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‘Strange companies’: The Northman in popular historical fiction

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Abstract: *This essay analyses how Bernard Cornwell and Giles Kristian, two authors of popular novels about Vikings, navigate historical research and dominant stereotypes about Vikings. The ubiquitous figure of the hyper-masculine and barbaric Viking may be at odds with the expectations that historical fiction will reflect a realistic portrait of past times. Cornwell and Kristian strike a balance between dynamic drama and embodied historical detail to arrive at a figure who reads as authentically of the Viking Age and persuasively of the desiring imagination of the present.*

Keywords: *Vikings, Northmen, Bernard Cornwell, Giles Kristian, popular culture*

Introduction

Popular culture website *tvtropes*, a fan-based wiki that gathers and describes enduring tropes across media, offers an entry titled ‘Horny Vikings’ to define this type of Northman as:

seldom seen without those spiffy horned helmets and are sometimes adorned with Pelts of the Barbarian. Vikings are always quite hairy, with long beards and longer Braids of Barbarism flying in the ocean breeze... Expect them to approach aboard intimidating, monster-headed long-ships, fierce men aboard fearsome boats (2018).

While obviously not a scholarly source, *tvtropes* is a reliable repository for summarising prevailing stereotypes. Its cultural criticism tends more towards parody rather than nuance, and yet the tropes noted above do inform a generally held view about Vikings in popular culture. Nor is this view a recent one. In medieval Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman chronicles, letters, myths and histories written in Latin, Old English and Old Norse, Vikings are conceptualised as raiders who are both barbaric and awe-inspiring. The entry for the year 793 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* famously records ‘terrible portents [that] came about over the land of Northumbria... fiery dragons were seen flying in the air... and a little after that in the same year... the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God’s church in Lindisfarne by looting and slaughter’ (cited in Swanton 1996, 55-57). Simeon of Durham likewise mentions these same portents, but adds that ‘the pagans from the Northern region’ came by ship to Britain ‘and overran the country in all directions, like fierce wolves, plundering, tearing and killing’ (cited in Stevenson 1855, 457). In one of five letters written

to King Æthelred in Latin on the subject, Northumbrian priest and scholar Alcuin (d. 804) laments the terror of this ‘pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could happen’ (cited in Whitelock 1973, 842). Wolves, dragons and fierce outlanders arriving by sea to slaughter Englishmen are likewise some of the familiar, and admittedly thrilling, images seen across popular media, including popular fiction, over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It goes without saying that these images’ relationship to historical record is contentious, and it has become commonplace for those with a stake in historical accuracy to discredit such tropes; one need only think of the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, UK, which is at pains to point out through its displays that Vikings did not wear horns, but were traders and farmers who spent a lot of time in villages doing peaceful, ordinary things. The pleasure, however, of imagining that Vikings were large, hyper-masculine barbarians is always close by; in the plastic horned helmets available in the gift shop, for example, but especially in the famous ‘Lloyds Bank Coprolite’, a giant Viking Age human dung specimen excavated in 1972, and proudly displayed at Jorvik under museum lights with its own interpretation board.

This essay seeks to explore how the ubiquitous thrills of the ‘Horny Vikings’ trope may produce tension with the expectations of the historical fiction genre, and analyses how Bernard Cornwell and Giles Kristian, two authors of popular novels about Vikings, navigate historical research and dominant stereotypes. In their respective series, Cornwell and Kristian strike a considered balance between the ‘Horny Vikings’ of *tv tropes* and the ordinary (potentially uninteresting) traders and farmers of Jorvik; they present Vikings as narratively dynamic seagoing adventurers who are also nuanced enough to engage with and embody historical details. The texts under consideration here were all published in the twenty-first century, so this discussion is in some ways a presentist account, that is, how popular historical fiction might respond to the current Western literary marketplace. However, it also has an eye on the past and presents the idea of the Northern ‘Other’ as a long-standing element of cultural imaginary in the West. Using historical documents and close textual analysis, this paper analyses how place (the wider world, the sea) and culture (literature, attitudes to women) are represented in popular historical fiction about Vikings. Our goal is not merely to show a correspondence between the historical record and representations of Vikings in popular historical novels, but to suggest that specifically contemporary concerns skew representation, meaning that the present always inhabits these images of the past. The consistently porous boundary between Northman and Englishman seems to suggest that difference is easily troubled. Alterity, in fact, is at least partially constructed in the imagination, allowing us to reflect on the imaginary nature of any reconstruction of history, even historical fiction that presents itself as adhering closely to historical fact.

Historical fiction is, by definition, not historical fact; it is in many ways able to cleave more towards the pleasures of imagination than the strictures of historical record. Of course, another pleasure of historical fiction is finely grained and accurate research; but the novelist, according to Hilary Mantel, 'offers up a version of the past — there can be others, and there will be' (2017). The novelist, she says, 'owns up to invention' while the historian 'struggles for neutrality'. Cornwell illustrates this sentiment in the 'Historical Note' appended to his novel, *Sword Song*. While explaining how there is 'more fiction' in this book than in others in the *Last Kingdom* series and highlighting some of the liberties he has taken with history here, Cornwell quips: 'I suspect I have been extremely unfair to the real Æthelred, but fairness is not the historical novelist's first duty' (2007, n.p.). In describing the function of invention in historical fiction, György Lukács develops the concept of 'necessary anachronism', where the 'inner substance of what is represented remains the same, but the developed culture in representing and unfolding the substantial necessitates a change in the expression and form of the latter' (1962, 61). Putting aside Lukács' highly contestable comment about 'developed culture' — imagining medieval culture as thoroughly superseded has long been a way of securing the modern subject's certainty about the present — the gesture towards *necessity* suggests that there may be compelling reasons to diverge from the historical record, depending on the intended audience. Meeting the demands of and working with the expectations and competencies of an audience is something that genre fiction is widely understood to do very well (Fletcher et al 2018).

Northmen in popular culture may share the same DNA as Northmen of the Viking Age (Lukács' 'inner substance') but the evolutionary pressures of culture and medium result in different phenotypes, or different expressions of that DNA. Not all Vikings grew horns in popular culture, after all. The genre of historical fiction exerts its own pressures on repression, which depend on its audience's expectations as well as its creator's tastes and the industrial complexes that seek to bring them together (Wilkins 2005). While fantasy fiction continues to gain pleasure from the monstrous northern Other (who is mapped onto wastelands and jagged mountain peaks inside front covers), and romance fiction continues to derive pleasure from the brutish Viking love interest (whose eroticised hypermasculinity is always fetishised on front covers), historical fiction plays by quite a different set of genre conventions. It is heavily concerned with research and the importance of historical accuracy (Newman 2016, 329), and is 'aware of the potential deceptions of the smooth narrative', recognising that history is 'messy, dubious, an argument that never ends' (Mantel 2017). Newman and Mantel write here particularly about middlebrow and literary historical fiction, the kind of books that garner prestigious reviews and win prizes (six of the last ten Man Booker prize winners have been historical novels, including two of Mantel's own). Yet popular works, such as Bernard Cornwell's *Last Kingdom* series and Giles Kristian's *Raven* and *Rise of Sigurd*

series, must pay enough attention to historical accuracy to satisfy historical fiction readers and also keep the pages turning to fulfil the demands of a popular market.

These three series follow narrative arcs that will be familiar to readers of other, earlier Viking Age fiction, which tell the tales of young men who travel far and wide due to blood feud commitments, such *King Olaf's Kinsman* by Charles Watts Whistler (1896), *The Men of Ness* by Eric Linklater (1932), *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* by Poul Anderson (1973), and *Blood Feud* by Rosemary Sutcliff (1976). In Cornwell and Kristian's stories, like the ones depicted in their antecedents, the young male protagonist's 'coming of age' coincides with losing his father (or, in the case of Osric/Raven, his father figure) to violent attack from outsiders and/or betrayal from within by a fellow warrior. This inciting incident occurs within the first few chapters of the first instalment of Cornwell and Kristian's series, but the repercussions play out over the remaining books. There are three novels each in Kristian's *Raven* and *Sigurd* series, and eleven novels (as of October 2018) in Cornwell's sweeping *Last Kingdom* sequence. In each case, the protagonist is removed from a relatively mundane life in his home village (Osric/Raven and Sigurd) or his ancestral kingdom (Uhtred) and is thrust into a warrior's world of thrilling adventure of seeking vengeance for his lost kinsman. This quest for revenge takes both Raven and Sigurd on seafaring journeys far from their homelands and all over early medieval Scandinavia, England, Wales, Northern Africa, Rome and Constantinople, while Uhtred's *raison d'être* — to punish those who usurped his father's Northumbrian kingdom and, eventually, to regain these lands for himself — sends him from battlefield to battlefield in the British Isles, and from lofty positions at King Alfred's court to a long stint as a lowly, seafaring slave.

These familiar narrative trajectories offer some evidence of how Cornwell's and Kristian's novels are situated within — and also perpetuate — the tradition of popular Viking Age novels. These authors admire the genre and each other's work within it. Cornwell provides a glowing front cover endorsement for Kristian's *Raven: Blood Eye* and Conn Iggulden offers similar praise for his *Sigurd: God of Vengeance* (which Iggulden beta-read for the author; Kristian 2014, 'Acknowledgements'). Meanwhile, Kristian's brief bio cites Cornwell as one of his 'writing heroes' and in the 'Author Interview' included at the end of *Raven: Blood Eye* Kristian names Margaret Elphinstone's *The Sea Road* (2000) and Robert Low's *Oathsworn* books as particular favourites and influences on his own writing (2009, 411).

Nevertheless, both Cornwell and Kristian are more noticeably concerned with making their historical research obvious for readers. As discussed below, Cornwell's repeated use of Old English poetry in his depiction of Uhtred's life and Kristian's almost *verbatim* inclusion of the Old English elegy *The Seafarer* in his first novel highlight their conscious inclusion of medieval material in their

modern stories. Moreover, these references are mingled with Old Norse gnomic 'wisdom' such as that found in the many verses of *Hávamál* in order, it seems, to lend 'authenticity' to the depiction of these fictional warriors but also to ground these narratives in historical research. Cornwell is keen to link his stories to the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse sources that have inspired them (see for instance, the 'Historical Notes' that serve as appendices for each volume of his epic series) while the 'Author's Note' that prefaces Kristian's first novel directly cites the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for the year 793 as a means of demonstrating how 'the story's historical context is consistent with contemporary sources and the conjecture of many of today's medieval scholars' (2009, ix-x). Likewise, the 'Historical Note' and 'Author Interview' that bookend this novel (401-412) go to great lengths to illustrate how long Kristian has been engaged in researching Viking Age Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England and which scholarly volumes have informed his fiction (e.g. *The Vikings* by Magnus Magnusson and Paddy Griffiths' *The Viking Art of War*). All of this research, though sometimes bordering on 'info-dumping' in Cornwell's books, largely serves to underscore story and character development and to convey to modern audiences that these fictional figures, like the historical ones that inspired them, 'were nobles and outcasts, pirates, pioneers, and great seafarers. They were the Norsemen' (Kristian 2009, x).

In combining an ostensibly realistic portrayal of Vikings and a more narratively dynamic portrayal of Vikings, a tension between the demands of objective fact and the demands of the imagination is revealed. That tension — one might argue a central tension of popular historical fiction — is exemplified by how imprecisely 'Northern' Vikings are shown to be in the works under consideration. Popular fiction in the Anglophone tradition has, unsurprisingly, inherited the view of Vikings as an historical enemy of England. While Viking activity was known in many places around the globe, the initial contact zone in the Western imagination has popularly been seen as England, specifically Lindisfarne; Neil Oliver's popular history of the Vikings notes that with the attack on the English monastery, 'the Age of the Vikings had begun' (2012). And yet the borders between Britishness and Northernness are troublingly porous. This porousness replicates the logic of the imagined past's relationship to the present in Viking historical fiction, and in historical fiction more broadly. The boundaries between us and them, North and South, are as potentially troubled as the boundaries between now and then. The two sides of these binaries actually keep 'strange company' (Kristian 2011, 314), and the two-way pull they exert alerts us more acutely to the constructed nature of historical accuracy.

Old Norse uses two words to define 'Vikings' and 'viking activity': *vikingr*, which refers to a person, and *víking*, which refers to an activity, such as raiding by sea (Jesch 2001, 44). Northmen are defined both by the noun *vikingr* and by the abstract *víking* activities they embark upon. *Viking* is both doing and being, identity and activity (Abrams 2007, 90). Contemporary audiences understand

Viking Northmen as seagoing adventurers, and Cornwell and Kristian play to this expectation with the conflicts inherent in these adventures, and the characterisation of men who understand the sea in an almost mystical way. Uhtred describes the ‘joy in a good ship, and a greater joy to have the ship’s belly fat with other men’s silver. It is the Viking joy’ (Cornwell 2005, 88) and bluntly links seafaring with a Northman’s sense of identity saying, ‘We had Odin, we had Thor, we had our ships, we were warriors’ (Cornwall 2004, 144). Throughout Kristian’s narratives, we see ‘these hard men from the north’ as ‘masters of the ocean and the elements... lords of the sea’ (2009, 83), Northmen who ‘would sail off the lip of the world for a fistful of silver’ (2009, 51) and to whom ‘the sea was a rolling road to wherever they pleased. It was unbound and unfettered, endless’ (170). A sense of vast space and distance is embodied in these quotations. The image of sailing off the edge of the world performs the function of a long ‘zoom out’ of the narrative frame. The characters have almost unlimited scope to do what they will, a scope echoed by the triptych of words that are formed in opposition to strictures: *unbound*, *unfettered*, *endless*. These are men without limits, who grow uneasy if kept away from their ships for too long (175, 182, 313), and uneasier still at the thought of dying in a forest a short walk from home, ‘not on the whale’s road but the wound sea’ (2014, 109). These seafarers are defined in terms of their lack of limits and, by inference, borders.

This last example reflects a shift in perception of what it means to be a Northman; that is, a seafarer who places great value on travelling beyond the confines of home without expecting to return, despite the blood feud obligations awaiting him there. To die in a local Norwegian forest suggests that the protagonist Sigurd’s life has been landlocked, sheltered; that he lacks sufficient wanderlust; that he hasn’t left the fjordlands and become ‘someone who gets off his arse and see[s] the world’ (Kristian 2017, 228), despite the risks involved. After Sigurd’s Wolfpack survives a terrible storm at sea, a young Norseman is inspired to sing a rendition of *The Seafarer*, an Old English poem recorded in the Exeter Book, a codex of Anglo-Saxon poetry compiled in the mid- to late-tenth century (c.950-990) that Kristian adapts to his story. The date of this poem’s composition is uncertain; its Christian themes place it somewhere after the seventh century (when the Anglo-Saxons were being converted) and its inclusion in the Exeter Book marks the latest date it could have been written, but at what point in the intervening centuries *The Seafarer* came to be is a matter of debate (Orton 1991, 37). Usually categorised as an elegy, it presents the story of a sailor beset by hardships as he travels alone *on hwælweg* (on the whale-road/the sea) as a means of exploring ideas of physical, social and spiritual exile. Simultaneously, this poem both rhapsodies the potential of the sea for adventure (*monað modes lust mæla gehwylce / ferð to feran, þæt Ic feor heonan / elþeodigra eard gesece*: the desire of my heart urges all the while / my spirit to travel, that I far hence / seek the homelands of foreign folk; lines 36-39, our translation) and

laments the inevitable ‘*merewerges mod*’ (sea-weary spirit; line 12, our translation). Although he is conflicted — the Old English seafarer is literally and figuratively an outsider, the sea a vehicle for separating him from the kin in his homeland who will never undertake, much less understand the reasons for taking, a journey like his — it is increasingly evident that he has hope that this wilful exile, this *peregrinatio pro amore dei* (pilgrimage for the love of God), will pay off in the end. Much better are the eternal joys of the Lord, the seafarer explains, than ‘*þis deade lif*’ (‘this dead life’; line 65b) here on earth. Though lacking the Christian message of *The Seafarer*, Kristian’s portrayal of Northmen in fiction reflects the Old English narrator’s internal conflict and the poem’s pervasive tone of uncertainty; these seafarers set out willingly, but without knowing if they will ever return.

