

Religion and the Pathologization of Fandom: Religion, Reason and Controversy in *My Little Pony* fandom

In both academic studies of fandom and popular media reporting, the linking of fandom and religion has often been part of what Henry Jenkins has called the “pathologization” of fandom (Jenkins 2013). The idea that fandom is a form of pseudo-religion, particularly in media reporting, not only makes assumptions about what fandom is like, but also about the nature of religion. Such reporting tends to suggest that religion is emotional rather than rational, that it becomes the focus of an individual’s world to the exclusion of all else and that it is used to justify bizarre, irrational behaviour which makes no sense outside of the religious worldview. While such criticisms of religious behaviour may be fair in some instances, more often than not the religious comparison aims to “other” both religion and fandom. In particular, a concentration on their supposed irrationality suggests that neither have any place within the empirical space of the public sphere in which the “public use of reason” is often seen as a prerequisite to entry (Habermas 2006).

Due to this, fans often attempt to demonstrate their rational nature and positive role within the public sphere – whether politically, socially, or educationally. This is seen, in part, through an attempt to disavow the religious comparison. While this strategy could be traced in a number of larger fandoms, when a new fandom emerges which is potentially open to pathologization by non-fans, the need to claim a rational basis for that fandom becomes more urgent. Fans may therefore move to quickly disassociate their chosen text from religious implications. In this article I conduct a case study of this phenomenon through an examination of a “religious” controversy within the adult fandom of children’s cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-present; hereafter *MLP:FiM*) Although not initially

sought by producers, *MLP:FiM* has attracted a dedicated adult fanbase (Robertson 2013). Fans of the show, initially young men, branded themselves “Bronies”, a portmanteau term combining “Bros” and “Ponies”.ⁱ At the time of writing the fandom continues to grow: with the show now in its fifth season, *MLP* fan fiction archive *FimFiction* currently hosts over 72,000 stories, while BronyCon 2014 in Baltimore attracted 10,000 attendees.

One of the biggest early controversies within the fandom related to 2011 episode “Feeling Pinkie Keen”, which was interpreted by many fans as promoting religious belief and denigrating science. In rejecting this reading, a number of fans sought to demonstrate the rational nature of their fandom by highlighting their social responsibility in a dual role as educators/fans, and the rationalistic nature of the imagined world they enjoyed exploring. They thus demonstrated that their supposedly irrational admiration for a children’s cartoon actually equipped them to be fully involved in the adult world. Conversely, this resulted in a pathologization of religion, in which faith was seen to be something which should be excluded from the public sphere. The interpretation of religion by fans therefore has implications for the way in which scholars of fandom talk about the resemblances between fandom and religion. The first section of this article critically examines the scholarship that has made this link, and the way in which fandoms in general have attempted to disavow it through a focus on rationality. This is followed by a case study of the “Feeling Pinkie Keen” controversy in *MLP:FiM* fandom.

Religion, Fandom and Rationality

The suggestion of much popular reporting on media fandom, and one that is reinforced by the connection that is often made to religion, is that fans have an irrational and all-consuming engagement with their chosen source text (Gray et al 2007). As Joli Jenson argues, when the fan is paralleled with the religious extremist, she acts as a figure against which readers or viewers can compare their own “measured” media consumption. This pathologization of fans is based upon the Enlightenment dualistic division of reason and emotion. A “respectable” engagement with media texts is constructed as a distanced consumption, while the fan’s relationship to their text seen as “a dangerous blurring of the line between fantasy and reality” (Jenson 1992, 21). For Jenson, describing fandom as a religion is therefore a way of branding it as an irrational other. This popular comparison between fandom and religion has often been borne out in scholarship, with religious language being applied largely to the affective appeal and rituals of fandom. At times this has gone as far as reading fandom as a form of “implicit religion” (Bailey 1997; 2010): including *Star Trek* (Jindra 1994, Porter 2009, Ammon 2014), *Hunger Games* (Ringelstein 2013), Elvis (Doss 1999) and Harry Potter fandoms (Neumann 2006).

One issue with viewing fandom as a form of religion becomes apparent when it is compared to the way in which fans describe their own practice. Not only are structural similarities between fandom and organised religion exaggerated (Reysen 2006), but fans do not generally view their own behaviour as a form of religion. On one side, non-religious fans feel affronted that their secular practice is being compared to (or described as) religion. On the other, many fans belong to religious traditions which exist uncontroversially alongside their fandom (Author xxxx; Cavicchi 1998, 52; Jenkins 2013, 21). Assertions that fandom is

a form of faith therefore often fall back into the debate over the academic definition of religion, usually adopting a Durkheimian or Geertzian definition in order to widen the category of what can be considered as religious (e.g. Chidester 2005; Lyden 2012; Neumann 2006). This approach tends to be functionalist in nature, examining similarities in experiences of the sacred and rituals, sacred space and pilgrimage. This certainly has advantages in encouraging scholars to look for instances of lived religion in non-traditional settings, and to explore the way in which fandom plays an important part in individuals' life worlds. Indeed, it should be stressed that the majority of studies on the implicit religiosity of fandom are sympathetic and nuanced in their portrayal of fans' experiences. Some of these experiences undoubtedly resemble those found in religious traditions (such as fan conversions), and it is correct to see fans using their fan objects to help to define what it means to be human (Porter 2009, Ammon 2014), which can be seen as a core feature of both implicit and explicit religiosity (Bailey 1997, 48). Yet the use of "religious" language to describe fandom can risk a misunderstanding of concepts such as fan conversion (Hills 2014), and offer a strained reading of popular culture by indulging in what Sean McCloud has called "parallel-mania", in which anything that parallels religious practice becomes a form of religion in and of itself (McCloud 2003). While I would therefore agree that using religious concepts of pilgrimage and experiences of transcendence can at times offer useful insights into fandom (e.g. Brooker 2007, Porter 2009), I would argue along with Markus Altena Davidsen that viewing fandom as "religious" in and of itself is a misrepresentation (Davidsen 2013).ⁱⁱ This position implies that the researcher has the power to arbitrarily declare what is and what is not religious, even against the protests of those actually engaging in the practices being described.ⁱⁱⁱ

