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# HEALING WOMEN

## THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND ALFREDIAN FANFICTION

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*This article explores female agency and the healing role of women in medievalist fiction on Alfred the Great. Alfredian fanfiction written during the pandemic mixes neo-medieval elements with current themes and preoccupations, such as illness, pain, solitude, hope, female agency, and border crossings. The fan authors have constructed a 21st century “neo-medieval-based culture” that mirrors events in current society. Their stories often take place against the backdrop of other times of crisis, such as wars against intruders. The authors use the illness of King Alfred as the Romanticised pandemic, thus reviving horrors with playfulness and humour, as the power of the past is to provide for hope in similar circumstances. This fanfiction also explores how non-normative persons are crossing borders and forming new traditions by reiterating as well as changing elements of their heritage.*

As fanfiction mirrors the context in which it is written, it is no surprise that in these times of the coronavirus pandemic, many fans are writing new stories that revolve around viruses, plagues, and other diseases, combined with themes of social isolation and overcoming loneliness. Various examples of this phenomenon can be found in fanfiction about Alfred the Great (848/49 – 26 October 899 CE), set in the contexts of the neo-medieval series *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings* (both available on Netflix). Although the historical King Alfred has been dead and buried for eleven centuries, now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the

mythical Alfred is still alive and kicking. Historically, the depiction of Alfred the Great has always mirrored the Zeitgeist of the times, in which Alfred consistently overcame the difficulties of that era.<sup>1</sup> As this paper will show, in 2020 this is still the case, although he cannot do that all by himself – in situations of (life threatening) crisis, the fan-fictional King Alfred is often saved by female strangers. To illustrate this, after some general remarks about fanfiction in times of Corona, I will discuss four works of medievalist fanfiction on Alfred the Great written during the 2020 COVID pandemic. All four revolve around the themes of female agency and the healing role of women. By connecting these works to both their story worlds as well as their authors' contexts, this analysis will show how this genre can be viewed as contemporary reception history. Moreover, it will become clear that through these works of fanfiction, non-normative persons are crossing borders and “rewriting the stories” (to paraphrase Haraway) by forming new traditions by both reiterating and changing elements of their heritages.<sup>2</sup>

## PANDEMICS IN FANFICTION

The novel coronavirus has pervaded every aspect of our lives, including fanfiction. The internet is rife with works featuring quarantine, social distancing, lockdowns, and panic buying of toilet paper. Sites such as Wattpad and Archive of Our Own (AO3 for short) serve as safe spaces where people can connect by producing and consuming fanfic. This is particularly the case because many people have been involuntarily confined to their homes and books are slow to come by. As such, fanfiction is thriving.<sup>3</sup> For many, invoking classic fanfiction tropes to be ways of instituting a feeling of control in a situation that feels outside their control.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, fanfiction has become a means of coping with quarantine and other safety measures introduced to control the coronavirus pandemic.

1 Joanne Parker, *'England's Darling': The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)

2 See for example: Donna Haraway, “It Matters What Stories Tell Stories; It Matters Whose Stories Tell Stories,” *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 34, no. 3 (Sep. 2019), 565–75  
Martine Mussies, “Queering the Anglo-Saxons through Their Psalms,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 31 (2019)

3 Palmer Haasch, “Coronavirus Is Starting to Show up in Fan Fiction, Placing Iconic Characters in Quarantine,” *Insider*, 17 March 2020, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://www.insider.com/coronavirus-fan-fiction-quarantine-social-distancing-shipping-escapism-ao3-2020-3>

4 Katherine Shwetz, “Apocalyptic Fiction Helps Us Deal with the Anxiety of the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The Conversation*, 18 March 2020, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://theconversation.com/apocalyptic-fiction-helps-us-deal-with-the-anxiety-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic-133682>

The fact that fanfiction is thriving during this pandemic gives credence to the statement that art is a reflection of life. This is especially true in this case because fanfiction writers and readers hold up a mirror to their deepest fears about the present and explore different responses to their realities. Notably, plague fiction is not a new phenomenon –indeed, the theme of infectious diseases has been around for a long time.<sup>5</sup> This is evident from the scores of books that have regained popularity and resurfaced recently such as Albert Camus’ novel *The Plague* (1947). Other prominent examples include Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) and Lawrence Wright’s *The End of October* (2020).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, there are dominant topics or tropes which have surfaced in fanfiction due to pandemics. Illustratively, the lockdowns and quarantine measures that have been put in place have inspired a new present-day romance trope –lovers brought together by quarantine. Notably, quarantine measures are used as a springboard for stories where characters fall in love after being trapped near to each other and grow closer with time.<sup>7</sup> Even though it is cold comfort, fanfiction serves as a means of coping with the pandemic that is ravaging the world at the moment. Moreover, through their shared fandoms, the writers of fanfiction experience a sense of togetherness whilst in solitary confinement, which contributes to their physical and mental health. For this paper, I will focus on four works that explore how the aforementioned topics come to play in fanfiction about the legendary King Alfred the Great. Special attention will be devoted to the role of the “healing women” in these narratives.

5 Katherine Voyles, “Plague Stories Are Cold Comfort: On the Limits of Fiction,” *War on The Rocks*, 11 May 2020, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/plague-stories-are-cold-comfort-on-the-limits-of-fiction>

6 John Dugdale, “Plague Fiction – Why Authors Love to Write about Pandemics,” *The Guardian*, 1 August 2014, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/aug/01/plague-fiction-writers-infectious-disease>

7 Aya Romano, “Quarantine Love Stories Are Becoming a Romance Trope,” *Vox*, 25 March 2020, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/25/21191148/quarantine-love-stories-reddit-husbands-coronavirus-ao3-fiction>

