

Brevity is the Soul of Fic: Microfiction, Microfic, and Shakespearean Abridgement in Online Fan Fiction

Johnathan H. Pope, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Grenfell Campus

ABSTRACT ♦ INTRODUCTION ♦ FAN FICTION ♦ MICROFICTION AND GENRE ♦
MICROFIC VERSUS MICROFICTION ♦ SHAKESPEARE MICROFIC AND ITS PREDECESSORS ♦
SILENCE AND THE ARCHIVE IN MICROFIC ♦ BREVITY AS INTERTEXTUALITY ♦
CONCLUSION ♦ REFERENCES

ABSTRACT

Through a focus on Shakespeare fan fiction, this article discusses ‘microfic’ – short-form fan fiction – as a unique genre of microfiction. Sometimes consisting of fewer than ten words, microfiction relies on clever twists or epiphanies rather than character or plot development for its effect. Although microfic is equally brief and compact, as a genre of fan fiction, it is always engaged in a sustained dialogue with a fan object such as Shakespeare that serves to import whole plots, characters, and metatextual debates into the text with the mention of a name or place. As such, the brevity of microfic is illusory, as it continually draws on – and contributes to – the fan object and its archive. Unlike microfiction in general, microfic is never self-contained. Through an analysis of numerous Shakespeare microfics available in the *Archive of Our Own* fan fiction database, this article indicates the extent to which their silences are seldom silent.

INTRODUCTION¹

Although fan fiction (fanfic) is often dismissed as juvenile and amateurish, its intimate relationship with a fan object—be it Shakespeare or *Star Wars*—enables it to make maximum critical intervention in minimal space. While often playful, irreverent, and insular in its terms of reference, fanfic also exploits its readers’ shared depth

¹ I would like to thank Ronan Hatfull and Taarini Mookherjee for organizing the “Fracking Shakespeare” seminar at the 2021 European Shakespeare Research Association conference where I first presented some of the ideas in this article.

of knowledge to eliminate any need for narrative or character development, maximizing the effectiveness of extreme brevity. Although short fanfic—here referred to as “microfic,” following the convention of referring to a work of fan fiction as a “fic”—shares considerable common ground with microfiction in general, its goal is often to expand, rework, or rearticulate a much larger text rather than to exist as an independent, self-contained text on its own. Following Derrida, Abigail Derecho describes fan fiction as “archontic literature,” “composed of texts that are archival in nature and that are impelled by the same archontic principle: that tendency toward enlargement and accretion that all archives possess” (Derecho 2006, 64). Fan fiction thus simultaneously contributes to and draws from the archive of the original text. As Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes note, fanfic authors “approach the body of Shakespeare’s work as an unconstrained archive of material that can be drawn from in contemporary instances” (2016, 277). With each withdrawal from that archive, a new deposit is also made in the form of the fic that is written.

Shakespeare fanfic has garnered increasing critical attention in recent years, and these studies have frequently focused on bringing this form of writing and textual dissemination into dialogue with Shakespeare studies and validating it as a worthwhile object of study that offers a unique form of reader participation. Kavita Mudan Finn and Jessica McCall suggest, for example, that fanfic is “the beginning of a new kind of criticism” that “allows students and readers to make meaning of Shakespeare rather than have a predetermined message thrust upon them” by traditional academic discourse and pedagogy, emphasizing that fanfic “preserves the multiplicity and complexity of meaning in the text rather than replacing it” (2016, 29). Fazel and Geddes have also suggested “Shakespeare users” (akin to software users) and “hyper-reading” as productive ways to consider contemporary, often digital, engagements with the playwright—such as fanfic—that participate in “a continuously expanding archive that accommodates the far-reaching permutations of a network of linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural associations” (2017, 3). Other recent studies have sought to explore the generic parameters of Shakespeare fan engagements in light of copyright and intellectual property concerns (Pope 2020) or to consider Shakespeare fanfic as a type of folk art or folk product (Yost 2018, 193–94). In addition to grappling with largescale issues of defining the field and its terms of engagement, work is beginning to emerge on specific genres or styles of Shakespeare fanfic such as Tom Hiddleston “Real Person Fic” (O’Neill 2021) or transgender Shakespeare fics (Herak 2023). While all of these works explicitly or implicitly recognize the archival interaction of fanfic, very little attention has been paid to microfic beyond brief allusions to such works (Pope 2020, 128; Yost 2018, 204).

