

Note to readers: *This text is heavily based on my master thesis from 2017, I'm in the process of rewriting it toward an article. Would love any feedback on what needs elaboration, of anything feels left out or out of context, and how to update and rework the text for this context.*

Heats, knots and hierarchies: Speculative genders in omegaverse fanfiction

Abstract

As a digital genre, fanfiction enables the recontextualisation and transformation of characters, plots, and stories from popular culture. The dynamic combination of a community-driven writing practice with well-developed platforms that support an extensive and generative labelling system, supports the development of an ever-expanding network of tropes, which are continually being reinvented and reimagined in new forms. This article discusses one such trope, popularly known as “omegaverse” or alpha/beta/omega fanfiction. Currently counting 89 253 distinct works on the fanfiction platform aO3.org, omegaverse fanfiction draws on popular imaginations of wolf or canine social hierarchies and reproductive behaviours in order to reimagine characters from popular culture into a parallel gender structure as alphas, betas, or omegas. Using concepts from fan studies and feminist theory, this article shows how omegaverse fanfiction treats discourses about gender and embodiment in the same manner as it treats the original media texts, mining them for meaning in order to imaginatively transform them. Through this speculative mode, omegaverse fanfiction creates a space where the discourses associated with gender, biology, and embodiment are broken down into a set of building blocks with which individual authors can explore the inner logic of fictional gender systems on societies, relationships, and situations, examine their consequences, and imagine their downfall. Furthermore, by rewriting these discourses onto familiar characters through fanfictional narratives, the alpha/beta/omega system works as a node through which fans imagine how specific reconfigurations of differently gendered bodies would play out as lived, situated, meaningful experience. The speculative mode that is characteristic of fanfiction as a digital genre, in combination with the affordances of platforms such as ArchiveOfOurOwn.org, support the iterative play not just with products and works of popular culture, but also with the discourses and meanings with which gendered bodies are constructed and made intelligible. The constant reinvention of the trope is made possible through the interconnected and iterative process of this community-based, affect-driven, digitally native genre. Understood as an example of electronic literature, omegaverse fanfiction can be read as a kind of ‘low theory’, theory that exists at the margin of formal knowledge formations, creating alternative ways of talking and thinking about gendered embodiment.

Introduction

After years of being valued more for what lay between his legs or in his head than who he was, it was hard to believe. Yet here they were, John close enough that every breath mingled, blue irises dark with desire and understanding as if, for once, he was reading Sherlock's mind with ease.

'You were a brilliant, mad, nutter of a man.' [John] nudged Sherlock's chin, encouraging him to meet his gaze again as if he could drive home the truth with eye contact alone. He licked his lips, his voice cracking as he forced out the words that Sherlock knew John would not find easy. *'And you still are. Alpha, Beta, Omega... This –'* [John] cleared his throat, huffing out a sigh and squaring his shoulders. *'This isn't about any of that. It's about who you are. Not what you are.'* (...) *'Don't,'* [Sherlock] implored, brushing two fingers across John's mouth before he could speak. *'We can't dismiss the impact our respective genders have on our situation, particularly mine, but please – don't say it.'*

(The Gilded Cage, BeautifulFiction 2014)

This is an excerpt from a fanfiction story called The Gilded Cage, based on the BBC TV-show Sherlock. In the course of this presentation I will try to unpack what is going on in the story this is an excerpt from, and show how it may relate to the concept of complicity and gendered in/equality. Fanfiction is any fictional text based on an established media product, written by fans of that product. Through the practice of writing fanfiction, fans appropriate characters, settings, and plots from commercially published media works, in order to produce stories according to their own desires. This means that fanfiction, as well as many other fan practices, involves a fundamental complicity with the works upon which they are based - constantly referencing, drawing from and referencing the original media products

One of the more common transformative practices in fanfiction is to insert a romance between two characters of the same gender, who do not have a romantic storyline in the canonical work, also known as "slash" fanfiction. In the case of Sherlock, this has to be seen in the context of what many fans perceive as queerbaiting, where a queer romance is strongly implied, but never textually acknowledged in the actual work. Thus slash fanfiction can be seen as an answer to the desire for more queer representation in popular media, but it has also been theorised as an expression of the desire to imagine relationships between two equal partners, without having to contend with the complications of gender roles.

