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Training New Members

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The Fanzines

At Shore Leave, Judy Segal led me through the fanzine rooms. In 1983 there were four parlor rooms filled with the fanzines for sale. She guided me to the more general work, and I bought fanzines from Roberta Rogow, who specializes in, among other things, fanzines for new writers; from Johanna Cantor, an articulate feminist; and from others, while eschewing some of the more controversial genres. This is typical for new members brought into the community. Mentors, particularly for complete neophytes like myself, are often more traditional members of the community and act as gatekeepers. They lead the new member to the art and literature that either requires minimal decoding for an outsider, or that will not shock the sensibilities of a reader who has not yet learned to decode the messages embedded in the community's product. Judy mentioned the hurt-comfort genre as one she found personally troubling; she dismissed the relatively new homoerotic fiction.

We met Lois Welling and Judith Gran outside the fanzine rooms, and here I was introduced to one of the most widespread practices in fandom—"talking story." Talking story is literally verbal narrative of the community's fiction. The story so "talked" may be one the talker has written, or plans to write, or one that she has read and particularly liked. Fans likewise talk the episodes of their favorite source products—narrating orally the episodes for fans who may have missed them, or to attract new fans to a particular source product. At Shore Leave, Lois talked her novella, *The Displaced.*

In my identity as a researcher Lois and Judith told me what it means to write these stories: how writing stories works out real-life problems and

concerns about the life the writer leads both inside and outside of the fan community, and how writing is a form of reaching out to others, of making contact. As someone perceived to be an initiate, however, I am led only into those areas of the literature for which I am deemed to be prepared, primarily those stories that deal with women sharing adventures and relationships with the characters of *Star Trek.*[1]

Here I began my study of the troubled and troubling history of these genres.

Re-creating the Adolescent Self: Mary Sue

Writing about women would seem to be the natural project of a women's community, but in fact the set of genres dealing with women have had a troubled history, and none more so than "Mary Sue."

Mary Sue is the youngest officer ever to serve on the starship *Enterprise.* She is a teenager, tall and slim, with clear skin and straight teeth. If she is not blond, Mary Sue is half Vulcan, her ears delicately pointed. But Mary Sue is not just another pretty face. She is usually highly educated, with degrees from universities throughout the known universe in all fields of technical and cultural studies (or an equivalent head of her class in Starfleet Academy). She can mend the *Enterprise* with a hairpin, save the lives of the crew through wit, courage, and, occasionally, the sacrifice of her virtue. If the formula is strictly followed, Lieutenant Mary Sue dies in the last paragraph of the story, leaving behind a grieving but safe crew and ship.[2]

Mary Sue is also the most universally denigrated genre in the entire canon of fan fiction. I first encountered the genre by reputation, because although fanzine editors no longer will publish stories about her, the controversy over her continues vigorously to this day in both the fanzines and in group discussions. Paula Smith coined the term in a brief version of the formula exaggerated for humor.[3] Her story, "A Trekkie's Tale," first appeared in 1974 in an issue of the fanzine *Menagerie.* In 1980, Johanna Cantor used the story with permission of the author to demonstrate the genre characteristics as part of a debate on the Mary Sue controversy in *Archives V.*[4] Here in its entirety is the story that coined the term "Mary Sue":

> "Gee, golly, gosh, gloriosky," thought Mary Sue as she stepped on the bridge of the Enterprise. "Here I am, the youngest Lieutenant in the fleet—only fifteen and half years old." Captain Kirk came up to her.

"Oh, Lieutenant, I love you madly. Will you come to bed with me?"

"Captain! I am not that kind of girl!"

"You're right, and I respect you for it. Here, take over the ship for a minute while I go for some coffee for us."

Mr. Spock came onto the bridge. "What are you doing in the command seat, Lieutenant?"

"The Captain told me to."

"Flawlessly logical. I admire your mind."

Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Mr. Scott beamed down with Lt. Mary Sue to Rigel XXXVII. They were attacked by green androids and thrown into prison. In a moment of weakness Lt. Mary Sue revealed to Mr. Spock that she too was half Vulcan. Recovering quickly, she sprung the lock with her hairpin and they all got away back to the ship.

But back on board, Dr. McCoy and Lt. Mary Sue found out that the men who had beamed down were seriously stricken by the jumping cold robbies, Mary Sue less so. While the four officers languished in Sick Bay, Lt. Mary Sue ran the ship, and ran it so well she received the Nobel Peace Prize, the Vulcan Order of Gallantry and the Tralfamadorian Order of Good Guyhood.