The link between religion and fandom becomes particularly problematic when it is tied to an idea of fandom as something potentially blasphemous. Doss argued that shame and fear of blasphemy led the Elvis fans she studied to disavow a religious element to their fandom, a position which assumed that fandom could be equated with false worship (Doss 1999, 69-113). While David Giles has argued that “there is nothing intrinsically pathologizing about comparing media fans to religious devotees”, at the same time he used the comparison to explain why fans allowed themselves to be physically and mentally abused by the celebrities or producers they followed (Giles 2000, 135-138). This risk of pathologization remains Jenkins’ problem with the “fandom as religion” concept. In a discussion of the subject with Matt Hills, Jenkins concluded that the idea suggests “the connotation of excessive worship” (Jenkins 2006, 17). This link is in part promoted by the etymology of the term “fan”, which can be linked to both the English “fanatic” and the Latin “fanaticus”, a Temple servant given to engaging in orgiastic rites and “frenzy” (Jenkins 2013, 12). As such, descriptions of media fandom as religion, whether intentionally or not, can suggest that fans engage with their fan object in an excessive or unhealthy way. Thus Jennifer Porter noted that she initially refused to define *Star Trek* fandom as religious for fear of pathologizing them. As Porter (who now argues explicitly that *Star Trek* fandom is religious) notes, her fear was not based on a personal view of religion (or fandom) as pathological, but instead on the hostility towards both religion and fandom she found in the media (Porter 2009, 279). While, it should be stressed that it is not the intention of those who write on the implicit religiosity of fandom, the comparison of religion to fandom can be perceived as a return to the pathologizing tradition. So the religious comparison is often viewed within fandom, argues Mark Duffett, as a way of discrediting fan activity as irrational and fans as deluded (Duffett 2013, 149-50; see also Duffett 2003). Obviously, this use of the concept does more than make assumptions about fandom: it makes certain assumptions about religion as well.

Ideas of excessive involvement, lack of moderation, and irrationality posit religion as an “other” to contemporary society. The comparison offers a very limited view of what both religion and fandom actually are.

Using Jenson’s terms, the comparison tends to reassert the binary of reason and emotion, placing the fan strongly on the side of an irrational, overly emotional and excessive involvement in contrast to “normal” media consumption. This is not to deny that fandom is driven by the importance of deep emotional connections with fan objects (Sandvoss 2005, 95-122), or connections with characters or celebrities which can often seem so close as to be considered spiritual in nature (Kirby 2013; Hills in Jenkins 2006, 21). Nonetheless, the presentation of fandom as a form of religion can imply inappropriate obsession rather than this depth of emotional attachment. Indeed, as Bailey acknowledges when he discusses the contemporary use of the term, “religion” can often be popularly understood as a synonym for obsessive interest (Bailey 2010, 272).

Many fans are fully aware of the supposed irrationality of their media engagement. Especially when involved in fandoms which might initially appear unusual, they are willing to construct strong defences built on ideals of Enlightenment rationality. While emphasising the emotional appeal which drew them into their fandom, at the same time fans have countered criticism by focusing on their rationality and the scientific rigour of the imagined worlds they explore and expand. As Michael Saler has written, these worlds are marked by “rationality combined with the imagination” (Salter 2012, 21; See also Jenkins 2013, 116); they are not only consistent within themselves, but particularly in science fiction fandom, are held up as models of a scientific worldview (Wolf 2012, 34-64). Thus, while Jindra argued

that *Star Trek* offered a form of escape from reality and utopian future hope for its fans, at the same time he found that it had inspired some to become scientists and, in several cases, to work for NASA (Jindra 1994, 41-42).

Arguing for the scientific consistency of the worlds they explore is one way fans can highlight the cultural capital of a text which might be dismissed as “meaningless” by mainstream viewers; demonstrating the way in which fans, unlike stereotypes of religious believers, maintain a thoroughly measured engagement with the object of their fandom. In other words, it reverses the pathologizing trend, demonstrating that fandom leads to healthy forms of learning which help fans function as active and productive citizens. Far from being disconnected from the real world, fans practise what Saler calls “animistic reason”: empirical thinking combined with the enchantment of the imagination. Sherlock Holmes functions as the archetypal example of this: a figure who is at one and the same time rational and secularist, but who uses his intellect and reason in such a complex and seemingly magical way so as to re-enchant them (Saler 2012, 104-111). Indeed, in modelling an internally consistent world fans show themselves part of a wider discourse of rationality, deploying what Melvin Pollner called “mundane reason” (Pollner 1987). That is, they assent to the existence of an objective, coherent and self-consistent world that can be studied. Although Pollner was writing about the construction of the world by sociologists (and society in general), fans apply these same principles to the fictional worlds they explore.

