Response to "Literary Archaeology and Para-Scholarship in Wold Newtonry"

Clyde O. McDaniel, Jr., Ph.D.
University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Wilmington, NC

I applaud the contemporary works of those who are diligently extending the seminal work of Phillip José Farmer, but I take issue with their use of the term "para-scholarship" in attempts to capture the essence of their activities as Wold Newton Universe writers. Scholarship is an extraordinary activity, and it is not confined to the roles of academics. Nor is it synonymous with the term "science" or "scientific research." But it is equally necessary and laudatory, for it implies extreme focus, perseverance, and systematization as one pursues a positive knowledge-generating goal. The activity typifies one and who works seriously to elucidate, clarify, and expand understanding in a field of endeavor. Usually, it focuses on describing and/or explaining a particular issue in the field by amplifying the connections (or relationships) between/among ostensibly disparate events, characteristics (or variables), concepts, and/or people (or characters). These descriptions or explanations comprise or tend in the direction of theory, which is a highly desirable ultimate goal of scholarly knowledge-generating activity.

Clearly, the content areas of focus do not determine whether the activity outlined above is scholarly. In fact, content areas may range from the purely fanciful through the abstract and insubstantial to the concrete and tangible. Further, it is considered quite normal for a content area to progress, over time, along a continuum made up of these three stages. While the mechanism that facilitates this progress is scientific research, some areas do not advance but are still considered functional and socially and culturally relevant at the

fanciful stage. They are, therefore, quite legitimate areas to define, explain, and develop, and those who participate seriously in such activities are, indeed, scholars. Good examples of these content areas are myths, religion, tall stories, fairy tales, and many other intangible aspects of culture that are "real" only by virtue of their impacts on people's behavior (eg, some social values); and **scholarship abounds in all of them.** These areas, and their associated scholars, serve very real social and psychological functions in a society. In doing scholarly work in a purely fanciful content area, a scholar must hold a primary criterion of science (empirical validation) in abeyance, and use, instead, trends or patterns prevailing in the literature on the topic or issue of interest as sources of validation of speculated connection/relationships

Having to do this poses a major challenge to scholars in these fanciful areas: to posit theory that is not empirically validated or, for that matter, validatable. The theory then becomes one that is logically consistent and derivable from the 'primitive" or basic concepts (that are either indefinable or arbitrarily defined) in the area according to fundamental rules of consistency that are contrived but are adhered to by all who practice scholarship in the area. Actually, this tendency is shared by all disciplines (whether fanciful or not), and it allows theory to evolve and expand based on the flexibility of the definitions of the "primitive" concept and the rules of logical consistency.

The "primitive" or basic concept in the Wold Newton Universe is the mutating capability of the meteor strike in 1795 in Yorkshire, England (and various chemical or otherwise catastrophes that occurred subsequently). The derived concepts involve the manner in

which the mutations, hypothetically, could affect any one of or a sub-set of normal human characteristics (leading to a fascinating array of possible super-natural humans – demonstrating both super-heroes and villains).

It is obvious that original contrived rules of logical consistency and their derivatives were necessary for developing biographies and genealogical connections between/among the super-heroes and villains, over time. It appears that they are based on: (1) the logical extension of the capabilities of the mutated features, (2) the tendencies for mutants to mate with non-mutants and bear children (because two mutants cannot bear off-spring), (3) the discovery, via dogged searches through the literature, for biological or similar traits that connect and/or imply connections of relevant characteristics over time (explicitly or inferentially), (4) the evolution of the mutants themselves, (4) the creative and imaginative tendencies of the scholars, and (6) public or consumer acceptability.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between information and knowledge in these fanciful areas, because in order for the former to be most useful in describing and explaining, it must be converted to the latter. **This is a primary role of a scholar in a relevant fanciful area**. Conceptually, information is issue specific, situational, time bound, and concrete. In essence, it is relevant for a specific issue, time, and place, under specific conditions. But issue, time, place, and conditions, can be used by scholars to conceptualize classes of phenomena – that is, groups or sets of information bits that are identical or sufficiently similar. A unit of knowledge, then, is a conceptually-organized system of information that is generalizable over time and place, and includes a whole

class of like, or near like, bits rather than only a small number that pertain only to the unique time-, place-, and conditions-bound context of a particular situation. Although each system of knowledge does not have to be organized conceptually according to the theoretical principles, at a minimum, it must be systematized according to some logically defensible principles of categorizing. **Scholars do this**!

Information, on the other hand, pertains to the concrete particularistic manifestations of the principles, as well as the contested subject matter, on the basis of which knowledge systems can be modified continuously. This means that routine information is a prerequisite for the construction of sound knowledge systems that, in conventional terms, are quite useful for understanding. This means also that creative and imaginative story tellers, character creators, and literature searching pattern finders are essential.

Generally, these scholarly practitioners are aware of the fact that a great deal of the information needed already exists on the internet, in books, articles, journals, monographs, theses, comics, other popular media, dissertations, archives, data banks, and the cognitions and attitudes of people who have undergone a variety of experiences. But across issues, time, place, and conditions, information is almost always scattered; so, in order to develop and expand theory in the fanciful area, scholars must often conduct exhaustive searches to synthesize and categorize these bits of information from these sources. AGAIN, THEIR WORK DESERVES RESOUNDING APPLAUSE, for without it, while information is everywhere, knowledge in the fanciful area would be nowhere in particular.

7/22/04

Comic Arts Conference; San Diego, CA