However the disease finally got to her and she fell fatally ill. In the sick bay as she breathed her last, she was surrounded by Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Mr. Scott all weeping unashamedly at the loss of her beautiful youth and youthful beauty, intelligence, capability and all around niceness. Even to this day her birthday is a national holiday of the Enterprise.[5]

In her 1980 commentary that accompanied the reprint of "A Trekkie's Tale," Smith explained that her intent was never

> . . . to put down all stories about aspiring females . . . my original idea . . . [Paula Smith's ellipses] was to parody the glut of [incredible] stories that existed in 1973 and 1974 . . . one memorable one has the heroine dying and resurrecting herself (hence, *incredible* adventures).[6]

Edith Cantor's response to "The Trekkie's Tale," and to Smith's comments about the term, describes her experience as an editor with neophyte fanwriters:

> "*That's* Mary Sue?"
>
> This neo[phyte fan] friend was absolutely astonished, and understandably so. *The* Mary Sue story runs ten paragraphs. But in terms of their impact on those they affect, those words [Mary Sue] have got to rank right up there with the Selective Service Act.
>
> "I don't know if I ought to be sending this to you," a neo described her story in 1978. "I'm afraid it's a Mary Sue. Only I don't know what that is."
>
> "I know you can't publish this," wrote another neo in 1979, "because it's a Mary Sue. But if you wouldn't mind reading it anyway, I'd appreciate it . . ."
>
> . . . I started Trekwriting with a Mary Sue (though I had the self-protective smarts to call my character "Uhura," which is acceptable to the self-styled guardians determined to purge Treklit of all traces of the unfortunate adolescent). So have many other Trekwriters—in fact I would propose that just as every dog is allowed one bite, so every Trekwriter should be allowed one Mary Sue. Said story should not necessarily be published (though we publish other stories whose plot/characterization have been done before), but they should be given a sympathetic reading and critique, and perhaps returned to the author with the explanation that she is following a too-well-beaten path, with the encouragement to turn her interests to other stories.[7]

Other fans have noted that James Kirk is himself a Mary Sue, because he represents similarly exaggerated characteristics of strength, intelligence, charm, and adventurousness. They note that the soubriquet "Mary Sue" may be a self-imposed sexism—she can't do that, she's a girl.

In spite of the controversy, and perhaps at the root of it, most fans will readily admit to having written at least one Mary Sue story. Like Cantor, Jacqueline Lichtenberg claims there is a Mary Sue in all women. Usually it is the first story a fan writes, often before she knows about the literature or its forms. Ann Pinzow described her own first story, and the ambivalence that many fans feel about sharing them:

> Somebody said, "that's a Mary Sue story." My emotions came into it . . . you're putting your heart on your sleeve. If I were to say this person is Ann . . . I couldn't show my face. I mean I'm no better or worse than anybody else, but I have my secrets too. But I could say "this is Mary Sue." I know that Mary Sue is Ann.[8]

Judith Gran analyzed the attraction that draws Mary Sue writers:

> I think [Mary Sue] is a way people build an alter ego, an ideal image of themselves to make connections with characters who they'd like to love, not just sexually. You admire the character, you want to reach out to Mr. Spock and in the process you get in touch with yourself.[9]

Gran continued with the observation that the real danger with Mary Sue stories may arise when the writer does not pass on to other forms. Mary Sue, as we have seen, represents the intellectual woman's ideal of perfection: she is young and desirable, competent and moral. Her intellectual and physical attributes not only meet the writer's standards for the perfect woman, but the people she admires appreciate her value as well.

Not all writers speak about Mary Sue with such compassion, however. Some, like Roberta Rogow, have less patience with the feminine superteen, even when they have been her perpetrators:

> My first fan story was terrible, and was rejected, and I tore it up and I hope I never do it again because it is the typical Mary Sue broken-hearted Kirk story.[10]

Nor are commercially published *Star Trek* novels immune to the controversy. During an interview conducted at the 1986 World Science Fiction Convention, I asked "Why do pros write—[is it] the same reason fans write?" The author of a commercially published *Star Trek* novel who wished to remain anonymous answered this way about her own book:

> In some cases I won't say that's true, but oh, dear, just say that an unnamed author admitted to having written a Mary Sue. Because, in fact that book I just signed is just a classic, a classic Mary Sue. When I read your article[11] I just cracked up, because she [the female hero] was fitting all the criteria.[12]

Ann Crispin, writer of two commercially published *Star Trek* novels, has been vocal in defense of the commercial novel of another writer, Diane Duane's *Wounded Sky*.[13] In Duane's novel, the heroine who saves the ship, crew, and universe is a brilliant crystal spider, a mathematician, and female. She does indeed die, or at least pass into an alternate existence at the end of the book, but not before passing her knowledge and consciousness along in the crystal egg she spins and leaves in the care of the captain. In the final pages of the book, the egg hatches, and the new spider emerges with the abilities, capacities, and memories of her mother.

In the letterzine *Interstat*, Duane had been accused of producing a Mary Sue in the person of K't'lk, the glass spider. Crispin, joining the Mary Sue debate in that letterzine, responded:

> Please quit classifying many *Star Trek* stories in terms of Mary Sue and non–Mary Sue! People level accusations of Mary Sue at the most unlikely subjects nowadays—including glass spiders—Seems to me this is going a bit far, since for me at least, the term "Mary Sue" constitutes a put-down, implying that the character so summarily dismissed is not a true character, no matter how well drawn, what sex, species, or degree of individuality.[14]