The Omegaverse

However, the story I quoted from in the beginning, is written into a fanfiction trope known as the omegaverse, or alpha/beta/omega dynamics. The omegaverse or alpha/beta/omega dynamics (often shortened to a/b/o) is an alternate universe consisting of a cluster of tropes involving humans with animalistic traits, inspired by the popular imagination of wolf biology and

behaviour, the rewriting of sex, gender, and the human reproductive system, and dynamics of dominance and submission. The defining feature of the omegaverse is the introduction of the alpha, beta, and omega categories which have been connected to a number of tropes which were already circulating in fanfiction communities, such as male pregnancy, knotting - a canine-inspired anatomical feature where a protrusion forms at the base of the penis during sexual intercourse, locking the partners together, heat cycles - another canine-inspired trope, in which a character experience urgent sexual desire at while they are ovulating, and unequal power dynamics, in which one character is written as dominant and the other one is written as submissive.

In an archetypal version of the omegaverse trope, omegas, both male and female, have heat cycles, ovulate, and have the ability to become pregnant. Alphas, both male and female, can form a knot during sexual intercourse, and often respond to the proximity of an omega in heat by going into rut, an intense sexual arousal which in many ways mirror that of the omega's heat. The beta label is usually reserved for characters without any alpha or omega traits, whose biological makeup is mostly unaltered from non-omegaverse humans, but in some stories they written as either sterile/infertile or intersex. The popular imagination of wolf pack hierarchy remains a central theme, and while the degree of emphasis on animality varies, most a/b/o stories involve a hierarchical social structure in which alphas are thought to be dominant and omegas are imagined to be submissive (Busse, 2013). The majority of omegaverse stories focus on a romantic and/or sexual relationship between an alpha and an omega character.

From its origin in the Supernatural fanfiction community in 2011, the omegaverse was quickly adapted by other fandoms (netweight 2013). The specifics of the trope are often adapted to the setting and genre of each individual fandom, and every writer will make their own interpretation of the trope. As a result, the omegaverse has become a loose and highly customizable framework which lends itself to a variety of different interpretations, depending on the interests and inclinations of the author. This means that while all of the above-mentioned elements are common in a/b/o, there is enormous variety in how they are interpreted. Each story contains its own unique version of the omegaverse, embracing some elements of the trope, while ignoring or discarding others. Some stories focus heavily on the erotic potential of a/b/o, in which heat cycles provide the urgency of excruciating and uncontrollable physical desire, knotting creates intensity and intimacy, and the alpha/beta/omega hierarchy and associated personality traits become a vehicle through which to explore a dom/sub dynamic. Some stories center around domestic narratives, exploring the romantic and intimate potential of soul bonds, coupledness and (frequently male) pregnancy. Other stories build on the concept of alpha/beta/omega hierarchy to outline societies in which a person's status as alpha, beta, or omega determines their status and position, using the a/b/o trope to explore experiences of oppression and injustice. A number of stories posit that a person's alpha or omega characteristics only become apparent when a person reaches puberty, and use this premise to explore experiences of adolescence. Most often, any particular a/b/o story will contain a combination of several of these themes.

Based on the BBC TV-show *Sherlock*, *The Gilded Cage* (BeautifulFiction 2015, hereafter referred to as TGC) starts with John Watson's accidental discovery that Sherlock is actually an omega, not an alpha as he had been assuming. Alternating between Sherlock's and John's point of view, the story then follows their gradual development from friends to lovers, a process that is complicated by the fact that John's status as an alpha, and Sherlock's status as an omega, starts them out in an asymmetrical position: in the society described in TGC, omegas are treated as the legal property of their families or their alpha partners. It also does not help the situation that Sherlock is still bound to his abusive former partner, from whom he moved to London to escape. The story is also a 'casefic', i.e. a story which revolves around the investigation of a crime: someone have been poisoning and killing alphas, and the resolution to the investigation turns out to have potentially groundbreaking consequences for Sherlock's future, as well as for omegas in general. It is 326 887 words long, which would make it 7-800 pages long in book form, depending on the font and formatting. With more comments, 'kudos', and bookmarks than any other Sherlock A/B/O fic in the archive, it is arguably the most popular omegaverse story within the Sherlock fandom. This story was selected for its thorough exploration of the difficulties involved in establishing an equal, respectful, consenting relationship under conditions of gendered oppression, as well as for its descriptions of omega embodiedness.