Of course, many fan objects already contain elements which are fantastical – the accepted presence of magic in the Harry Potter universe, for example. Yet the acceptance of these elements does not usually constitute an embracing of the mystical; rather, fan

discussion helps to construct a consistent world within the diegesis, in which magic works according to clearly defined rules. The world of the text remains “rational” in that it is consistent within itself (Wolf 2012, 43-48). The imagined worlds of fandom are simultaneously deeply rationalistic and well-ordered, while also being enchanted and possessing a deep affective appeal.

Establishing the rational nature of fandom therefore works against the pathologizing tradition of scholarship on two levels. First, it demonstrates that fans are grounded in reality. The accusation that fans are unable to differentiate between reality and fiction was common in studies of fandom based on the work of the Frankfurt School, and remains in much popular reporting (Duffett 2013, 34-52). An emphasis on rationality demonstrates that the fan is aware that she is engaging with a fictional world, and turns the criticism back on the critic through demonstrating that the rules of that world are built on detailed scientific and rational principles. In other words, the fan demonstrates that she is more in touch with “reality” than the critic who fears a “slippage” between real life and fiction in which one cannot be differentiated from the other.

Second, the fan’s focus on rationality works against the claim that fandom is inherently regressive. The implication that fans are old enough to know better than to spend time exploring imagined worlds has been common. For example, the initial “Tolkien Clubs” which sprung up in the United States in the 1960s were derided by the press as infantile and a sign of fans denying their adult responsibilities (Saler 2012, 189-90). The pathologizing tradition, in Lawrence Grossberg’s words, imagines the fan as “always juvenile, waiting to grow up” (Grossberg 1992, 52). By concentrating on the logical consistency of the worlds

they explore, it is possible for fans to demonstrate that they are applying complex theoretical and scientific principles in their fan activity. Their text of choice is therefore constructed as an object worthy of study, with the supposedly regressive and “low culture” elements restructured along the lines of “high culture” and scientific/academic research (Fiske 1992, 31-37). In doing so, the fan demonstrates that she is a fully functioning adult focusing on a valuable cultural artefact which has the potential to encourage further rational/high culture thought. An emphasis on rationality is therefore a consistent feature of popular culture fandoms. As I argue below, *MLP:FiM* fans are far from unique in this respect, but the specifically regressive implications of their fandom provided an additional impetus for fans to clearly demarcate the rationality and cultural legitimacy of their chosen text.

This construction of rationality and empiricism can nonetheless be destabilized through the fan object itself. If the text appears to advance an “irrational” position, then the defence of fandom can be internally undermined. This is particularly the case if the supposed irrationality has religious undertones. A recent example can be found in *Doctor Who* fandom.^{iv} The 2014 episode “Kill the Moon” was based around the conceit that the moon was a giant egg containing an unborn alien. With the egg hatching, and Earth potentially at risk, the characters had to decide whether to kill an “innocent” life, or allow the creature to come to term and hope that its nature was benign. After their decision to let the creature live was vindicated, a number of fans read the story as an anti-abortion allegory. While this led to praise from some religious groups (Daly 2014; Stanley 2014), condemnation of what was seen as a regressive moral stance (e.g. Whovianfeminism 2014) was combined with an attack on the scientific inaccuracies of the story – the possibility that the moon was an egg; the size of “bacteria” featured, the role of gravity and so on (Hassell 2014; Harper 2014; Plait 2014). While the inclusion of supposedly irrational elements can cause controversy within an

established fandom, when a fandom is relatively new and therefore more susceptible to pathologization by the media, the effects are likely to be more keenly felt. This dynamic can often be explained simply by the numbers involved. While certain texts or fan objects may be felt to be “acceptable” due to their established status or accrued cultural capital, pathologization of fandom in the media concentrates not only on an overly-extreme involvement with a text, but the types of text engaged with (Gray et al 2007, 3-5). As Jenkins has noted, while it is now broadly acceptable to admit to being part of certain fandoms in public life and the academy (e.g. *Lost*, *Doctor Who*, *Buffy*), there are fandoms which are still seen as being both regressive and open to pathologizing, such as those which are predominantly seen as right-wing (e.g. wrestling) or coded as overly-feminine (e.g. *Twilight*) (Jenkins 2013, x-xii).

The adult “Brony” fandom dedicated to *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* provides a case study of the way in which seeming promotion of religion within a text can result in a firm reassertion of that text as a rational and high culture object. *MLP:FiM* fandom has been open to pathologization on a number of levels. As a relatively new fandom, it lacks both the numbers and cultural capital which can be accrued by a longer running franchise. Focused on a show produced by a large corporation with the explicit aim of selling toys, it is not only “low culture” but potentially representative of negative social and economic practices. More pertinently, based around a franchise aimed at girls aged 3-8, the fandom is built around a text explicitly coded as both feminine and regressive (Johnson 2013). Aware of the potential for pathologization of their fandom, fans have worked to highlight their role as educators, and the text’s position as a high culture object promoting rational discourse. This can be traced through attempts by some fans to disassociate the text from supposedly religious undertones, as evidenced in the case study below. The following section will briefly outline the

background and details of the controversy within the fandom, before moving on to fans' discussions of religion in its wake.