## MATERIALS & METHODS

This paper features a close-reading of four pieces of non-AO3 fanfiction about Alfred the Great, written during the COVID-19 crisis: an untitled piece [“Alfred / Modwenna / Wyrn”] by Surakian (April 2020), an untitled Spanish King Alfred fanfic by marithesoprano (April 2020), the short story “Like an Angel in the Night” by BigHeartBigFart (March 2020) and “The Last Kingdom Fanfiction”

by jasminecanada (June 2020). What these four works of fanfiction have in common is their narrative of a healing woman rescuing King Alfred. The image of the healing woman in these pieces of fanfiction resembles the trope of “The White Magician Girl”, a stock character often present in fantasy literature and role-playing games, that acts as “the party’s resident healer, nurturer and source of feminine wisdom”.<sup>8</sup> As this paper will show, in both medieval and neo-medieval texts, the fictional worlds that encompass medieval literature have depicted creatures, prophesized events, and included magical items that gave colour and memorable character to several tales. Women play a vital role in these narratives and their first appearance; these figures fit into a tradition in which they are idealized as healers or helpers. However, this role comes with its challenges. They also have to wage battles to maintain this role as rescuers. For instance, in the case of Jacqueline Felice de Almania (early 14th-century), she was placed on trial for practising medicine, and had to question the intention of male physicians and their attempt to discredit women.<sup>9</sup>

Although surprisingly similar in terms of content, the case studies chosen for this paper come from very different sources. It is no surprise that most scholarship on fanfiction uses examples from the AO3, as it is not only the largest and most well-known fanfiction archive, but also very easy to browse. However, it is important to understand that the “open access” fanfiction of AO3 is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to fanfiction – there is also much to discover in more “hidden” places, such as on other social media, like Tumblr and Facebook and more locally orientated equivalents like LIVEJOURNAL, on forums dedicated to specific fandoms, and in diaries and letters shared in more private forms of correspondence such as mail groups. These more hidden fanfics are often to be found through networks of minority groups, such as autism, queer, and/or non-binary support groups. Following Abigail Derecho, fanfiction texts are often described as “archontic”.<sup>10</sup> This is based on Derrida’s ideas of texts being archives.<sup>11</sup> As Peter Gldenpfennig explains, when we view fanfiction as archives, we can “see the text as an entry to an open archive with the original

8 See for example: Tropedia, “White Magician Girl,” accessed 20 September 2021, [https://allthetropes.fandom.com/wiki/White\\_Magician\\_Girl](https://allthetropes.fandom.com/wiki/White_Magician_Girl)

9 F. Edward Cranz et al., “Memoirs of Fellows and Corresponding Fellows of the Medieval Academy of America,” *Speculum* 61, no. 3 (1986), 759–69.

10 Abigail Derecho, “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*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland.), 61–78.

11 Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995), 9.

artefact as the basis for this same archive”.<sup>12</sup> My focus here is on depictions of crisis and connection in more hidden fanfiction about King Alfred, in order to open up the archives of non-normative fans’ experiences and wishes during the coronavirus pandemic.

12 Peter Güldenpfennig, “Fandom, Fan Fiction and the Creative Mind,” MA thesis, (Tilburg University, 2011), 14, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://arno.uvt.nl/show.cgi?fid=120621>

All the case studies discussed take place in the fictional world of *The Last Kingdom*, a Netflix series based on Bernard Cornwell’s historical book series *The Saxon Stories* (2004-2020), centring on a fictional depiction of Alfred of Wessex as the first king of the Anglo-Saxons and the “creator” of England (in Cornwell’s historical interpretation). As is not uncommon in fanfiction, three of the four writers discussed have merged this fandom with another, to create



David Dawson as Alfred. Still from Jon East, dir. *The Last Kingdom*. Season 3, episode 5. Aired 19 November 2018, on Netflix.

a “cross-over”. Moreover, all authors have included names and quotes from vastly different texts to arrive at what Judith May Fathallah calls “a pastiche of texts from supposedly different sources”.<sup>13</sup> By carefully gluing together their collage-like stories, the authors build bridges between fans and fandoms, thus creating social cohesion and closeness in times of isolation. Generally, in most fanfics featuring Alfred of Wessex, the king is the most powerful figure in the stories. For example, in Robyn aka DxTURA’s untitled work from January 2020, it was King Alfred who saved the main character of *The Witcher*, Geralt of Rivia.<sup>14</sup> But in the case studies written during the COVID-19 lockdown, even mighty Alfred needs a little help from his friends. The authors clearly reference *The Last Kingdom* episode S3E9, in which the king dies, and in their rewritings of the story, the fans add a new layer to the centuries-old traditions of storytelling around the immortal King Alfred.

#### SURAKIAN – AN UNKNOWN DISEASE, BODILY PAIN, AND SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

The first case study is an untitled story from April 2020, written by Surakian, a female author who only posts M/M fantasies (aka “slash fiction”) on her AO3 account, but also writes works that fall in other categories, such as this case study.<sup>15</sup> Alongside Alfred, the main characters in Surakian’s work are two non-canonical entities, Modwenna and the Wyrm, whom have been added to the intermedial storytelling by the author because they symbolise elements that communicate the narrative’s message.<sup>16</sup>

The name Modwenna is mainly associated with Ireland and some historical records claim that King Alfred received much of his education, from the years of his sickly childhood to his early youth, in Ireland.<sup>17</sup> According to Mooney’s benchmark publication *A History of Ireland* (1845), it was during this period and upon the occasion of his illness that the young king was sent to a certain Modwenna, a religious lady in Ireland, for healing.<sup>18</sup> Notably, Modwenna

13 Judith May Fathallah, *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 195.

14 Robyn/DxTURA, “The Witcher x King Alfred,” accessed 20 September 2021, <http://martinemussies.nl/web/the-witcher-x-king-alfred>

15 Surakian, “5 Works by Surakian,” accessed 20 September 2021, <https://archiveofourown.org/users/Surakian/works>

16 Surakian sent me this *The Last Kingdom* fanfiction via private messaging, on 11 April 2021. With her permission, I posted it with an introduction at my own website <http://martinemussies.nl/web/alfred-modwenna-wyrm>

17 There are many connections between King Alfred and Ireland. See, for example: Ruth Wehlau, “Alfred and Ireland: Irony and Irish Identity in John O’Keeffe’s *Alfred*,” *European Romantic Review* 22, no. 6 (Dec., 2011), 801–17, doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2011.615995.

