creator who identifies as a woman "inserts a female avatar" into their work, "a line seems to be crossed," and detractors are quick to claim all women characters as implausible, insisting Mary Sues — and the women who create them — are simply not good enough to exist in the first place (161).

Media is subjective, and it is understood that not every person is going to feel the same way about a story or character. Critical debates materialize when someone believes their individual experience must be universal, frustrated when they cannot exactly identify with the

story or character in study. Yet, writing women is treacherous when the Mary Sue trope has already caged them, efficiently policing "any perceived move away from" the standard (Sapuridis and Alberto). In "Affirmational and Transformational Values and Practices in the Tolkien Fanfiction Community," Dawn Walls-Thumma contends the "vitriol directed to female characters" dubbed as Mary Sues has sanctioned the idea that "violence, albeit in the fictional sphere, [is] acceptable as a mode of containment." Such aggression blurs the line between the female characters chastised as Mary Sues and the marginalized writers who dared to create them: "The fear of writing a Mary Sue and the community wrath such a character would invite cause many . . . to avoid writing female characters — especially original female characters." Both the fictional and tangible woman are put at risk, and to protect themselves, writers stop creating female characters altogether.

For women writers, the Mary Sue became an opportunity to explore the self, creating more diverse representation for characters who identify as women while sharing "an intensely personal, if public, performance" within a creative safe space (Bonnstetter and Ott 346). Therein is how the Mary Sue grew inextricably linked to characters and stories gendered as feminine, uniquely empowering "authors and audiences to explore interests, questions, and desires that have historically been denied [to] women in a society dominated by masculine voices, literature, and artistic practices" (346). The Mary Sue, "as an instance of *feminine writing*" like termed by Hélène Cixous, is "a distinct and important challenge to the patriarchal economy of writing" as it "[allows] women to write their own desires" with full autonomy (346). For a society dominated by men, the Mary Sue is a female-coded threat to the exclusivity of creative works.

At the same time, the Mary Sue trope is taken advantage of to simplify the apparent arduous task of crafting a female character. Creators of any gender identity, though mostly men,

routinely use the "self-indulgent" basis of the Mary Sue to cheat their own female characters to life (350). Because the Mary Sue comes premade, customized to a basic degree, then there is little need to work on characterization, using the generic composite of a woman to fulfil a false quota and ultimately "[reifying] [the male protagonist's] dominance" at her expense (350): "Mary Sue is a fantasy of the perfect woman created within the masculine American culture. Men are served by Mary Sue, who ideally minimizes her own value while applying her skills, and even offering her life, for the continued safety and easy of men" (qtd. in Bonnstetter and Ott 350). The self-insert origins of the trope are simultaneously used to limit representation of women and bastardize what little of it there is.

A behemoth series like *Star Wars* naturally has a fanbase just as large, fraught with opposing character analyses. When female protagonist Rey was introduced in seventh episode *The Force Awaken*s, she was scathingly dissected. As studied by Samantha Wiser in "MaRey Sue: Perpetuating Mary Sue in the *Star Wars* Trilogy," inside the mainstream films specifically, Rey "brings many firsts to the series," being "the first woman to be the central character," "use the Force," and "wield a lightsaber" (1). She stands starkly against "the traditional feminine roles previously defined," arguably "[breaking] the passive female stereotype" *Star Wars* had long preferred in favor of spotlighting male heroes (1). For this, Rey is labeled a Mary Sue, too "perfect" and "unrelatable to audiences" (4). Interestingly, such criticisms come from two contrasting parties: fans who accuse her of being a Mary Sue and fans who *agree* she is a Mary Sue but recognize this is the fault of the creators, not because it is a woman in a lead role.

"In trying to create a strong female character," Wiser writes, "the films actually create a character that is unbelievable due to her wide range of talents and her effortless mastery of new skills," perpetuating this trend of stagnant character development (5). A self-insert like Mary Sue

is not a problem in of itself. The issue occurs when writers of female characters — normally identified as men, especially in a phallic powerhouse like the *Star Wars* franchise — expect the trope to do all the work in evolving those female characters into complex beings. At its core, the Mary Sue is a literary device. Like with all tools of storytelling, it is there to be poked, prodded, subverted, and shaped into a compelling portrayal; it is not meant to remain static, lazily used to stitch together a heroine before leaving her to gather dust. As the story grows, so should its characters. Yet, "Rey is unable to escape her role of being a Mary Sue" — not because she does not have the potential to thrive but because her creators do not put in the effort (2).