Significantly, the brevity of microfic is conditional and paradoxical: textual abridgement by way of archival expansion. To this I would also add that the presence of the ever-expanding archive of the text renders nearly all textual silences in fan fiction as ellipsistic silences, that is, *absence* that knowingly signifies *presence*. Consider mydearconfidant’s thirty-four-word fic “Melancholia; Hamlet, rewritten,” which the author describes in summary as “Ophelia gets her own justice”:

Hysteria
 a disorder
 that is in women alone

Ophelia
 Pushes him into the water

Or
 She pulls him
 into the water with her

Riptide

And
 Rises

Hell hath no fury
 Like a woman scorned (mydearconfidant 2019)

Shakespeare microfic is haunted or footnoted by fragments of the Complete Works, their adaptive legacy, and pedagogical or scholarly approaches to the playwright, indicating the importance of considering microfic a distinct genre of microfiction. Indeed, the larger the archive of the original text and the more fans there are contributing to that archive, the easier it is for microfic to function and maintain coherence in a way fundamentally dissimilar to microfiction.

FAN FICTION

While there are a number of fanfic archives available online, the largest is [ArchiveofOurOwn.org](https://archiveofourown.org) (AO3), which, as of September 2023, contains just under twelve million works, nearly all of which have been posted by authors using pseudonyms. Of these millions, approximately 16,000 are tagged as engaging with Shakespeare in general, with 4,500 belonging to the Shakespeare fandom specifically.² Of the 4,500 fics tagged as belonging to the Shakespeare fandom, approximately 1,500 stand at fewer than 1,000 words and nearly 350 works at fewer than 200 words.³ Works of fan fiction or “fics” are generically diverse, often in ways that scholars of Shakespearean adaptations are already familiar with: adaptation unconstrained by copyright or intellectual property concerns.

2 Given the size of the archive, these number are always changing. Just as new fics are added every day, users can remove fics that have already been posted.

3 Important to note here is that AO3 lists a number of fics as containing zero words but which are, in fact, podfics (audio recordings of fics). As audio files, they could be any length.

Where fan fiction departs from typical Shakespeare adaptations, however, is that it does not participate in the marketplace, at least not in the same way that commercial film, theatre, novels, and so forth participate in the marketplace. Consequently, fanfic is largely unconstrained by censorship, marketability, or, most importantly here, expectations of length. While some fics are written to be broadly appealing, others are written to satisfy the desires of a small subset of readers or just the individual authors themselves. Fan fiction is also inherently inter- and metatextual, commonly “crossing over” characters from different fictional universes, such as having Tybalt share a drink with Marvel’s Loki (The_Arkadian 2015). Finally, fics can be as long or as short as the author desires. The shortest Shakespeare fic I have read — discussed later — consists of a mere four words, and those simply a quotation from *Hamlet*: “The rest is silence” (republic 2016). The title of this fic — “John Cage collaborates with William Shakespeare” — is, indeed, longer than the fic itself.

In fan fiction, size exists in conceptual extremes: extremely short fics and extremely small audiences for individual fics are housed within a massive and ever-expanding archive that, in some instances, contains texts that far exceed the expected length of a short story, play, novel, or even series of novels. AO3 tracks metadata for each fic, enabling users and authors to see how many times a fic has been read, and readers can leave comments or “kudos” (a digital “thumbs up”), with many fics receiving just a few hundred hits and a handful of comments or kudos. The noncommercial nature of fanfic means that the size of the potential audience is — depending on the author — irrelevant, with “gift fics” sometimes written at the request of a single reader or to say “thank you” to another author. Regardless of the impressive size of the archive and its nearly 6 million registered users, audiences for individual fics can thus be very small, sometimes by design. Participation in a community of likeminded fanfic authors and readers establishes an archival reciprocity of exchange that enables both readers and authors to engage with the fan object in real time. Fics can always be amended, expanded, or deleted; because of this they are embedded with an always-on potential for change and transformation instead of being inherently static.

MICROFICTION AND GENRE

Microfiction has become increasingly popular in recent years, perhaps nowhere more evident than in the proliferation of “six-word horror stories” in the mid-2010s. Abbreviated forms of writing — in various genres — are, however, both wide-ranging and longstanding, rooted as much in poetic forms such as sonnets, haikus, epigrams, and prose poems as they are in the short story, arguably microfiction’s closest relative. Although brevity is the defining characteristic of microfiction, there is little consensus on how short these texts should be, which has contributed to a propagation of terms whose meaning shifts from critic to critic: flash fiction, nanofiction, short shorts, postcard fiction, sudden fiction, and so forth all describe varieties of microfiction whose upper limit might be 1,000 or 2,500 words but likely no fewer than six words (Galef 2016, x; Howitt-Dring 2015, 180). Kent Thompson suggests that the narratives contained in many song lyrics fit the definition (1988,

104). William Nelles convincingly argues that stories shorter than 700 words “are not just quantitatively but qualitatively different than most stories above that length” (2012, 88).