It is certainly not unusual for authors of Viking Age novels to recycle early medieval poetry and to integrate excerpts, settings, themes and even characters from these classics into their own narratives. *Beowulf*, for example, is a perennial touchstone for Bernard Cornwell and Giles Kristian, and in his *Last Kingdom* series Cornwell has also adopted the enigmatic refrain from the Old English *The Wanderer* as his protagonist’s oft-repeated tagline: ‘*Wyrd bið ful aræd!*’ (usually translated as ‘Fate remains wholly inexorable,’ but Cornwell also substitutes ‘inescapable’ when it suits the narrative; 2007, 10). Such borrowings function as shortcuts. They quickly lead readers back to an imagined legendary past while sketching out the social and heroic ethos encapsulated in epics like *Beowulf*. Like *Beowulf* itself — an Old English poem that imagines early Scandinavian heroes and settings — these medieval borrowings offer evidence of authors viewing people and places of the past through the lens of the present, often (inescapably) conflating the two in their narratives.

Depictions of sorrowful, profoundly anxious travellers like the ones narrating *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* are not what twenty-first century audiences typically associate with the axe-wielding, longship-sailing, Valhalla-or-bust Northmen often found in modern popular depictions of the ‘Horny Vikings’ variety. Even so, the inclusion of several (slightly altered) passages from *The Seafarer* in *Blood Eye* (2009), the first book of Giles Kristian’s two Viking Age trilogies, and indeed Uhtred’s constant reminder that ‘*Wyrd bið ful aræd!*’ (fate is wholly inexorable) sets a more elegiac tone in these narratives than what might be expected from action-adventure stories about Northmen. More than merely depicting the Northman as a figure who ‘has no fear of death if he holds a sword’ (Kristian 2009, 125) and whose countrymen are ‘cautious creatures on land, as though they had stowed their confidence aboard their longships’ (182), these stories depict warriors in more complicated and emotionally conflicted ways. For instance, upon hearing the first few verses of *The Seafarer* Raven observes, ‘The men were smiling and nodding in appreciation. They all knew the sea and knew that she would sometimes swallow even great men. But the sea was their domain, too, and they loved her’ (74). That blurring of difference

(the civilized reader and the barbaric Viking) is attached to the blurring of literary difference (Old English and Old Norse). Vikings are both us and them, both South and North, both fearless and fearful.

Such passages certainly reflect the notion that Northmen were preoccupied with and identified by ships, sailing, voyages abroad ‘and the military and social ethos which lay behind or even which resulted from these activities’ (Jesch 2001, 6). But even as these novels portray traversing space and borders as a central part of a Northman’s life and identity, it is also repeatedly shown to cause these men grief, much as it does for the Old English seafarer. In Old English elegies, as in these novels, the sea offers an opportunity for new experiences — but often at the cost of being with kin, at home. In *The Pale Horseman* Uhtred declares, ‘until I reached Bebbanburg [his ancestral home] I would be a wanderer’ (Cornwell 2005, 314) and in *Sword Song*, when he temporarily finds himself ‘where the Temes flowed towards Lundene and the sea,’ Uhtred describes himself as ‘an *exile* and a warrior’ (2007, 24; emphasis ours). Similarly, although the Northmen in Kristian’s series believe ‘their kinfolk would be proud to know they had journeyed so far and won so many hard fights’ (2011, 116) they frequently reflect on how far they have travelled from home (2017, 118, 126, 128), which often amounts to tallying how long they have been away; ‘We had come so far along the sea road that men began to say they could no longer remember the faces of their wives and children back home’ (2011, 439). A sense of weariness from being at sea is also displayed in small, but telling, observations. When the weather turned bad, men ‘talked of their kinfolk back home’ (2011, 125; 2010, 170), while ‘in far-flung lands, [they] observe even more fiercely the habits and customs of their home’ (2011, 174) and the further they sail, the more nostalgic their thoughts become; ‘Hedin Long Face said the place looked like Fensfjord, where most of the Fellowship came from, but Olaf barked that that was *hjem lengsel* — homesickness — talking... The sea here was not as clear or deep, the land not as high, and the air not as sweet as a Norwegian fjord’ (2010, 132). Homesickness here is defined by an idealised contrast of sensory ideas: visual scale and olfactory pureness. But this idealised contrast may be imaginary, since some of the men are not sure if their memories of home are accurate, allowing the possibility that the North as an ideal may be partially created from the desiring imagination as much as from objective fact. This dynamic shares a similar logic to the contemporary West’s cultural imaginings of the Vikings themselves.

Throughout these series, there is a subtle shift in the way warriors like Raven, Sigurd and Sigurd’s warband are portrayed, a shift that is also evident in the characterisation of Uhtred in Cornwell’s *Last Kingdom* series, which sheds some light on new ways ‘Northmen’ are reimagined in twenty-first century popular fiction. In these books, Northmen are not homogenous crews of fame-seeking, fearless berserkers who point the fierce dragon-prows of their longships West, intent only on increasing their fame and their hoards before returning,

holds full of plunder, to generic, snow-covered Nordic lands — lands, to borrow Robert Macfarlane's phrase, 'where wildness survived' (2007, 7). At least, they are not *only* that. Cornwell tends to embrace the notion that 'to be a Viking was to be a raider' (2004, 101) who rapes and pillages (119, 125-126, 143, 226) and who should aim to 'start [his] killers young, before their consciences are grown' (103), but Kristian in particular softens these stereotypes. Though his Northmen are 'gods of war' who certainly slay on the battlefield, they otherwise tend to keep potentially harmful blades — those made of flesh — sheathed.

This self-control supports Erika Ruth Sigurdson's argument that rape is 'not an integral aspect of Viking masculinity [in modern popular fiction]. On the contrary... the hero's masculinity was defined instead by his sexual restraint, and his ability to love a worthy woman and look for her love in return' (Sigurdson 2014, 262). Even in romance fiction, where 'essentialised sexual difference is a key pleasure' (Wilkins 2016, 6), Viking lovers contemplate forced sex but do not carry it out; although, as Wilkins goes on to write, sometimes their actions 'at the very least redefine widely held notions of what constitutes appropriate consent' (9). Restraint in these novels is a way of showing the presence of love (7), and both Sigurd and Raven clearly follow this trend. Kristian's protagonists both fall hopelessly in love with the only woman in their crews; after many chapters yearning for these women, both men spend one night finally (and secretly) having sex with the objects of their desires (although one of Kristian's female characters is a shieldmaiden and the other a powerful witch-warrior-princess, these women nevertheless function primarily as love-objects for the heroes) and neither Sigurd nor Raven ever repeat this act. These are men whose love is perpetually fixed on one woman, and in both cases circumstances conspire to prevent the couples being together for long.

There is one instance of rape in *Blood Eye*, the first of Kristian's books, and modern sensibilities and discomfort with this situation are evident in Raven's internal monologue. After winning a fight against the Welsh, Raven's crew decides to present him with a Welsh lass to be his 'pillow for the night' (2009, 347). Still a rookie in this crew, Raven is afraid of disappointing his companions, so he accepts the gift without a word. Even though the girl fights it, Raven goes through with the act — but not without great inner turmoil; 'I felt filthy to the soul, far worse than the lowest beast. And yet the self-disgust, the shame that burned in my heart, did not make me stop... When I had finished... loathing pulled at my deepest being, dragged me down like some malevolent shadow spirit from Satan's pit' (348). The language here is unequivocally condemnatory: 'filthy', 'lowest beast', 'disgust', 'shame', 'loathing', 'dragged me down'. These words, gathered in a close knot and focalised by the character's viewpoint, have a visceral impact, enacting their judgement of rape. It is possible to interpret Raven's self-reflexive shame as a product of his Christian upbringing in England (he cites Satan, after all). However, it is more convincing to view it as a sign of the twenty-first century historical fiction writer's conception of the

Northman as someone with a complex and emotional inner world, and a sense of masculinity that does not rely on casual rape. The line between heathen and Christian, Northman and Englishman, is as porous as the line between past morals and present morals. This notion is further demonstrated in the remaining two books of the *Raven* series, and all six of the *Sigurd* books. By far the most impressive, successful and masculine warrior of all Kristian's characters, Sigurd remains a bachelor throughout his adventures, never condescending to dally with whores at taverns the way his men sometimes do, much less commit rape during or after raids. These are heroes not for a Viking age, but for a contemporary Western age.

In many ways, Kristian's heroes behave as readers might expect Vikings to. They are seafarers who go on raids, who seek vengeance and adventure while travelling to far-off lands. Yet these characters are also more than that. They are men from the wild north who have melancholic feelings that readers can sympathise with and understand. Even as the tyranny of time might serve to alienate these Northmen from today's readers, their updated (and often admirable) morals and inner conflicts serve to draw them closer to 'us'. At points like these, the work of the historical fiction genre in recouping and re-presenting the past for the present becomes more readily visible.

Historical fiction allows readers to experience the drama and radical difference of history from the inside, softening the alterity between 'us' in the present and 'them' in the past — a division that has been present in historical and fictional writings about the Northmen for centuries. The early Anglo-Saxon letters cited in this paper both view and write about Northmen from an outsider's perspective, an us/them dichotomy that is delineated by faith (the Northmen are 'heathens') and/or territory (who come from 'Northern countries'). Whether it appears in its Latin form (*Northmanni*) or its Old Norse equivalent (*Norðmenn*), the term 'Northmen' has been consistently used as an Othering device in medieval sources, intended to distinguish the authors' peoples from those who winter elsewhere. (The term *austmaðr* (pl. *austmenn*), 'Eastman' or 'Easterner', is more generally used in Icelandic sources to describe the 'Northmen' referred to in this discussion, particularly the Norwegians, because, geographically-speaking, Norwegians are more eastern (and southern) than northern when viewed from an Icelandic perspective). Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (c.1068-75), for example, identifies the Danes and 'the other peoples who live beyond Denmark' as Northmen (I, 16:20). In Norwegian texts written in Latin — the anonymous *Historia Norwegiae* (before c.1330), Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (c.1177-1187) — and the anonymous *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* (c.1190) — phrases such as 'our people' (Latin, *gentis nostrae*; ON, *frænda* and *menn*), 'the whole country' (Latin, *tota patria/toti patriae* or 'whole population' *totius populi*; ON, *landit í öllum*) and 'our country' (employed as in 'our peoples', *nostrum gentum*; ON, *landsfólk*) suggest an awareness of belonging to an imagined community based

on shared territory, and does not include the term 'Northman'. However, in his analysis of the early medieval traveller and chronicler Ohthere's journey (as recorded in the *Old English Orosius*; attributed to King Alfred), Shane McLeod argues that 'Northmen' (OE *Norðmonna*) relates to the supra-regional area in which Ohthere situates Hålogaland, the district-area where he lives 'at the northern end of a larger territory that he knew of as Northway [*Norðweg* = Northway/Norway], which probably included all of the land along the "north way" sailing route to Kaupang' (2008, 5-6). In this case, Ohthere may in fact be employing the term as a means of identifying himself with the group of Scandinavians who inhabited the 'north way' sailing route, including the Norwegians (6-7). Meanwhile, in the twelfth-century Icelandic law code *Grágás*, 'a distinction is made between the inhabitants of Iceland and foreigners. In the terminology of the law, foreigners were *útlendir menn* ('out-landers')... The out-landers included the inhabitants of the [Icelanders'] countries of origin – that are Norwegians, Danes and Swedes (*Grágás* Ia: 172; II: 338; and III: 448), who were in other contexts set apart from the rest of the world' (Hastrup 1990, 85-86).

However, in Kristian's and Cornwell's novels, early medieval sources like these are remembered, reinterpreted and reused in ways that perpetuate, dramatise and complicate the perception of Northmen as Other. The boundary between 'us' and 'them' is blurred in these books by the fact that both the protagonists (Raven and Uhtred) are at first abducted by, and then assimilated into, crews of Northmen (them) from England (us, from where most of our cultural conceptions about Northmen arise). In *Blood Eye*, young Osric witnesses the frightening arrival of Sigurd's 'wolves' in the village of Abbotsend in England; 'These outlanders leaping from their dragons were armed and fierce. They were warriors' (2009, 16). Like Kristian's Northmen, Cornwell's are initially described by outsiders in a passage that echoes the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry cited above. First, Uhtred's father calls them his 'old enemy' and,

they came, he said, from northern lands where ice and mist prevailed, they worshipped the old gods, the same ones we had worshipped before the light of Christ came to bless us, and when they had first come to Northumbria... fiery dragons had whipped across the northern sky, great bolts of lightning had scarred the hills and the sea had been churned by whirlwinds (2004, 9).

In these scenes, the Northmen fulfil their much-practised role as the Other.

However, long before Jarl Sigurd renames Osric 'Raven' — indeed, almost immediately upon seeing the Northmen for the first time — the boy quite literally begins the process of understanding them. 'The outlanders' sharp language began to change, seemed to melt, the percussive clipped grunts becoming a stream of sounds that were somehow familiar' (2009, 16). Throughout the series, Raven mimics the Northmen's language and behaviour, 'repeating them until... I understood them', and in so doing, eventually forgets he was ever an

Englishman. Though Cornwell's *Last Kingdom* is set in 866 — around 100 years after Osric's/Raven's story took place — the circumstances are similar. Osbert (soon renamed Uhtred) is taken from his homeland in Northumbria by Vikings and very quickly assimilates. Likewise, Uhtred soon embraces paganism over Christianity and revels in the 'fury of the Northmen' (2004, 144) and prides himself on being a warrior (103-104, 198). Despite their origins, both protagonists soon identify as Northmen. As Sarah L Higley points out,

Identity implies similitude and recognition — what is *idem*, 'like'. It covers everything from that which keeps a culture or a nation together to that which keeps the human body intact. Being able to identify what fits into the pack and what does not has always been essential to both animal and human societies (2005, 340).

In Raven's case, this pack mentality is made manifest as he becomes one of Jarl Sigurd's 'Wolfpack,' and their collective identity is further symbolised by the wolf tattoos they all get, which they see as, "Something that reminds us who we are. . . And what we are. We travel so far from home, I don't want to forget" (Kristian 2010, 265).

While Uhtred is characterised as the more vicious of the two protagonists, he is nevertheless more uncertain and confused about his positioning as a Northman, declaring, "I'm a Dane," I said and, at that moment I meant it' (Cornwell 2004, 75). Yet at other times, "I was sure I was a Northumbrian, a secret *scea-dugengan* hidden among the Danes, and in truth I was confused" (76) and "Of course I was confused" (95-96). In *The Pale Horseman*, he explains, 'I had learned [the Danes'] language and worshipped their gods until I no longer knew whether I was Danish or English' (2005, 18) and yet "I'm a Northumbrian!" And that was part of the problem. I was an outsider' (33) and even still, "I'm a Saxon," I said again, sounding more certain than I felt' (168). This uncertainty continues throughout the ten-book series. Benedict Anderson (1983) and Michael Hechter (2000) have argued that 'imagined communities' — which includes groups of genetically unrelated people like large crews of Northmen — are intangible, existing largely in the psychological bonds that connect their members. Uhtred's wavering self-definition reflects the general lack of clarity surrounding what qualities define a Northman. Indeed, in all three series, the definition of a Northman is as unclear as it is in the medieval sources cited above. "I'd sooner trust a Dane," says Floki in *Blood Eye*, to which Raven replies, "The English think you *are* Danes... They think all heathens are Danes" (2009, 168). In *The Last Kingdom*, Ragnar explains that it is not where a man comes from but where he goes that makes him a Northman; "The Svear, the Norse and the Danes were the Northmen, the men who went on Viking expeditions" (2004, 55), a point echoed in Kristian's *Odin's Wolves*: 'All must at some point have reflected on what a strange company we were nowadays. Norsemen, Englishmen, Danes, Greeks, a woman, a monk, a blauman, an emperor and a wolf, all sharing labor (*sic*), food and drink, and the rolling sea road

and all destined for the Great City, Miklagard' (314). This equivocation reflects the difficulty of maintaining hard boundaries between nationalities and, by extension, the boundaries between present and past.