Bronies and the “Feeling Pinkie Keen” Controversy

In 2010, Hasbro hired Lauren Faust, known for her work on cult cartoons such as *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, to helm a reboot of *My Little Pony* subtitled *Friendship is Magic*. Faust aimed to produce a series which avoided what she saw as the pitfalls of cartoons designed for young girls, such as simplistic conflict resolution, exaggeratedly passive female characters, and an overly pink colour palette. The result was a cartoon that, while aimed squarely at the target demographic, was also marked by several of the narrative tropes of “magical girl” anime such as *Sailor Moon*, and drew on the structure of cult telefantasy series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Author xxxx; Johnson 2013; Robertson 2013).

Set in the magical land of Equestria, the show's initial setup focused on intelligent and studious unicorn Twilight Sparkle and her research on friendship in the town of Ponyville. There she befriends five other ponies: the socially retiring Fluttershy; tomboyish Rainbow Dash; the hyperactive party-planner Pinkie Pie; hard-working farm pony Applejack, and dress designer Rarity. Together, these six ponies each represent one of the magical “elements of harmony” which can be combined to fight evil. While episodes often focus on learning social lessons, at times the ponies face more apocalyptic threats to their world in the form of monsters, dangerous magical artefacts, and spirits of disharmony. *MLP:FiM* thus arrived

with a detailed mythos surrounding its main characters, a hyperdiegetic world, and hints at a wider mystery as to greater forces bringing the main characters together, all elements which Matt Hills has argued are markers of “cult” texts (Hills 2004). While these elements were not included as a way of appealing to adult viewers, their presence in the diegesis suggests one reason for *MLP:FiM*'s appeal to viewers of other cult telefantasy productions.

This unexpected adult audience initially developed through notorious internet forum 4-Chan, known for its links to hacking and trolling activities. In response to an article pathologizing *MLP:FiM* as a symptom of the “End of Creator Driven Animation” (Amidi 2010), a number of 4-Chan users watched and defended the show, continuing to engage with it during its first season. Fan art and fan fiction dedicated to the show began to appear soon after the first episodes aired, with the term “Brony” as a descriptor for fans coined soon afterwards.

By its very nature, the Brony phenomenon was open to the pathologizing tradition of reporting fan cultures. As Johnson notes, *MLP:FiM* was located in a zone of severe cultural delegitimization in terms of its gendering, presumed audience, and supposed purpose (Johnson 2013). Each of these implied that the show lacked cultural worth. Gendering texts as feminine has often served as shorthand for their low cultural value, as suggested both by early studies of romance novel fans (Radway 1984) and the continuing critique of the *Twilight* franchise (Pinkovitz 2007). A further issue surrounded the show's intended audience. Aimed at young children, the show might be presumed to lack depth or subtlety and be overly didactic, reflecting a popular perception of child audiences as passive and easily influenced (Bignell 2002, 131). Rather than the semiotic openness found in high

culture texts (Fiske 1992; Sandvoss 2005, 123-134), *MLP:FiM*'s critics suggested that the show's target audience meant that the text would both lack depth, and that child viewers would be uninterested in looking for it (Johnson 2013, 146-151). The presumed passivity of the audience raised another issue. The show's overtly commercial nature could be taken to suggest that it existed solely as an advertising tool. As such, the show appeared ancillary to Hasbro's main purpose in commissioning it – selling toys (Amidi 2010). In short, it appeared an unlikely candidate for attracting a committed fandom, let alone one comprised predominantly of young men.^v

This potential for extreme delegitimation is demonstrated in some of the initial reporting which surrounded the fandom. This often returned to the pathologizing tradition. Reports on *Fox* went so far as to argue that Bronies were claiming social security in order to stay at home and watch more episodes of *My Little Pony* (Treaway 2011). Even early positive discussions strayed into the territory of pathologization. A report in *Wired* in September 2011 opened by informing readers that: "Each day, out-of-work computer programmer Luke Allen self-medicates by watching animated ponies have magical adventures." The sentence draws on several elements of the pathologizing tradition. The fan is portrayed as infantilized and non-productive ("out-of-work"), unable to deal with reality ("self-medicates"), and obsessed to the point of requiring daily contact with the fan object (Watercutter 2011). While the *Wired* article was not bad natured, it nonetheless illustrates the way in which even more positive coverage could recall traditional negative elements of reporting on fandom. While much recent reporting has been markedly positive (e.g. Daily Mail 2013, Moore 2015), the temptation to return to the pathologizing tradition remains. For example, a recent article in the UK's *Metro* newspaper entitled "Now we have seen everything: Bronies, the grown men

obsessed with *My Little Pony*” focused on obsession and the “unsettling” nature of the fandom (Lynch 2014, see also DeCarlo 2014).