The popularity of the six-word story is often attributed to Ernest Hemingway who is frequently credited with writing the story referred to as “Baby Shoes” which reads “For sale: baby shoes, never worn,” although no evidence has been found to prove that Hemingway actually wrote the story (Galef 2016, x-xi; McCormack 2021, 19n2). Regardless, the prevalence of “Baby Shoes” in discussions of microfiction is easily understood because it epitomizes the form and its “compressed force which is released in the reader’s mind” (Thompson 1988, 106). Where microfiction leaves little room for plot or character development, its effect typically relies on “some kind of epiphany, or expressing an idea of a turn, realization or twist in the narrative as the pieces come to a close” (Howitt-Dring 2015, 180). As a self-contained, short form of writing, microfiction writers must also “suggest possibilities in their work, to imply larger potentialities that may exist beyond the page,” possibilities that necessitate active reader participation in order to construct the narrative worlds (Cosgrove 2020, 102; Kiosses 2021, 11; Irving 2017, 155–56). This holds true whether the microfiction is 6 words, 700 words, or 1,000 words in length. Short-form fan fiction—microfic—complicates some of the prevailing understandings of microfiction. Rather than implying possibilities beyond the text, microfic plugs into something that is already established, often exploring a possibility or potential raised in the original text instead of teasing multiplicity itself. Microfic’s playground is the Keatsian negative capability of the Complete Works, and while this is largely true of fanfic in general, its impact is heightened in this succinct genre due to the archival accretion of a multiverse of possibilities (Fazel and Geddes 2021).

MICROFIC VERSUS MICROFICTION

In the world of fan fiction, microfics can—but are not required to—fall into numerous categories, some of which are specific to particular fandoms. In general parlance, “ficlet” or “snippet” describes a work that is approximately 1,000 words or fewer, a “drabble” is exactly 100 words long (there are also variations such as the “double drabble” at 200 words, or the “dribble” or “half drabble” at 50 words), and “twitterature” can be up to 280 characters. There are also fandom-specific short fic categories such as “221B,” a 221-word fic in which the final word begins with the letter “B,” emerging from the Sherlock Holmes fandom.⁴ Such abbreviated forms of writing are often undertaken by fic authors as a writing prompt or challenge that can strive to apply seemingly arbitrary rules that are grounded in some detail of the fan object (“221B,” for example, refers to Sherlock Holmes’ London address, 221B Baker Street). In terms of their length and constraints, these genres share conceptual ground with longstanding poetic forms such as the sonnet, and they run parallel to—and are part of—the current trend of microfiction. Indeed, a popular genre of Shakespeare microfics are sonnets written as if shared between characters in the plays. Along with fics written in the style of dramatic dialogue

⁴ This list is by no means exhaustive, and new fanfic genres emerge continually. For a recent but partial user-generated list, see: <https://ao3commentsoftheday.tumblr.com/post/629569357446545408/types-of-short-fic>.

to mimic a playtext, these sonnets are the closest we get to a fandom-specific genre of fan fiction because their chosen forms serve as engagements with the fan object—Shakespeare in general or a specific play or poem—in conjunction with the content of the fic. “Epilogue by a Fool,” for example, offers an imagined coda to *King Lear* in sonnet form, prompted by the theme of bastardry:

Why, here’s a balmy riddle to confound
 The gathered company of either land:
 Who shall we blame, whose guilt abound,
 For so much death and waste of fair Britain?

This man, unseemly and untimely born,
 Schemed with those got in royal beds;
 And neither sex nor blood nor age is shown
 To ’scape the carnage where it led;

But whether was more fault of fate or men,
 The pull of Mars and his vengeful demands,
 Or mere mortal jealousy, spite, and sin,
 ’Tis naught to grief but futile mute commands.

So tragedy is raised by heedless acts,
 Sown in base luxury, reaped with regrets. (scrimshaw 2022)

While fanfic authors often strive for witty irreverence, others seek to engage with their fan objects in insightful and poetic ways in which the relationship between form and content is part of that engagement, as in sonnets such as the above.

Although microfic shares considerable conceptual ground with traditional microfiction, some key distinctions become immediately apparent, distinctions that help us understand microfic as a genre unto itself. After all, where a text was published and whether or not the author was paid to write it are insufficient generic parameters, even though such characteristics have often been used to differentiate fanfic from traditional literature (Pugh 2005, 11, 25–26; Pope 2020, 15–16). In other words, microfic is not microfic simply because it is short and published on AO3. Where fan fiction—of any length—typically departs from other forms of writing is in its inherently intertextual nature as it persistently engages in a dialogue with a fan object, a dialogue that will ideally be recognizable to other fan readers. Although, “recognizable” is a very subjective concept in relation to any fandom, as fics frequently emerge from the smallest of details in a fan object, its supplemental texts and paratexts, or within metatextual discussions and debates. Regardless of the obscurity of the point of reference, without a recognizable character or setting, fan fiction loses its coherence as *fan* fiction and becomes simply *fiction*. In their paratextual notes to the thirty-three-word *Measure for Measure* fic “Afterwards,” author fen-girl88 begins an explanation of the fic with a spoiler alert about the play: “I doubt anyone will read this who

doesn't know the play already, but here's a spoilery endnote just in case" (fengirl88 2016). Familiarity with the fan object is assumed.