In popular fiction, there is 'no longer any connection necessary between the signifier and a specific historical, geographical or cultural reality. Vikings do not come from anywhere' (Sundmark 2014, 209). Perhaps it is difficult to define Northmen because in both historical and fictional sources they are conceptualised as miscellaneous 'strange companies' that 'come from all over' (Cornwell 2007, 28) — bands of men and (sometimes) women who share gods and goals more than homelands. Nevertheless, despite their countries of origin, there remains a sense of displacement, an awareness of otherness and of not being 'at home' that colours depictions of Northmen in Kristian's and Cornwell's works. These texts seem to take pleasure in upsetting the received binaries of popular understanding around Northmen, to draw their characters with more nuance and depth, but also to show readers that differences between people of the past and people of the present are perhaps not as stark as imagined.

'History is other,' argues Jerome de Groot, 'and the present familiar... The historical novelist similarly explores the dissonance and displacement between then and now, making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar' (de Groot 2010, 3). In fiction, views of the Northmen shift from the foreign to the familiar, from 'them' to 'us' and back again as Raven and Uhtred travel further away from their homes. Whereas in earlier Viking Age novels, such as Frans G. Bengtsson's classic *The Long Ships* (1954), 'The titular hero always comes back home after his travels' (Sundmark 2014, 203), in these more recent works Northmen can be seen as itinerant figures, symbols of displacement. Home, for these Northmen, becomes increasingly imaginary. It is a concept used to motivate or threaten, not a destination to which they can hope to return. Mantel argues that readers of historical fiction 'actively request... a subjective interpretation' of historical facts, and so the writer must 'recreate the texture of lived experience', 'activate the senses' and 'deepen the reader's engagement through feeling' (2017), as Cornwell and Kristian do through a series of deeply melancholic descriptions of homesickness.

As Sigurd's Wolfpack faces yet another battle 'he called the names of men's wives and women back home in Norway, rousing them to greater feats for their sakes' (2004, 361) but after all the feuding and strife in his early life, Sigurd also knows none of the men from Skudeneshavn (their home village on the island of Karmøy, Norway) can ever go back there: 'That thread of their lives had been cut, though no one spoke of it, each chasing fleeting memories amidst a dizzying swirl of them... For those men knew they could never hold their wives and comfort their children, not without putting those loved ones' lives at risk' (2014, 345). Raven, recently adopted into the Northman's way of life, is twice removed from home; he listens silently as his crewmates 'talked of their kinfolk

back home... for I had no kinfolk to talk of' (2010, 170). As much as his fellow warriors, Raven yearns to see Norway, though for him it will be a first. Murkiness surrounds Raven's past in all three books; he was raised in England but not born there, and he is convinced that 'eventually [he] would set foot on the rocks these Norsemen talked of so fondly, and [he] truly believed that when [he] did, the fog in [his] mind would clear and [he] would remember... [He] would know that the fjordlands were [his] home' (328). This quotation shows that home, even when deeply longed for, may be an imaginary place. Homesickness and nostalgia are revealed to be largely formed out of the imagination. Raven's melancholy yearning for his Viking home echoes our strong affective relationship with the medieval past. It is at least partly a past that is imagined in the present.

Unfortunately for this type of Northman, settling down is impossible (Cornwell 2004, 71, 74) and going home early from overseas voyages shows that he has lost the trust of his companions (99); he has not yet achieved enough fame or wealth to contemplate 'the day when he would sail back to Norway' (Kristian 2016, 422), or he has not yet had his fill of sightseeing: 'No one talked of going home, for we were caught up in the excited wonder of Miklagard like a dog chasing its own tail' (2011, 442). Even at an early stage in Sigurd's life, when he and his men have not yet travelled beyond Scandinavia — they sojourn in Denmark and in the land of the Svear-Spear (Sweden) for a time — there is a notable emphasis on the Wolfpack being heavy-hearted so 'far from home' (2014, 345; 2016, 216; 2017, 118, 126, 128). In the same moment as Cornwell and Kristian invoke the narratively interesting adventures of the sea, they shade it with an elegiac mood, adding depth to the characters and drawing them empathetically closer to the reader.

Sundmark argues 'it is far easier to idealise a Viking who stays in his home country rather than one who is essentially an invading enemy' (2014, 205), but from the perspective of two writers of genre fiction, it is far easier to make a Viking interesting and dynamic if he leaves home. Vikings have become a by-word for conflict in popular culture, and popular fiction has particularly enjoyed this hyper-masculine, mediievally irrational figure across a number of genres. Kristian and Cornwell, both historical fiction writers with an eye on the importance of research and realism, give us sea-going raiders and plunderers but humanise them by denying them a promise of return, taking them out of the North and yet always allowing them to be defined by the lands they have left behind. They are recast as travellers, sympathetic characters struck by wanderlust, compelled to go forward even though they are wistful for friends and family back home. These Northmen are 'fellowships of warriors, bound by honor (*sic*) and wanderlust, [that] would reach as far as Newfoundland and Baghdad, the sword-song of their battles ringing out in Africa and the Arctic. They [are] nobles and outcasts, pirates, pioneers and great seafarers' (Kristian 2014, x). The melancholic Viking responds to the needs of present-day popular historical fiction, to bring pleasure to reading audiences who prefer their pillaging with a

side of elegy and contemporary morality. This Northman, the ideal protagonist for the high conflicts and realistic characterisation of popular historical fiction, is both of the Viking Age and of the desiring imagination of the present.

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Bleedthrough: The Two-Way Traffic between Popular Historiography and Fiction

Marianne McLeod Gilchrist

Abstract: *While historical fiction is dependent on historiography, it can exert a powerful hold on authors of non-fiction and their depictions of the past, especially at popular level. Case-studies of characters from the Crusades (Conrad of Montferrat) and the French Revolution (Maximilien Robespierre and his close friends and family) demonstrate how fiction can perpetuate superseded historical interpretations, instead of engaging with current research. They also show how often popular non-fiction relies on images and stereotypes that originate in fictional works. Lines are further blurred by novelists appearing as experts on historical documentaries. While commercial factors play a part, so too does emotional investment, often rooted in childhood reading, as shown in an example drawing on the representation of prehistoric animals.*

Keywords: *Conrad of Montferrat, popular culture, Walter Scott, Montferrat, Crusades, French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre*

In the relationship between popular historiography and historical fiction, ideas, like ink, seep through the page in both directions. The reliance of historical fiction on primary and/or secondary historical sources is a given, often displayed in notes and bibliographies. However, the influence of historical fiction on historiography – especially, though not exclusively, at the popular level – is less overt. Its emotional grip, often rooted in childhood reading, can prove a stumbling block to authors and readers alike when new academic research challenges established literary images of characters and events. There are also ethical questions about ‘using other people as props’ in colourfully written ‘visionary history’ of the Carlyle or Runciman school (Gossman, cited in Cumming 1999, 178) or in fiction, where novelists may use real-life characters in ways not supported by surviving evidence. My aim here is to illustrate some of these issues with examples from medieval and modern history, to demonstrate that they are not restricted to particular historical periods or locations.

I will be focusing on two case studies; Conrad of Montferrat, a twelfth-century Italian crusader prince, and Maximilien Robespierre and his friends in the French Revolution. Despite leading very different lives in different times, their afterlives in historiography and fiction share some notable features. Prominent Romantic literary figures – Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle, respectively – established English-language narratives that shaped their fictional images. These influenced popular non-fiction, which fuelled further fictional depictions,

including films, children's books and computer games; both men appear as stereotyped villains in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, for example. Current scholarship is re-evaluating them, challenging the foundations of their popular images. However, as discussed below, popular non-fiction tends to lag at least several decades behind academic research, perpetuating interpretations and characterisations rooted in fiction and questionable ethnic and gender stereotypes. In concluding this study, I will draw out some common threads in popular treatments of real-life subjects. A further example, drawn from animal history, may cast light on *why* popular writers and audiences are slow to embrace new research.

In English and Welsh schools, History becomes an optional subject at the age of fourteen, so for many British people, the formal study of the subject stops at simplified, child-friendly level. For those whose interest is sparked later or is in topics outside of the curriculum, this leaves an information gap. While those of us who continue to study history have greater opportunities to revise or reject impressions absorbed in childhood, the emphasis on specialisation still means that some subjects are not revisited at an in-depth adult level. Historical fiction may therefore come to serve as a secondary or even substitute historical canon, a basis for what readers *believe they know*. Research on historical romance readers in the US indicates many believe romances' historical content lends them educational value (Radway 1991, 106-13); 'hey 'feel they are learning something about the history of a different place and era' (Pianka 1998, 104). In recent years, television documentaries have appeared to endorse this by using historical novelists, not specialist academics, as presenters or discussion panellists (see below).

Conrad of Montferrat and the Third Crusade

Conrad of Montferrat (c 1145-92) became an international hero in his own lifetime. The Byzantine chronicler Niketas Choniates praises his good looks, 'manly courage and intelligence' (Choniates, cited in van Dieten 1975, 1: 201). An anonymous Western chronicler describes him as 'extremely clever both in natural mental ability and by learning, amiable in character and deed' (*Brevis Historia Occupationis et Amissionis Terræ Sanctæ*, cited in Holder-Egger and von Simson, 1916, 64). He was praised in songs by Peirol and Bertran de Born, in the Auvergne and Limousin respectively. Peirol calls him the '*marques valens e pros*' ('valiant and noble Marquis'), while *Heu, voce flebili cogor enarrare*, a lament for the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Bavarian *Carmina Burana* manuscript, describes him as '*Marchio clarissimus, vere Palatinus*' ('The most renowned Marquis, truly a paladin').

A dynastically well-connected Piedmontese nobleman, he travelled to Byzantium, where he saved the emperor's throne during an attempted military coup. He then sailed to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, just as it was on the point of

collapse after Saladin's victory at Hattin. Holding Tyre against the odds, he sent out appeals that led to the Third Crusade and saved the kingdom. He married Queen Isabella after her first marriage was controversially annulled and was elected king, but assassinated days before his coronation.

However, English-language popular histories, novels and films usually present Conrad as a stereotyped villainous Italian; swarthy, scheming and treacherous. Anglo-Angevin chroniclers are certainly hostile, since Richard I supported Guy de Lusignan's rival claim for the kingship of Jerusalem – but these scarcely attract a wide readership. Instead, Conrad's image has been shaped for almost two centuries by Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1825). This was also my own introduction to him, via the 1980-81 BBC serialisation.

Scott effectively created the historical novel as a popular genre, and his influence has been wide-ranging and long-lasting. Cheap editions and stage productions disseminated his works across social classes. Translations gave him an international audience: Victor Hugo reviewed *Quentin Durward* before responding with his own romance of Louis XI's time, *Notre Dame de Paris*; Mikhail Lermontov depicts Pechorin reading *Les Puritans d'Écosse* (*Old Mortality* in French) in *A Hero of Our Time*; Rossini and Donizetti turned *The Lady of the*



Figure 1: François-Édouard Picot, *Conrad de Montferrat*, 1840s, Salle des Croisades, Versailles [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Lake and *The Bride of Lammermoor* into operas. In *Ivanhoe* (1819) and *The Talisman* (1825), Scott created enduring images of the Crusades that went on to inspire the Victorian chivalric revival. While he is no longer fashionable as a novelist, film and television adaptations have perpetuated his stories and characters – these two novels most of all.

The pioneering Crusades historian Charles Mills was sceptical of Scott's handling of the subject, writing of *Ivanhoe* that, 'when he [Scott] wants a villain... he as regularly and unscrupulously resorts to the fraternity of the Templars as other novelists refer to the church, or to Italy' (Mills 1825, 1:337-38). In *The Talisman*, Scott re-used his stock Templar cleric, but added the Radcliffean Gothic staple, the Machiavellian Italian. Conrad of Montferrat, misspelled throughout as 'Conrade of Montserrat' (Scott misread 'f' for 'long s' in his sources) was thus added to the population of what Kenneth Churchill calls 'malignant marquisses (*sic*) scheming in gloomy castles' (Churchill 1980, 18). He described him as 'generally accused of versatility, of a narrow and selfish ambition, of a desire to extend his own principality, without regard to the weal of the Latin kingdom of Palestine' – seemingly ignorant of the fact that, through marrying Queen Isabella (unmentioned in the novel), the Latin kingdom *was* Conrad's 'own principality' (Scott 1825, 148-49). He is depicted as more dandified carpet knight than warrior:

"Wise? – cunning, you would say," replied Richard; "elegant in a lady's chamber, if you will. Oh, ay, Conrade of Montserrat – who knows not the popinjay? Politic and versatile, he will change you his purposes as often as the trimmings of his doublet... A man-at-arms? Ay, a fine figure on horseback, and can bear him well in the tilt-yard, and at the barriers, when swords are blunted at point and edge, and spears are tipped with trenchers of wood instead of steel pikes" (Scott 1825, 99).

This evokes another Italian stereotype of the time: the flamboyant and fawning *cicisbeo* or *cavalier servente*.

Near the end of his life (1832), Scott tried to justify taking '[c]onsiderable liberties' with Conrad:

That Conrade, however, was reckoned the enemy of Richard, is agreed both in history and romance. The general opinion of the terms upon which they stood, may be guessed from the proposal of the Saracens, that the Marquis of Montserrat should be invested with certain parts of Syria, which they were to yield to the Christians (Scott 1825, xvii).

But this 'proposal' – again, misrepresenting Conrad's claim as King of Jerusalem – comes from a fanciful fourteenth-century romance, *King Richard*, which Scott knew from the Auchinleck Manuscript (then in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh) and George Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* (1805). Scott quotes Ellis's plot summary as if it were a historical source, but misattributes it (by accident or malice) to Mills' *History of Chivalry*:

The Marquis, he [i.e. Richard] said, was a traitor, who had robbed the Knight Hospitallers of sixty thousand pounds, the present of his father, Henry; that he was a renegade, whose treachery had occasioned the loss of Acre; and he concluded by a solemn oath, that he would cause him to be drawn to pieces by wild horses, if he should ever venture to pollute the Christian camp by his presence (Scott 1825, xx-xi, citing Ellis 1805, 2: 230).

Mills, whom Scott had accused of being ‘not... aware that romantic fiction naturally includes the power of such invention, which is indeed one of the requisites of the art’ (Scott 1825, xvii), was right to fear that Scott’s reputation as an antiquarian would convince readers of his fabrications. Generations of readers assimilated his vision of the past; his Scottish-set novels, *Tales of a Grandfather* and tartan-swathed staging of George IV’s visit to Edinburgh still shape popular Scottish historiography and heritage tourism.

William Stubbs was born the year *The Talisman* was published. During the 1860s-70s he edited the main Anglo-Angevin chronicles: the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, and Roger of Howden’s *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis* and *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houeden*. In his editorial apparatus, he not only failed to question their bias, but amplified it in language reminiscent of Scott. In a footnote to Roger of Howden’s *Chronica*, he described Conrad as ‘the evil genius of the Third Crusade’ (Roger of Howden 1869, 2: 194, n 3). In his preface to the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, he called him ‘ruthless in enmity, faithless in friendship, cunning and unscrupulous enough to pass for an Italian of a later age’ (*Itinerarium* 1864, cxxv). His assassination was depicted as deserved; ‘the character of Conrad was such, and the persons whom he had injured so many and various, that it is a wonder he was not disposed of earlier than he was’ (*Itinerarium* 1864, xxiii).

Later novels built on these foundations. In Gordon Stables’ boys’ adventure story, *For Cross or Crescent: The Days of Richard the Lion-Hearted* (1897), Conrad is a ‘proud, ambitious man, a brave and daring, too, and undoubtedly a soldier. But when we add to this that he was a bully, and treacherous to a degree, we cannot well admire him’ (Stables 1897, 351). Maurice Hewlett’s *The Life and Death of Richard Yea-and-Nay* (1900), aimed at adults, drastically changes his career. While the historical Conrad was defending Tyre against Saladin’s army and fleet, Hewlett’s Conrad, ‘a large, pale, ruminating Italian, full of bluster and thick blood’ (Hewlett 1900, 82), is in France, conspiring against Richard with Philippe II and Richard’s brother John. In the Middle East, he tries to get the Assassins to kill Richard (rather than *vice versa*, the reason Conrad’s cousin Leopold of Austria arrested Richard on suspicion of murder). Richard’s (fictional) ex-mistress Jehane persuades the Assassins’ leader to kill Conrad instead. Cecil B DeMille’s 1935 film, *The Crusades*, in which Joseph Schildkraut plays Conrad, draws heavily on Hewlett and Scott, without acknowledgment. The credited writer is Harold Lamb, author of a popular history of the Crusades,

which – despite copying Scott’s misspelling of Montferrat as ‘Montserrat’ – at least puts Conrad in the right countries at the right times and credits him with ‘the one virtue of skill in war’ (Lamb 1931, 99). Perhaps because of the need to adhere to the Hays Code, the film ascribes to Richard’s queen, Berengaria (Loretta Young), the role in revealing the conspiracy which Hewlett’s novel gives his mistress.