While the applicability of the soubriquet to the self-renewing glass spider in Duane's novel may be problematic, the stories that most nearly fit the description of Mary Sue in her "pure" form can be found in the *Star Trek* section of any bookstore. In the novel *Dreadnought*, by Diane Carey,[15] Mary Sue is called Piper. During her Kobayashi Maru test, a practical exercise in the no-win scenario. . . . Piper (people on her planet only have one name) beats the test, and brings down most of the training center's computers, with an ingenious maneuver she picked up reading girls' adventure books. While her astounded instructors tell her she is the first person ever to beat the test honestly (Captain Kirk cheated), she apologizes for the havoc she has wreaked with the computers. Captain Kirk observes the test and commandeers the cadet for his crew. On her first day as a crew member of the *Enterprise* she is called to the bridge because a hijacked prototype dreadnought is signaling the *Enterprise* with her biocode. From her first meeting with Captain Kirk, Piper feels a "subliminal connection" with the captain, who, she later says, "in some previous life had been my private Aristotle."[16]

The cadet, now lieutenant, becomes the pivot on which turns a plan by the hijackers to thwart a military coup. In the process of uncovering the coup, Piper must free a captive Kirk. She creates a diversion by leading three companions in a bunny-hop down the hallway past his guards, who are easily overpowered in their bemused state. At the story's climax, Piper must take command of the dreadnought to overcome the military conspirators in combat without, however, killing them. (Captain Kirk has no such qualms, and blows the traitors to smithereens.) Piper rejects command until it is thrust upon her, but she says of her young (male) Vulcan companion, "The respect that mellowed his face was empowering."

In the final chapter of the book, and after only a day or two of active service, Piper is promoted to lieutenant commander and becomes the "youngest recipient of the Federation's second highest award," for helping to "Save Star Fleet as we know it, Commander, with your ingenuity."[17] After the award ceremony, she makes a date with Captain Kirk for a sailing weekend.

At least in the eighties, and in commercial publication, Mary Sue survives to see the end of the book, although in J. M. Dillard's *Demons*,[18] the Mary Sue character Anitra Lantry nearly dies before her love interest, Dr. McCoy, discovers a cure to parasitic psychic plague that is killing the inhabitants of the planet Vulcan.

. . . The Mary Sue story taps into deep emotional sources in the writer. New fans almost invariably stumble upon the genre as their first writing effort, often before they know that a community exists at all, and this is as true for the writers of commercially published Mary Sue novels as it is for their amateur counterparts. J. M. Dillard, the author of *Demons* mentioned above, is a case in point. According to Dillard,

> I watched the series until they cancelled it, I watched all the reruns. . . . I'd always wanted to sit down and write something, and when I saw the Pocket novels coming out, I said, well, huh! I know Trek better, or at least as well as somebody else, I wonder if I could get away with it, so I sat down and I wrote the novel. . . . I just wrote my little episode to thrill my Trekkie heart and sent it off. But I didn't know about the fan literature.[19]

Clearly a form so universally arrived at among female science fiction and action-adventure fans meets emotional needs that are not satisfied with the more intellectualized approaches of satire or didacticism. At the same time, Mary Sue produces deep feelings of discomfort in her readers in the fan community. Mary Sue stories are central to the painful experience of a female fan's adolescence.

Fans often recount the scorn they experience for their "masculine" interest in science fiction and action-adventure. These readers grew up in a period during which active, even aggressive, behavior was acceptable for prepubescent girls who were expected to put away their grubby corduroys and baseballs, their books that chronicled the male fantasies of exploration and adventure, when they entered adolescence. With the teen years, girls were expected to turn to makeup, curlers, and dresses with stockings and high-heeled shoes to attract the attention of boys who were winning acclaim on the football fields and basketball courts of their local high schools.

The teenaged girl had to be not just seductive but nonthreatening; she could not challenge the supremacy of the male on the playing field or in the classroom. Her marks could be better than his, but she was expected to mask her verbal performance with a variety of techniques to assure the men around her that she was an irrational, flighty creature in spite of her misleadingly superior performance in any particular situation.

Many women in fandom, however, did not make this transition. Some, like Devra Langsam, simply were not built for the model: five feet ten inches tall when she was thirteen, Langsam towered over both the smaller girls and the more slowly developing boys in school. Other fan women felt set apart because they were heavier than the petite ideal, or because they needed thick glasses that sometimes distorted the appearance of their eyes while they symbolically marked the wearer not only as too intelligent, but also as too "serious." Most of the women in fandom, including members of the first group who found themselves outsiders by virtue of their physical makeup, were unwilling or incapable of masking their intelligence. Some community members who did succeed on male terms found themselves stranded in an alien culture whose values they did not share.

For intelligent women struggling with their culturally anomalous identities, Mary Sue combines the characteristics of active agent with the culturally approved traits of beauty, sacrifice, and self-effacement, which magic recipe wins her the love of the hero. As described earlier, when *Dreadnought*'s Piper becomes the first cadet to beat the no-win Kobayashi Maru test without cheating, she apologizes for the effect her maneuver has on the base computers. Later, when she has uncovered a plot to overthrow the Federation and has organized an effort to thwart it, she synthesizes the available data aloud. This conversation then occurs with her Vulcan companion Sarda:

> SARDA: Humans can certainly be dithyrambic at times.
> PIPER: I was just trying to be logical.
> SARDA: Please avoid such attempts in the future.
> PIPER: I'll try to stick to intuition.
> SARDA: It seems more within your grasp.
> PIPER: I'll remember.[20]

At the end of the book she receives her real reward: not her medal of valor, but her date with the captain (the *Enterprise* here standing in for the football or basketball team).