Furthermore, brevity operates in very different ways in both microfic and microfictions to the extent that we can understand brevity in microfic as an extension of its essential and explicit intertextuality such that its intertextuality enables and authorizes its concision. Holly Howitt-Dring defines microfictions as "tales in and of themselves, with no further wording, content or context needed than their final value on the page," emphasizing that the genre "connects with a moment of epiphany, however big or small, and, using succinct, sometimes sensitive and sometimes sparse prose, tells a story in absolute miniature" (2015, 179–80). To this end, Microfiction prioritizes wit, ingenuity, and the unexpected within its brief but self-contained narrative, with little to no room for plot or character development. "Baby Shoes," for example, *implies* the existence of intersecting plots and characters, but all of these details are stripped away in order to heighten the impact of the final two words, "never worn." This is akin to an individual sonnet, wherein an epigrammatic turn offers a clever twist on a discreet moment or observation without the expectation of narrative progression over the course of its fourteen lines. Viewed in isolation from the rest of the sequence, the mistress whose "eyes are nothing like the sun" in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 is only slightly more developed as a character than the anonymous seller of the baby shoes, and there is a similar scarcity of narrative in both texts. Instead, the effect of each text relies on its clever, unexpected conclusion that enables each to exist as a self-contained and complete text. "Baby Shoes" is impactful precisely because it raises numerous questions that imply often-tragic narratives or characters beyond its confines. Perhaps some anonymous parents simply purchased too many pairs of shoes and their child has outgrown them before they were ever worn, but that prospect would make for an uninteresting story. Instead, numerous tragic possibilities involving death and grief haunt the edges of these six words.

By contrast, microfic is never entirely self-contained, never a story in "absolute miniature," even if it can be read and can maintain its textual coherence as such. "Epilogue by a Fool," for example, loses its intended impact if readers do not bring their knowledge of *King Lear* to the reading even if the sonnet can be intelligible on its own. In her discussion of fan fiction, Sheenagh Pugh emphasizes that

Mini-stories may be used for all sorts of reasons in profic, but one overriding reason for their popularity among fanfic writers is their suitability for a shared canon. Because her audience already shares so much background information, it is possible for a fanfic writer to come in at the middle or end of a story and still take them with her. Exposition is largely irrelevant and information can be conveyed via very brief allusions which will mean more to the "canon" audience than they would to outsiders. . . . Similarly beginnings can be invested with all the emotional charge of the consequences the audience knows about but the characters do not (2005, 172–73).

The existence of this shared canon means that, even in a 100-word drabble, a lot of background can be imported by using a specific character, whereas in "profic" (professional fiction), that same background would be left up to the speculation of the reader (Pope 2020, 117). To this end, Nelles emphasizes that a lack or

absence of character development, and even a dearth of individuated characters, is a hallmark of microfiction because “the development of psychologically nuanced three-dimensional characters with individual histories simply requires too many words.” Microfiction is thus necessarily largely populated by “anonymous adults of unspecified age” (2012, 92). Imperative anonymity or ambiguity is not present in microfic, a fact that becomes increasingly clear the shorter a fic is.

The above Pugh quotation highlights a key feature of fan fiction and its functionality in short-form genres. Although references to a shared canon’s characters, settings, and narratives are *allusive*, they are not *allusions*. Whereas allusions use references to other texts to illuminate and offer a shorthand interpretive framework for the present work, fan fiction follows the reverse trajectory by using the present work to illuminate the original text and by importing literal characters and settings rather than their figurative implications. In mydearconfidant’s “Melancholia; Hamlet, rewritten,” the characters are not *like* Ophelia and Hamlet, they *are* Ophelia and Hamlet. Although this microfic is fewer than forty words, the author presents the reader with a revision of *Hamlet* in which Ophelia kills Hamlet and survives the events of the play, thus reflecting on the themes of gender and power in Shakespeare’s play. The effect of this fic is predicated on the reader’s knowledge of the original play and, to a lesser extent, its interpretive legacy, a coherence that is contingent rather than insular. In this regard, microfic perhaps best epitomizes the paradox of the archontic principle of fanfic. The shorter the microfic and the smaller its quantitative contribution to the archive of the original text is, the more it requires the reader to draw from that same archive in order to achieve intelligibility and offer critical intervention. As Fazel and Geddes note, “Shakespeare’s body of work exists at multiple levels beyond the theatrical, including editorial and pop cultural, resulting in a refracted *urtext* at the core of the fan’s creation, in which the idea of an ‘original’ exists with the same autonomy as its adaptive counterparts” (2016, 276). The larger the archive of and audience for the original text (both of which, in relation to Shakespeare, are vast), the less one microfic has to say as it plugs into the extant cloud of metatextual discourse, further distinguishing it from self-contained microfiction in general.