These works created the context for the popular non-fiction (but highly novelistic) account that has dominated Conrad’s image since the mid-twentieth century; Steven Runciman’s *A History of the Crusades* (1951-54). Here, he is a ‘grim middle-aged warrior’ (Runciman 1954, 3: 26), who ‘had been living at Constantinople but had been involved in a murder there’ (Runciman 1952, 2: 384). This claim that he came to Tyre as a fugitive murderer is repeated by numerous popular non-fiction writers: Geoffrey Hindley, Percy Newby, Robert Payne, Karen Armstrong, Terry Jones and Alan Ereira, James Reston and David Boyle. It serves as a litmus-test, showing where authors use Runciman as a substitute primary source, without checking his misleading footnote: this cites two texts of the Old French Continuations of William of Tyre, neither of which alleges murder (see Gilchrist 2012, 25-27).

As I have discussed elsewhere (Gilchrist 2012, 15-36), the murder allegation is a misrepresentation, probably deliberate, of Conrad’s killing of Alexios Vranas, leader of a military rebellion against Emperor Isaakios Angelos, in battle at Constantinople in 1187. Runciman selects an inaccurate summary from Roger of Howden’s *Chronica* (*‘Interim Conradus le Marchis, ... facto homicidio in civitate Constantinopolitana, fugam iniiit’*, Roger of Howden 1869, 2: 320-21) over the dramatic descriptions by Choniates and several Western chroniclers as the foundation for his characterisation.

Runciman admitted being attracted to history ‘by romantic imaginings’, not ‘a scientific desire for knowledge’ (Plante 1986, 67). He acknowledged reading Scott’s lesser-known novels, telling Riley-Smith, ‘I think one ought to write a study on the works that inspire you by irritating you, and certainly Walter Scott, I thought, got medieval history pretty wrong’ (*Interviews with Historians* 1996). He hated Scott’s depiction of Byzantium in *Count Robert of Paris*, but if he had read that ‘dreadful book’ (Bryer 2006, xlvii) it is more than likely that he knew the more popular *The Talisman*.

Despite Runciman’s professed scorn for Scott, Riley-Smith sums up their interdependence, that Runciman’s work ‘was almost what Walter Scott would have written had he been more knowledgeable’ (cited in Tyerman 2011, 195). Runciman regretted that ‘historians are now terrified of telling a story, as though that were fiction, and not history’ (Plante 1986, 67). He parallels Scott’s formula of making the viewpoint characters essentially contemporaries in fancy dress, to facilitate reader identification:

[Runciman's] characters are not really medieval at all, but recognisable modern, pre-Freudian people in medieval clothes. Consequently, they are not distanced from his audience... The closer his text resembles a novel, the more engaging it is. Above all, he panders to the two most potent sirens of popular history: the sense that people in the past were essentially just like people in the present; and that, partly as a consequence, the past can be judged according to hindsight and modern schemes of value, ethics and morality (Tyerman 2011, 199).

However, as Anne Scott MacLeod points out, the consequences can be damaging:

Characters are divided into right – those who believe as we do – and wrong; that is, those who believe something that we now disavow. Such stories suggest that people of another time either did understand or should have understood the world as we do now, an outlook that quickly devolves into the belief that people are the same everywhere and in every time, draining human history of its nuance and variety (MacLeod 1998).

Runciman's novelistic style makes his work attractive to popular historians with no academic background in history and to novelists:

The absence of doubt is combined with the skilful creation of a convincingly fabricated world inhabited by his recognisable stereotype cast. Such was the conviction behind this literary performance that others have plundered it almost as a primary source (Tyerman 2011, 196).

Ronald Welch's children's book *Knight Crusader* (1954) adopts Runciman's then-recent interpretation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem's politics, while Schildkraut's performance in DeMille's film supplies Conrad's physical depiction as 'a sleek cat of a man... with white, fluttering hands, and a silky voice' (Welch 1954, 189). Graham Shelby's *The Knights of Dark Renown* (1968) and *The Kings of Vain Intent* (1970) draw on Runciman's narrative and characterisations. *The Kings of Vain Intent* is Conrad's most Radcliffean Gothic appearance; 'this sinister Italian', 'the monster of Montferrat' (Shelby 1970, 19 and 190). He seems to combine the British-Italian actor Christopher Lee's Dracula from contemporary Hammer films with another famous Conrad – Veidt – as the sinister Italian Cesare in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*:

Marquis Conrad of Montferrat came out of the shadows like an apparition from hell. He was an exceptionally tall man, with narrow shoulders... He had long, thin fingers, thin wrists and, by the hang of his sleeves, the arms of an undernourished woman. His face was also thin, his cheeks adzed into shadows, his jaw narrow beneath taut skin. His scraped-down features allowed his eyes to register their full impact - hard and wide, then half covered by low, veined lids. Around his face and across his forehead hung lank black hair (Shelby 1970, 13).

In an explicitly sadistic chapter added to the American edition, Conrad flogs Isabella into unconsciousness and rapes her (Shelby 1970, 105-107). Shelby claims in an endnote that the main events, including Conrad's assassination, are 'based on established historical record' (Shelby 1970, 307), but does not explain that his character-assassination is entirely invented.

Corresponding with me ten years before his death, Shelby wrote that the sexual violence was added for commercial reasons, 'a cold-blooded compromise between myself and the publisher... If Conrad happened to carry the can for this, it helped make him the villain I clearly thought him to be'. He went on, 'A dozen painters with a dozen brushes will paint a dozen different portraits of the same subject. Don't you agree?' (letter postmarked 21 August 2006). However, there is a difference between a portrait that respects available evidence and simply attaching a real-life subject's name to a ready-made Gothic stereotype.

Jill M Phillips' bodice-ripper on Philippe II's reign, *The Rain Maiden* (1987), goes further. Everyone has sex with each other, regardless of gender, age or consanguinity, to the extent that an online chart is needed to make sense of it (Bushway 2010). Conrad becomes the lover of Philippe, his cousin's son, who has had affairs with all the Angevin princes by this time, and Richard I commits incest with his sister Joanna. Judith Tarr's *Devil's Bargain* (2002), which has some fantasy elements, further perpetuates Conrad's swarthy Italian villain image, and depicts him as merely 'a marquis with pretensions' (Tarr 2002, 142-43). Like many Angevin-fixated American and British novelists, she fails to grasp that lack of royal title does not make the Aleramici of Montferrat insignificant: they were related to the Capetians, Hohenstaufen and Babenbergs, among others. Conrad's fleeting appearance in Meg Clothier's historical romance *The Empress* (2013) is more positive, but thinly written, having a brief affair with Agnès of France (his cousin's daughter), although there is no evidence or even rumour in Choniates to support this. The ethnic stereotype here is the 'Latin lover', harking back to Eleanor Porden's Byronic depiction in her narrative poem, *Coeur de Lion* (1822) – for its time, better-researched than *The Talisman*, but less influential.

In Ubisoft Montréal's first issue of its computer game *Assassin's Creed* (2007), a version of Conrad, thinly fictionalised under his father William's name, appears as a target for the Assassin player-character. He appears as a swarthy, brutish-looking man with a cropped hairstyle a century out-of-date. While his inclusion at least makes some sense in this setting of the game (he was killed by members of the Nizari 'Assassin' sect in 1192, rather than 1191), other versions of the game wreak greater havoc historically, as we shall see.

Robespierre and friends

Two centuries ago after Mills criticised Scott's cliché recourse to Templar villains, Templar conspiracy theories remain a staple of historical fiction and pseudo-history. *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) applies them to the French Revolution, inspired by propagandist works such as Louis Cadet de Gassicourt's *Le Tombeau de Jacques de Molay* (1796) and the royalist cleric Augustin Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797) (Partner 1990, 130-33). As in historical novels, historians are credited to bolster credibility; Jean-Clément Martin was consulted but without decision-making powers. Maxime Durand, the production co-ordinator, claims, 'Dr Martin felt we had a bit too much of a royalist view on the Revolution. We had been trying to not seem too pro-Revolution but swung a bit too far. So we were able to shift back and give it more of a neutral view' (Beer 2014). One wonders how extreme it was previously, given that Durand's more 'neutral view' includes claiming Louis-Antoine Saint-Just wore clothes of human skin, from a tannery at Meudon (see Carlyle 1837, 2: 379; Quennedey 2016 examines the sources) and depicting Maximilien Robespierre as a bloodthirsty tyrant, who says, 'I want to kill as many people as possible... My genocidal crusade begins here and now'. It exemplifies the Thermidorian image Martin has done much to undermine academically. Robespierre held no dictatorial role; he opposed slavery and supported civil rights for Jews and Protestants, but was scapegoated retrospectively for decisions made collectively in wartime crisis and for atrocities committed by those who killed him (such as Joseph Fouché) when he tried to bring them to book. Martin hopes, perhaps over-optimistically, that players may later read more (Martin 2014), but concerns raised by the French Left (see Corbière 2014) appear to confirm wider criticisms of computer-game politics (Brown 2018).

Since 2011, when, after a public appeal, the Archives Nationales bought Robespierre's manuscripts from the Le Bas family (his girlfriend's sister's descendants), interest in him has revived. The *légende noire* is being dismantled, chiefly in France by Michel Biard, Marc Belissa, Hervé Leuwers, Jean-Clément Martin, Cécile Obligi and others, and by Anglophone historians Marisa Linton and Peter McPhee. However, as with the Crusades, popular discourse lags decades behind. British press coverage of *Assassin's Creed* reflected this. In *The Independent*, John Lichfield claimed the game's depiction was 'arguably less scary than the creepy subtlety of the real Robespierre', 'a monstrous prig and a priggish monster' (Lichfield 2014) – a characterisation rooted in Thomas Carlyle. In popular non-fiction, Jonathan J Moore's *Hung, Drawn and Quartered: The Story of Execution through the Ages* claims he should be called 'the Psychotic', not 'the Incorruptible' (Moore 2017, 152).

While Robespierre earned his 'Incorruptible' nickname in life, in English this is often prefixed with 'seagreen'. This was coined by the man who forged his popular image as Scott and Runciman did Conrad of Montferrat's, Thomas

Carlyle – Romantic, polemical and fiercely anti-democratic. Like Runciman's *A History of the Crusades*, Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* (1837) remains in print, despite being superseded historically, because it reads like a novel and *functions* as one. It prioritises sensationalism over evidence, making quasi-Biblical rhetorical appeals to emotion. When Oscar Browning took Carlyle's account of Louis XVI's 'Flight to Varennes' as a sample, retracing the route, he 'was quite surprised as I went on to find how careless and inaccurate it was'. His warning is equally applicable to Runciman:

any one who reads Carlyle's narrative will have before his eyes a very vivid picture... But when he looks minutely into it he will discover that almost every detail is inexact, some of them quite wrong and misleading. This is the danger of the picturesque school of historians. They will be picturesque at any price (Browning 1892, 76).

As Mark Cumming shows, Carlyle paints Robespierre as a canting 'Methodist parson' according to his 'preconceived notion of the political radical rather than a consideration of the man himself'. He described the Bristol MP John Arthur Roebuck and anti-slavery campaigners in similar terms. He also designates Robespierre inaccurately as 'Autocrat of France' (Cumming 1999, 181-82 and 193). Famously, he gives him a 'complexion of a multiplex atrabiliar colour, the final shade of which may be the pale sea-green' (Carlyle 1837, 2: 136), drawn from Germaine de Staël's description, 'His features were *ignoble*, his complexion pale, his veins of a green colour' (de Staël-Holstein 1871, 183). She had met him briefly in 1789, but her reminiscences, published posthumously in 1818, reflect the Restoration's political climate. Her use of 'ignoble' – often translated as 'ugly' – here carries class implications: 'un-aristocratic'. As with Conrad of Montferrat's ethnic stereotyping, Gothic fiction is evoked – the green veins visible through pale skin hint at the new literary vampire genre, as in post-Thermidor caricatures of Robespierre squeezing blood from a heart into a wine-glass (see Bihl and Duprat 2012, 216). Pat Mills and Olivier Ledroit's modern comic-book *Requiem: Chevalier Vampire* (2000-) even makes him a vampire.

Carlyle inspired numerous English-language novels and plays. The most enduring are Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and Emmuska Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* series (1903-40). These insert 'British saviour' heroes – Dickens' Sidney Carton, sacrificing himself for the husband of his beloved Lucie, and Orczy's Sir Percy Blakeney, who rescues aristocrats and inspires Tallien to stage the Thermidor coup. Dickens acknowledges that, 'no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr Carlyle's wonderful book' (Dickens 1859, Preface), although *A Tale of Two Cities* keeps major historical characters off-stage. It was popularised in several theatrical adaptations, notably Freeman Wills' *The Only Way* (1899), written for John Martin Harvey. As Joss Marsh writes, 'at 4,000 performances between 1899 and 1939, *The Only Way* was not a play: it was a cultural phenomenon' (Marsh 2009, 126).

That same year, Henry Irving had commissioned his own French Revolution star vehicle, *Robespierre*, from Victorien Sardou (whose previous Revolutionary drama, *Thermidor* (1891), had provoked protests and political debate in Paris because of its bias). Irving even asked Martin Harvey to defer his production to avoid a clash (Marsh 2009, 143, n. 27). Sardou reworked an 1895 script, in which Robespierre is shot by his adult illegitimate son, to have him shoot himself to save this son; an earlier British play, Benjamin Webster's *The Destruction of the Bastille* (1842), had him sacrifice himself to save an adult daughter (Marsh 2009, 130). The long-lost offspring plot was perhaps more credible for Irving, at sixty-one, than for Robespierre, who was barely thirty-six.

The success of both *The Only Way* and *Robespierre* helped inspire Orczy's 1903 play, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which she then novelised. Sequels followed until 1940. Her tall, cadaverous Robespierre in *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1908) resembles Irving. He 'ruled over them all by the strength of his own cold-blooded savagery, by the resistless power of his merciless cruelty', 'the most ambitious, most self-seeking demagogue of his time'. She apostrophises 'The sea-green Incorruptible!' with heavy sarcasm (Orczy 1908, 13).

Dickens and Orczy became a substitute historical canon for a subject that, like the Crusades, English-speaking schools rarely teach in depth. In the 1930s Hodder & Stoughton went so far as to market *The Scarlet Pimpernel* as a children's educational resource, implying that the protagonist was an historical figure 'who can teach them more about the French Revolution than all the textbooks put together'; that they will grasp the subject quickly, having 'learnt all about the men of 1789... from an immaculate English gentleman who had ample opportunity for observing their habits on his frequent visits to the French capital' (Dugan 2012, 209). 'Classic' status, reinforced by stage, film and television adaptations, keeps the novels in print and in the popular imagination. A purportedly 'historical' *Doctor Who* adventure, *The Reign of Terror* (1964), reworks motifs from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, presenting Robespierre as 'The Tyrant of France' (Carlyle's 'Autocrat') and mispronouncing his name throughout. (In contrast, the French television drama-documentary, *La Terreur et la Vertu*, made the same year, is intelligently scripted, movingly acted, and framed by on-screen academic debate). While modern dramatisations prune Orczy's anti-Semitism and claim to have 'made Percy humanitarian rather than political' (Richard Carpenter, cited in Tibballs 1998, 52), the emphasis remains on aristocrats saving aristocrats: class war sugar-coated with swashbuckling. Pointedly, Margaret Thatcher gave François Mitterand a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* as her 1989 bicentenary gift (Doyle 2001, 17).