18 Thomas Mooney, *A History of Ireland, from Its First Settlement to the Present Time, Including a Particular Account of Its Literature, Music, Architecture, and Natural Resources ... Illustrated by Many Anecdotes of Celebrated Irishmen, and a Series of Architectural Descr* (n.p.: Creative

Media Partners, 2018), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=VZtsvgEACAAI>

19 London, British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra A.ii

20 David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 3rd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 311.

21 Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

22 Martine Mussies, "Wyrms," *Musings* (blog), 10 December 2020, accessed 20 September 2021, <http://martinemussies.nl/web/wyrm>

23 *The Oxford English Dictionary* (London: Clarendon Press, 2001).

24 Ranait Flanagan, "The Early Bird Is the Wyrm: If and How the Literary Use of Wyrm in Genesis A & B and Beowulf Informs Its Linguistic Meaning?," *Innervate* 10 (2017), 91-97, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/documents/innervate/17-18/q33221-ranait-flanagan.pdf>

25 Kevin J. Wanner, "Warriors, Wyrms, and Wyrd: The Paradoxical Fate of the Germanic Hero/King in Beowulf," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 16 (1999), accessed 20 September

was also the name of a seventh century nun and saint in England who was celebrated in sanctity for performing holy miracles in Staffordshire (a landlocked county in the West Midlands of England) at Burton Abbey, which she founded.<sup>19</sup> It has been noted that Modwenna sought the help of King Alfred at a time when her abbey was on the verge of collapse. Often, there is some confusion registered between Modwenna, also known as Saint Modwen and Modwenna, also known as Saint Monnine.<sup>20</sup> The latter was one of Ireland's first female saints who lived in the fifth century – two centuries before the other Modwenna, who in turn lived two centuries before the rule of King Alfred.<sup>21</sup> As well as founding the monastery at Killeavy, Saint Monnine is also commemorated for her charity work and all the miracles she performed. By using the name Modwenna in her fanfic, Surakian adds another layer to this confusion, while adding an element of time travel to the story.

The term "wyrms" can be used to describe a variety of ideas.<sup>22</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines a "wyrms" as a dragon without legs or wings.<sup>23</sup> Other dictionaries define "wyrms" as a large snake. The general consensus is that in Middle English the term "wyrms" refers to the earthworm and similar creatures, such as dragons and snakes. Nonetheless, it can be argued that there is no standard definition for the term in fantasy genres. Various mythologies have their own unique definitions and uses of the word. Most Western mythologies depict "wyrms" as long-bodied fire drakes that are flightless.<sup>24</sup> Within the biblical text *Genesis*, in its retelling of the sin, the word "wyrms" makes an unlikely appearance and is used to describe the well-known serpent in hagiographical literature. In *Beowulf*, the term "wyrms" is used to describe the final monster which is a dragon, as seen in the statement "then the wyrm awoke, accusation was renewed".<sup>25</sup> And Gifer is the name of the leader of the decomposing worms in Beowulf. Germanic cultural art, in particular the tales of Beowulf, conveys a strong belief in the boar protector and often featured dragon and snake-like monsters which were referred to as "wyrms".<sup>26</sup> Evidently, the word in question is used to describe a wide variety of serpentine creatures.

Majority etymological research argues that the word in question is used to mean dragon and is of Germanic origin.<sup>27</sup> Its equivalent in Old High German is “wurm”.<sup>28</sup> These words were replaced by the Latin term “draco”, “draconic” which was borrowed by Germanic languages in the Middle Ages. In 1967 Hayo Vierck, the German archaeologist coined the term “wurme” to classify a group of creatures portrayed in ancient art, characterized by snake-like bodies and variable heads.<sup>29</sup> In Germanic languages, the term “wurme” is widely used to denote all saurian-, worm-, drake-like or snake-like creatures. On the whole, it can be argued that the term “wurm” is used to refer to creatures resembling worms or snakes.

By writing a story about King Alfred, Modwenna and the wurm Gifer, Surakian’s story might seem like an ordinary neo-medieval “mash-up” fantasy. But at another level, various elements relating to the coronavirus pandemic are at play here. In this paper, I will discuss the three most obvious ones in some more detail. First, the idea of a disease for which current treatments have no cure. Surakian has incorporated this frightening idea that we are hearing and seeing all around us into her story, which takes place in an Anglo-Saxon (Early English) context, using the wurm as a symbol for it. Because common mortals cannot cure the wurm’s disease, King Alfred needs a *deus ex machina*, which comes in the form of the holy Modwenna. When she asks the king how he can withstand this suffering, he answers: “I did not dare, against the Lord’s word, bow or break.” This is the translation of a quote from the Old-English poem “The Dream of the Rood”: “Thær ic tha ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word bûgan oppe berstan”. In this poem, these lines are about the cross – and “the cross’s inability to influence events” – the ultimate symbol of Christ’s resurrection by Divine intervention.<sup>30</sup> Humans are powerless and have to wait for a miracle.

Secondly, there is the fear of bodily pain. “The night seemed to stretch on endlessly for Alfred as his pain worsened, greater than any pain he had ever suffered in his lifetime thus far.” At the time when this fanfiction was written,

2021, <https://www.medievalists.net/2009/12/warriors-wyrms-and-wyrd-the-paradoxical-fate-of-the-germanic-heroking-in-beowulf>

26 Stephen O. Glosecki, “Men Among Monsters: Germanic Animal Art as Evidence of Oral Literature,” *Mankind Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (Winter 1986), 207.

27 J.T. Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon: The Nature of the Beast in Germanic Literature* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1998), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.com.bn/books?id=UDBcAAAAMAAJ>

28 Martyna Katarzyna Gibka, “Meet the Dragon: A Brief Study of Dragons in the *Harry Potter* Series and the *Inheritance Cycle*,” in *Imaginary Creatures in Medieval and Modern Fantasy Literature*, ed. L. Neubauer (Kraków: Wydawnictwo LIBRON – Filip Lohner, 2016), 145-58, accessed 20 September 2021, [http://www.gibka.pl/06\\_Martyna%20Gibka%20-%20Meet%20the%20dragon.pdf](http://www.gibka.pl/06_Martyna%20Gibka%20-%20Meet%20the%20dragon.pdf)

29 Hayo Vierck, “Ein Relieffibelpaar Aus Nordendorf in Bayerisch Schwaben,” *Bayerische Vorgeschichtsblätter*, no. 32 (1967), 104–43.