SHAKESPEARE MICROFIC AND ITS PREDECESSORS

Such contingent or conditional coherence is not unique to online fan fiction and has longstanding historical precedents in a variety of short-form texts and performances. Consider, for example, Francis Kirkman’s collection of drolls *The Wits* (1662), which extract humorous excerpts from a variety of early modern plays, such as the gravedigger scene from *Hamlet*. Douglas Lanier describes these drolls as “slightly transgressive” in their focus on inversions or parodies of class hierarchy and their tendency toward farce and sensationalism (2002, 27–29). Another historical counterpart to microfic would be David Garrick’s planned pageant and procession of Shakespearean characters from nineteen plays in his 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford-upon-Avon, although the procession was cancelled due to rain (Stott 2019, 139). In both of these cases, however, the similarities to fan fiction are as important as the differences. Kirkman’s drolls extract brief but textually accurate

portions that are intelligible on their own. In his preface to the 1662 edition, Henry Marsh emphasizes that “He that knows a Play, knows that Humours have no such *fixedness* and indissoluble *connexion* to the Design, but that without *injury* or *forcible revulsion* they may be *removed* to an *advantage*; which is so demonstrable, that I am sure nothing but a *morose propriety* will offer to deny it” (1662, A3v). More’s playful tone anticipates the spirited and often tongue-in-cheek nature of fan fiction: those with a “morose propriety” need not apply. Contrast arises, however, in the relationship between the part and the whole, as Marsh asserts that these scenes can be exported from the original play “without injury” and are capable of existing on their own because they have no “indissoluble connection” to the play, implying that prior knowledge of, say, *Hamlet* is not required to enjoy “The Grave-makers.” Similarly, Garrick’s pageant of characters at the Jubilee was to include a number of characters from a play performing a dumb show of a key scene beneath a banner, aiming to “distill the substance of Shakespeare into a synoptic form” (Stott 2019, 151). Unlike Kirkman’s drolls, however, Garrick’s pageant would only be intelligible to the knowing audience of Shakespeare fans equipped with a prior knowledge of the play. A dumb show of Lear in his madness can only make sense to an audience possessing some familiarity with *King Lear*. Likewise for the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s humorously abbreviated versions of the plays in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*.

By comparison, republic’s fic “Witch act is this?” (a *Macbeth* drabble) seeks to reduce the entire play solely to sexual innuendo, with the author explaining that the fic emerged from “reading bits of Shakespeare out-of-context to make them sound dirty, and that lead to the idea of a filthy drabble made up entire[ly] of excerpts from Macbeth. And that’s what this is—all the [sic] this work is from the play itself, ‘creatively’ shuffled around” (republic 2015). More akin to Garrick’s pageant than Kirkman’s drolls, “Witch act is this?” consists of textually accurate excerpts, but it is not intelligible on its own. Nevertheless, both droll and pageant strive for textual or performative accuracy rather than adaptation of, interpretation of, or commentary on the original play (in saying this, however, I recognize that any performative or textual editing is an act of interpretation and adaptation by omission or inclusion). Although some fan fiction simply seeks to expand upon or reiterate the fan object by enabling readers to spend more time with a favorite character through, for example, a “missing scene” fic (what *was* Hamlet up to in Wittenberg?) (imperatrix 2016), many fics—including missing scene fics—offer critical interventions into the fan object.

SILENCE AND THE ARCHIVE IN MICROFIC

It is clear that intertextuality operates differently in microfiction than in microfic. Nelles emphasizes that, in microfiction, intertextuality serves an economical function: “with the briefest of allusions a writer can, in effect, add cues, contexts, and even entire narratives without adding length, since most of the extra words are found in the reader’s head rather than on the page” (2012, 96). Fan fiction of any length takes the textual economy enabled by intertextuality to its logical extreme through its archontic principle, heightened in microfic. When it comes to Shakespeare, the archive that fics simultaneously draw on and contribute to happens

to be quite large, consisting not just of the Complete Works and an archive of fan works, but also of over four centuries of performance, adaptation, and interpretation.