Carlyle also inspired adventure novels such as George Alfred Henty's *In the Reign of Terror: The Adventures of a Westminster Boy* (1888) and Eliza F Pollock's *My Lady Marcia* (1901). Deliberately aiming nationalistic, conservative messages at adolescents, these remained in print for some years; Henty's works

are still published by Christian conservative presses in the USA. Harry, Henty's young 'British saviour', rescues Robespierre from street violence and briefly works as his secretary as a means to save his aristocratic friends. Pollard contrasts the Americans with the French as embodying 'good' change on ethnic and class grounds, making Lady Marcia's father say, "'The Americans are Englishmen, and by no means the worst type of Englishmen; there is good blood amongst them'" (Pollard 1901, 31). Religion underpins her politics, with the claim, 'Christ's millennium shall make all men equals', so Robespierre dies for hubristically attempting it by human means (Pollard 1901, 498).

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905, expanded from her 1887 novella *Sara Crewe*) is still in print. Although it is not an historical novel, Carlyle's *The French Revolution* serves as its subtext. The half-French heroine, Sara, endures drudgery in a garret by imagining herself in the Bastille, or as the imprisoned Marie Antoinette:

'If I am a princess in rags and tatters, I can be a princess inside... There was Marie Antoinette when she was in prison and her throne was gone and she had only a black gown on, and her hair was white, and they insulted her and called her Widow Capet. She was a great deal more like a queen then than when she was so gay and everything was so grand. I like her best then. Those howling mobs of people did not frighten her. She was stronger than they were, even when they cut her head off' (Burnett 1905, 146).

When, through a friend, she finally reads Carlyle, she relishes narrating the Princesse de Lamballe's murder during the September Massacres (Burnett 1905, 188-89; the sexual mutilations Carlyle mentions were a fabrication – see de Baecque 2003, 65). Burnett elides the Bastille, symbolising *ancien régime* oppression, with Marie Antoinette's imprisonment in the Temple and the Conciergerie – it is unclear whether this is authorial error or reflects Sara's imaginative reworking of history. Sara identifies her persecuting headmistress *not* with absolute monarchy but with *revolutionary* tyranny because she defines her as 'vulgar'; 'the opposition between taste and vulgarity' is made 'synonymous with good and evil', recalling Carlyle's debt to Edmund Burke (Gruner 1998, 169-70). Robespierre cannot easily fit this model because he was *not* 'vulgar', but rather a cultured young lawyer and occasional poet. Burnett therefore makes Sara question her previous admiration for 'cleverness', as, "'Lots of clever people have done harm and have been wicked. Look at Robespierre –'" (Burnett 1905, 188).



Figure 2a (left): Maximilien Robespierre, anon, possibly after Gérard, Musée Carnavalet, Paris [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 2b (right): Maximilien Robespierre, Lithograph by François Séraphin Delpech, 1824 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Fictional and non-fictional depictions turn his refinement and sensibility against him. When nineteenth-century Romantics recast his relationship with Georges-Jacques Danton as an epic political duel, as in Büchner's *Dantons Tod* (1835 – revived by the National Theatre as recently as 2010), they employed gendered stereotypes (Huet 1997, 149-65). Danton's physical bulk and machismo are emphasised, not his lace frills and flashy '*nouveaux riches* airs' (Roche 1989, 122). Carlyle – strongly influenced by German Romanticism – follows this pattern (Cumming 1999, 187), designating Danton 'a Reality', 'Thou brawny Titan' and 'a very Man' (Carlyle 1837, 2: 172, 391). In contrast, Robespierre, slight, fine-featured and delicate, is feminised. Carlyle writes, 'with what terror of feminine hatred the poor seagreen Formula looked at the monstrous colossal Reality, and grew greener to behold him' (Carlyle 1837, 2: 386).

A factor in this feminisation may be a frequently engraved portrait of Robespierre wearing stripes (figs 2a & 2b). This was fashionable in 1780s-90s, but as menswear grew steadily drabber during the nineteenth century, colourful clothes became coded retrospectively as effeminate. As Marie-Hélène Huet says, Hilaire Belloc's 1902 biography describes him with 'words that could apply to an *Ancien Regime* marquis', "'a little dainty and always exquisitely fitted'" (Huet 1997, 155). Orczy has him buffing his nails; "'Women are so vain!" he added, contemplating with rapt attention the enamel-like polish on his fingernails' (Orczy 1908, 23). In the 1998-99 BBC adaptation, despite claims to greater historical authenticity (Tibballs 1998, 9-21, 52-56), he remains a dictatorial figure whose dandyism rivals Sir Percy's.



Figure 3 (left): Maximilien Robespierre by Claude-André Deseine, 1791, Plaster cast in the Conciergerie, Paris, of the original terracotta bust in the Musée de la Révolution Française, Vizille, Photograph by the author, May 2018.

Figure 4 (right): Maximilien Robespierre, physionotrace *grand trait* (traced directly from his profile) probably by Jean-Baptiste Fouquet, 1792, Musée de Versailles [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Some modern historical romances perpetuate this camp caricature. Carolly Erickson's *The Hidden Diary of Marie Antoinette* (2005) calls Robespierre 'The Green Ghoul', 'the ugly little man in the bright green waistcoat and trousers, his hawk-like face a mass of pox scars, his strange light eyes looking huge behind thick spectacles', a 'vain, foppish, dangerous man, a man who wore lace at his neck and wrists, a powdered wig and high-heeled shoes in the old court style' (Erickson 2005, 324-25). This suggests she has not seen his portraits from life (figs 3 and 4; see also Gilchrist 2018). A well-groomed, middle-class professional, he wore fine linen, not lace; his shoes (visible in Boilly's 1783 presumed portrait, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille) were fashionably flat. He attracted female fans, who cheered him on from the Jacobin Club galleries, wore his picture in jewellery and prayed for him during his illnesses – earning his rivals' jealousy (Shusterman 2014, 130-32).

Robespierre's visual feminisation has influenced depictions of his sexuality. His private life was unremarkable: he corresponded flirtatiously with his sister's friends, was jilted by his aunt's stepdaughter, and later grew close to Éléonore Duplay, his landlord's daughter. Her sister and his physician believed they intended to marry. However, popular history, fiction and film feed off each other

to depict him as either a pathologically puritanical automaton (Carlyle's 'Formula') or a camp gay stereotype. His colleague Saint-Just is prettified as an androgynous 'Archangel of Terror', sometimes wearing jewellery, 'to discredit his personality by questioning his manhood' (Vinot 1985, 14). Although both young men had known relationships with women, fiction and drama began implying a clichéd pretty boy/middle-aged man dynamic (there was barely a decade between them, but casting exaggerated this). This reached an international audience in Andrzej Wajda's film *Danton* (1983) (loosely based on Stanisława Przybyszewska's play), in which Danton – depicted as a hard-drinking womaniser – berates Robespierre:

Look at yourself! You don't drink wine! You faint at the sight of a naked sword! And they say you've never screwed a woman! So?... You want the happiness of men and you're not even a man.

Wajda's Robespierre spurns Éléonore for Saint-Just, who gives him flowers (Huet 1997, 162-64). *Danton*'s art-house credentials lent it more weight than a Hollywood blockbuster. While its relationship to 1980s Polish politics is acknowledged (see Belissa and Bosc 2013, 290), it reinforced established *literary* stereotypes about the characters and masculinity.

What underpins these is an elision of political power with male potency. During the 1989 bicentenary, Marcel Debarge, a Socialist politician, claimed, 'I like Danton because I have always had a weakness for people who live, who screw' (Huet 1997, 163; Kaplan 1995, 449). In Robespierre's native Arras, the President of the Chamber of Commerce decried his 'abnormal ascetic aspect', 'having no relations with women' (Kaplan 1995, 455). Power is seen as the business of 'real' men – defined, disturbingly, via Danton's literary image, as heavy drinkers who frequent prostitutes. As Erika Vause writes,

Robespierre's supposed lack of masculinity makes him unable to govern properly and thus compels him to set up an 'unnatural' dictatorship. The movie *Danton* goes a step further in its extreme, pervasive and nearly neurotic homophobia. In this portrayal Robespierre is not only 'unmasculine' but also homosexual. This, and this alone, is the reason Danton deserves to rule instead (Vause 2003).

This is most explicit in a French novel, Dominique Jamet's *Antoine et Maximilien, ou, La Terre sans la vertu* (1986). Described by one reader, Lilas Mousset, as 'to Wajda's *Danton* what *Fifty Shades of Grey* is to *Twilight*' (Mousset 2016), it portrays Robespierre as a misogynistic homosexual, paedophile and serial killer. Unlike Shelby's market-driven pornographic caricature of Conrad of Montferrat, Jamet's purpose is ideological – his brother was former Vice-President of *Le Front National*. His target is his characters' *political* potency. Robespierre and Saint-Just even feature as a couple in a purportedly non-fiction German anthology of 'gay villains', Eric Walz's *Schwule Schurken* (2002). Their pairing has inspired online female 'slash' writers and artists to

romanticise it, often using a manga or animé aesthetic (Belissa and Bosc 2013, 292), but it is difficult to see a positive value for women in appropriating homophobic stereotypes, further marginalising female characters.

A few writers have engaged with female perspectives. Joanne S Williamson's young adult novel *Jacobin's Daughter* (1956) depicts Robespierre and his circle fairly sympathetically, using the memoirs of his girlfriend's sister, Élisabeth Le Bas (née Duplay). However, she dilutes Élisabeth's politics, misrepresenting some relationships to avoid alienating Cold War-era American readers. Her fictional Élisabeth dislikes Saint-Just, describing him as 'a horrid boy' (Williamson 1956, 118), although Élisabeth's own memoirs suggest that she valued him as a friend of her husband, to whose sister he was engaged; she later bought his pastel portrait, now in the Musée Carnavalet. Williamson relates the tragedy of Thermidor by directly quoting Carlyle. Perhaps maintaining Élisabeth's first-person narration would have been too harrowing for teenaged readers, including her husband's suicide, her sister's beloved 'Max' being shot in the face and executed after a seventeen-hour agony, the whole Duplay family, including Élisabeth and her baby, being imprisoned and their mother's murder or suicide in her cell. Williamson's decision also confirms English-language writers' difficulty in escaping Carlyle – even in 1950s America, he defined the Revolution's literary landscape.

The Duplays fare worse in Hilary Mantel's in *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992). As Mantel's first novel, written in the mid-1970s but not published until later, it reflects the historiography of its time and a very young novelist's emotions. While her male characters are rendered sympathetically, her hostility to the Duplay sisters is reminiscent of young fan fiction writers treating canonical girlfriends as rivals, and is perhaps also influenced by Charlotte Robespierre's memoirs – herself jealously possessive of her brothers. Mantel depicts Éléonore as 'an unfortunate girl, plain, drab and pretentious' (401), who calculatingly seduces Maximilien (540–44). Desmoulins fantasises about smothering her with a cushion (446). Novelists and film-makers sometimes convince themselves of their own inventions because of their imaginative investment in them, which becomes a problem when they venture into non-fiction. Reviewing a biography of Robespierre, Mantel claims, "Éléonore thought she was loved," said a fellow-student, "but really she only scared him" (Mantel 2000). She bases this on the English translation of Lenôtre's 1895 *Paris Révolutionnaire, Paris in the Revolution* (1925, 28), which draws on Albertine Clément-Hémery's memoirs, but Mantel distorts the context: it was royalist *fellow art students*, not Maximilien, who allegedly feared Éléonore for political reasons (Clément-Hémery 1832, 14 and 32). Her 'plain' Éléonore derives from Lenôtre's description of her portrait as having 'coarse features, a common appearance, thick lips' (Lenôtre 1925, 27). The original pastel (Musée Carnavalet, fig 5) shows a dignified beauty, but Lenôtre, writing when it was still in family hands, had perhaps

only seen a poor-quality photograph, like that in Hippolyte Buffenoir's *Les portraits de Robespierre* (Buffenoir 1910, pl. 71).



Figure 5a & 5b: *Éléonore Duplay*, pastel, possibly a self-portrait, Musée Carnavalet, Paris 5a: [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons; 5b: from Buffenoir, *Les portraits de Robespierre*, 1910.

Mantel especially vilifies *Élisabeth*. While trying to avoid historical clichés about her male characters, she seems to have decided she needed a villain, so took up the stereotyped *femme fatale* who feigns innocence – and gave her a real woman's name. She has Charlotte Robespierre tell Maximilien, “That little horror *Élisabeth* looks at men as if – I can't describe it. If any harm ever came to her, it wouldn't be the man I'd blame” (Mantel 1992, 558). In fact, *Élisabeth* was the only one of the Duplays whom the possessive and jealous Charlotte claimed to like. Mantel has her try to seduce Desmoulins, who regards her as a ‘practising rapist’ (449-51), and contribute to Danton's death with a false accusation of rape, casting doubt on her own child's paternity:

“Are you – let's be quite clear – are you telling me Danton raped you?”

“I struggled for as long as I could.” She began to cry (Mantel 1992, 824).

Élisabeth herself wrote that, while staying with a friend, Madame Panis, to recuperate from illness, they visited Danton at Sèvres:

He told her I appeared unwell, that what I needed was a good boyfriend to restore me to health. He had one of those repulsive forms that are

scary. He approached me, wanting to put his arm around my waist and kiss me. I repulsed him forcefully, although still quite weak...

I urgently begged Madame Panis not to bring me back to that house again; I told her this man had said such frightful things to me, such as I had never heard. He had no respect for women, still less for the young (Stéfane-Pol 1900, 108-09).

Rape is not implied, nor did Élisabeth contribute to his execution. Unfortunately, for Anglophone readers, *A Place of Greater Safety* is more accessible than Élisabeth's untranslated memoirs, as Williamson's *Jacobin's Daughter* is out-of-print and expensive. Her reputation is thus defined, and damned, by Mantel.

Mantel (who studied law, not history) appeared on a BBC documentary, *Terror! Robespierre and the French Revolution* (2009), with Simon Schama, whose book for the 1989 bicentenary, *Citizens*, drew mainly on his 1970s research, and the philosopher Slavoj Žižek. In many respects, it mirrored the historical interpretation behind the BBC's 1998 *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, including its questionable Soviet analogies (Tibballs 1998, 15-21, 54-55), partly coloured by Wajda's *Danton* and by the bicentenary coinciding with the Soviet bloc's implosion. (As Steven Laurence Kaplan noted, many of the bicentenary's controversies 'really concerned the gods that failed the twentieth century, not the gods athirst in the eighteenth'; Kaplan 1995, 482). The only current French Revolution expert, Marisa Linton, appeared for barely a couple of minutes. Low-budget dramatised scenes halved the Committee of Public Safety from twelve to six. As Larissa MacFarquhar described Mantel's approach in *A Place of Greater Safety*, 'She wrote little about ideas. For her, the politics of the revolution had to do with tactics and personal power' (Macfarquhar 2012). In consequence, on screen, she infantilised Saint-Just, neutering his ability as an orator and formulator of political ideology:

he's the classic rebellious teenager who's not that long out of his teenage years and he's playing out his own psychological battles, but suddenly he's playing this game with the lives of thousands of people. The Revolution is allowing him to play it out on mass scale... It's hard for us to realise what people at the time found so impressive about him. We think, why didn't they just call his bluff and say 'Sit down, child!'?

She ignored his military experience: a man nearing twenty-seven with front-line service is no 'child'. Moreover, Henry VIII, whom Mantel has discussed in *Wolf Hall*-related documentaries, became king at eighteen, but she has never suggested telling him, 'Sit down, child!'

The programme was shortlisted for the Grierson History Award and nominated for the Royal Television Society History Award. Subject specialists were less enthusiastic. Peter McPhee has criticised it because it 'explicitly elided

Robespierre's name with the Terror and likened France to the Gulag and the Third Reich':

In our own times the use of the terms 'Terror' and 'war on Terror' have become so highly charged that a calm consideration of French revolutionaries in 1793-94 who adhered to a policy of 'terror until the peace' has become almost unachievable. Fanciful parallels have been drawn between Robespierre and Tony Blair on the one hand and Osama Bin-Laden on the other... The Terror was not his work, but a regime of intimidation and control supported by the National Convention and 'patriots' across the country (McPhee 2012, 229-30).