Nor is Dillard's Anitra Lantry immune to the syndrome. Dr. McCoy reads humorously from her psych profile that Lantry is: ". . . Intelligent, creative, stubborn, sensitive, telepathic, stubborn, optimistic . . . did I say stubborn?"[21] (After a brief bit of repartee they kiss.) Earlier, Scotty tells the captain, "The woman's a phenomenon. She never asked a single question . . . and she did the job [overhauled the engines] exactly as I woulda done it myself."[22] But she uses her skills off-duty to wire Captain Kirk's shower for sound (he sings off-key, we learn). Traditionally for the genre, Lantry is loved and admired by one and all: she is respected by Scott and the captain, forms a telepathic link with Spock, and has a romantic relationship with Dr. McCoy. When they believe she is dead, McCoy weeps but through the link, Spock has an awareness of her that tells him she still lives.[23]

For the fan woman of any age, her Mary Sue story is her attempt, if only in print, to experience that rite of passage from the active child to the passive woman who sacrifices her selfhood to win the prince. Mary Sue must be an adolescent, behaviorally if not absolutely chronologically, because she represents a transition in roles and identity specific to that period in a woman's life. The fan versions of Mary Sue often expressed a cultural truth of their time, however: to make the transition from child to woman, the active agent within her had to die. Mary Sue writers traditionally kill the active self with their alter-ego character at the end of their stories. First-time writers influenced by the women's movement seldom revised the importance of subterfuge in their characters but, like Carey and Dillard, raised the expectation that subterfuge would save the active agent from an untimely demise.

If we ask the question "Who is served by the woman's internalization of this model," we can easily see that 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 ease of men. Even in her superiority Mary Sue must efface her talents with giggles and sophomoric humor. She must deny that her solutions to problems are the result of a valid way of thinking, modestly chalking up successes to intuition, a term that often seems akin to Joan of Arc's voices. Women who come to fandom have usually internalized this model because it is the best of the options masculine culture offers them: they may be sexual, they may be precocious children, or they may fade into social nonpresence.

Some writers produce version after version of the Mary Sue story as they struggle to bind their personalities and identities to the cultural model of the ideal woman represented by Mary Sue. Others grow to resent her as they did her real-life counterparts in their own adolescences. The writer, become reader, recognizes Mary Sue's childish behavior as a coping mechanism she has used herself or observed in her friends to mask the threat their own intelligence and competence poses to men. Women rely on men to become husbands and to hire or promote them in the workplace, and the women in media fandom are painfully aware that those men need only ignore them to remove that threat.

In fandom, however, members strive to leave the camouflage behind, and they discourage it in their writing as they strive to create new models in their art. Women fan editors do not publish Mary Sue stories; they go to great lengths to educate their readers to look beyond the adolescent stereotype for their female heroes. I had to turn to the commercially published novels to find examples of the form as it is defined within the fan community.

Marriage and the Alien Male: Lay-Spock

Women in the fan community have rejected Mary Sue, the cultural role of precocious child, and in many cases have replaced her with the matriarch in the genre referred to as "lay" stories, so named because the alter-ego heroine develops a sexual relationship with the hero. Her adventures are an adjunct to his world; her demeanor is one of matriarchal dignity outside of the bedroom and politically correct sensuality within it. While a "lay" story can be written around any one of the characters, by far the most frequently written is the "lay Spock," with other Vulcans, and in particular Sarek, Spock's father, a close second. When pressed for an explanation for this fascination with the alien, informants reply only that Spock, or Sarek, or Vulcans in general are sexy, interesting, or handsome, that it is exciting to imagine how sex might be in an alien culture. A look at the literature itself, however, reveals deeper concerns.

Jean Lorrah's *Night of the Twin Moons*[24] series takes us through the marriage of Amanda and Sarek, Spock's parents, from their meeting into later life. The marriage is one of love and mutuality, with Amanda sharing in Sarek's work as well as his private life. In the story "The Time of Mating," however, Sarek enters his first pon farr, the male Vulcan's mating frenzy.

Every seventh year the male spends a number of days—in this story it is ten days, but the number varies from fan story to fan story—in a "blood fever" of lust in which he must either copulate mindlessly and almost continuously with his mate or die. Pon farr is so shameful, and painful, to the Vulcans that they never speak of it, but Amanda teaches Sarek to enjoy the experience, and enjoys it herself, as she shares pon farr with him through the mind meld, or telepathic contact of married Vulcans. Their experience encourages another married Vulcan couple to relax and enjoy their pon farr as well.

Sex, as defined within the canon of the episodic television series, is an intrusion into the world of work and male companionship. In pon farr as described in the *Star Trek* series episode "Amok Time," sexuality is embarrassing for Vulcan males: uncontrollable, primarily physical, and frightening. During pon farr, a stimulated Vulcan will kill if thwarted in his pursuit of sexual release with the partner to whom he was bound in childhood. He is not perceived as a considerate sexual partner.

In Jean Lorrah's stories, and those of other lay-Spock writers, however, male emotions are revealed, controlled but available to the partner who manages her husband's more uncontrollable physical urges. Amanda, as the ideal wife in the ideal family, teaches Sarek and other Vulcans who fall within her influence how to accept their physical and emotional natures within a shared and caring relationship between equals who complete each other rather than subordinate one to the other.