The importance of the archontic principle to Shakespeare microfic becomes clear when we explore any interpretive or adaptive strand. Abigail De Kosnik—along with many other fan scholars—has noted, “Fan fiction is created primarily by people and for people who self-identify as female or as not-male, many of whom identify as nonheterosexual or not exclusively heterosexual” (2016, 12). Perhaps as a consequence of this, fan fiction proliferates with feminist and queer interpretations of fan objects, and Shakespeare is no exception. “Slash” fic, aimed at queering characters whether or not they are canonically queer, has been regularly employed to challenge the heterosexist assumptions about textual silences and ambiguities. Additionally, Shakespeare slash draws in the rich interpretive tradition of exploring the queer potential of the plays and poems but unencumbered by the scholar’s demand for proof and citation. Shakespeare scholars are undoubtedly familiar with queer readings of *Twelfth Night*’s Antonio, readings which, along with the narrative of the play itself, form the shared canon of arobysung’s microfic “Price of Silence,” which reads (in its entirety at 141 words):

Antonio was quiet—the scene playing out before him demanded his outrage, his screams, his fury but he remained quiet, nails digging into his palms as he clenched his fists tighter. He’d made his case, explained himself to his satisfaction, yes, but that’s not what held him at bay.

Sebastian had revealed himself, spoken truth for a stunning mindless moment. Then he’d noticed his sister, embracing the distraction she afforded, relief in his eyes borne of more than joy at family reunited as he turned away from Antonio.

The fear in the boy’s eyes willed the pirate’s mouth stay closed. The words threatening to spill out muffled in a heartbreak Antonio refused to let himself feel.

He forced himself pliant as Orsino had him led out. Antonio did not look back.

The pain from his now bloody palms was almost soothing. (arobysung 2010)

“Price of Silence” embodies the shorthand interpretive potential of fan fiction, especially in microfic. As Anne Jamison stresses, “Fic makes no claims to ‘stand on its own.’ . . . A work of fic *might* stand on its own as a story—it might be intelligible to readers unfamiliar with its source—but that’s not its point” (2013, 14). Like Garrick’s Jubilee dumb shows, arobysung’s fic is only intelligible to a knowing audience. As Shakespeare fans, we can locate this scene in act 5 of *Twelfth Night*, after Sebastian arrives on stage and says to Antonio, “O, my dear Antonio!/ How have the hours racked and tortured me/ Since I have lost thee!” (5.1.228–30). Once Sebastian sees Viola, however, he seems to forget about Antonio, and Antonio remains wholly silent for the remainder of the play, a silence that is interpreted in the fic as indicative of loss and heartbreak. While “Price of Silence” can technically be read as a self-contained text like any piece of conventional microfiction, its effect is almost entirely contingent on textual worlds and interpretive possibilities beyond itself. Likewise, fic writers have

extrapolated on the homoerotic possibilities of Shakespeare's sonnets to create slash sonnets written from the perspective of various characters in the plays. In pqlaertes's "Wittenberg" sonnet (120 words), Laertes comforts Hamlet in Wittenberg when the prince receives news of his father's death (pqlaertes 2012). Similarly, mific's sonnet "In Wittenberg" is written in Hamlet's voice addressing Horatio, with the Danish prince expressing his desire to stay at school with his love: "Our scholarship's of the heart; no library tomes/ Hold the truths love hath writ into our bones" (mific 2017). The effectiveness of all of these short fics relies on a shared canon of both the fan object and metatextual discourse.

BREVITY AS INTERTEXTUALITY

The nature of fanfic likewise disrupts a clean coalescence with prevailing notions and theories regarding microfiction, particularly regarding the role of the reader and the narrative importance of implication in constructing a narrative. Shady Cosgrove emphasizes that "it is the job of the microfiction writer to suggest possibilities in their work, to imply larger potentialities that may exist beyond the page," and these implications "leave space for reader imagination" (2020, 102). Dan Irving likewise argues that the extreme brevity of microfiction heightens the "gappiness" of the text and thus "calls for a high degree of reader participation" to fill in those gaps (2017, 158). Or, as Spyros Kiosses puts it, "microfiction strips the narrative process to the nude and balances this reduction by giving the reader the opportunity to co-author the text" (2021, 11). While reader participation is certainly a key element of fan fiction in general, readers are typically not expected to fill in gaps through speculation but rather to supply known details from the fan text itself. The narrative gaps evident in "Price of Silence," for example, are largely filled by *Twelfth Night*, with the effect of the fic predicated on the reader's expected knowledge of the play. Likewise, participation in fanfic comes more so in the form of community engagement between authors and readers that works to inspire more texts than in finding multiplicities of meaning in an individual work of microfiction.