As one of the more recent documentaries, repeated several times on BBC4, it nevertheless informed some British press responses to the *Assassin's Creed: Unity* controversy in 2014.

Documentaries and Dinosaurs: common threads, conclusions and questions

The legacies of Scott and Runciman's treatments of Conrad of Montferrat and of Carlyle, Dickens and Orczy's depictions of French Revolutionaries demonstrate some of the problems in the interrelationship between historical fiction and historiography – between Browning's 'picturesque historians' and novelists. Non-fiction, especially at the popular level, absorbs fictional interpretations and images, either consciously or subliminally, perhaps from childhood reading. Entrenched, this colours further generations of fiction. It also exposes underlying ethical problems in fictional use of real-life characters and in the media's blurring of distinctions between history and fiction.

Ever since Scott's disputes with Mills, some historical novelists and dramatists have attempted to assert themselves over historians, even over their subjects. Sardou, author of Irving's stage hit *Robespierre*, demonstrated in *La Maison de Robespierre* (1895) that the Duplays' house survives within a much-extended building. So far, so good, but after recalling meeting Élisabeth Le Bas in the 1840s, he depicted her as a self-deluding dupe *because* her recollections contradict her friends' established characterisations (Sardou 1895, 73-76). He republished the same piece as a preface to Élisabeth's memoirs, which her grandson-in-law edited in 1900 (Stéfane-Pol 1900, ix-xi). He did not examine the *literary* basis of the characterisations he upheld, or question his own attribution of a fictional aristocratic former mistress and son to Robespierre. Interestingly, he was the dedicatee of Lenôtre's *Paris révolutionnaire* (1895), which Mantel seems to have used in English translation.

Mantel is one of several novelists with little or no academic background in history who take precedence over scholars in television documentaries *because* they have written best-selling fiction – in her case, on the French Revolution and Henry VIII. Philippa Gregory (English literature PhD: *The Popular Fiction*

of the *Eighteenth-Century Commercial Circulating Libraries*) has presented documentaries on the Wars of the Roses and on slavery, and appeared on *Time Team*. These appearances 'legitimise [her] as an author and ensures that the reader feels a sense of authority and authenticity' (de Groot 2010, 63). It is unclear how far this is because broadcasters wish to appear 'popular', fearing accusations of intellectual elitism, or whether academics refuse invitations in fear of being edited to the point of misrepresentation to create 'soundbites'. Either way, it limits opportunities for new scholarship to reach a wider audience.

This use of novelists may make sense in generating viewing figures. However, teaching in adult education, I found some students became defensive when faced with un-learning information from schooldays, films or novels. Popular non-fiction and fiction encourage emotional investment more overtly than academic works, with childhood reading having a long-term impact. As Christopher Tyerman writes,

Attitudes to the past are often conditioned by early perceptions, even, perhaps especially, if these are subsequently revised or rejected. My acquaintance with crusading began with images of heroic but misguided knights in the marvellously vivid, tendentious, but far from unintelligent, illustrated Ladybird History series of the 1950s and 1960s. Such pictures stay etched on the retina of memory (Tyerman 2011, xi).

These pictures are difficult to dislodge, the more so when drawn from culturally embedded 'classics' by writers such as Scott, Dickens or Orczy, even in abridged or comic-book form, and reinforced by equally 'classic' film or television adaptations. Computer games add another layer of involvement because of their interactivity – in directing the actions of a character within the narrative, the player becomes an active participant.

Riley Black, writing for *The Smithsonian* (2012), shows how resentment at changing 'what everyone knows' affects even historical representations of *animals*, regarding claims that dinosaurs' appeal has been 'ruined' by discoveries about their feathers. In comments on Robin McKie's 2017 article in *The Observer* on dinosaur behaviour, one reader, Dane Sanzen, claims that scientists had betrayed his childhood self by letting him invest in what he calls 'junk data', although it was based on the evidence then available:

Dinosaurs were beloved by kids, kids cared about them, devoured books (real books even, written by academics) about them, bought representations of them. The one field of study that spoke to everyone was based on junk data... It (decades of myth represented as likely fact) was never needed. Nobody needed to sloppily fill kids['] head[s] full of wonderment and then take [it] away (Comments under McKie 2017).

Given such responses, in a competitive publishing market, it is perhaps safer financially for popular histories and historical fiction to perpetuate familiar narratives and stereotypes, even when based on superseded research. Academic

publishers can afford to take greater risks; their smaller readership is more likely to be excited than resentful at having assumptions challenged.

Market-driven conservatism is further reinforced when subjects are framed within genre conventions. The cases examined here are generally forced into ‘swashbuckling adventure’ or ‘historical romance’ moulds, with their own rules of narrative and characterisation. Genre expectations include clearly defined heroes and villains, ideological and philosophical debates reduced to personality clashes and ethnic and gender stereotypes used as shortcuts in characterisation, instead of engaging with the complexity of real human beings in other times and cultures. Erickson’s *The Hidden Diary of Marie Antoinette* is an extreme example of an academic ‘writing down’ to the expectations of historical romance fiction, while her publicity uses her authorship of *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* to boost her credibility. Popular non-fiction works, such as royal *vies romancées*, follow similar lines, assimilating historical figures to fictional stereotypes to make them marketable to a non-academic audience.

Nationalist expectations in popular narratives lead to further stereotyping. In the Third Crusade, although Richard I was, as Stubbs pointed out, ‘no Englishman that we should be concerned to defend him on national grounds’ (*Itinerarium* 1864, xvii-xviii), fiction and popular history assimilated him because he was king. Anglophone novelists surrounded him with supporting characters to appeal to their readers: Scott’s Sir Kenneth is revealed to be David, Earl of Huntingdon, one of Richard’s Scottish cousins; Stables and Welch supply Anglo-Norman viewpoint characters. With Saladin idealised according to Enlightenment tradition, villainy had to be delegated elsewhere. Conrad, in particular, was forced into the ‘wicked Italian’ stereotype of the Gothic novel. English-language depictions of the French Revolution were coloured by the wars of 1793-1815 and fears of social unrest, such as Chartism, and the wars and revolutions of the early twentieth century (for Orczy, her parents’ experience of a peasant rising in Hungary also contributed). The use of ‘British saviour’ heroes relegated French characters to supporting roles as victims or villains in their own history. Williamson and Mantel challenge that, despite other problems in their work.

However, to perpetuate historical clichés, myths or superseded interpretations in the belief that the audience *expects* them is to fail that audience. Authors, as well as readers, need to question assumptions created by their own childhood reading, even – perhaps especially – of beloved classics. Ethnic and gender stereotypes from nineteenth and early twentieth-century historical fiction still infiltrate and influence popular perceptions of history. After over sixty years, popular works on the Crusades still mine Runciman as a substitute primary source. Orczy’s *Scarlet Pimpernel* still looms large in English-language depictions of the French Revolution through film and television adaptations, and a Broadway musical. A recent pantomime version trivialised the Revolution as a threat to

cute puppet poodles (Wiegand 2018). While some readers/viewers are reluctant to engage with ideas or narratives that challenge those with which they grew up, others are open to the excitement of new discoveries and/or interpretations. In the case of the feathered dinosaurs, although some felt betrayed, others were thrilled that dinosaur descendants still live among us as birds, and are prepared to take wing with them into the world of new knowledge.

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Fantastical History: Dreams in The Roman Mysteries

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Abstract: *When it comes to dreams and prophecies, where is the dividing line between realist historical fiction and historical fantasy? This paper explores Caroline Lawrence's use of prophetic dreams in her historical detective series for children, The Roman Mysteries, and asks how and why the author is able to weave a fantastical element of this nature into a realist series. This allows us to consider wider questions concerning what sets fantasy apart as a genre and how historical fiction in particular can embrace certain types of genre slippage without losing its essentially realist identity.*

Keywords: *Romans, Roman Mysteries, children's literature, fantasy, genre, historical detective fiction*

This paper is about a meeting-point of genres; a literary crossroads at which fantasy, history, religion and literature are combined. It started with a simple question – why did one particular author include Greco-Roman style prophetic dreams in a series of otherwise mimetic historical novels for children?

The initial impetus for this article came out of a short e-mail correspondence with children's author Caroline Lawrence some years ago. I was researching the use of dream reports and dream sequences in Greek and Latin literature of the Roman period (eventually resulting in the publication of *Dreams and Dreaming in the Roman Empire: Cultural Memory and Imagination*; Harrisson 2013). Lawrence includes several dream sequences in her series of historical children's detective stories, *The Roman Mysteries*. Several are prophetic and some even revive the ancient literary trope of the message dream, which tends to be more rare in modern literature. I asked her why she included these dream sequences and she replied:

I decided to give Jonathan prophetic dreams because it's the closest historical fiction can come to magic or fantasy. The ancient Romans believed in signs and wonders, horoscopes and dreams. I was partly inspired by biblical dreams and visions and as Jonathan is the most spiritual I thought he'd be the best one. Also, he's a pessimist and the weight of prophetic dreams can help add to his burden.

In fact, all the children except Lupus have dreams. Flavia dreams of Hercules in the *Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina*, Nubia dreams of her traumatic capture and death of her family in several books, and Jonathan also

has a kind of out of body experience in *The Pirates of Pompeii* where he catches a glimpse of Paradise.

Dreams are a useful way of recapping, prefiguring and showing the emotional state of the character (Lawrence, e-mail to Harrisson, July 12 2009).

Lawrence refers to several different factors in her choice to use prophetic dreams:

- The desire to include an element of fantasy in otherwise mimetic books.
- The fact that some ancient Romans believed in the significance of omens and some dreams.
- The Judaeo-Christian tradition of divine dreams and the spiritual aspect of prophetic dreams.
- The usefulness of dreams in indicating character, both through prophetic dreams and the character's reactions to them, and more internal, emotionally-based dreams.

This last factor, though interesting, is beyond the scope of this paper. The others, however, place dreams as a literary device at a crossroads between fantasy and reality and between history and modernity.

Defining fantasy as a genre is notoriously difficult, but in this paper we will draw on the definitions suggested by Farah Mendlesohn, Edward James and John Clute (see below) to examine this very particular form of genre slippage. Prophetic dreams are fantasy (in generic terms); but they are also reality (for ancient Romans); which implies fantasy (for modern readers); but perhaps, again, reality (for Christian or other religious or spiritually inclined readers). This paper uses Lawrence's books as a case study to argue that prophetic dreams are uniquely well placed to allow for the kind of genre-slippage Lawrence refers to ('the closest historical fiction can come to magic or fantasy'), especially in historical fiction set in the Classical past.

The Roman Mysteries (published 2001-2009) are a series of seventeen children's detective stories set in the ancient Roman world during the reign of the Emperor Titus (79-81 CE). The series follows a group of four young children of roughly the same age as the book's presumed readership (the books are middle-level, on which see Crumpler and Wedwick 2011, 66-68; although British children do not usually attend a separate middle school, the concerns of middle-level literature are broadly similar in the United Kingdom). The four protagonists are; Flavia, a middle-class Roman girl, the group's leader and self-styled 'detective'; Jonathan, her Jewish-Christian neighbour; Nubia, initially Flavia's slave and later her freedwoman, who was captured in Africa and her family killed, and Lupus, the youngest, whose tongue was ripped out by his uncle after he witnessed the murder of his father. A series of arc plots plays out

across the seventeen books, but each novel also follows an individual ‘mystery’, so they can be read out of order. There are two spin-off series; *The Roman Mystery Scrolls* (2012-2013), for younger children, and *The Roman Quests* (2016-2018), for older readers.

The author, Caroline Lawrence, studied Classics at Berkeley and Classical Art and Archaeology at Newnham, Cambridge, at undergraduate level; she studied Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College, London at postgraduate level, and she taught Latin, French and art for primary school children (*The Roman Mysteries* 2015). Lawrence is, therefore, familiar with (and passionate about) the primary sources for the period in which her stories are set. Having grown up in America, she describes the initial idea for the series as ‘Nancy Drew in ancient Rome’ (Flavia is the Nancy Drew analogue) (*The Roman Mysteries* 2015).

Taking the three factors in the choice to include prophetic dreams under consideration here in reverse order, we will consider first the Judaeo-Christian tradition of divine dreams.

Dreams are one of the few aspects of pagan religion shared with ancient Judaism, and that survived into Christianity. Divine and prophetic dreams appear in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible. Unlike other forms of divination, prophetic dreams are not condemned, but are usually seen as a message from God (see for example Genesis 20.3-7; Genesis 28.10-22; Genesis 31.10-13; Genesis 37.2-47.12; 1 Kings 3.4-15; 2 Chronicles 1.16-12; Matthew 1.20-24; Matthew 2.12-16; Matthew 2.19-23; Matthew 27.19). At one point, Yahweh specifically states that He speaks to prophets through dreams (Numbers 12.6-8). A significant proportion of Christians today believe in the possibility of divine dreams – for example, a contemporary Southern Baptist congregation surveyed in 2007 were asked whether they agreed that ‘Dreams sometimes foretell the future or reveal hidden truth’; 43.5% agreed, 40.3% disagreed, while 16.1% had no opinion (Dougherty et. al. 2009, 330).

There is an identifiable genre, particularly in North American literature, of ‘Christian fiction’, which includes both mimetic fiction and fantasy. ‘Christian fiction’ grew to prominence in the United States through the 1990s and includes self-help books and mimetic fiction for both children and adults, some of it including religious experiences, as well as more ‘fantasy’ style narratives of the afterlife or the end of the world (see further Christopherson 1999, 440). However, not all novels that deal with Christian themes are ‘Christian fiction’. The works of Christian authors such as CS Lewis or JK Rowling, for example, while including substantial Christian allegorical material, do not fall under this category, because they are written for and marketed to a general audience, not an exclusively Christian one. The term ‘Christian fantasy’, as used by Brian Stableford, more accurately reflects these works – it encompasses religious fiction that uses allegory or that deals with the afterlife and includes works

dealing with heaven and hell, such as CS Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, as well as *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Stableford 1997, 191; on heaven in contemporary Anglophone literature, see further Tate 2009). Stableford's sub-category, however, is a scholarly construct used to categorise fantasy fiction, unlike 'Christian fiction', which is a sub-genre recognised by book-sellers and publishing marketing teams.

The Roman Mysteries are not 'Christian fiction' in the sense that they are not marketed as such and they are aimed at a wide, not exclusively Christian, readership. However, the series does feature numerous Christian themes. Throughout most of the series a Christian worldview is presented through the Jewish-Christian characters of Jonathan and Dr Mordecai. Jonathan and his family identify primarily as Jews, belonging to an early Christian sect and continuing to practise Jewish customs as well as Christian. Some stories have particularly overt Christian themes, such as the emphasis on the importance of forgiveness in *The Dolphins of Laurentum*, and Christian themes and language recur throughout *The Gladiators from Capua* (for example 'Jonathan was dead... and now he is alive' echoing Luke 15:32), as well as imagery drawing on depictions of Christians in the arena in films such as *Quo Vadis?* (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), culminating in Jonathan's near execution at a false hill in the arena topped with a false cave and a wooden cross, echoing the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus (Lawrence 2004, 176, 182, 186).

One of The Roman Mysteries (*The Prophet from Ephesus*) and one of the spin-off novels for older children (*Death in the Arena*, the third of The Roman Quests), are Christian conversion stories, and both feature significant, apparently divine, dreams. In *The Prophet from Ephesus*, the children travel from Egypt to Ephesus in search of Jonathan's baby nephew, Popo, who has been kidnapped. They do not find Popo, but they do encounter John the Evangelist, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. Jewish-Christian Jonathan is baptised and reaffirms his Christian faith, and Nubia and Lupus both convert to Christianity, leaving only Flavia to practise tradition Greco-Roman pagan religion.

