

## Digging King Alfred: A Response

Dr. Mar Guerrero-Pico

In her article, M. Mussies examines the depiction, reimagination and reception of historical figures and objects in fanfiction. By fittingly using the figure of Alfred, King of Wessex and the Anglo-Saxons in the 9th century as case study—or may I say a ‘prompt’ to stick to fanfiction vernacular? — and applying a close textual analysis on two Alfredian fics, the author contributes to a growing body of research on fanfiction in general, but still limited when it comes to fan representations of historical personalities, facts, or artefacts.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Mussies’ contribution is a stimulating endeavour that paves the way for more scholarly work on a practice that, as I explain in this response, has critical implications for both historical literacy and cultural representation.

In a seasoned and ever-participatory landscape of transmedia convergence, where stories circulate beyond media and genre constraints and anyone can produce, remix, and share their own messages, fanfiction based on historical figures does not certainly come off as an outlandish occurrence.<sup>2</sup> In fact, if we look at the ‘Historical RPF’ tag on ArchiveOfOurOwn.com, the fanfic archive from which Mussies has unearthed the Alfredian stories reviewed in her essay, more than 12,600 *historical real-person fanfics* populate the tag.<sup>3</sup> Again, not a shock given the loyal following that the RPF subgenre—featuring celebrities or public figures as characters in the stories—has among fans worldwide. Therefore, if Jimin from the band BTS or Taylor Swift, both transmedia brands with narrative universes of their own, can be reappropriated as

*Dr. Mar Guerrero-Pico is Lecturer in Participatory Cultures and Media Literacy in the Department of Communication at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra-Barcelona (Spain). Her PhD research is focused on the study of fanfiction as a narrative expansion modality in transmedia fictional universes. She has also worked as a research assistant for projects focused on exploring the transmedia skills and informal learning strategies of adolescents. Her research interests include fan cultures, transmedia storytelling, (trans)media education, and television shows.*

► [Profile page](#)

1 *Fic* and *fanfic* are alternative abbreviated forms to refer to fanfiction, especially, when addressing specific texts of the genre.

2 Jenkins defines convergence as a triple-faceted process that entails “the flow of contents across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multimedia industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2006, 2). Specifically, the term transmedia is related to the expansion of contents through different media platforms by both the authors or owners of an intellectual property, and their consumers (Jenkins et al., 2013, 161-178).

3 The initials RPF stand for Real Person Fiction. For further details see ► <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Historical%20RPF/works>.

muses for fan fiction writing, why can it not be the case for medieval rulers or leaders? If anything, these antique protagonists pose a greater challenge to fan writers, who want to keep it as canon as possible.

### **HISTORICAL FORENSIC FANDOM**

As remarked by Mussies, the concepts of accuracy and authenticity are central to historical research, as historians and archaeologists strive to meticulously reconstruct past events, individuals, and artifacts. Similarly, in fan communities or fandoms, the idea of a 'canon' is an important concept, as fans seek to maintain a sense of 'fidelity' to the narrative universe or source material they are passionate about. While the worlds of historical research and fandom may seem disparate, there are meaningful similarities between the ways, in which accuracy and authenticity are evaluated in historical research, and the ways, in which fans consider canon. In fan communities, the idea of canon refers to the 'official' or authoritative version of the story as established by the original creators—or celebrities for RPF. For fans, maintaining the integrity of canon is important because it helps to maintain a sense of continuity and consistency within the storyworld, or in relation to the characters' defining identity traits.<sup>4</sup> So, just as historical researchers strive for accuracy and authenticity in their representations of the past, fans also seek these standards in the way that their favourite stories and characters are portrayed, regardless of whether they are positioning the characters in a more or less canonical alternate universe or not, as I have shown elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

However, what is often synchronous research, with the *history/canon* of the famous person developing in real time and within click's reach, becomes asynchronous when it comes to digging into the distant historical past, often resorting to increasingly scattered, unreliable secondary sources as we push back in time. Whatever the starting point is, historians, archaeologists and fan writers go about their business as if they were investigators trying to fill the gaps. In this sense, the concept of 'forensic fandom' coined by J. Mittell cannot be more adequate to illustrate my point. In his work about contemporary television culture, he presents this idea as the phenomenon of fans closely and collectively analysing and dissecting the details of their favourite television shows in online communities.<sup>6</sup> An inquisitive and collaborative approach to the subject matter, and a reconstructive

---

4 Guerrero-Pico 2015.

5 Guerrero-Pico 2016.

6 Mittell 2015.

aim, prevail for both historians and fan writers.