For many women pon farr acts as a symbol for their perception of male sexuality. American men, like Vulcans, are trained not to express their feelings. The stories teach their readers how to approach the unpredictability of sexual encounters with human men, who may seem just as outwardly controlled and inwardly unpredictable as their Vulcan counterparts. Lorrah's stories are written in a didactic mode as relationship education for adolescents, and for women at any age who have trouble making sense of their own relationships. For many of the writers, whether they use pon farr as a device for beginning a sexual relationship or as an excuse to show that even obligatory sex can be fun in the right frame of mind, the "alien" is the human male, whose motives and behavior may seem random and unpredictable.

Writing is a risky business, and fanwriters use a variety of distancing devices to protect themselves from the risk of personal exposure in their writing. . . . In Mary Sue stories, the heroine's age, and even her giftedness, afford the adult writer a buffer between her inner world and her work. The

risk is correspondingly greater when the writer creates an adult and fully sexual woman in a less than ideal relationship. Not only does the writer reveal herself to others, she often discovers herself as well. When Judith Gran explained about Mary Sue, "You want to reach out to Mr. Spock and in the process you get in touch with yourself,"[25] Lois Welling agreed:

> I know that's true for me. I mean Susan [her character in *The Displaced*[26]] was. I worked a lot of my problems out with writing her. I know I did. And I think that's why I don't want to do very much with her any more. It's because she served her purpose. She was a lot of fun, but she served her purpose and I don't need her anymore.[27]

In *The Displaced*, Susan is a widowed thirty-four-year-old emergency room nurse from twentieth-century Chicago whose vacation is disrupted when twenty-second-century slavers hijack the airplane on which she is traveling. Because of her emergency room experience, her hijackers do not consign her to the mines with the other captives but assign her to the infirmary and the breeding farm. She and the two other female members of her breeding unit, a Romulan med-tech named Tha and an Andorian teenager driven insane by sexual abuse during her captivity, are awaiting the assignment of a male partner to their hut.

Into the dark and gloomy situation comes Mr. Spock, well into pan farr and captured on his way home to mate. Tha recognizes Spock as a Starfleet officer and as a Vulcan, a people known to respect all living things. The two women co-opt him for their breeding unit but discover to their dismay that a Vulcan given stimulants while in pan farr is not the considerate sexual partner they expected. After Spock returns to guilt-ridden awareness, the women begin to overcome their initial distrust, and gradually the group develops a mutually supportive family unit that grows to include their five children.

The women chose the Starfleet officer as their male partner because he was the most likely candidate to help them escape. In fact, Spock does escape, but not before Susan and he reveal the love that has grown out of the mutual respect between them. Even after he returns to rescue them, however, the couple's hardships are not over: Susan's child, conceived during Spock's last night on the slave planet, is born prematurely and dies after only a few days. In spite of their hardships, the couple form a firm and lasting marriage. Susan insists that Spock return to his position in Starfleet, and she returns to Vulcan with his parents to start a new life.

Clearly, the lay-Spock story is closely related to the Mary Sue story; at least some readers would include *The Displaced* in that genre. If we look more closely, however, certain distinctive characteristics begin to emerge. The female hero is not an adolescent but a mature adult woman who rejects traditional male explanations for her perceptions. When Tha, her Romulan companion, does not arrive home on schedule, she asks Spock for help:

> "Spock, I can't find Tha and I just know something is wrong."
> [Spock replies] "Susan, you do not know . . ."
> "Don't tell me what I know! Tha and I have had the same routine for over two years now and we always come back here together. If one of us can't make it we let the other know. I've looked; she's in none of her usual places. Come with me now, *please*."[28]

Unlike her Mary Sue counterpart, Susan does not permit her male companion to dismiss her knowledge as intuition. There is nothing "natural" or "instinctive" about it, and she tells him so forcefully. Holding onto the dignity of their thought processes is one of the hardest battles many women fight in the workplace and even at home, and Susan chooses mature self-assertion rather than capitulation to the identity of child that masculine culture tries to impose upon her. She neither giggles nor bunny hops, and her humor expresses rather than defuses her aggression. When asked how she came by a scar on her face, Susan explains: ". . . Fraunt [the evil overseer] asked me if we had another male yet. I said no, we were waiting for another Vulcan. Then he said, oh, you like those pointed ears, huh? All I said was that they beat the hell out of pointed heads, and he hit me."[29] Susan knows she will suffer for the remark, but it is her only way to strike back and she will not give it up.

The most obvious and striking difference between the lay-Spock and the Mary Sue, of course, is the open expression of satisfied sexual desire and the link between sexual satisfaction and trust established in the stories.