A Stiller Doom (Tessa on Ice 2017, hereafter referred to as ASD), is based on a Japanese animated TV-series called *Yuri!!! on Ice*. The story centers on the young Russian ice-skater Yuri Plisetsky (the namesake of the main character in the show, the Japanese ice-skater Yuri Katsuki). Surpassing his peers in junior championships, Yuri has just begun entering competitions as a senior, and has his eyes set on the olympics. This plan gets derailed when Yuri unexpectedly goes into heat, revealing that he is an omega, and not a beta as he had previously assumed. As an omega, Yuri has to confront prejudice, shame, discrimination, and ultimately the Russian state, in order to continue to skate. In the TV-series Yuri Plisetsky is portrayed as ambitious, arrogant, and rebellious, a teenage punk with a short temper, and in ASD these traits are channeled into Yuri's resistance against the treatment of omegas in Russian society. Throughout the story, Yuri also develops a romance with the Kazakhstani skater Otabek Altin, whose "omegist" mother turns out to be an important influence on Yuri's political awakening. This story was selected for its exploration of the teenage experience of becoming gendered, and for its depiction of the journey through resignation, anger, and hope, as Yuri gets involved in activism against the oppression of omegas.

Misogynistic premises

A conspicuous feature of omegaverse fanfiction is the degree to which the alpha/omega dynamic resembles misogynistic stereotypes of men and women. Although a/b/o is a ternary rather than binary system, and uses the labels of alpha, beta, and omega rather than male and female, it is easy to read the alpha/omega categories as exaggerated versions of the male/female gender/sex system. In omega verse stories, meanings, norms, and biological characteristics normally

associated with women are usually written into the omega category, and meanings associated with men and maleness are written into the alpha figure. The direct association of reproductive function with social roles and behaviour, linking the ability to become pregnant with inferior status, domesticity, and submissiveness, and the ability to impregnate with superior status, aggression, and dominance, is highly reminiscent of coarse caricatures of misogynist discourses. In addition these traits are also often said to be biologically hardwired, coded into hormones, instinct, and genes, presenting a view of (a/b/o) gender as something that has an inescapable essence which is dictated by nature, and that gendered characteristics and behaviour can be straightforwardly traced back to biological dictums. The attribution of fixed characteristics to categories based on biological or “natural” traits, echoes the gender essentialist descriptions of women which have been frequent targets for feminist criticism (Grosz 1995).

Furthermore, these biological imperatives not only manifest in gendered behaviour, they also often dictate the direction of the character’s attraction. Often omegas are described as responding instinctively to the presence of a certain alpha, without conscious intent or will. This is amplified by the common use in a/b/o of the soulmate and soulbond tropes, where two characters are written as destined for each other on a biological level, resulting in near-irresistible mutual attraction and a special connection. When the mechanisms underlying the soulmate/soulbond phenomenon are described as part of the alpha or omega biology (betas are often described as “immune” to soul bonds), this results in the biological and essentialist encoding of alpha/omega heterosexuality.

Even though it is clear that the a/b/o stories analyzed in this thesis draw on essentialist, stereotypical, and heteronormative representations of sex and gender, it does not automatically follow that they can be said to straightforwardly reproduce or resist them. Fanfiction tropes, and alternate universes in particular, are often based on a hypothetical ‘what if’-type question through which the canonical material is transformed and reinterpreted (Pugh, 2005). In the case of the stories analyzed in this paper, some of the questions they can be said to explore are: what if the basic structure of human reproductive functions positioned one sex as fundamentally dependent and vulnerable to exploitation? What if this group was valued only for their reproductive abilities, and were restricted in their participation in society because of this? What if people of one gender was treated as the property of another, because of their reproductive abilities? What if their (in)ability to consent to sexual relations was seen as irrelevant?

This speculative mode allows the stories to have a more flexible relationship with reality than other kinds of texts. As opposed to non-fiction and more realist styles of fiction, fiction that is rooted in the ‘what if’ mode is not assumed to be directly representing a reality that exists external to the text. As such, these kinds of stories are freed from the need to prove the premises upon which the stories are made, and spared from the imperative of having to justify themselves as truth claims. By placing the stories in a/b/o alternate universes, these stories are exempted from any assumption that they represent how gender and sexuality works in existing societies, structures, and places. As a result, the stories can describe sexism and oppressive gender

structures without having to be held accountable for the accuracy of their accounts as descriptions of women's situation in any given place or time. Releasing the stories from the need to anchor their premises in references to 'what is', the 'what if' mode frees them to explore the consequences of these premises from a speculative, imaginative point of view. Within the omegaverse system, gendered oppression becomes hypothetical and malleable, making it possible to take it apart and put it back together again. The speculative mode of omegaverse fanfiction creates a space in which the discourses associated with sex and gender can be treated as a set of building blocks, with which individual authors can construct models of societies, relationships and situations, examine them, and imagine their downfall. By writing about structures of gendered oppression as if contrafactual, the stories not only makes it possible to examine the premises they are based on, it also creates a space to imagine their unraveling and envisioning the possibility for change.