Mittell argues that this type of fan engagement offers important insights into the way audiences understand and make meaning from complex narratives. Considering Mussies's work, such semiotic process could also extend to historical events, objects and characters, elements of another kind of complex narrative that has experimented comparable interpretations through time. This lasting impression of some historical interpretations on the social imaginary is visible in King Alfred's set of virtues being transferred from the Middle Ages to the Victorian era to promote the predominant national values at the time. An analogous commentary can be made about the figure of Queen Isabella of Castile (1451-1501), whose papal byname, the Catholic, aligns with historical biographical notes describing a hardworking, wise, collected, and devout character. Such qualities were highly regarded as a model of femininity by the national-catholic propaganda of General Franco's dictatorship in Spain between 1939 and 1975, but somewhat still accompany contemporary approaches on the figure of the monarch. In the last few years, the Spanish television industry, especially public service broadcasters, has ventured into the country's past seeking inspiration for its fiction programming. In this context, TV series such as RTVE's *Isabel*, *Carlos, rey emperador* and *El Ministerio del Tiempo* serve as entry points to specific takes on the past.<sup>7</sup> For instance, *Isabel*'s first season heavily draws on Castilian fifteenth-century chronicles and documents to contest the hagiographical perspectives on the sovereign, portraying a headstrong and independent leader, chiefly in her early years on the throne.<sup>8</sup>

### TRANSMEDIA 'FANON' AS HYPOTEXT AND HISTORICAL GATEKEEPING

Drawing on G. Genette's narrative theory, we can argue that same way Freikugels and Obszarska have based their productions on *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings*, *Isabel* fan creators have expanded plots and developed new situations drawing on such televisual hypertext from the historical hypotext or source text.<sup>9</sup> In other words, their canon is not built on historical archives, or formal education, but already speculative, derivative work that tries to reimagine what has been lost in the course of time. As shown by recent studies on video games and TV series, learning about the past has turned inevitably mediatised.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, and mirroring other media

---

7 Translated into English as *Isabella*. Translated into English as *Charles, Emperor King*. Translated into English as *The Ministry of Time*.

8 Queen Isabella of Castile's reign spanned a total of thirty years, from 1474 until her death in 1504.

9 Establés/Guerrero-Pico 2016; Genette 1997.

10 Burgess/Jones 2022; Gambarato/Heuman 2022, Venegas 2022.

productions set in the past (e.g., the *Assassin's Creed* video game series featuring both historical and fictional elements), historical fan fiction establishes at best *contextualised alternative universes*, typically retaining elements of the original source text, but transforming specific aspects, such as the background, character relationships, or settings in order to explore issues close to the author's personal life and outlook.<sup>11</sup> The changes made to the original are grounded in the existing context and are often motivated by a desire to explore a particular aspect in greater depth. And when one of these fan reinterpretations and rewritings—not necessarily rooted in canon—is sanctioned by the community and repeated pervasively through other fan-made texts, then, it becomes the *fanon*, or hypotext, that powers a shared universe or intertextual tradition in a fan community.<sup>12</sup> For example, Freikugels' diegetic transposition resulting in the characters' crossover between *The Lord of the Rings'* Aragorn and the King Alfred featured in *The Last Kingdom* could supply other fans with replicable prompts to play and speculate on.<sup>13</sup>

As Mussies suggests, the author detected common identity markers (e.g., heredity, magnanimity and, I would add, humility) between Aragorn and King Alfred that facilitated their narrative merge. In this vein, Paolo Bertetti's extensive research on the identity variations of transmedia characters is an excellent framework to explore how the Anglo-Saxon-inspired ring featured in the fanfic plays a central role in the 'figurative identity' of both characters (i.e., the appearance and names that set them apart) and how this translates to their 'thematic identity', that is, to the role they play as kings in the story.<sup>14</sup>

From what transpires from Mussies's analysis on Obszarska's fanfic, we can agree that historical fanfiction writers engage in an archival quest to enrich and add detail to the background they aim to describe, most notably when specific artefacts intervene in the narrative being told. When this is done well, it implies a set of skills to select, verify, summarise and effectively apply historical sources to their transformative works.<sup>15</sup> And the same abilities also come in handy when the purpose is verification. Going back to Isabel,

---

11 Guerrero-Pico 2016, 82.

12 Kirby 2002; Busse/Hellekson 2006.

13 Transformation that impacts the diegesis ("the world wherein the story occurs") presented by a hypotext; therefore, basic aspects of the story may change, such as its original "spatiotemporal framework" and character's nationalities, genders or sociocultural background. At the same time, these kinds of diegetic conversions can also modify the action that occurs in the hypotext (Genette, 1997, 294–296).

14 Bertetti 2014.

15 Coppa/Tushnet 2017.

and moving away from fanfiction for a moment, *isabelinos* —as the fans of the series are known— produce GIFs with scenes subbed in English to broaden their reach and peak international fans' interest in this part of Spanish history. Likewise, these fan translators would translate peace treaties and personal correspondence and juxtapose them with remixed images from the series. The reason for this practice is fact-checking the series events that do not adhere to historical documentary sources. In addition, fans would also create timelines including landmark events, and dates of birth and death of the historical characters.<sup>16</sup> Parallel to transformative fan approaches to history, such as fanfiction, a case should also be made for fan-driven historical gatekeeping with an educational goal.