In contrast to microfictions, micofics frequently work to *limit* rather than *expand* implications by "elevat[ing] subtext to text" (Grossman 2013, xiii), offering instead interpretive implications for the fan object rather than suggesting a multiplicity of implications within the fic itself. The epigrammatic wit and succinct moment of epiphany that Howitt-Dring identifies as central to the genre of microfiction can operate quite differently in microfic (2015, 179–80). Rather than developing an epiphany within its short span of words, "Price of Silence" serves instead as an epiphany about another text: *Twelfth Night*. Likewise, the cleverness of some micofics relies less on their critical intervention into a fan object and more on a playful relationship or simple dialogue that is established, or on the succinct retelling of a larger story. Small_Hobbit's "Ophelia" offers a rearticulation the titular character's life in *Hamlet* in a series of four haikus:

She floated on air
Her prince was in love with her
Nothing could spoil it

She floated through life
 Until father's warning words
 Took the joy away

She floated about
 Bestowing pansies and rue
 Grieving sudden death

She floats on water
 The willow tree branch broken
 Waiting for the end (2015).

Likewise, in “Never,” fengirl88 offers a haiku in dialogue with the death of Lear: “one word, repeated:/ grief beyond imagining/ breaks an old man's heart” (2018). More lighthearted is griffinage_53's short series of *Macbeth* haikus, which includes the poem “Stab Duncan”: “Stab stab stab stab stab/ stab stab stab stab stab stab stab/ stab stab stab Duncan” (2021). In these cases, epiphanic cleverness lies not in an unexpected twist within the texts but instead in the metatextual relationship between microfic and fan object, such as the pleasure evoked by the contrast between the brevity of the haiku form and expansiveness of *King Lear* or *Macbeth*. “Stab Duncan” also embodies the important generic distinction between microfiction and microfic. It is arguably impossible to read this fic as text that tells a story in “absolute miniature,” or perhaps even as one that tells a story at all. Rather, the pleasure it evokes arises from the reader's prior knowledge of *Macbeth* and the prevalence of murder as a prime mover of the play's narrative.

Perhaps paradoxically, then, the larger the body of metatextual discourse that exists and the larger the body of work that comprises the fan object is, the easier it is for microfics to function and the more distinct they are from microfiction in general. The aforementioned four-word fic, republic's “John Cage collaborates with William Shakespeare,” consists solely of a short quotation from *Hamlet*, “The rest is silence,” Hamlet's final words in the play (2016). As the title and tags indicate, the fic engages in a playful, intertextual engagement with composer John Cage, whose experimental composition 4'33” consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence divided into three movements. This fic embodies the esoteric nature of fan fiction in general and the playful but interpretive potential of microfic in particular in which silence speaks volumes, even when it is not necessarily speaking in its own voice. In part, we can understand a fic like “John Cage collaborates with William Shakespeare” as what Christy Desmet characterizes as post-Renaissance “Shakespearean commonplacings 2.0” in which short-form quotations, retweets, and memes serve as appropriations of Shakespeare do not simply reiterate or re-present the original text but instead “explore the rhetorical function of the commonplace as a form of intellectual reflection and moral argument” (2022, 14–15). The above fic may not offer anything new to *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare, or John Cage individually, but—as in a Renaissance commonplace book that collects quotations under thematic banners—the wit of the juxtaposition implies the knowledge and discretion of the author or collector as a curator of a textual archive. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play

and Hamlet his most verbose character, so the silence to follow stands in stark contrast to the many words that have preceded it, well known to the Shakespeare fan. So, too, the silence of Cage's composition in which the pleasures of the quiet of the piece are predicated on the expectation of music that would, in performance, precede and/or follow 4'33". Silence might lie within the fan object itself (such as Antonio's literal silence in *Twelfth Night* that is filled in by the "Price of Silence" fic, or the silences that precede the narrative in *Hamlet* that begins in act 1, scene 1) or in the ellipsistic silences that surround the fics before they begin and after they end. These silences paradoxically serve as the foundation of fan fiction's acknowledged but silent withdrawal from the archive of the fan object.

CONCLUSION

Fan fiction—of any length—is, by its very nature, engaged in a persistent dialogue with its fan object and, in many cases, some of the metatexts and paratexts that make up the archive of that object. The nature of this dialogue means that even the briefest reference to—in the case of Shakespeare—a character or a play in the fic's text or in its title or tags serves to import whole worlds, plots, and interpretations into the fic, even if they are not explicitly discussed or developed in the text itself. The author does not have to tell the reader anything about Hamlet beyond his name because fan fiction's intended audience of other fans is expected to bring their knowledge of the play to bear on any *Hamlet* fic. Fully developed plots, characters, and debates are always waiting in the wings of a fic, visible and familiar to the reader. Consequently, while microfiction and microfics share considerable common ground in terms of their brevity and economy of language in order to achieve their impact in a small space, microfics' indissoluble engagement with texts and discourses beyond its boundaries also marks it as a distinct genre of microfiction in which brevity is belied by its archontic principle.