Regardless of whether or not the majority of reporting adopted a pathologizing position, fans nonetheless perceived their fandom as being portrayed negatively in the media. For example, Laurent Malaquais’s 2012 documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adults Fans of My Little Pony* focused on perceived instances of media pathologization and acts of physical or verbal violence against fans (Malaquais 2012).^{vi} *Star Trek* actor and *MLP:FiM* voice artist John de Lancie, who narrated the film, deliberately justified his involvement in terms of an attempt to tackle what he saw as the pathologization of fans in the press and broadcast media (Walker 2012).^{vii} Faced with a delegitimized text and reports that were perceived to have adopted a pathologizing view of fandom, it is unsurprising that much of the narrative from within the Brony community attempted to legitimize both fan practice and the core text. As Johnson has noted, this was worked out in a number of different ways. By focusing on Lauren Faust’s role as an *auteur*, the text was inscribed with the values of high culture, and celebrated for promoting diversity and breaking down gender barriers (Johnson 2013). This was not a resistive reading; rather, fans worked with producers (often engaging via Twitter and Deviant Art) to construct a discourse of legitimacy. Similarly, fan analysis – on blogs, wikis and in “analysis” videos posted to YouTube - worked to highlight the semiotic richness of *MLP:FiM*, and to explore the way in which high culture readings of the text could be applied. Fans used this to demonstrate that their engagement with the text was not regressive or infantilizing, but could be seen instead as part of a high culture discourse. Returning to Jenson’s binary between emotion and reason, where media coverage was perceived by fans to have focused on the supposedly irrational nature of fandom, fan analysis highlighted the rationalist, high culture elements of the core text. While

acknowledging the importance of the affective nature of fandom, the show's educational remit and positive portrayal of science and learning in lead character Twilight Sparkle allowed fans to place the show on the "correct" side of this binary – promoting a rational and scientific engagement with the world through its educational message. If the pathologizing tradition of fandom portrays it as a type of pseudo-religion in terms of highlighting its supposed irrationality, obsessive behaviour and inappropriate devotion (Jenkins 2006, 17-19), then constructing a fan object as highly rationalistic instead ties fandom to Enlightenment ideals of a measured, reasoned engagement with the text.

This rationalistic reading of the core text was challenged by the first major internal controversy in Brony fandom. Episode 15 of *MLP:FiM*'s first season, "Feeling Pinkie Keen" aired on February 11th 2011 and was immediately read as containing a religious subtext. The episode centred on Twilight's attempt to understand Pinkie Pie's "Pinkie Sense", a form of extra-sensory perception which led her to correctly predict falling objects and various other dangers. Twilight, convinced that "Pinkie Sense" is scientifically impossible, engages in a series of empirical experiments to prove her opinion. Her growing frustration at a phenomenon seemingly beyond her understanding leads her to put her own life, and that of her friends, at risk. She is saved by taking a literal "leap of faith" at Pinkie's bidding, at which point she experiences a conversion: "I can't fight it anymore. I don't understand how, why, or what, but Pinkie sense somehow makes sense... Just because I don't understand doesn't mean it's not true." Twilight thus concludes the episode by demonstrating her new found belief in "Pinkie Sense", writing to her mentor Princess Celestia that: "I now realize there are wonderful things in this world you just can't explain, but that doesn't necessarily

make them any less true. It just means you have to choose to believe in them.” At this point Pinkie’s “sense” kicks in, and Celestia descends from the sky in order to collect the letter in person (Thiessen and Wootton 2011).

A religious subtext was read into the episode’s moral with an angry online reaction beginning almost immediately after airing (Wood 2011). As the largest community site, *Equestria Daily*, noted “the usual discussions about how cute Twilight looked in a snow suit or what Luna’s backstory was quickly turned into religious debates” (Sethisto 2013). Showrunner Lauren Faust was led to publically deny on her Deviant Art page that the episode was intended to either promote religion or attack science: “I really blew it with the letter at the end---- even for people who didn't immediately jump to the conclusion that such a statement could only apply to religion. I wish I could back [sic] and clarify it further.” (Faust in My Little Pony News 2011). Writer Dave Polsky later reiterated that: “the intention was not to do anything about religion” (Juu50x 2014).

Regardless of these denials, reaction on *MLP* message boards, Wikis, and subsequent YouTube discussion was dominated by the claim that the episode covertly promoted religious belief. An interesting feature of this was an immediate move to ensure that the text was on the correct side of the reason/emotion binary, which resulted in an “othering” of religion. “This episode crossed the line from explaining epistemology to promoting belief in the supernatural”, noted Evergreenfir on the *MLP:FiM Wiki* (2012) (hereafter MLPWiki);^{viii} “basically an attack on anyone that tries to explain [s]cientifically things that are yet to be explained” complained another anonymous poster (MLPWiki 2012b). Comments soon turned to discussions of science and religion. “A” noted that the episode failed to promote “trying to

research and to appreciate science” when it should have “bash[ed] superstitious and ridiculous beliefs” (Comment on MLPNews 2011). Blogger Jed Blue, who subsequently published his blog as a book on postmodern philosophy in *MLP:FiM*, interpreted the episode as “anti-atheist” and the wish-fulfilment fantasy of someone who imagines a world in which “‘pessimist’ skeptics and scientists get beaten over the head with anvils because of their unbelief” (Blue 2013, 149). These concerns were reiterated in discussions of the episode on *Equestria Daily*. Patrick_Starman expressed concerns that the moral “makes the episode look like its [sic] attacking Atheism”, while Smashmatt202 questioned whether the writers were being disingenuous in claiming not to have recognised the religious connotations of Twilight’s decision to “choose to believe” (Comments on Sethisto 2013). This was echoed on *My Little Pony News* (hereafter MLPNews), where “Twilight” complained that “Faust is trying to whitewash the word ‘faith’, and I’m not buying it... Polsky... has a clear message, and Faust supported it” (Comment on MLPNews 2011). Some viewers, such as Blue, found a coded reference to divinity in the descent of Celestia: “a literal visit from God” (Blue 2013, 147). As *MLP News* reader xcv2dhf put it: “Celestia descends from the sky as if she was female horsey Jesus. Clearly evangelistic. I call absolute bull on Faust’s response” (2011).