The book opens with a 'vision' of a 'celestial battle', later revealed to be a recurring dream of Jonathan's that sends him off to Rome to warn the Emperor Titus that his brother Domitian is trying to kill him (Lawrence 2009a, 1, 181-184). This brings the other characters back to Rome and sets in motion the events of the final book in the series, *The Man from Pomegranate Street*. The dreams are contrasted with the 'voice' Jonathan hears throughout much of the book, which taunts him by insisting that all the bad things that have happened to the group and to Popo are his fault for accidentally starting a catastrophic fire in Rome (the historical fire of 80 CE, which takes place during *The Enemies of Jupiter*; see below). The voice is clearly stated to be 'inside his head' (Lawrence 2009a, 77) and when Flavia asks if it is his God, Jonathan replies "Definitely

not. If anything, it's the opposite – it's evil''' (Lawrence 2009a, 91). Jonathan is baptised and reaffirms his Christian faith about two thirds of the way through the novel, and this frees him from the voice, which he does not hear again (Lawrence 2009a, 164, 170). The dreams, on the other hand, Jonathan does not mind, even those that bring him back to the fire in Rome (Lawrence 2009a, 143). Dreams, it is implied, may come from God – unlike the whispering voice that seems to want to drive him to suicide (a mortal sin in Christian theology), saying 'why don't you just die?' (Lawrence 2009a, 77).

Jonathan interprets his dream as a reference to Titus and Domitian, but *The Man from Pomegranate Street* reveals that Titus was not, in fact, murdered by Domitian (and leaves his possible murder unsolved). The significance of Jonathan's dream is not revealed until the spin-off series, *The Roman Quests: Death in the Arena*, published eight years later. In this story, Roman teenager Ursula gets involved with a cult group of Druids in Britannia, presented as broadly analogous to the hippie counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s. She takes a 'potion' and gains the ability – so she believes – to enter into the animals around her, resulting in a fantastical sequence with distinct similarities to the young Wart's apprenticeship in the form of various animals in TH White's *The Sword in the Stone* (Lawrence 2017, 17-29; White 1996 [1939], 42-50, 76-86, 126-136 171-175, 194-206). While her brother Juba is sceptical, Ursula is able to 'prove' the reality of her experience by having witnessed the arrival of her other brother, Fronto, as a bird, almost bringing the book entirely over into the realm of historical fantasy (Lawrence 2017, 33).

Over the course of the book, this Druidic fantasy becomes a Christian conversion narrative, with a similar structure to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (but resulting in Christian conversion rather than conversion to Isis). Ursula and the others are looking for Jonathan. When they find him, Christian Jonathan exorcises the animal spirits that he is able to see within Ursula (Lawrence 2017, 178). Towards the novel's climax, Ursula experiences fever dreams of fighting in a gladiatorial arena, similar to those reported by early Christian martyr Perpetua in her *Passio* (dreaming of herself in the arena; *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 10; Lawrence 2017, 169-170). These dreams guide Ursula through the story's climactic events and end with her conversion to Christianity and becoming Jonathan's apprentice as a healer, having recovered from the seizures she had been suffering after taking the potion (Lawrence 2017, 213-217, 226, 230).

It is Ursula and her siblings who finally find Jonathan's nephew Popo (whose original full name was 'Philadelphus', 'one who loves his brother'), who has been adopted by British Druids and is living under the name Raven. By the time Jonathan is finally reunited with his nephew, a series of events have resulted in Raven and his long lost twin brother Castor (originally named 'Soter', 'Saviour') being pitted against each other in a fight to the death in the

arena. This, finally, fulfils Jonathan's dream of two brothers representing 'Castor and Pollux... Dark against Light. Good against Evil. Ice against Fire' struggling against each other, as the heroic Castor fights his Druid brother who has taken the name of a dark coloured bird (Lawrence 2009a, 181; 2017, 210-212). It is Ursula's actions that save the twins from having to kill each other (Lawrence 2017, 213-216). The two Christian conversion stories are therefore entwined together by Jonathan's prophetic dreams.

However, Christian Jonathan is not the only character to experience divine dreams in *The Roman Mysteries*, nor are dreams the only form of accurate prophecy represented. There is some literary precedent for accurate prophecies in novels set in ancient Rome thanks to Robert Graves' influential historical biographical novel, *I, Claudius* (1934), which opens with a set of fictional Sibylline verses (Graves 1941 [1934], 12-17). As Antony Keen has pointed out, the significant thing about these prophecies is not just that Claudius reports prophecies that later turned out to be true – the law of coincidences suggests that, in a world full of prophecies, this must sometimes happen. But Claudius' Sibylline prophecies also refer to events surrounding the publication of Graves' novel (within the fiction, as Claudius' autobiography) and the reign of Nero and end of the Julio-Claudian line, events which Claudius could not possibly be aware of (Keen 2009). These prophecies are designed to foreshadow known later history for the reader and provide them with a sense of superiority over the hapless characters through their better knowledge – as such, they must be proved to be accurate, regardless of whether or not author and reader would consider this likely in real life.

The *Roman Mysteries* also include an accurate prophecy from a famous ancient oracle, in this case the Delphic Oracle. In *The Fugitive from Corinth*, following an attack which left her father wounded, Flavia is convinced that he has been cursed, contrary to the doctor's opinion that he is suffering from amnesia as the result of a blow to the head (Lawrence 2005, 28, 38). It is the Delphic Oracle who points out the truth, that no one has tried to kill her father (they were trying to kill her tutor, Aristo) and who prophesies that he will recover himself when it rains from a clear sky (eventually revealed to be a reference to Flavia crying before he wakes up; Lawrence 2005, 123, 206-207). Farah Mendlesohn has observed that in quest fantasy prophetic visions often go unchallenged (Mendlesohn 2008, 44) and Diana Wynne Jones' dryly witty *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* clearly states that 'all Prophecies come true' including 'dreams and visions' (Wynne Jones 1996, 148) The same is true of prophecies and vision across several forms of fiction (see Harrisson 2013, 126) and so it is true here also – the pagan Delphic Oracle is entirely accurate. The preferred form of prophecy in the *Roman Mysteries*, however, is dreams.

The *Roman Mysteries* incorporate several different types of dream, just as ancient literature does; some deliver some kind of omen or prophecy, some offer

a vision of the future, some are anxiety or wish-fulfilment dreams reflecting the dreamer's state of mind. Prophetic dreams in ancient literature took on two main forms – symbolic dreams (in which various images, words or actions in the dream metaphorically represent real life future events) and message dreams (in which the dreamer is given a message by a god or divine figure, usually giving them orders, occasionally predicting the future; see Harrison 2013, 57-68). In modern literature, however, message dreams have increasingly gone out of fashion. While symbolic dreams may be considered plausible, at least to the extent that readers are willing to suspend their disbelief and accept them in a narrative, message dreams are not. The exception, of course, is in fantasy literature, though even there direct message dreams of the type found in ancient literature are rare. However, the plots of two of *The Roman Mysteries* are driven by message dreams; *The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina* and *The Enemies of Jupiter*.

Message dreams are useful because they provide a clear mechanism to drive the plot. We have already seen that Jonathan mis-interprets his symbolic dream about the twins fighting, and it is years, in both story-time and real time, before the true meaning of the dream is revealed. In ancient literature, message dreams were far more likely to provoke action from the dreamer, while symbolic dreams were used more often for foreshadowing and dramatic irony (see Harrison 2013, 131). Whereas symbolic dreams are usually hard to understand and very difficult to do anything about, message dreams usually suggest – indeed, stipulate – a particular course of action. This is especially useful to a novelist, as characters can be made to take actions as a result of message dreams that they would not otherwise take. This technique is used frequently in ancient Greco-Roman novels; for example, in *Chaireas and Kallirhoe*, Kallirhoe decides to go ahead with marriage to Dionysios because of appearances by Chaireas in her dreams (Chariton, *Chaireas and Kallirhoe*, 2.11), while in *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Sostratos is led to his daughter through dreams sent by Artemis (Achilles Tatius, *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, 7.14) and in *Daphnis and Chloe*, the lovers' foster parents are persuaded by dreams to send them out to the fields, where they will meet each other (Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, 1.7–8).

In *The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina*, Flavia comes to believe that her father's new girlfriend, Cartilia, is hiding a sinister secret, and that following a trail guided by the twelve labours of Hercules will lead her to uncover it. This belief is prompted by a dream that she has after her freedwoman Nubia has calmed down an escaped lion. Flavia dreams that Hercules tells her she has completed the first task, but must complete eleven more as he did, to atone for an offence that is the same as his (Lawrence 2003b, 69-70). Flavia misunderstands the message; she thinks it means she must prevent her father from marrying Cartilia, whereas in the end the tasks lead her to discover only that Cartilia is divorced rather than widowed, but genuinely loves her father. The 'offence,' which Flavia thinks is a reference to her disobeying her father by

refusing to get married, turns out to refer to the fact that shortly after her putative stepmother Cartilia takes her out dancing in the woods in the middle of an epidemic, Cartilia becomes ill herself and dies – thus Flavia has, like Hercules, killed her family, not by refusing to marry and have a family (for which there is still plenty of time) but by inadvertently being the partial cause of her potential stepmother's death. However, even though she misunderstood the dream (another classic trope of ancient literature), it is the message that drives the plot of the novel.

In *The Enemies of Jupiter*, Flavia and her friends try to interpret a message dream of the emperor Titus, but are unable to do so until it is too late. Titus has dreamed that Jupiter appeared to him and said, 'When a Prometheus opens a Pandora's box, Rome will be devastated' (Lawrence 2003c, 44-45). Titus believes that this 'devastation' refers to the plague the city is suffering under and he hopes that, if the children can work out who the 'Prometheus' is (this is understood to be a metaphorical reference) and what box he or she has opened, they will be able to close it again and the plague will end. In the end, however, it turns out that the phrase 'opens a Pandora's box' is a figure of speech similar to the modern 'open a can of worms,' and that the 'Prometheus' is actually Jonathan, who has already done so by writing to Titus suggesting his father be brought to Rome to treat plague victims (hoping to effect a reconciliation between his father and mother, who is Titus' slave) and who takes the name 'Prometheus' when he becomes a gladiator at the conclusion (Lawrence 2003c, 171). The 'devastation' is, in fact, the fire that sweeps through the city at the end of the book (and ends the plague).

The use of prophetic dreams in these two stories is very much in line with the use of prophecy in ancient literature. Prophecy determines action, but all the action succeeds in accomplishing is to bring about the prophecy, which is always completely accurate. In the ancient world, there was no division between 'fantasy' and 'realism,' so stories of this kind belonged to no special subset, but were simply part of literature, and indeed, history, with various historians and biographers including Herodotus, Suetonius and Plutarch making use of such dreams.

Accurate prophecies and prophetic dreams are also found frequently in modern fantasy literature both for adults and children, including (though by no means limited to) fantasy stories with a connection to the ancient world. The Percy Jackson series, for example, includes a number of prophetic dreams throughout the series. However, *The Roman Mysteries* are not written or marketed as fantasy, but as historical detective stories.

Some Roman-set detective novels for adults include historical supposedly prophetic dreams, but it is rare for the detective themselves to take any interest in them. In his historical mystery novel *Rubicon*, for example, Steven Saylor has his hero Gordinaus the Finder's son write to him about Caesar's dream of

having sex with his mother (Plutarch, *Caesar*, 32; Suetonius, *Divine Julius*, 7) but Gordianus himself has other things on his mind and make no comment (Saylor 1999, 360). Caesar's wife Calpurnia's historical dream is also featured and embellished, becoming recurring nightmares that last for years, in *The Triumph of Caesar*; Gordianus the hero, however, scoffs at the idea that dreams might be significant, telling her, 'I thought you were not the sort to act on dreams or omens' (Saylor 2008, 8) and although Calpurnia continues to be afraid, Caesar's death does not occur during this book (for the historical sources for Calpurnia's dream, see Appian, *Civil Wars*, 2.16.115; Plutarch, *Caesar*, 63; Suetonius, *Divus Julius*, 81.3; Valerius Maximus, 1.7.2; Velleius Paterculus, 2.57.2). Similarly, in Lindsey Davis' series of novels about Roman detective Marcus Didius Falco, a dream interpreter appears in one novel, *Saturnalia*, but the viewpoint of both author and first person narrator protagonist is spelled out clearly in the list of principal characters that appears in the novel's front matter, which reads, 'Pylaemenes offering Chaldean dream therapy (twaddle)' (Davis 2007). In historical detective stories, the detective, who focuses on looking for clues and evidence and avoids jumping to conclusions, is rarely interested in prophetic dreams.

In order to ensure that The Roman Mysteries remain essentially realistic and to keep them firmly within the historical detective subgenre, *The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina* plays down the more fantastical elements of the plot. Flavia's dream could be the product of her own subconscious, as she is surrounded by images of Hercules. Her actions are motivated by her own dream, which is plausible in a realist sense, as this does not require the dream to be accurate, only Flavia to be convinced by it. This reflects a not uncommon technique in historical fiction, of replicating the world-view of historical characters, without necessarily subscribing to it. What brings the use of the message dream here closer to fantasy is that, although Flavia concludes that the dream was false, it can be interpreted as true by the reader.

This sort of technique can also be found in ancient literature – for example, in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Iphigenia dreams that the earth shakes and she runs out of the house and sees the cornice, roof and pillars fall. One pillar is left, with yellow hair on it, and it speaks in a human voice, and Iphigenia gives it the rites given to strangers about to die in Tauris (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 43–55). Iphigenia believes that it was her brother Orestes that she consecrated with the rites, and that the dream indicates that he is dead (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 55–62). When Orestes appears alive, he immediately assumes that the dream was false after all (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 570–3). However, the dream has, in fact, come true; although Orestes is still alive, he has come to Tauris and Iphigenia has performed the rites of consecration as she usually does before the sacrifice of a Greek man, though in the event she recognizes him in time and they escape together (Euripides,

Iphigenia in Tauris, 43–55). The audience know that the dream was truly prophetic, even though the characters do not.

The Enemies of Jupiter is even closer to fantasy, and in some ways it is the closest of the series (excepting *Death in the Arena*) to a fantasy novel in tone, themes and plot structure. The narrative is driven by the attempt to interpret Titus' dream on the assumption that it is divine and prophetic and its divinity is not questioned, except by Jonathan on Christian grounds, who declares, 'I don't believe in pagan prophecies' (Lawrence 2003c, 47 – but see above on why we might assume Jonathan is mistaken here). The solution to the central 'mystery' of the book, which would more normally refer to the discovery of human activity through observation (the 'search for truth', as Jerome de Groot puts it; de Groot 2010, 126), is the revelation of the meaning of the dream, which is indeed revealed to be entirely accurate.

The book also features several other dreams, chiefly non-prophetic anxiety dreams; Flavia reassures Nubia that the man who sold her into slavery is not still alive, after Nubia has dreamed about him, explaining the Virgilian concept of the Gates of Horn and Ivory, with true dreams coming through the horn gate and false dreams through that of ivory (Lawrence 2003c, 89-90; Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.893-899). Nubia also has a fever dream in which she senses that Jonathan is in danger (Lawrence 2003c, 148). However, it is Titus' prophetic dream that is most significant. The link with fantasy as a genre is cemented with an appearance from the Ark of the Covenant, in which the Ark is described in such a way that it could be simply a very pretty box, or it could be the magical artefact that melts the faces of Nazis in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1981). When Nubia sees it, the narrative explains that she had seen nothing like it before:

Why Perhaps it was the pearly light, pouring down from above. Or the fact that three of the four walls in the room were painted gold. Whatever it was, the box seemed to be the source of the light (Lawrence 2003c, 108).

Jonathan warns his friends not to touch the box, so no one does – leaving the reader free to decide whether it really does have magical properties or not. Strictly speaking, the book remains realist and plausible, but in the imagination of the reader, especially a young fan of *Indiana Jones*, it becomes more and more like fantasy.

To talk of 'the closest historical fiction can come to magic or fantasy' is to talk about genre, a highly complex subject with a rich scholarly background (see Duff 2000 for an introductory reader including essential works on the subject by Bakhtin, Genette and Derrida). As far as the broader questions of what genre *is* are concerned, and even what historical fiction or fantasy fiction are (not to mention children's literature and mystery stories), the aspect of genre I would like to focus on here is that of audience expectation. 'Genres are... social

contracts between a writer and a specific public', according to Fredric Jameson (1981, 106). Farah Mendlesohn suggests 'Genre = codes + narrative techniques + audience' (Mendelsohn 2008, 229). Children's historical fiction is, in the words of John Stephens, 'essentially a realist genre' (1992, 202). A reader (child or adult) sitting down to read a historical detective story – already a blend of two genres – that is not marketed as historical fantasy expects to read mimetic fiction, devoid of supernatural elements. To betray that expectation is to risk betraying the trust of the reader and their ability willingly to suspend their disbelief. And yet, this does not happen. The reader accepts the intrusion of the fantastic and moves on. Why?