REFERENCES

- ao3commentoftheday. 2020. "types of short fic." *Tumblr*. <https://ao3commentoftheday.tumblr.com/post/629569357446545408/types-of-short-fic>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- arobynsung. 2010. "Price of Silence." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/44136>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- Cosgrove, Shady. 2020. "Controlling the Clock—How Showing and Telling Impact Time in Short-Short Fiction." *New Writing* 17 (1): 101–6.
- De Kosnik, Abigail. 2016. *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Derecho, Abigail. 2006. "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction." In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Desmet, Christy. 2022. "Commonplace Shakespeare" in *Borrowers and Lenders* 14.1: 1–18.
- Fazel, Valerie and Louise Geddes. 2016. "'Give me your hands if we be friends': Collaborative Authority in Shakespeare Fan Fiction." *Shakespeare* 12 (3): 274–86.
- Fazel, Valerie M. and Louise Geddes. 2017. "Introduction: The Shakespeare User." In *The Shakespeare User: Critical and Creative Appropriations in a Networked Culture*, edited by Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes, 1–22. Cham, Switz.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fazel, Valerie M. and Louise Geddes. 2021. *The Shakespeare Multiverse: Fandom as Literary Praxis*. New York: Routledge.
- fengirl88. 2016. "Afterwards." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/6075300>. [Accessed April 28, 2023].
- fengirl88. 2018. "Never." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/16587950>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- Finn, Kavita Mudan, and Jessica McCall. 2016. "Exit, Pursued by a Fan: Shakespeare, Fandom, and the Lure of the Alternate Universe." *Critical Survey* 28 (2): 27–38.
- Galef, David. 2016. *Brevity: A Flash Fiction Handbook*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Griffonage_53. 2021. "Macbeth Haikus." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/35471092>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- Grossman, Lev. 2013. "Forward" in Anne Jamison. *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*. Dallas: Smart Pop: xi-xiv.
- Herak, Yves. 2023. "'edmund is trans he told me himself': Recognition in Transgender Shakespeare Fan Fiction." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 39: np. <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/2421/3053>. [Accessed April 26, 2023].
- Howitt-Dring, Holly. 2015. "Housewives and Half-Stories: A Question of Genre and Gender in Microfiction." In *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now*, edited by Emma Young and James Bailey, 179–92. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Irving, Dan. 2017. "Storytelling in Miniature: Microfiction and Reader Participation." *Enthymema* 18: 150–59.

- Jamison, Anne. 2013. *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*. Dallas: Smart Pop.
- Kiosses, Spyros. 2021. "Towards a Poetics of Narrative Brevity: Short Story, Microfiction, Flash Fiction." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature* 9 (1): 9–18.
- Kirkman, Francis. 1662. *The Wits, or Sport upon Sport*. London: Henry Marsh.
- Lanier, Douglas. 2002. *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marsh, Henry. 1662. "To the Reader." In Francis Kirkman. *The Wits, or Sport upon Sport*, A3r-A4r. London: Henry Marsh.
- McCormack, Leah. 2021. "Flash Fiction: A Study in Temporality." *New Writing* 18 (1): 2–20.
- mific. 2017. "In Wittenberg." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/10077755>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- mydearconfidant. 2019. "Melancholia; Hamlet, rewritten." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/20792138>. [Accessed April 28, 2023].
- Nelles, William. 2012. "Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?" *Narrative* 20 (1): 87–104.
- Pope, Johnathan. 2020. *Shakespeare's Fans: Adapting the Bard in the Age of Media Fandom*. Cham, Switz.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- pqlaertes. 2012. "Wittenberg." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/371544>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- Pugh, Sheenagh. 2005. *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*. Bridgend, UK: Seren.
- republic. 2016. "John Cage collaborates with William Shakespeare." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/8092441>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- republic. 2015. "Witch act is this?" *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/5447549>. [Accessed October 27, 2022].
- scrimshaw. 2022. "Epilogue by a Fool." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/39402774>. [Accessed April 27, 2023].
- Shakespeare, William. n. d. *Twelfth Night*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library. <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/twelfth-night/>. [Accessed 27 October 2022].

Small_Hobbit. 2015. "Ophelia." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/4622004>.
[Accessed April 27, 2023].

Stott, Andrew McConnell. 2019. *What Blest Genius? The Jubilee that Made Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton.

The_Arkadian. 2015. "Pass The Mead." *Archive of Our Own*. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/3329339>.
[Accessed October 27, 2022].

Thompson, Kent. 1988. "Afterword: GUNG." In *Open Windows: Canadian Short Short Stories*, edited by Kent Thompson, 101–9. Kingston, ONT: Quarry Press.

Yost, Michelle K. 2018. "Stratford-Upon-Web: Shakespeare in Twenty-First-Century Fanfiction." In *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction*, edited by Andrew James Hartley, 193–212. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.