

## Textual Poachers: Scholars, Fans, and Fragments

Thinking about lost texts and reading fragments is very like being in a classical land and standing among the ruins of an ancient site: we can almost perceive what it used to be like in its original state, but *not quite*. Part of the appeal lies precisely in the mixture of closeness and distance, reality and imagination, longing and unattainability.

— Matthew Wright, Prologue: *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Volume I*

Fandom and academia are curiously alike: both centrally involve processes of re-imagination. Academics strive to see things and theories anew, while fans often work on re-imagining their beloved objects.

— Matt Hills, Foreword: *Understanding Fandom*

For decades popular culture has furnished classicists with abundant material for discussion and study, from screen media (film, television, video games), to literature (novels, comics), to music and more. As my fellow panelists know, there is no shortage of opportunities for classical scholars to explicate how pop-culture phenomenon “Ω” resonates with ancient-world phenomenon “A” (and all points in between or in parallel or *ad lib*...). Moreover, such opportunities are in themselves examples of how the study of popular culture can benefit from the study of classics, and vice versa. With this in mind, my paper offers a broad take on “Popular Classics” and examines how pop culture — *as a culture*, with a full array of (un)written codes, roles, aesthetics, trends, and fetishes — resonates with the culture of classical studies. The possible tacks are many. For example, one might profitably compare the culture wars of both milieux (on those of classics see Adler 2016) and the battle-lines drawn over the formation of canons. Or the rules of engagement among fans and among scholars, and the intersections of identity that locate some near the center and relegate others to the periphery, whether in the convention hall or in print (recent issues of the journal *Eidolon* have been on point here).

My topic is less controversial, perhaps, but hopefully no less revealing. Poaching my title from Henry Jenkins’ seminal study of popular culture (1992), I propose to explore the treatment of fragmentary texts by communities of scholars and fans. The former are concerned with reconstructing lost works and

situating them within the *corpora* of authors; the latter, with predicting the turn of events in future installments of pop-culture franchises. Case studies will include, on the one hand, scholarly discussions of the remains of Greek tragedy, and, on the other hand, fan discussions of the *Harry Potter* and the *Star Wars* franchises — with emphasis on the considerable overlap between the theories, methodologies, and outcomes in play. Each community enjoys unique luxuries, with attendant advantages and disadvantages. Scholars of tragic fragments, for instance, have the luxury of meeting a relatively mild burden of proof, because the works in question are lost; and yet the fact that the works are beyond recovery ensures that scholarly theories can never be fully validated. Fan theorists, in turn, normally have the luxury of the next episode arriving well within their lifetimes; and yet they run the risk of being discredited once that episode has arrived, and its mysteries have been revealed.

Regardless of whether scholarly and fan theories are right or wrong, what matters most are (A) the terms in which they couch their respective texts and authors, which speak to the values of the community at large; and (B) the status conferred upon the theorist within his or her community. Point (A) is perhaps obvious, but is important nonetheless: What does it mean to posit a Sophocles who is more like Euripides (as is the tendency of Sommerstein 2003, an edited volume on the Sophoclean fragments)? Or a J.K. Rowling who resembles H.P. Lovecraft (to judge from fan theories *circa* 2007 in advance of Rowling's seventh and final volume, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*)? Point (B) requires classicists, at least, to confront potentially uncomfortable questions — questions that (*mutatis mutandis*) define fandoms of every stripe. What motivates speculation to begin with: pursuit of truth, such as it is, or requirements for promotion and tenure? What happens when speculation becomes an end unto itself? Where does scholarly speculation end and self-promotion begin? As we continue to re-imagine the ancient world, fan culture and its relentless industry of speculation can shed light on our own best (and worst) practices.

## Bibliography

Adler, Eric. 2016. *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond*. University of Michigan Press.

Duffett, Mark. 2012. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*.  
Bloomsbury Academic.

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York:  
Routledge.

Sommerstein, Alan (ed.). 2003. *Shards from Kolonos: Studies in Sophoclean Fragments*. Bari: Levante  
Editori.

Wright, Matthew. 2016. *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy (Volume 1): Neglected Authors*. Bloomsbury  
Academic.