30 C. Hough and J. Corbett, *Beginning Old English* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 82, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=TaaFQgAACAAJ>

various clickbait horror stories were going “viral” on social media. Most of them were about recent cases of COVID-19, but one of them was an older story about a French woman, who had a canine tapeworm in her spine (as described by *The New England Journal of Medicine*).<sup>31</sup> This resonates with Isidore’s description of the serpent (anguis) as “created from the spinal cord of dead humans, thus while they kill humans they are also born from them”. In her fanfiction, Surakian describes Alfred of Wessex having a similar experience, writing about “an inflamed spot that has been the source of the pain rolling through his body”. This seems to be a quite realistic representation, for according to physiotherapist Jolanda Myers-van der Veer, such an inflammation leads to oedema, which causes compression on a nerve or even on the entire canal, so that neurological failure with severe pain could indeed be the result.<sup>32</sup> This realistic description mirrors a human fear that was topical during the coronavirus pandemic, as severe discomfort is a realistic result of getting infected with COVID-19.

Thirdly, there is solitary confinement: “Alfred laid alone, having long since sent his wife and children away to another hut along the marsh, hoping to spare them from catching the illness wrecking his body. He refused to put them at risk.”<sup>33</sup> This is also a familiar situation during the current crisis, with some people not seeing family members for months because they want to protect them. Altogether, by mixing her neo-medieval fantasies with elements from today’s events, Surakian’s fanfiction mirrors the context in which it is written.

#### MARITHESOPRANO - CROWNS, COMBINED RITUALS & TALKING TREES

The second case study is an untitled Spanish work of fanfiction about “El rey Alfred” by Venezuelan Tumblr user marithesoprano. The narrative is similar to that of Surakian’s story – the great King is sick and a female visitor tries to heal him. In this case, the woman in question is Lagertha. Through this insertion, marithesoprano connects *The Last Kingdom* to another major TV series,

31 Marine Jacquier and Lionel Piroth. “Vertebral Hydatidosis,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 379, no. 2 (2018), e5.

32 Private correspondence.

33 Surakian, [“ALFRED / MODWENNA / WYRM”], *Musings* (blog), 12 June 2020, accessed 20 September 2021, <http://martinemussies.nl/web/alfred-modwenna-wyrm>

*Vikings* (2013-). This crossover has been done before, for example in Bandi Crawford's 2019 story *Æthelflaed and Lagertha*, which centres around the bi-romantic feelings of the two characters in the title.<sup>34</sup> In this untitled fanfic, Alfred gets sick after he is visited (in a dream?) by a lady wearing a crown. Lagertha tries to heal the King and is assisted by a male personage, namely Athelstan. While Lagertha and Athelstan are performing rituals to save the King, something unexpected happens in the narrative. King Alfred has a vision of an old willow who informs him of the attempts of the two people close to him to help him overcome this peculiar illness. After this vision, another one follows. The King feels a breeze from behind him and turns around to see a beautiful woman. When he asks her for her name, she answers "Stephanie", which also means "crown" (from the Greek word Στέφανος), just like "corona".

In *Vikings*, Athelstan is a monk at Lindisfarne during the Viking raids, who was taken to Kattegat by Ragnar. Later in the story, it becomes clear that Athelstan is the father of Alfred the Great. In *Vikings*, he is already dead before his son Alfred is born, but his soul returns to greet and bless the two masters he served in his earthly life, namely the Viking King Ragnar Ragnarrsson, former husband of Lagertha, and the Wessex King Ecbert who would later become Alfred's grandfather and protector. Although the name Athelstan might suggest that this character is based on King Æthelstan (c. 894-939), the first King of England and one of the greatest Anglo-Saxon kings, his story seems to be more inspired by the historical scholar, clergyman, poet and teacher Alcuin of York, born in Northumbria in around 735, who wrote letters on dealing with the Viking attack on Lindisfarne in 793. In any case, Athelstan is a devoted Christian. Whereas in Surakian's work the king is saved by prayer and Celtic rituals, for marithesoprano, the combination of Viking and Christian beliefs does the trick: "She then placed the candles in strategic places in the room and began to dance near the king while she chanted ancient songs and the monk prayed".<sup>35</sup> Thus, Vikings and Christians set aside their differences to work together towards a common goal: the fight against the illness brought by the crowned lady.

34 Mussies, "Queering the Anglo-Saxons through Their Psalms."

35 "Colocó después las velas en sitios estratégicos de la habitación y comenzó a danzar cerca del rey mientras pronunciaba cánticos antiguos y el monje rezaba." Trans. Martine Mussies.

36 S.A. Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=6lrMQwAACAAJ>

37 F.J. Simoons, *Plants of Life, Plants of Death* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=KEUAbRBoeBAC>

38 Lloyd L. Gunderson, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle about India: An Analysis and Reconstruction* (University of Wisconsin, 1966), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=f6CAAAAAMAAJ>

39 M. Lapidge, M. Godden, and S. Keynes, *Anglo-Saxon England*, vol. 30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=wbwVa7WCUC>.

40 Philipp Vandenberg, *Mysteries of the Oracles: The Last Secrets of Antiquity* (London: Tauris Parke, 2007).

41 Luís Mendonça de Carvalho, Francisca Maria Fernandes, and Hugh Bowden, "Oracle Trees in the Ancient Hellenic World", *Harvard Papers in Botany* 16, no. 2 (2011), 425–27.