While not all fans agreed on the existence of a coded religious message in the episode, Faust’s official denial highlights the fact that producers took the criticism seriously. The nature of fan responses raises the question as to why a suggestion that *MLP:FiM* promoted religion or irrationality was viewed so negatively within the fan community. Returning to Jenson, it is possible to suggest that positioning the text on the wrong side of the emotion/reason binary associated it with the pathologizing tradition of fandom that fans perceived in early media reports and reactions to the Brony phenomenon. By appearing to promote unthinking acceptance of the supernatural, the show might not only be seen as

regressive within the context of American “culture wars”, but as lacking in positive intellectual value. In other words, the cultural capital of the text was further diminished through an apparent association with unthinking religion. Fans attempted to combat this in two ways. Firstly, by characterising fandom as the rational defender of the child viewer. Fandom thus became the “gatekeeper”, ensuring that children received a positive message from the show. Religion was here pathologized and denied a place in the public sphere. Secondly, fans re-read the text as a criticism of poor scientific practice. Consequently, the seemingly irrational message could be read as a celebration of rationalism and fandom seen again as highlighting the dangers of “irrational” religious belief.

Mark Duffett has written that fans are aware of two communities who engage with their texts – the fan viewer and the casual viewer. While there can be opposition to the casual viewer’s lack of in-depth engagement with the text, at the same time fans can often position themselves as defenders of the casual viewer, becoming more critical of the text as they imagine how non-fans might engage with it (Duffett 2013, 43). Bronies, well aware that they are not the show’s intended audience, add a third category when thinking about *MLP:FiM*: the child viewer. The show can therefore be approached with a focus on how a variety of audiences will appreciate it: the adult fan viewer, the adult casual viewer, and the child viewer. Many responses to the episode therefore positioned fans not as irrational consumers, but instead as gatekeepers, assessing the ideology of the show and ensuring that it promoted a positive message to children. Ironically, this returned to views of the child viewer as passive and in need of protection by adult authority. On *MLP News* Marlowe noted that fans should be concerned with what she termed as “bigotry in a children’s show” while Someguy went as far as arguing that *MLP:FiM* was now no longer suitable for children. This was backed up by other posters on the site. “A” claimed that “my mouth was literally agape when I saw the

episode... It will take a lot for me to show [my daughter] that [episode] if the show is still available when she can start understanding it, and a lot of guidance to get through it.” N. Moore bemoaned that “the episode had such a great opportunity to show the value of science, and instead was anti-intellectual and pro-superstition-an irresponsible message to young girls” (Comments on MLP News 2011). One Wiki poster claimed that the episode offered “a dangerous message to today’s youth” (MLPWiki 2012b). Another anonymous user agreed: “this is a very bad way of teaching viewers (especially children) to think rationally” (MLPWiki 2013a). Comments on analysis videos were often similarly outraged. “Art of the Ghostie” noted that “When I watched this episode for the first time I thought ‘Holy shit, did a priest wrote this, or what? [sic]’”, while LtHavoc1983 described the episode as “the only episode I don't like from MLP, because it seems to teach blind acceptance and that science is a dull tool... [it] teaches children the wrong lesson.” Teawithgrief expressed the same sentiment a little more colourfully: promoting unreasoning belief “is a INCREDIBLY dangerous way of thinking... and to put something like that in a childrens [sic] show... holy shit what a dick move” (Comments on DrWolf001 2013).

One of the interesting intra-fandom debates surrounding this episode revolved around one of the key claims of the pathologizing tradition: the idea that fans were taking the show too seriously. Commenting on a YouTube analysis, SonicGum15 told other fans to “Suck it up and don't be such a over-sensitive viewer [sic] about writing when you're watching a little girl's show... I don't take the show THAT seriously, at least I really know what i'm watching” (Comment on Joshscorcher 2013). This was echoed by Star472 on *MLP News*:

Are we still talking about My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, the children's television show, or a show made entirely for adults? Come on people, like it or not, this is still a kid's show!!! If you want serious or politically correct, I'm sure there's some informative stuff on CNN or whatever. Lighten up or change channel. Sheesh. Of [sic], even better, engage in more grown up activities. (Comment on MLP News 2011)

Answering Star472's criticism, a user named "Faust" argued explicitly for the responsibility of fans in combatting possibly prejudicial source material: "If it's a children's show, then it is even more important to seriously evaluate the message given. Who cares what happens in a Saw movie, since adults can handle whatever amount of gore or bigotry... However, bigotry put in a children's show can be influential in shaping their attitudes and damaging" (Comment on MLP News 2011). Similar comments could be found on the *MLP* Wiki. Verg77 pointed out that "you may say 'oh c'mon, it's just an episode of a kids' show, what's the harm, serious? [sic]'. Well, kids are rather impressionable... if the kids who are watching this don't have their own clear opinion on [religion] they might just be convinced and simply accept it without giving it much thought" (MLPWiki 2014). In these responses, fans viewed themselves as having a duty of care to the text's intended audience, working to hold producers accountable for the ideological messages of the work they produced. In supposedly promoting "religion" producers were seen to have crossed a line: where the show should have been teaching children to view unverifiable claims sceptically, it instead appeared to be promoting unquestioning belief. To remain an acceptable fan object, *MLP:FiM* needed to maintain a "scientific" approach – in doing so, not only was the rationalistic nature of the show (and thus fandom) reaffirmed, but it was demonstrated that it had a positive role in educating the next generation as empirical thinkers. The unstated assumption made in these discussions was that religious or supernatural belief was dangerous

and regressive. In other words, negative assumptions made by the media about fandom were projected onto religion.