Before Spock escapes to bring help for his "family," he and Susan recognize that their relationship has transcended the economic-survival structure imposed upon them by outsiders, and they come together for the first time out of choice rather than as breeders protecting the viability of the group:

> She had seen him [Spock] unclothed many times, but had always been determinedly impersonal, professional. . . . Now she took a deep slow breath and reached out to run her hand slowly over his chest, down his lean hard muscled abdomen to his genitals, again marvelling at the slender tendrils located on either side of his penis. Usually coiled and concealed in the pubic hair, they were now unfurled and small ripples shuddered down their length. . . .
>
> Sue remembered her first reaction to this ultimate proof of his alienness. It had been one of surprise. But he had taken her wide-eyed expression and forceful expletive to be negative, and no amount of talking would convince him otherwise. After that he had always been very careful to keep them coiled out of sight. She came to realize from some of the mental images that they were a normal part of Vulcan mating ritual. . . . That the tendrils were uncoiled now was an important sign of the depth of his feeling and trust. . . .[30]

In *The Displaced*, sex is not the reward for properly attracting the attention of the desired male, Rather, sex represents a contractual necessity imposed by outside forces until the couple establish a trusting and loving relationship. By contrast, Mary Sue is an object lesson in subterfuge. She cannot form a sexual relationship of substance because her love interest is drawn to the image she projects rather than to the person she is. Where there is no risk—and dropping the subterfuge means risk—there can be no trust.

The distinction between the Mary Sue and the lay-Spock genres is a vital one. While many women in the community maintain the ideal of home and family as part of a woman's life, roughly 70 percent of them are unmarried. Those who are married must struggle with the threat a changing sense of self imposes upon their relationships. It is no coincidence that so many of the stories take place in a setting of slavery, often in situations that subject the protagonist to sexual exploitation, even rape. While many community members idealize the family, as we saw with the Lorrah story, some participants perceive traditional family life to be institutionally oppressive. In their writings they demonstrate that both the man and the woman must work within the family to overcome the oppression inflicted upon them both by society and by life.

In Barbara Wenk's *One Way Mirror*,[31] Jenny, the heroine, again is a twentieth-century woman, this time a *Star Trek* fan captured to be a slave not in a backwater of the benign Federation, but in the mirror universe of her favorite *Star Trek* episode, "Mirror, Mirror." In the mirror universe, a cruel

empire counterparts the Federation, and women are valued for their expense more than for their contribution to society. Slair, the Vulcan third officer of the starship *Victory*, has been pressured to take a mistress from among the captives as an appropriate display of property, and he chooses Jenny out of spite because she seems the least likely to cause him trouble:

> "Beautiful women can provide an officer with problems. I merely require a passably attractive female." He eyed her speculatively, then continued, "You also appear to be of a calm temperament. I do not wish this arrangement to inconvenience me unduly."[32]

The heroine is not happy with her situation but realizes that a worse master or death are her alternatives if the Vulcan discards her. She consciously draws on the example of *The Thousand and One Nights* and holds her Vulcan master's attention by telling him stories from *Star Trek* the television show, and about fandom and fan stories. Here Wenk mixes in a rich stew of insider humor: Gene Roddenberry is a renegade from the Imperial Empire, and the series episodes a "vicious distortion" of Empire politics. The idic, favored in jeans patches and costume jewelry as a symbol of universal tolerance, is "really" the family crest of Vulcan's ruling dynasty overthrown by the Empire; wearing the idic is considered treason. Over the course of their relationship, the Vulcan is amused and outraged by the stories, and impressed with the spunk and determination of the human cast adrift in an alien universe. He begins to see her as companion rather than property, and she falls in love with him in spite of his continuing though less frequent abuse, which Wenk presents as mild compared to the treatment other women of Jenny's station receive in similar circumstances.

Wenk's *One Way Mirror* is a complex work. She begins with an epigram from Jean Cocteau: "Mirrors should reflect a little before throwing back images," and on the first page, Jenny reflects on her situation: "Be careful what you wish for, Dad always says. You may get it." Clearly the story that follows will be a warning to its readers to consider the implications of their fantasies. And yet, the story that plays out is similar to *The Displaced*. While the empire does not enslave the Vulcan people, that society does force the Vulcan Stair into a relationship with Jenny just as slavery forced Spock into a relationship with Susan in the foregoing story. The couples both have sex long before they establish the interpersonal trust that marks the shift in their relationship from temporary and outside-motivated to permanent and

inner-motivated. Unlike Susan, however, Jenny has no rescue, and her Slair is the harsh and sometimes brutal man his society has made him. She can never completely let go of the example of Scheherazade but must learn when to stand up for herself, and when doing so will cost her more than she can pay. At the very end of the story, Jenny, who has perceived herself as plain and unsophisticated, wishes she were like a woman she sees fleetingly, then realizes immediately that the other is herself, seen in a mirror.