The nursing characters are helped by an old willow. Just like the wyrm in Surakian's story, this idea of a talking tree is a clear signifier of medievalism, which was not present in the canon of *The Last Kingdom* (nor in *Vikings*, for that matter), but has a long history in medieval texts. The seventh-century scholar Isidore of Seville provides a comprehensive medieval definition of trees in his *Etymologiae*. According to the scholar, the term "tree" is derived and modified from the word "field" because these are plants that cling to the earth with their fixed roots.<sup>36</sup> Notably, different trees had different meanings in the medieval times. For example, the palm tree was a symbol of victory as evidenced by its remarkable height and leaf retention. Some trees were considered holy trees and served as places of worship, such as the ash tree among the Vikings.<sup>37</sup> One of the most striking salient qualities of trees in medieval times, particularly in medieval literature, was that of sapience. The talking tree – a sapient tree from mythologies and stories – is a common occurrence in medieval literature.

Some of the most prominent mentions of talking trees include the talking trees in Alexander's letter to Aristotle. Notably, Alexander the Great wrote a letter to Aristotle elucidating the wonderful things that he had encountered in India and the *Liber Monstrorum*. In these narrations, Alexander speaks of monsters, wild animals, fantastical poisonous snakes, and men clothed in tiger skins as well as talking trees.<sup>38</sup> Alexander gives vivid and clear descriptions of the talking trees and the message of doom that these trees prophesied to him. The male tree of the sun and the female tree of the moon which were prophesied in Greek and Indian are described as defying the laws of nature, thereby alluding to the presence of divinity within or around the trees.<sup>39</sup> This is not a medieval novelty, as the idea of divinity surrounding talking trees could already be found in Greek mythology, for example in Herodotos' description of the oracle of Dodona (Δωδώνη), which was devoted to a Mother Goddess.<sup>40</sup> The tall trees in the Dodona grove – a forest beside the sanctuary of the Greek god Zeus – are said to be blessed with the gift of prophecy.<sup>41</sup> These trees, oaks to be precise, spoke and delivered oracles, both in living state and when they

were cut down and built into the ship *Argo*.<sup>42</sup> Similar ideas also found their way into later examples of storytelling, such as Tolkien’s medievalist fantasy. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the forests of Middle Earth include the Forest of Fangorn, home to huge walking and talking trees that were responsible for the destruction of the evil Saruman’s stronghold in Isengard.<sup>43</sup>

## BIGHEARTBIGFART – BORDER-CROSSING FIGURES & EXPERIMENTAL MEDICINE

The third case study is a piece of fanfiction called “Like an Angel in the Night”.<sup>44</sup> Written at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020), this piece by Tumblr user BigHeartBigFart combines characters from *The Last Kingdom* with one from another Netflix series: *Outlander* (2014-). This series – based on the books by Diana Gabaldon – tells the story of Claire Beauchamp, a British nurse. Claire and her husband were separated during the Second World War and after the end of the war in 1945, they decide to go on a honeymoon in Scotland. There they visit a stone circle, through which Claire suddenly gets transported to the year 1743. Because of time travelling, *Outlander* has often been characterized as a work of speculative fiction.<sup>45</sup> As Mary Ann Potter explains, the purpose of the genre “is to center on the re-imagining, and even dissolution, of absolute categories of time, space, and gender”.<sup>46</sup> As the following paragraphs will show, the border-crossings between these “absolute categories” are examined, questioned and worked out further in fanfiction.

In “Like an Angel in the Night” (the third case study), Claire emerges in medieval Wessex, just in time to heal its king. The narrative involves the same three elements as in the first case study – a miracle to cure the disease, the fear of bodily pain and the issue of loneliness. However, this time, what is bothering the king is not a mysterious illness caused by a wyrm, but a realistic depiction of Crohn’s disease, which allows scope for an added layer of creativity in the description of the preparation of a medicine.<sup>47</sup>

42 Caroline Jane Tully, “Trees and Boats”, in Id., *The Cultic Life of Trees in the Prehistoric Aegean, Levant, Egypt and Cyprus*, vol. 42 (Peeters Publishers, 2018), 101–22.

43 Gavin H.M. Holman, *In the Land of Mordor Where the Shadows Lie: Good, Evil, and the Quest in Tolkien’s Middle Earth*, BA thesis, (Leeds Polytechnic School of Librarianship, 1981).

44 With the author’s permission, I republished this work at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/like-an-angel-in-the-night>

45 Valerie Estelle Frankel, *Adoring Outlander: Essays on Fandom, Genre and the Female Audience* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2016), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=w7WaCwAAQBAJ>

46 Mary-Anne Potter, “‘Everything and Nothing’: Liminality in Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander*,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 21, no. 3 (2019), 282–96.

47 David Pratt, “The Illnesses of King Alfred the Great,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 30 (2001), 39–90.

Claire needed to think faster, if she was to save this man. She needed antibiotics. She racked her brain with medicinal herbs, thanking her lucky stars that she took the time to study natural remedies in her spare time. "I need Garlic, honey, clove..." Claire began to shout. "I also need water, alcohol, and fresh cloth!"



David Dawson as Alfred.  
Still from Jamie Donoughue, dir.  
*The Last Kingdom*. Season 2,  
episode 6.  
Aired 20 April 2017, on BBC Two.  
Image retrieved from <https://the-last-kingdom.fandom.com/wiki/Alfred?file=Season+two+Alfred.png>

As the title indicates, in Alfred's world view, time-travelling Claire is an angel, sent by the Lord. The Christian connotations of the story are confirmed by the third character, Father Beocca. In *The Last Kingdom*, Father Beocca is a priest in the household of main character Uhtred as well as the Court Chaplain of Wessex, serving under King Alfred the Great. In these two roles, he always serves as a mediator between the pagan and Christian traditions. In this sense, being between heaven and earth, Father Beocca is a figure who crosses borders himself. This is confirmed later on in the *The Last Kingdom* canon, as Beocca marries a Viking lady, namely Uhtred's adoptive sister Thyra Ragnarsdottir.