Omega otherness

By actively modifying and transforming the human body, inventing bodily constellations that do not exist outside of the text, these stories are not bound to represent existing bodies and genders, nor can they be assumed to directly originate in the lived experiences of their authors. Instead, they are representations of the experiences that could plausibly be produced by the bodies, societies and characters imagined in the stories. The use of a fictional gender structure creates the opportunity to examine the inner logic of discourses about sex and gender by imagining hypothetical bodies and societies based on the premises that underpin these discourses, whether that is hierarchically ordered, biologically rooted gender categories, or socially constructed and enforced gender norms. This means that even though the omega is constructed from traits and concepts associated with femaleness, such as hormonal cycles and the capacity to become pregnant, the imagined experience of the omega is not directly equatable to that of a woman.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the masculine sees itself (and is seen) as the universal, the absolute, while woman is seen (and sees herself) as the other, the particular, the exception to the male norm (de Beauvoir 2011, 6). Within the a/b/o system, omega characters are positioned as the other in relation to the alpha (or occasionally alpha/beta) norm. Furthermore, through the omegaverse trope, meanings by which women have been conceptualized as other and lesser - such as the primacy of the body over the mind, the volatility and infectiousness of the leaking female body, and the fear of uncontrollable female desire - are written into omega bodies. In addition, the stories construct societies in which omegas are disciplined by social norms and institutions in ways that echo the historical subjugation of women. Presented as both a naturalized, biologically rooted category and a socially constructed identity, omega genderedness is essentially over-determined, resulting in a fictionalized representation of female-coded otherness. Rather than representing women or femaleness, the omega figure is an embodiment of multiple discourses by which women have been (and still are) constructed as other. The omega does not signify woman, he or she signifies the otherness with which the category 'woman' has been imbued. By stitching together the omega from discourses that have been used to constitute

women as lesser and other in relation to the male norm, the figure of the omega can then be mobilized to undermine and resist these discourses.

In both TGC and ASD, various meanings that go into the discursive construction of woman as other are made to converge in the figure of the omega, whereupon the narrative is dedicated to discrediting them. The stories attack these discourses from multiple angles, sometimes contesting the veracity of the essentialist premises that go into the omega figure, revealing that what seemed like a biological, naturally given identity is in fact a result of oppressive, socially constructed structures that can be resisted and changed. At other points they refute their validity through the character's ability to defy even the dictums that are encoded into their bodies, making them rise above biological imperatives and thus proving that biology is not destiny. Within these stories the question of whether sex or gender is foundational is left unresolved - both of them go into the construction of gendered otherness in the shape of the omega. Biology and culture both contribute to the oppression of omegas, but neither of the two are deterministic, as proven by the ability of the main characters to overcome them. By giving the omega characters the means to overcome their uncontrollable bodies, find ways to flourish in a society which is structured to deny them the chance to develop their capabilities, and to have them find love and respect with an alpha despite all the things that separate them, the narrative becomes one of transcendence and hope. As a caricature of the constructions of female otherness, the omega is constituted as a strawman argument erected only to be demolished, supporting the inherently optimistic claim that even if the premises that construct women as other were written in flesh, they could be proven wrong and defeated.

The male omega

So far, this discussion has focused on the constellations of meaning produced through the a/b/o categories, without paying too much attention to the fact that the characters that embody them carry their male/female genders into the stories. From the perspective of the inner logic of the stories, this makes sense. Within the omegaverse, meanings, behaviours, roles, and structures that we generally associate with gender and sex are all connected to the a/b/o system. Even though the characters' canonical male/female gender is still referred to alongside their a/b/o designation, the a/b/o categories are largely the ones that determine both reproductive abilities, gender roles, and which norms apply to them. It is also the system by which some characters are othered, while other characters are constituted as the norm. In both TGC and ASD, omegas are oppressed because they are omega, regardless of their male/female gender.

Nevertheless, this discussion would be incomplete without discussing the significance of this double gendering. What are the consequences of writing the omega as a man? At first glance, the fact that the characters retain their male/female gender may seem irrelevant, simply included as a relic from the source material. However, this would ignore one of the most characteristic traits of fanfiction as a genre: the reliance on characterisation from its source material. Fanfiction assumes reader familiarity with the source texts, and uses that familiarity in the production of