### **FOSTERING HISTORICAL LITERACY THROUGH FAN FICTION**

This brief remark on the latent skills that fans exert when writing fanfiction based on historical figures, events and artefacts makes me wonder about the implications of this practice for the improvement of historical literacy and cultural representation, especially among the youth, which I believe supplements the two points provided by Mussies in her discussion. Let me conclude this response by shedding some light on reasons why fanfiction is a valuable tool to foster education on history in both, formal and informal learning environments.<sup>17</sup> First, as suggested above, creating fiction about the past requires a certain level of competence, which includes knowledge of the historical context and culture of the period, during which the elements of the narrative are set. This can improve familiarity with the subject matter and help writers to understand the complexities and nuances of the historical era they are depicting.

Furthermore, the process of writing historical fanfiction requires extensive research. Engaging in research can lead fan writers to develop critical thinking skills, as they learn to distinguish between credible sources and mis/disinformation. Additionally, research can assist authors to better comprehend the *Zeitgeist* they are writing about as well as the motivations, actions, and experiences of the historical figures, not only allowing authors to more accurate and authentically portray historical characters in their fanfics, but to do so in a more ethical manner.

Besides historical knowledge and research skills, writing this kind of fanfiction can also help authors to develop creative writing skills, such as characterisation, dialogue, and plot development. This also applies for experimentation with different writing styles,

---

<sup>16</sup> Establés/Guerrero-Pico 2016, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Black 2008; Scolari et al. 2018; Rouse 2021.

techniques, and structures, which enables fans to explore the creative possibilities of writing about the past and projecting possible worlds onto it.<sup>18</sup> The aim here is to develop a greater appreciation for the source material, and to reflect on its cultural and historical significance.

Finally, writing historical fan fiction requires an awareness of the way, in which historical figures and events are represented and interpreted in different contexts and time periods. Thus, fan writers may equip themselves with a critical lens through which they can evaluate historical representation and consider how different perspectives and interpretations shape our understanding of history.

---

<sup>18</sup> Eco1979.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Black, R.W., 2008: Convergence and Divergence, Informal Learning in Online Fanfiction Communities and Formal Writing Pedagogy, *Counterpoints* 388, 125—143.
- Bertetti, P., 2014: Toward a Typology of Transmedia Characters, *International Journal of Communication* 8, 2344—2361. Retrieved from ► <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2597>
- Burgess, J./C. Jones, 2022: Exploring player understandings of historical accuracy and historical authenticity in video games, *Games and Culture* 17(5), 816—835.
- Busse, K./K. Hellekson, 2006: Introduction, in K. Hellekson/K. Busse (eds.), *Fan Fiction and fan communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, Jefferson, North Carolina, 5—32.
- Coppa, F./R. Tushnet, 2017: Transformative, in E. Navas/O. Gallagher/X. Burrough (eds.), *Keywords in Remix Studies*, New York, 273—282.
- Eco, U., 1979: *The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*, Bloomington, Indiana.
- Establés, M. J./M. Guerrero-Pico, 2016: Los fans como traductores y distribuidores de contenido en el ecosistema transmedia: promocionando series de televisión españolas en el extranjero, in: S. Torrado Morales/G. Ródenas Cantera/J. G. Ferreras (eds.), *Territorios Transmedia y Narrativas Audiovisuales*, Barcelona, 59—73.
- Genette, G., 1997: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln, Nebraska.
- Guerrero-Pico, M., 2015: Producción y lectura de fan fiction en la comunidad online de la serie Fringe: transmedialidad, competencia y alfabetización mediática, *Palabra Clave* 18(3), 722—745, ► <https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2015.18.3.5>
- Guerrero-Pico M., 2017: Dimensional expansions and shiftings: fan fiction and transmedia storytelling the Fringeverse, *Series: International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 2(2), 73—86, ► <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/6593>
- Jenkins, J., 2006: *Convergence Culture: When New Old and New Media Collide*, New York.
- Jenkins, J./S. Ford/J. Green, 2013: *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York.
- Kirby A, 2022: Examining Collaborative Fanfiction: New Practices in Hyperdiegesis and Poaching, *Humanities* 11(4), 87, ► <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11040087>
- Mittell, J., 2015: *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York.
- Rampazzo Gambarato, R./J. Heuman, 2022: Beyond fact and fiction: Cultural memory and transmedia ethics in Netflix's The Crown,

- European Journal of Cultural Studies*, ► <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494221128332>
- Rouse, L., 2021: Fan Fiction Comments and Their Relationship to Classroom Learning, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 35. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.1911>
- Scolari, C. A./M. J. Masanet/M. Guerrero-Pico/M. J. Establés, 2018: Transmedia literacy in the new media ecology: Teens' transmedia skills and informal learning strategies, *El Profesional de la Información* 27(4), 801—812. ► <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.jul.09>
- Venegas, A., 2022: *Pasado virtual: Historia e imagen en el videojuego*, Vitoria-Gasteiz.