#### JASMINECANADA - POLYGLOT WOMEN, THE CHI RHO & RESURRECTION

The fourth case study is simply called "The Last Kingdom Fanfic", and was written by jasminecanada. In this story, King Alfred gets very sick and is cured by princess Gisla, who has come to attend a royal wedding with her husband Rollo. When Alfred takes off his crown, he already feels better, but he is not completely healed. Gisla finds a prayer to heal him in his Enchiridion (his notebook), in which she draws a Chi Rho sign. Alfred and Gisla talk about friendship between their peoples and Alfred explains how friendship feels for the Anglo-Saxons. Since readers might wonder how Gisla and Alfred could understand each other, jasminecanada has given them a dialogue to explain how elite women move across linguistic borders to cement dynastic marriages, a statement backed up by modern scholarship, such as that of Elizabeth Tyler.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, in this neo-medieval "mash-up", the King can only survive with the help of a princess called Gisla and the healing powers of a symbol, the Chi Rho.<sup>49</sup> Gisla (or Gisela) of France was a legendary tenth-century Frankish princess who, according to tradition, was married off to Viking leader Rollo of Normandy.<sup>50</sup> For her fanfiction, jasminecanada was most likely inspired by the character of Gisla in Netflix' series *Vikings*, a character based on the tales surrounding Princess Gisela of France but also influenced by stories of Poppa/Popa of

48 Elizabeth M. Tyler, "Crossing Conquests: Polyglot Royal Women and Literary Culture in Eleventh-Century England," in *Conceptualizing Multilingualism in England, c.800-c.1250*, ed. Elizabeth M. Tyler, vol. 27, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011), 171–96.

49 Suzanne Lewis, "Sacred Calligraphy: The Chi Rho Page in the Book of Kells," *Traditio* 36 (1980), 139–59.

50 Martine Mussies, "Gisela of France," in *World History Encyclopedia*, 2020, accessed 20 September 2021, [https://www.worldhistory.org/Gisela\\_of\\_France](https://www.worldhistory.org/Gisela_of_France)

Bayeux and Jeanne d'Arc (c. 1412-1431 CE). Through this addition, the author not only creates a crossover between *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings*, but also a border crossing through time, as the historical princess Gisla lived one century after King Alfred. Still, there is a strong connection between the two: their Christian faith.

In all the works of fanfiction discussed in this paper, the authors use Christian acts and symbols, such as the cross, the Bible, and the Chi Rho symbol. In line with the argument of Daria Radtchenko, I consider these new artefacts to be “simulacra, referring not to the reality of the past, but, finally, to the texts about texts about the past”.<sup>51</sup> This re-writing of the stories by placing new layers on top of them is very visible in the way jasminecanada uses the Christian Chi Rho. This symbol is a Christogram, a monogram based on the first two letters of ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (“Christos”, “the Anointed One”, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Messias”).<sup>52</sup> The Anglo-Saxons also used the Chi Rho symbol, as I witnessed when visiting Rochester Cathedral as part of the visiting choir.<sup>53</sup> In the *Textus Roffensis*, which is on display there, four Chi Rho symbols can be found, all written for King Æthelred II (or “Ethelred the Unready”). Other surviving Chi Rho attestations that might be linked to the historical context of King Alfred are those in the Book of Kells and in the Lindisfarne Gospels.<sup>54</sup> But jasminecanada explicitly adds a new meaning to the symbol: it is not only a marker that refers to Jesus himself, but also a sign of his immortality, the resurrection:

Gisla having such faith in this, going back to her devotion to Christianity. Carefully and precisely she begins drawing a Chi Rho Sign, as Alfred watched her ministrations silently. Finishing the creation of the symbol Gisla broke the silence, “This symbolizes the victory of resurrection over death, may you overcome this illness”.

51 Daria Radtchenko, “Simulating the Past: Reenactment and the Quest for Truth in Russia,” *Rethinking History* 10, no. 1 (March 2006), 127–48.

52 “Χριστός,” in Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=xristo/s>

53 Martine Mussies, “King Alfred & Rochester,” *Musings* (blog), 16 September 2019, accessed 20 September 2021, <http://martinemussies.nl/web/king-alfred-rochester>

54 Robert G. Calkins, *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=sdOzz5HxngC>

## ANALYSIS

All the texts analysed were written during the COVID-19 lockdown and explore themes that relate to those circumstances, such as the fear of an incurable illness. They fall into the realm of neo-medievalism, the modern revival of Medieval culture, as explained by Umberto Eco in his “Dreaming of the Middle Ages”.<sup>55</sup> The elements of COVID within this culture mirror our current Zeitgeist, as can be seen on the @GTuronensis page on Facebook, for example, on which an anonymous 21st-century pseudo-Gregorius Turonensis describes our current predicament as “the Great Plague”. Storytelling is a natural way in

55 U. Eco and W. Weaver, *Travels in Hyperreality* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=YFDOAwAAQBAJ>



David Dawson as Alfred. Jon East, dir. *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 4. Aired 6 April 2017, on BBC Two.

56 Martine Mussies, "Autiethnography," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (June 2020), doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1789.

57 Michele L. Crossley, "Narrative Psychology, Trauma and the Study of Self/Identity," *Theory & Psychology* 10, no. 4 (Aug. 2000), 527–46.

58 Ingrid Baart, *Ziekte en zingeving. Een onderzoek naar chronische ziekte en subjectiviteit* (Dissertation Universiteit voor Humanistiek, Utrecht, 2002).

59 Jan Olthof and Eric Vermetten, *De mens als verhaal. Narratieve strategieën in psychotherapie voor kinderen en volwassenen* (Utrecht: De Tijdstroom, 1994), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=9mZPXwAACAAJ>

60 A.W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2013), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=qacxAAAAQBAJ>

61 Richard Philip Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Longman, 1998), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=eQOwQgAACAAJ>

which to make the incomprehensible recognizable.<sup>56</sup> By interpreting, organizing observations and creating cohesion within a story, people make sense of the world around them.<sup>57</sup> The need for explanatory stories seems to be even stronger when events force an entirely new storyline.<sup>58</sup> In order to get a crisis under control, the construction of stories is inevitable: we describe what is happening so that we can understand it.<sup>59</sup> In this way, storytelling seems to be an inevitable response to adversity. As the story changes continuously, it greatly affects the narrator and the narrator's vision of the past, the present, and the future.<sup>60</sup>

With their rewritings of the "canon" of *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings*, these authors have followed in the footsteps of King Alfred of Wessex himself, as his translations/retellings of canonical texts were also informed by his personal experiences.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, while the historical Alfred was likely more like a rough and weathered stone, the fantasies of present-day fanfiction authors present the king as a smooth and shining gem. And they keep polishing him. The case studies analysed above show a version of Alfred that is polite, modest and wise, a model of the post-WWII ideals of masculinity: the autodidact intellectual, the self-disciplined leader, the morally responsible friend, and the companionate family man. Their Alfred is humble and vulnerable and seems to surpass the tensions of historical fiction in terms of outdated, regressive and hazardous ideas around gender and sexuality. He is a blank canvas, a neutral projection screen for the fans. Alfred's neutrality enables readers to use him as a proxy through which they meet the larger-than-life women who can cure mysterious diseases.