The message in this story seems to be that a woman can learn to curb the more hostile impulses of a man and win a modicum of respect by standing up for herself and also by knowing when to back down. The mirror Vulcan does learn to love the heroine, or so one is given to assume, and his behavior gradually becomes more respectful, while Jenny grows in sophistication and understanding of the new culture of which she becomes a part. But the lesson here seems to be "make the most of even the worst situation in which one finds oneself."[33]

Differences of opinion are a part of fan life, and I have often met readers who disagreed vehemently with my interpretations of stories, while a sufficient number agreed to make me feel reasonably confident that I had, if not *the* interpretation, at least a reasonable one. My objection to *One Way Mirror*, that it encourages readers to stay in abusive relationships, however, is the one reading that has received no support in the fan community whatsoever. Fans often accuse me gently of taking the story too seriously. It is only play, they say, and the author does use the reflexive humor of the group, mixing fannish behavior with classic literature and the canon of *Star Trek* in a text that is broadly marked as "play" in spite of its romance novel form.[34]

The play aspects of the text, however, are motivated by the reader's insider knowledge of the series, of the formulaic nature of romance novels, and of the fan community itself. Fans see the character Jenny as a reflection of their own culture, and they enjoy her playful use of the series and the materials of their own community while they share with the author the sly literary allusions, and the fun of wildly mixing their genres. If the reader doesn't know *Star Trek*, the community, the *Arabian Nights*, science fiction, romance novels, *and* the theory that they don't mix, she may enjoy the story, but she won't get the joke.

In correspondence the author herself emphasized the play aspect of the novel:

> *One Way Mirror* is a sex/romance fantasy: it has the same relationship to actual male/female relationships that *Three Weeks* did to the Balkan Question and *The Sheik* did to the Mid-East Conflict. The whole point of a fantasy is its amusement value; the more jewels and gold lame, the better. (And surely every reader has noticed that *not once* does Slair ask Jenny to clean the cabin or pick up his socks; housework on the ISS Victory is apparently done by Helpful Elves.) There is no message in this story; in the immortal words of a Great Movie Mogul, "If you want to send a message, call Western Union."[35]

As we will see later in this work, the challenge of mastering a form and playing with it may often motivate a fanwriter. Fans who have discussed *One Way Mirror* with me do give the work serious critical consideration, however, both for its subject matter and for its length—well over a hundred thousand words. Most consistently, readers object to my interpretation of the story because I imply that the heroine had a choice in her actions—escaping while planetside, for example. The fan women often explained to me that Jenny could not manipulate the situation for her benefit because she found herself in a culture whose rules she did not know and in which she had neither status of her own nor kin or friendship networks for her support. Her actions, I am told, must be seen as the best available in a bad situation. Above all, they remind me of the words with which the story begins: "Be careful what you wish for. . . . You may get it." To fans, *One Way Mirror* acts not as a model for living but as a cautionary tale of wishful thinking gone wrong, in which signals of playfulness deflect the risk of the serious message behind them.

Women in the Eighties

If members reserved their criticism of female characters for those who fit the Mary Sue stereotype, I would have expected to see many female characters develop in the fan fiction with the support of the community. In fact, Johanna Cantor's challenge posed in 1980,[36] "Why is it that in a group that is probably 90% female, we have so few stories about believable, competent, and identifiable-with women?" remains substantially unmet. The term Mary Sue seems to expand to encompass the characters women write to overcome that onus.

All the stories discussed above were in print when Cantor asked her question, and more had come into print by 1984, the time of the debate in *Interstat* described earlier in this chapter. And yet, participants at a panel discussion in January of 1990 noted with growing dismay that any female character created within the community is damned with the term Mary Sue.[37]

At Clippercon in 1987, a panel of women who do not write female characters in their stories described similar experiences as the reason they write only about the male characters that appear in the source products themselves:

> —. . . [e]very time I've tried to put a woman in any story I've ever written, everyone immediately says, this is a Mary Sue.
> —The automatic reaction you are going to get is "that's a Mary Sue."[38]

In her analysis, Johanna Cantor suggests an explanation for the lack of convincing women characters, and for the expanding usage of the term Mary Sue:

> . . . Could it also be that we are afraid, as women, to put into our creations that touch of humanity for which read touch of self, that might make them a little too real? I think so. . . . "So what if it hurts, if it makes a good book," Lord Peter Wimsey decreed. (Granted, he wasn't the one who was going to write the book, read the reviews, and do the hurting.) We're not going to get rid of the term Mary Sue. . . . But we can be prepared to turn a resolutely deaf ear, as we work on what we want to work on.[39]

I suspect that the matriarch stories we have discussed in the previous section suffer from too much of the self for the comfort of many fans. Whether expressing love in an idealized marriage as do Amanda and Sarek, overcoming adversity as do Susan and Spock, or finding space for mutual respect in a harsh and oppressive culture like Jenny and Slair, all of these female characters are realized in terms of their relationships to men. Their relationships are not incidental in the women's identity, but integral to them; whereas the achievements of the women in the stories may be their own, their status depends on their husbands. Even Cantor, who decries the lack of strong women, makes the status of her female hero T'Pan contingent upon that of Spock. In her story "Rendezvous," T'Pan has agreed to mate with Spock because he is in pon farr and has no bondmate. In exchange, both her family and Spock's have agreed that the child, if any, will belong to her house. Spock and T'Pan are drawn to each other, but T'Pan will not marry because that would cloud

the legal status of the child, and because she would have to travel with her husband in case he went into pon farr again. She agrees instead to a pledge that leaves Spock legally free and T'Pan his chattel:

> As a chattel T'Pan could not vote, could not own property: she was a non-person. T'Pan brushed that aside. So long as she did not try to vote and avoided using other channels that might activate an inquiry, no one outside their immediate families need know.[40]

As a corpus, these stories seem to say that a man's status depends on appearances and the hierarchy of his culture, but that a woman has no need of these trappings of success to recognize her self-worth. Competence and a relationship built on mutual respect are their own rewards.