The same imperative was demonstrated in a second response to the episode, which again served to code *MLP:FiM* as a rationalistic text. In addition to positioning themselves as the defenders of the child audience, a number of fans read “Feeling Pinkie Keen” in such a way as to reframe it as pro-science. As several fans pointed out, Twilight chose to dismiss the evidence that Pinkie’s power actually worked, sticking stubbornly to her claim that it was a scientific impossibility in the face of experimental evidence to the contrary. In the words of TexasUberAlles’ comment on *Equestria Daily*: “To stop asking questions before you reach the event tree entry of ‘cannot measure this using existing tools’ is to stop being scientific.” Redtutel, who admitted to being a Christian, also supported this type of reading: “This episode isn’t against science, it’s against BAD science, the type that automatically assumes something is true, and then proceeds to only look at things that support their assumption” (Comments on Sethisto 2013). Writing on *MLP Wiki*, an anonymous fan likened the episode’s portrayal of Twilight’s scepticism to the initial rejection of Newton’s theory of gravity by the scientific community: “Newton (Pinkie Pie) would bring up the idea of gravity (Pinkie Sense) and the community (Twilight), being uable [sic] to understand gravity at the time would doubt him and try to find another answer which to them would have seemed more logical” (MLPWiki 2013a). This echoed others: “What Twilight was doing wasn’t science... A real scientist would say ‘holy crap, let’s look into this and see if we can find a physical explanation, or perhaps develop a hypothesis’” (MLPWiki 2011a). Another poster saw the episode as “a pretty good representation of [how] skepticism and the scientific open mind should operate. The other ponies and eventually Twilight believe in Pinkie Sense because it is repeatedly demonstrated to actually work, which is actually in direct contrast to superstitions

resulting from confirmation bias” (MLPWiki 2011b). This sort of reading saw some fans go to extreme lengths to defend the show’s rationality. On *MLP News* Luthor engaged in a detailed scene-by-scene analysis of the episode to demonstrate that “all of Pinkie’s predictions can be easily explained by a combination of Subconscious hyper-observationalism and self-fulfilling prophesy [sic].” For example, in one scene Pinkie correctly warns Twilight about the imminent danger that she’ll fall through a trapdoor, a warning which Twilight ignores. Slapstick ensues. Luthor’s comment provides a painstaking rationalisation for the prediction which can be seen as an example of Pollner’s concept of “mundane reason”, albeit applied to a fictional world. A consistent world is thus constructed by filling in lacunae in the text in rational terms. Luthor here mirrors the actions of a judge in Pollner’s study, who constructed the minimal information on a traffic ticket “into a possible version of a scene... guided by mundane suppositions regarding the coherency and determinateness of objects in the world” (Pollner 1987, 35):

Pinkie probably knew that Twilight was following her the whole time and the cellar door was there, she probably saw Applejack enter the cellar earlier off-screen and she knew that she would open it at some point, the fact that twilight [sic] fell into it is simply a coincidence since the door would have opened at some point any way. (Comment on MLP News 2011)

There was therefore nothing supernatural about Pinkie Sense. Similarly, Jed Blue reread the episode by seeing Twilight as representative of climate change deniers, conspiracy theorists or young earth creationists (Blue 2013, 149-152).

In this way, the core text was rehabilitated as something that was seen to be marked by maturity and social responsibility. Where some fans criticised the show for appearing to promote religion, others therefore chose to re-read it as attacking poor scientific practice. Moving away from the pathologizing tradition, fandom could therefore be seen to be engaging in a wider political debate on the importance of science in education, the dangers of inconsistent theory, and the nature of thorough research. While these readings might appear strained, fans felt it was their responsibility to draw a progressive message from the text: as Blue wrote, “this was ponies; it’s worth at least trying to read the episode in a more positive way and get what good out of it we can.” (Blue 2013, 152)

These responses attempted to rehabilitate the text within the framework of “animistic reason” Saler has traced. The comments of some fans demonstrated the assumption that an association of the text’s message with religion or the supernatural would further devalue it as a cultural artefact. *MLP:FiM* was therefore redeemed as rationalistic; helping to teach another generation how to think well. The link with religion, so long a staple of the pathologizing tradition of reporting fandom, was therefore reconceptualised or downplayed. This not only suggests the degree to which the idea of religion as something irrational or incompatible with “high cultural” discourse has worked its way out into wider culture, but has important implications for those who would describe fandom as a form of religion. The use of the idea may not only be disingenuous in descriptions of fan practice, but it might, ironically, be serving to help pathologize religion in the eyes of fans. It should be noted that this assertion is not intended to downplay the importance of fandom to individuals, or the genuinely transformative personal and communal experiences which occur within fan communities. It is simply to suggest that describing such experiences as religious might, at times, prove counter-productive (see also Duffett 2003).