As the above examples show, thanks to these fierce females, the mythical King Alfred is still very much alive. In the words of BigHeartBigFart: "Claire looked into the eyes of a man who appeared to have come back from the dead, and all she could do was smile." Since Alfred keeps overcoming death, he might be considered immortal and some congregations/denominations consider him to

be a saint. But as Alicia Spencer-Hall explains: “the line between resurrection and resuscitation can be very blurry”.<sup>62</sup> Although in theory both may involve divine intervention, in the pieces of fanfiction discussed it is not a quality of Alfred himself that he arises from the (near) death, but he is saved through the actions of female healers from all corners of the world, such as Modwenna, who “had achieved many miracles”.<sup>63</sup> As Polina Ignatova explained in her presentation “Ravens and Dogs and Bears, Oh My!” at the virtual International Medieval Congress 2020, there is a connection between St Modwenna and the shape-shifting walking dead. Geoffrey of Burton’s “Life and Miracles of St Modwenna” (c. 1126) features a scene in which two peasants sin, upon which St Modwenna strikes them dead. After this, St Modwenna turns them into walking corpses.

In order to examine how emancipation happens by re-writing stories, we need to help “Cherchez la femme” as Professor Barbara Olsen writes.<sup>64</sup> Her appeal to search out unknown women at the heart of a mystery, is as relevant to ongoing research into 9th century Anglo-Saxon England as it is to her own period of expertise, Greek Antiquity, where, in her words, “so often women have been shrouded in myth, notoriety or obscurity”.<sup>65</sup> Although Judith M. Bennett remarks that “[f]eminist work in medieval studies is a thriving enterprise with a distinguished past and a promising future”, 28 years later, there is still much work to do.<sup>66</sup> As amateur medievalists, writers of fanfiction for *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* are also engaging with this feminist agenda. These present-day storytellers are filling the gaps by adding female heroes to the intertextual storytelling around King Alfred.

By writing about their female inspirations, the authors of fanfiction about King Alfred are adding a new and border-crossing layer to the myths surrounding the immortal king. In their stories, the females have agency, in the definition of Duits and Van Zoonen: “the purposeful actions of individuals, leaving aside the question of whether these actions are autonomously arrived at, or are

62 A. Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience*, Knowledge Communities (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=i4dIDwAAQBAJ>

63 Surakian [“Alfred / Modwenna / Wyrn”].

64 Barbara A. Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos* (London: Routledge, 2014), 1, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=pxZxAwAAQBAJ>

65 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece*, 1.

66 Judith M. Bennett, “Medievalism and Feminism,” *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993), 311-12.

67 Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen, "Who's Afraid of Female Agency?: A Rejoinder to Gill," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no. 2 (May 2007), 161-70.

68 Kjartan Birgir Kjartansson, *Christianity Under Fire: An Analysis of the Treatment of Religion in Three Novels by Bernard Cornwell*, BA thesis, (University of Iceland 2015), 9, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/21491/1/BA%20ritger%C3%B0%20Kjartan%20Birgir%20Kjartansson.pdf>

69 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, Glass Mountain Pamphlet (Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=1lwLAQAIAAJ>

70 Jolien de Waard, *Adapting Claire's Feminist Beliefs and Female Agency: A Comparison Between the First Outlander Novel and Its Television Adaptation*, BA thesis, (University of Utrecht 2018), 11, accessed 20 September 2021, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/367240>

results of structural forces".<sup>67</sup> Kjartan Birgir Kjartansson notices "considerable differences between the two religions when it comes to gender roles in [the canon of] *The Last Kingdom*, with the pagan religion being a lot more tolerant to women making their own decisions compared to the Christian women who are mostly powerless".<sup>68</sup> But in the case studies discussed, all women – both Christian and pagan – are powerful, for they are the ones who can beat the unknown disease, thus saving the king from death. Gisla is definitely a devoted Christian, Modwenna is a – probably Celtic – Christian who also uses spells, Lagertha relies on Viking customs and Claire is a woman of 20th century medicine. All together, these four stories point towards the idea of a global sisterhood, as women from different countries, religions, and cultures work together to fight the disease. And without these fierce females, King Alfred would have died.

In this 21st-century pandemic, nursing women are on the frontline – side by side with their fellow male health professionals – and within the intertextual storytelling, there is an ongoing emancipation of the women featured. The fans' changes to the original storylines are increasing the agency of their characters and making the portrayals more feminist, showing a sense of autonomy and beliefs about equality in their actions. Historically, female nurses have often been portrayed as the female helpers of the male doctors, who "know best".<sup>69</sup> But in contemporary fanfiction, the acts of nursing and healing help build feminist characters and establish agency. As Jolien de Waard explains, there is a scene in the Netflix version of the *Outlander* series that was not in the books by Diana Gabaldon (on which the series is based). Around WWII, "albeit out of necessity, Claire was living in a time where small steps were taken towards more gender equality."<sup>70</sup> This added scene, the opening of S1E3 "The Way Out", is a flashback to the beginning of the War, as Claire and her new husband Frank are at the train station (00:02:26-00:04:12):

Frank: “Woe betide the man who stands between you and what you set your mind upon. And damned if that stubbornness isn’t what I find so attractive about you!”

Off screen: “All aboard!”

Claire: “As they say, that’s my cue.”

Frank: “This is backwards! I should be the one leaving for the front lines...”