Writing the Self

When women in fandom write about women they are talking to each other about themselves in the symbolic language of their literature. With their efforts they pass through stages of their own development as individuals, from the superteen Mary Sue who lingers in the consciousness even of middle-aged matrons who have steadfastly refused to let go of the active agent of their prepubescent years (or fantasies), to the matriarch struggling for dignity against a society that pressures the family into systems of oppression. Few of the stories about women seem to postulate institutional dignity or equal status for women, but in the fan fiction the fan women talk about their struggle for dignity in their relationships. And in amongst the stories of struggle, the reader finds the stray sentence, given little weight in any single story, but that repeated in story after story speaks of the small frustrations that build up into deep-seated resentments over time: "Sarek had never, ever, been one to turn away from her and fall asleep after making love . . ."[41] or the many references to bathing and cleanliness that appear particularly in erotic stories from England and Australia.

While the stories about women do represent the struggle of some women in the community, that number seems to be very small. In a survey I conducted at More Eastly Con . . . which attracted a high concentration of fanzine readers, only 9 percent of respondents reported reading Mary Sue stories, and only 14 percent reported that they read lay-Spock stories. By contrast, 20 percent reported reading homoerotic fiction, and 24 percent enjoyed hurt-comfort.

Part of the reason so few stories about women are written or read by fan readers may take us back to the question of distance mentioned earlier in this chapter. Most of the stories that do feature women characters take place in the science fiction universes of *Star Trek* and *Blake's 7*. The different times and different cultures in which they play out stories of women's captivity and redemption offer writers a degree of distance from the situations they write. By contrast, contemporary dramas tie the writer to the here and now. The writer has little fictional distance from which she may imagine alternative ways of relating, and she is always drawn back to the recognition of the way things really are in the world in which she actually lives.

Notes

1. Camille Bacon-Smith, "The Mary Sue Genre in *Star Trek* Fan Fiction," *Folklore Women's Communication* (1984).
2. Personal correspondence with Paula Smith, September 27, 1990.
3. Paula Smith, "A Trekkie's Tale," reprinted in "Mary Sue: A Short Compendium," *Archives V* (Winter 1980), ed. Johanna Cantor, 34 (fanzine).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 35.
6. Ibid.
7. Cantor, "Mary Sue: A Short Compendium."
8. Ann Pinzow, taped interview, Cockeysville, Md., July 1984.
9. Judith Gran, taped discussion, Cockeysville, Md., July 1984.
10. Roberta Rogow, taped interview, New York, September 1985.
11. The author was referring to my article "The Mary Sue Genre in *Star Trek* Fan Fiction," which circulated among writers in both the fan and commercial Trekwriting circles.
12. Taped interview, 1986; citation information withheld at request of informant.
13. Diane Duane, *The Wounded Sky* (New York: Pocket Books, 1983).
14. Ann Crispin, letter, *Interstat* (June 1984), ed. Teri Meyer (fanzine).
15. Diane Carey, *Dreadnought* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986).
16. Ibid., 167.
17. Ibid., 246.
18. J. M. Dillard, *Demons* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986).
19. M. Dillard, taped interview, Atlanta, September 1986.
20. Carey, *Dreadnought*, 139.
21. Dillard, *Demons*, 156. The ellipses are Dillard's.

22. Ibid., 63.

23. Ibid., 138–39.

24. Jean Lorrah, series published by the author from 1975 through the present and including the novel, *Night of the Twin Moons*, and three volumes of collected stories by Lorrah and others.

25. Gran, taped discussion, Cockeysville, Md., July 1984.

26. Lois Welling, *The Displaced* (Champaign, Ill.: self-published, 1978).

27. Welling, taped discussion (with Gran and others), Cockeysville, Md., July 1983.

28. Welling, *Displaced*, 92. Ellipses are Welling's.

29. Ibid., 118.

30. Ibid. First ellipses are Welling's.

31. Barbara Wenk, *One Way Mirror*, in *Masifurm D, special supplement #2* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Poison Pen Press, 1980).

32. Ibid., 8.

33. In personal correspondence with me dated September 26, 1990, Wenk adds her wry objection to this interpretation: "As for the matter of encouraging women to stay in abusive relationships I can only state, categorically and firmly, that I am utterly opposed to their so doing, and strongly urge any woman trapped in an abusive relationship on a starship with an alien nobleman to leave immediately and seek professional help."

34. Note in particular the "dark hero" aspect of the romantic male, as described in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

35. Personal correspondence from Barbara Wenk, September 1990.

36. Cantor, "Mary Sue: A Short Compendium," 35.

37. Reported by Judy Chien, who attended the panel discussion at Most Eastly Con, Newark, N.J., January 1990.

38. Taped panel discussion, Cockeysville, Md., March 1987.

39. Cantor, "Mary Sue: A Short Compendium," 34–35.

40. Johanna Cantor, "Rendezvous," *R & R XXII* (Bronx, N.Y.: Yeoman Press, 1985), 77 (fanzine).

41. Jean Lorrah, *Full Moon Rising* (Bronx, N.Y.: Yeoman Press, 1976), 64.

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