After two movies, "filmmakers were clearly aware of the . . . unrest" toward Rey and decided then to work on her character (9). By that point, it was too late, and energizing her character in the third film by having her show more emotional conflict did not make an impact. Notably, Rey's mentor and lead from the first trilogy, Luke Skywalker, was "a farm boy who picked up a lightsaber and commanded a rebel fleet with relative ease" (Toomer). As a male hero, though, his saccharine origins were forgiven and he was given space to develop, "never hampered by the same criticism" Rey received (Toomer). Genuine effort was put into fleshing Luke out; some was given to Rey in a rush before she was blamed for the films' lackluster reception. When fans want more representation in media, then critique the representation given, this somehow means the character — specifically minority characters such as women — has failed, all because of *who* they represent, not *how* they were represented.

Even in fiction, women as heroes are just too difficult for the majority to comprehend. They are either created by the underrepresented, earning them a quick dismissal, or mutilated by those with established power. The unfortunate conclusion drawn from this is that they should just not appear to begin with. In 2014, when video game publisher Ubisoft, famous for their popular

Assassin's Creed series, was "asked why there weren't any playable women assassins" in their latest installment, they "[insisted] that it would [be] too hard to animate a woman character" (Rude). Creative director Alex Amancio explained that "it's just not worth it to do some extra work in order to have a female character," especially if that means giving less attention to the male lead:

> It's double the animations, it's double the voices, all that stuff and double the visual assets. . . . It was really a lot of extra production work. Because of that, the common denominator was Arno [the white, male protagonist]. It's not like we could cut our main character, so the only logical option, the only option we had, was to cut the female avatar. (qtd. in Rude)

The Mary Sue trope has diminished from its self-exploration origins in fan fiction to now indicate any fictional woman, let alone woman creator, should not even be bothered with in the creative sphere. This is not to excuse poorly written characters, ones who identify as female or otherwise, but rarely does a heroine receive "the same grace" given to the hero as they first materialize: "Why are we so quick to dismiss the abilities of a woman while praising a man in the same breath?" (Weekes)

Ultimately, we are left in the agonizing position of either begging for representation — only for it to be deemed unrealistic since it puts the marginalized in positions of power — or championing the most lackluster depictions because *any* depiction must be better than nothing — and if we instead criticize, then begging for complex representation, well, we must not really support the existence of these characters to begin with. Both options feel like the wrong approach. Of course the easiest solution is to indeed not create and include characters who identify as women, let alone any minority, since the additional effort means no longer relying on

what is now considered the standard to create a story. The hard answer is the one that involves change: Hold writers of women up to a higher standard, evolving beyond the vitriol of the Mary Sue to expect unique depictions of female characters more universally. Elevate women and other marginalized voices to better positions of authority in media and entertainment. Recognize female characters for their character, not a trope they were built on, and watch them thrive. Yet, escaping the false equivalency of Mary Sue meaning woman meaning unrealistic and poorly written is only possible once addressing the misogynistic roots that grip how women are perceived and portrayed: as tools, as devices, but not as heroes and certainly not as real humans.

However, the Mary Sue can be reclaimed. When utilized correctly to form a female character, the Mary Sue can make a good story become *great* while also giving voice to the marginalized creators who are inspired by the trope. In 2023, director Greta Gerwig made history with the hit movie *Barbie*, spotlighting the titular feminine icon as she transforms from the quintessential Mary Sue into an autonomous woman who actively determines her ending — which, with such freedom, actually makes it a new start. "[Stories] are kept alive by their fans . . . and their fandoms," serving as a jumping point into "all the adaptations, remixes, reboots, sequels, homages" that exist in celebration of media (Geraghty et al.). To reclaim the Mary Sue, we must reject the idea that female and other minority characters are simply too mysterious and unapproachable to illustrate, placing blame on the underrepresented; instead, we need to recognize it as a failure of the creator, holding them accountable and demanding better. Then, we need to address the misogyny that lies beneath — easier said than done. But, even in a maddeningly patriarchal world, women have continued to endure. So shall the Mary Sue.

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