Claire: “Welcome to the 20th century!”

Apparently, it was Claire’s decision to fulfil her duty at the front as a Royal Army Nurse, and she expected her husband to support her ambitions. This added scene emphasises the characterisation of the female protagonist as a feminist and this is built out further in fanfiction. Similar processes are at stake for the other women in our case studies. Thus, by travelling from the historical evidence – sometimes via the historical novel and/or through various Netflix series – into fanfiction, the women became more powerful. This is similar to the “Droste effect”, a “mise en abyme” of a picture of a nurse recursively appearing within itself.<sup>71</sup> Through this loop of a text about a text about a text, the historical women break out of their moulds and take their places at the frontline of a crisis.

The border-crossing theme does not end there and even goes beyond the final frontier, because just like Claire, the other women mentioned also come from different times (if they even existed at all). Our first case study features the healing of the king by a presumably Celtic woman named Modwenna. If Modwenna is indeed a Celtic lady, this would be a case of time travel because, unlike the Vikings, King Alfred did not fight the Celtic people. In fact, he ruled over the Anglo-Saxon people, who were the product of the union between the Celts and the Saxons. Historical records show that the Celtic people, originally referred to as Britons, lived in Great Britain during the Iron Age, the Roman Era and the post-Roman era.<sup>72</sup> Following the departure of the Romans from Britain, the land was left to the Celts, who comprised the indigenous

71 *The Motivated Sign: Iconicity in Language and Literature 2*, ed. Olga Fischer and Max Nänny (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001).

72 John T. Koch and Barry W. Cunliffe, ed., *Celtic from the West 2: Rethinking the Bronze Age and the Arrival of Indo-European in Atlantic Europe*, Celtic Studies Publications (Oxford, UK; Oakville, CT: Oxbow

Books, 2013), XVI.

73 Francis Palgrave, *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (London: William Tegg & Co., 1876), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=t8MsAAAAMAAJ>

74 Markku Filppula, Juhani Klemola, and Heli Paulasto, *English and Celtic in Contact* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

75 Joanne Parker, *The Harp and the Constitution: Myths of Celtic and Gothic Origin* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

76 Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History*, book IX. Translated by Oliver Elton, accessed 20 September 2021, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Danish\\_History/Book\\_IX](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Danish_History/Book_IX)

77 K. Holman, *Historical Dictionary of the Vikings* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=NL4FAWAAQBAAJ>

78 Emma Groeneveld, "Lagertha," *World History Encyclopedia*. Last modified 2 November 2018, <https://www.worldhistory.org/Lagertha>

population of southern England. The peoples of what is now England suffered attacks from other Celtic tribes – the Welsh and the Scots – as well as the Vikings, but that was centuries later.<sup>73</sup> As a measure of protection, the Celts took in Germanic mercenaries to help protect their land and freedom. These mercenaries were paid in land. Over time, the population of Germanic mercenaries who were called Anglo-Saxons, increased and the Celtic tribes were pushed into the West and North of England.<sup>74</sup> Based on these historical facts, it is clear that King Alfred would have had little contact with the Celtic people.<sup>75</sup> Unless the king did meet a certain Modwenna.

Similar anachronisms and other instances of border crossing are at stake through the addition of Lagertha. According to twelfth-century Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, Lagertha was “a skilled Amazon, who, though a maiden, had the courage of a man, and fought in front among the bravest, with her hair loose over her shoulders. All marvelled at her matchless deeds, for her locks flying down her back betrayed that she was a woman.”<sup>76</sup> She is presented in Saxo’s work as the first wife of Ragnar Lothbrok, who is also a legendary but historically dubious Viking. “Although his sons are historical figures, there is no evidence that Ragnar himself ever lived and he seems to be an amalgam of historical figures and literary invention,” writes Katherine Holman.<sup>77</sup> Still, the storytelling around Ragnar is remarkably persistent – and persists in the present day. In *Vikings* season one, it was Ragnar who led the Viking Raid on Lindisfarne in 793, and in season five, King Alfred sealed an alliance with Lagertha as well as with two of the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok (Ubbe and Bjorn). But if Ragnar and Lagertha did exist, we should probably place them somewhere around the middle of the ninth century, well after Lindisfarne and well before the reign of Alfred the Great, who defeated the Vikings at the Battle of Edington in 878. However, as Emma Groeneveld states: “it is clear that [Lagertha] fulfils a role not immediately expected of historical women of that time but instead of a more legendary proportion: that of the warrior woman.”<sup>78</sup> And therefore, to this day, the mythical Lagertha remains

an inspiration. Moreover, marithesoprano's description of Lagertha's rituals resonate with the scene in the *Egill's Saga* in which Egill uses runes and a verse to counter poison, which could also be interpreted as a border crossing between the magical and the physical in Viking medieval thought.<sup>79</sup>

As these four case studies – written during the COVID-19 lockdown – show, Alfredian fanfiction written during the pandemic combines neo-Medieval elements with topical themes and current human fears, such as illness, pain, solitude, as well as the themes of hope, female agency, and border crossings. The fan authors have constructed a 21st century “neo-medieval-based culture” that mirrors events in current society. Their stories often take place against the backdrop of other times of crisis, such as wars against intruders (in Alfred's time, the Anglo-Saxons faced the Vikings; in Claire's time the British faced the Nazis). In every case study discussed, Alfred needs a female – be it Modwenna, Claire, Lagertha or Gisla – to save him from death. With this paper, I therefore hope to have made a relevant contribution to the flourishing study of (neo)medievalisms. Arguably, there is much more to the Alfredian collages of present-day fanfic writers than the topics discussed in this paper. For example, in the first case study, Surakian writes how Modwenna describes the wyrm “causing the host great pain until they grow enough to consume them and break free from the host body”, which resembles the popular 1979 science fiction horror film *Alien*, directed by Ridley Scott. Future research should further examine how the neo-medieval setting relates to tropes from the science fiction genre.

79 Catharina Raudvere, “The Power of the Spoken Word as Literary Motif and Ritual Practice in Old Norse Literature,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005), 179–202.

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