new stories. According to Francesca Coppa (2006), fanfiction readers come to the text with pre-established extratextual knowledge, especially (in the case of fanfiction based on visual media) of the characters' bodies, voices and relationships. She argues that "the actor's body, as much as the words on the page, is the medium of (...) fannish storytelling, and that fanfiction as a genre has much in common with theatrical drama, in that it "directs bodies in space" (2006, 225). The writers making the already established characters act out a script of their own, rely on the reader's familiarity with the source material to bring the physicality of the characters into the story (Coppa 2006b). In the case of movie and television fandom, this includes the canonical characters' physical features, their looks as determined by the actors who play them, and their gender as presented in the canonical media. This means that when a fanfiction story is based on the BBC TV series *Sherlock*, the reader will imagine the characters as they are portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman in the show. In omegaverse stories such as TGC and ASD, the main characters are gendered as male not just through the textual references to their maleness, but also through the images and associations drawn from the reader's familiarity with the source media. Through these fics, characters envisioned as male are put into embodied situations structured by discourses which have been, and are still, used to construct women as other. Yuri is made to go through the adolescent crisis of becoming a gendered body, experiencing feelings of betrayal and grief as his body presents the traits that will condemn him to the subjugated status of an omega, as well as the process of his gradual omegist awakening as he comes to learn how society is structured in order to maintain alpha interests. *Sherlock* is put in a situation where his agency and freedom are constantly threatened, both by his volatile, uncontrollable omega body, and laws that frame omegas as property, not people. Together with John he is made to struggle to find a way to form an equal, respectful, and trusting relationship despite the unequal power dynamics that follow from their respective statuses as omega and alpha.

To follow Coppa's theater reference, by writing these male characters as omegas, they are made to act out scripts structured by female-coded otherness. The result is that character is simultaneously gendered through the familiar, extratextual, male/female gender system, and through the imagined alpha/beta/omega gender system, producing a two-layered, double genderedness. This puts the male omega in an interesting position: according to his m/f gender he represents the norm, while as his a/b/o gender he represents the other. By writing a familiar male character as an omega, experiences which are coded as particular, exceptional, and less than fully human because of their association with female otherness, are imagined to be experienced by a character who, through his status as a man, represents the norm, the absolute, the human. The double position inhabited by the male omega puts experiences of female-coded otherness into a context in which they can be recognized and legitimized as if they had been experienced by someone who were seen as the norm, while also retaining their specificity. Through the figure of the male omega, the suffering, indignity, and injustice that comes from being othered are validated by being played out by a character who has the ability to be read (by the reader of the text, if not by the world of the fan text itself) as the norm. Simultaneously embodying both

the norm and the other, the male omega smuggles experiences of female-coded otherness into the sphere of the universal.

Textual poaching

In “Textual Poachers” Henry Jenkins argues that fanfiction authors poach meaning from pop cultural texts and repurpose it for their own use, transforming and often subverting the meanings communicated by the original media in the process. By treating media texts as “raw material for their own cultural production” (Jenkins 1992, 24) the writers “become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (ibid., 24). In extension of this, L  ppanen (2008) has pointed out that fanfiction writers often actively draw on the images of gender and sexuality presented in the media they are basing their story on, in order to “modify, question, parody, critique and radically subvert the ways gender and sexuality are represented in the cult texts” (L  ppanen 2008, 176). In the case of the omegaverse, this rewriting of discourses about gender and sexuality is an intrinsic and fundamental feature of the trope: the distinguishing elements of a/b/o - encoding the alpha/beta/omega categories with unequal power dynamics and the retooling of the reproductive body - invites active engagement with discourses of gender and sexuality. The omegaverse trope thus functions as a framework through which discourses about gender and sexuality are brought into the text, reorganised, and rewritten. A/b/o fanfiction stories thus do not limit their re-interpretative practice to meanings poached from media texts, they actively bring discourses about the sexed and gendered body into the story. Through the a/b/o trope, the sexed and gendered human body is treated as text that is mined for meaning and used as raw material to be repurposed, much in the same way that they repurpose the meanings found in pop cultural texts.

According to Henry Jenkins, fanfiction is a result of fascination and frustration. If the original work did not fascinate the writers, they would find no reason to engage with it. If it did not frustrate them, it would not arouse the desire to transform it according to their own interests and preferences. The stories that result from this process can be read as expressions of a desire to change something about the source text, to explore possibilities that the canonical texts fail to realize. By reconfiguring and reinterpreting the original texts, fanfiction supplies the source texts with new meanings and possibilities. As a result, fanfiction can be read as a form of critical commentary of the source texts upon which it is based (Jenkins 2006). It follows that fanfiction which treats the discourses surrounding sex and gender the same way as it treats the media texts is subject to the same logic. By taking the discourses surrounding sex and gender as its source material and creatively transforming them, omegaverse can be read as critical commentary of the discourses which constitute sex and gender.

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