Conclusion

This article does not pretend to be a universal model for how fandoms react to the supposed promotion of religion within their core texts. Any fandom will have a variety of reactions within it, and not all Bronies reacted to “Feeling Pinkie Keen” negatively. While the bulk of this article has highlighted the ways in which fans reacted negatively to the pathologization associated with religious ideas, it is also necessary to recognise that these ideas can also encourage an internal debate in fandom over the nature of religion itself. An excellent example of this can be found in the YouTube analysis of the episode by Joshscorcher. This is often tongue-in-cheek, but includes a serious debate on the nature of religion and the imagined world of *MLP:FiM*. Josh, who self-identifies as a Christian, invited Zane, an agnostic fellow-commentator, to jointly analyse the episode with him. The two calmly talked about the differences in their beliefs. The debate continued in the comments. While many fans commented negatively on the irrationality of the show, or attempted to redeem it scientifically, others engaged in debate about the nature of faith or admitted to their own beliefs. The connection to the public sphere was sometimes made explicit. As GreatFox42 noted, “I appreciated the two viewpoints given for this review. It probably is the only way to do this episode justice... The review was fair with solid points, and both sides of the issue being addressed without /completely demonizing the other./ That's something I think even politicians could learn from” (Comment on Joshscorcher 2013). A similar debate on *MLP News* saw Augustine, Confucius, St. Dominic, Schopenhauer and George Lemaitre cited to discuss the nature of religion and its rationality (or lack thereof) (Comments on MLP News 2011). Fandom in these instances was used a lens through which to examine existing or potential religious belief via the imagined world of Equestria. To quote Saler, the imagined

world debated in fandom operated as a “public sphere of the imagination” (Saler 2012); an abstracted space in which to calmly analyze important contemporary issues.

While fandom should not, then, be set up in opposition to religion or as its replacement (Author XXXX, Kienzl 2014), it remains true that a number of fans reacted negatively to the supposed promotion of religion within their core-text. Part of the reason for this relates to the pathologization of fandom in the popular media, in which “religion” has been commonly tied to fandom in a highly negative way. A focus on an empirical, scientific worldview is therefore one tool used by fans to legitimise their fan interests to a world which is perceived to be sceptical or derisive of their fandom. In the case examined here, when their text appeared to challenge rationality, a number of fans responded by making sure that they were on the “right” side of the rational/emotional binary. They did this by defending an empirical position and the role of their chosen text in promoting the “scientific” worldview. Fandom, often portrayed as regressive and escapist, became something which had a valid place in public discourse. In the case of “Feeling Pinkie Keen”, some fans repositioned themselves as guardians of rationality in the public sphere, or chose to defend the educational value of the episode by re-reading a potentially pro-religious text as instead being an attack on poor scientific method. By doing so, they consciously distanced their fandom from religion. For these fans, then, their fandom was not analogous to religion, as suggested in much of the scholarship on the implicit religiosity of fandom.

Indeed, where Cornel Sandvoss has argued that fans are willing to renegotiate their understanding of the text as its central elements change over time (Sandvoss 2005, 109-113), for some fans the implication that religion might be involved in their fan object has been a

line that they are unwilling to cross. Their position recognises how widely held the belief that religion and science are in conflict is; how empiricism and rationality are popularly seen as the flipside to emotional engagement. That fandoms are conflicted about their rationalistic and affective elements does not mean that fans are “odd”; rather fandom reflects the struggle of the twenty-first century West to reconcile its impulses towards the scientific and the mystical, and the continued determination of many to see the two as radically separate.

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ⁱ The term “Brony” is now generally used to refer to fans irrespective of gender, although some female fans prefer the term “Pegasister”.

ⁱⁱ I do not mean to imply here that popular culture cannot be consciously used in a religious way, simply that fandom is not *per se* religious in nature. Some religious groups do consciously make use of popular fiction (e.g. The Church of All Worlds), or use it as the inspiration for their faith (e.g. Jediism). For more on this see Davidsen 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ I examine the concept of implicit religion more fully in Author XXXXb.

^{iv} These examples are taken from fan blogs, media reporting and “professional” fans (e.g. weekly fan reviewers for publications such as *Slate*). Even on more mainstream sites, the comments below the articles served as a space for debating the scientific consistency of the imagined world of *Doctor Who*.

^v One feature of *MLP:FiM* fandom is that the core text is approached in a non-ironic manner (see Robertson 2013). Adult fandom of children’s television has often been marked by an ironic engagement with the text which could deflect criticism of its regressive nature (see Buckingham 1998); in disavowing this approach, Bronies used alternative strategies of cultural legitimation which emphasised the affective importance of the text.

^{vi} This perception of media pathologization or popular abuse has continued in some sectors of the fandom. For example, Bronycon 2014 included a panel on “Coming out of the stable”, designed to help fans who feared that friends or families would misunderstand their fandom.

^{vii} de Lancie explained his reasons for working on the documentary in 2012: “So a friend of mine came over for dinner who does documentaries and said ‘We should do a documentary.’ And I said ‘No no no no no. It’s not my world, I don’t want to be jumping into it.’ But then a week or so later he sent me a Fox News things [sic] which – as far as I’m concerned Fox has done more to destroy the news in our country than anything else – and I was very upset by what they had to say, and I just went ‘Those fucks! Let’s do this documentary.’” (Walker 2012).

^{viii} Comments from all of the sites cited here are undated, with the exception of those on MLP Wiki. The dated MLP Wiki comments are cited individually in the references to this paper.