The closest the reader expects such a book to come to fantasy is in the description of story elements that the historical characters might view as fantastic, but the modern reader will not (see Stephens 1992, 84). Lawrence uses these techniques in her spin-off series for younger readers, *The Roman Mystery Scrolls*. There is no actual fantasy or even any slightly fantastical elements in *The Roman Mystery Scrolls*, but instead these books use language relating to monsters and other scary phenomena to spice up the story while maintaining absolute realism in the actual plot.

For example, in the first book in the series, *The Sewer Demon*, Lawrence plays on ancient beliefs and superstitions to create exciting sequences that nevertheless produce a mundane (if surprising) explanation in the end. The title refers to the 'demon' that a rich client of Floridius the soothsayer believes is haunting her house. About halfway through the book the protagonist, Floridius' apprentice Threptus, falls into Ostia's sewer and Chapter 6 ends with Threptus facing an unknown thing in the sewers, and the statement, 'He knew with terrible certainty that the thing in the water was a sewer demon' (Lawrence 2012, 46). However, the 'demon' floating towards Threptus turns out to be Floridius' satchel, hard to see in the dark sewer, while the 'demon' haunting their client's house turns out to be an octopus that had got into her toilet and well. In this story, Lawrence manipulates the ancient belief in demons and spirits to produce exciting sequences for her readers, while avoiding implying that there is any truth to such beliefs.

Actual fantasy content, however, is more unexpected, especially in books for children that are not marketed as fantasy stories. Perry Nodelman has suggested that children's literature may form a genre in its own right, beyond merely sharing an intended audience (Nodelman 2008, 242-243). Viewed this way, *The Roman Mysteries* are already triple-genre-ed as children's-historical-mystery before we ever bring fantasy into the equation. One of Nodelman's 'long list of shared characteristics' of children's literature is that the texts are, to a degree, didactic (Nodelman 2008, 81). Modern children's literature is not usually didactic in the same way as nineteenth century literature for children, which placed 'didacticism against pleasure... true stories against fantasy' (Rose

1984, 55). However, authors of historical fiction for children are usually aware that the historical fiction read by children is likely to shape their view of that particular period for the rest of their lives, with the result that there is, inevitably, a didactic dimension to their work. Rosemary Sutcliff, for example, suggested that ‘children can surely get a truer picture of the past if something that breathes life into the bare bones [of taught history] is given to them (Sutcliff 2001 [1989], 112). De Groot suggests that the historical novel in all its forms has often been considered broadly educational on some level, and in historical novels for children, this is a particularly important interpretative framework (de Groot 2010, 47-48, 90). Lawrence herself is clear that ‘I try to fit in as many facts as I can and make them as accurate as possible’, so that her books introduce children to Roman history as well as offering an enjoyable adventure (Harrison 2011).

This awareness of the potential significance of historical novels in shaping children’s world-views is not necessarily constrictive. Historical fantasy exists as a sub-genre in its own right, including in works for children. This group includes a number of well known works for children from across the last century, from Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906) to Joan Aiken’s counterfactual novel *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962), as well as numerous stories of King Arthur (see Shippey 2009). As noted above, Lawrence’s more recent work has taken even further steps towards the fantastical through Ursula’s use of Druidic magic. However, historical fantasy is rarely separated out from other fantasy novels for marketing purposes. As Elizabeth Wein has put it:

When people ask what kind of books I write, my honest answer is “sort of historical fantasy”—a categorization that is both evocative and apt, but doesn’t actually exist as a library shelf (Wein 2009, 163).

Historical fantasy is a separate genre – a different journey on the part of the writer, marketed differently to the reader. Wein described how her ‘agenda is different... from that of a true writer of historical fiction’ (Wein 2009, 167). Although the technical details are as accurate as possible, the placing of the story as fantasy allows the author to incorporate elements not just of magic but of folklore and tradition that an historian or even a writer of non-fantastical historical fiction would not include.

The closest historical fantasy gets to non-fantasy historical fiction is timeslip stories. These include both fantasy, such as Philippa Pearce’s *Tom’s Midnight Garden* (1958), Penelope Farmer’s *Charlotte Sometimes* (1969) or Helen Cresswell’s *Moondial* (1987) and science fiction, for example Susan Price’s *The Sterkarm Handshake* (1998) and its sequels, and it is not restricted to children’s literature (the popular *Outlander* series by Diana Gabaldon is a well known example aimed at adults). In a timeslip story, the only fantastical element may be the means by which a character travels in time (usually backwards, though there are exceptions, such as Françoise Elman’s French children’s novel *La*

Double Chance de Juliette, in which the protagonist escapes Nazi-occupied France by travelling forward in time; Elman 1992). The story then functions as an historical novel with a modern commentary, eliminating the need for historical characters to embrace anachronistically modern opinions in order to provide a sympathetic viewpoint character (as Anne Scott MacLeod has put it, the protagonists of historical novels for children often ‘experience their own societies as though they were time-travelers (*sic*), noting racism, sexism, religious bigotry, and outmoded belief as outsiders’, in an attempt to provide a sympathetic protagonist and a commentary on the past; MacLeod 1998). Lawrence’s own forthcoming novel, *Time Travel Diaries* book one, is her first complete historical fantasy, a timeslip story. However, the presence of a means of travelling through time means that it is always possible, if desired, to include further fantasy elements without breaking that ‘social contract’ with the reader about what sort of book the story is, since it already includes fantastical elements – in the fourth *Outlander* book, for example, the protagonist Claire encounters the ghost of another traveller in time (Gabaldon 1997, 354-355).

However, *The Roman Mysteries* do not go so far as to become historical fantasy, nor are they marketed as such. And yet, the inclusion of prophetic dreams takes them a step beyond simply using fantastical language to describe non-fantastical elements of a story. Following the precedent set by Graves, these dreams do bring an element of fantasy to these otherwise mimetic stories.

The place of supernatural and fantastical phenomena in historical fiction brings into sharp relief the issue of what fantasy fiction *is*, in the first place. Mendlesohn and Edward James offer four different methods for defining fantasy; by the way books are marketed by publishers and booksellers; by the definitions of academics and scholars working on fantasy fiction; by what has historically been understood to be ‘fantasy’, and, the ‘most obvious’ definition, ‘the presence of the impossible and the unexplainable’ (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 3-5). It is this ‘most obvious’ way of delineating fantasy that is of significance here – *The Roman Mysteries* are clearly not marketed as fantasy, nor studied as fantasy, nor have they been historically understood as fantasy.

John Clute suggests that fantasy literature tells a story which is ‘impossible in the world as we perceive it’, and further elaborates that ‘fantasy’ as a genre did not exist before the sixteenth century, because although stories were told which both their authors and readers considered to be impossible, this ‘perceived impossibility’ was not the point of the stories (Clute 1997, 338). On the existence of literature defined as ‘fantasy’ under this definition before the sixteenth century, Brett Rogers and Benjamin Stevens have pointed to the existence of several texts from the ancient world which deliberately present the impossible (Rogers and Stevens 2017, 8-9). Equally importantly, though, the question of what is or is not perceived to be possible in the world is not so

simple, neither for the world before the sixteenth century Enlightenment, nor after it.

The chief difficulty with this ‘most obvious’ definition is that relies on the idea of ‘the world as we perceive it’ – but, of course, different people perceive the world entirely differently. As Mendlesohn and James point out, temporal or geographical distance can result in a different world view. They point to *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as a work usually considered fantasy in a modern context, but considered ‘divinely inspired vision’ by its seventeenth century author, and to magic realist literature from Latin America and the American South, which reads as fantasy literature ‘to fantasy readers’ but is not written as such, but rather with a ‘firm sense’ of a supernatural world that exists along with the natural (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 3).

These examples focus on temporal or geographical distance, but beliefs are not held in the same way by a unified group in any place or at any point in history. For example, in 2007, a small Baptist congregation in Texas were surveyed about their beliefs on a range of theological issues including God, God’s judgment, heaven and hell, and New Age ideas and aspects of the paranormal (cited above). While there some issues on which 100% of the congregation agreed (the existence of God and of heaven), even major aspects of Christian theology did not provoke absolute universal agreement (7.8% of respondents only thought Satan ‘probably’ existed) while any issue that was not a fundamental aspect of Christian theology provoked varying levels of belief, including ideas about Armageddon, who might or might not get in to heaven, or haunted places (Dougherty et. al. 2009, 327-330).

It is true that there are certain ideas that may be rejected by a majority of the members of a particular group – the Southern Baptists almost (but not quite) universally rejected astrology, for example, with only 1.6% of respondents agreeing that astrology can foretell the future (Dougherty et. al. 2009, 330). In the Anglophone Western world in general, it is probably safe to say that a negligible number of people – if any – believe in the sort of magic you find in, say, the Harry Potter books, by which a witch or wizard can wave a wand and move an object or turn someone into an animal (this kind of magic is considered so unlikely in the general cultural imagination that questions in the type of surveys referred to here generally do not test for it). A certain amount of literary fantasy can be clearly placed under the category of things ‘impossible in the world as we perceive it’.

However, as we have already seen, a small but not insubstantial number of people in the contemporary Western world believe in the possibility of significant or prophetic dreams. This belief is not confined to the Christian population. A number of hypotheses have been put forward for the relationship, if any, between traditional or orthodox Christian beliefs and ‘unconventional’ beliefs or beliefs in ‘the paranormal’, a category which includes phenomena

such as ghosts, telepathy, UFOs, astrology, and, in some surveys, prophetic dreams. Several scholars have argued for a positive correlation between religious and paranormal belief, with those subscribing to one set of beliefs more likely to subscribe to the other (see for example Orenstein 2002, 309; McKinnon and others have argued that, while the correlation is largely positive, lack of church attendance is also a significant factor, making belief in the paranormal more likely; McKinnon 2003, Mencken et. al. 2009). Others have argued for a negative correlation, with paranormal belief in competition with traditional religiosity (see for example Bainbridge 2004, 393). Others still have argued that there is no correlation at all. For example, a 1998 poll from the Southern United States demonstrated no correlation – responses from those surveyed suggest that belief is more unpredictable and more personal than either model would suggest (Rice 2003, 105; see further Bader et. al. 2012, 706, for a summary of the scholarship in this area).

However significant the overlap with Christian belief is, there is data demonstrating that belief in the paranormal, though held by a minority, has not gone away. Data from the Southern Focus Poll, weighted to provide a national American sample, suggested that 33.3% of the United States population believe in astrology, while 42.1% believe in ghosts (Rice 2003, 100). Levels of belief in both conventional religious ideas and the paranormal in Britain are, on the whole, much lower than in the United States, but not non-existent; the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, for example, found that 50% of respondents believed in ‘a pattern of events as if they were meant to happen’ and 22% believed in ‘a feeling of being in contact with the dead’, though only 6% believed in ‘astrology as important’ (Glendinning 2006, 588). Outside the Anglophone world, in predominantly Catholic Italy, a 1994 survey suggested 31.5% of the population believed or partly believed in astrology (notably higher than the US or UK data), 28.2% believed or partly believed that communication with the dead was possible, and 16.7% believed or partly believed in palmistry. The lowest belief figures in the Italian survey were for ‘sorcery’, an area not included in the Anglophone surveys, with 8.7% expressing belief or partial belief (Bader et. al. 2012, 712).

Scientific explanations for these phenomena are available. Ghosts may be draughty windows, premonitions the result of paranoia, significant dreams a coincidence, near-death experiences hallucinations resulting from a traumatised brain (see for example Geiger 2009, 237-253; Shermer 2010 and Herman 2011 on the phenomenon of the ‘sensed presence’). John Allan Hobson has confidently declared that, thanks to sleep science, ‘the mystery of dreaming is largely stripped away, leaving the content nakedly open to understanding without complex interpretation’ (Hobson 2002, xiv).

However, no amount of theorising can definitively prove to those who believe in them that ghosts, visions and dreams are not exactly what they appear

to be. The 2005 Baylor Religion Survey in the United States suggested that 54.6% of the population agreed or strongly agreed that ‘dreams sometimes foretell the future or reveal hidden truths’ (Mencken et. al. 2009, 76). A few minutes browsing a shop selling scented candles and incense sticks will reveal several books such as Russell Grant’s *The Illustrated Dream Dictionary* (1995), Gillian Holloway’s *The Complete Dream Book* (2006) or Denise Linn’s *The Hidden Power of Dreams: The Mysterious Power of Dreams Revealed* (2009), which continue to make sales. Websites offering similar dream interpretations are even easier to find by spending just a few seconds on Google. Belief in all these phenomena, while by no means as high as it may once have been, can still be found in a small but by no means negligible proportion of the population in the Western world.

I want to propose a tripartite division of fantastical or supernatural elements that may be incorporated into the general fiction, whether mimetic or marketed as ‘fantasy’. The three main categories of what we might broadly call ‘the fantastic’ are, I suggest, the definitively not-possible, the almost certainly not-possible, and the probably not-possible. In the first category belong imaginative phenomena invented by specific authors. These are not only absolutely and definitively not possible in, to use Clute’s phrase, ‘the world as we perceive it’, but they have never been considered possible in any known period of history. In this category we find hobbits, marsh-wiggles, Borrowers and Bertie Botts’ Every-Flavour Beans. None of the fantastical elements incorporated into *The Roman Mysteries* come under this category.

In the second category, we find those phenomena that people in the past may have believed to be real, or at least possible; elves, vampires, dragons or the kraken, even the gods of religions that no longer have large numbers of followers in the modern world. As far as ‘the world as we perceive it’ is concerned, having explored, recorded and catalogued most of our planet and even a little beyond it, we now know that nowhere on earth can you find dragons of the sort that appear in Western folklore, or portals to the land of elves. There is no longer a space beyond the edge of the map where we imagine monsters live – we have circumnavigated the globe and not found them. *The Roman Mysteries* includes some elements of this type of fantasy but very few – the Ark of the Covenant and, from the spin-off series, the Druid ‘magic’ Ursula gets involved with are the chief examples.

The third category is a liminal category, existing somewhere in between the ‘possible’ and the ‘not possible’ in ‘the world as we perceive it’. In this category belong those phenomena that the majority of the population in the modern Western world consider ‘impossible’, but that a significant minority consider ‘possible’ – thus placing these *topoi* in a liminal space that is neither strictly fantastical, nor strictly mimetic. The use of dreams in *The Roman Mysteries* is designed take advantage of this liminal category. Because some people believe

in the possibility of these elements, their inclusion does not entirely break the mimetic illusion of reality in the novels. On the other hand, because many readers do not believe in the real possibility of these elements, they introduce a sense of magic or fantasy into the story, justified by the ancient belief in the possibility of such things.

Prophetic dreams are, then, uniquely well placed to offer authors of historical fiction an opportunity to introduce an element of fantasy into their work. As a phenomenon believed to be possible both by some people in the past, and by some people in the present, they straddle the line between fantasy and reality. Sceptical readers may scoff, but can suspend their disbelief to accept the world-view of the historical characters. Less sceptical readers, meanwhile, may embrace the possibility of these phenomena and consider them ‘possible’ elements in the world as they perceive it. Both are, in this way, able to enjoy a mimetic historical story with fantastical elements without feeling that the unspoken contract between author and reader promised by the novel’s genre has been broken.

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Historical Fiction: Towards A Definition

Bryony D. Stocker

Abstract: *This paper explores the origins and theoretical response to the historical novel. It touches on the nineteenth century split between academic history and historical fiction, which promoted an artificial opposition between history and fiction, and discusses the lack of scholarly definitions of the genre. Issues surrounding the classifications that are available are examined, before a new definition is proposed.*

Keywords: *historical fiction, historical novel, definition, postmodernism, historiography, H. White, J. De Groot, G. Lukács*

Early scholarship's impact on definitions of the historical novel

Although not the first critical study of historical fiction (Herbert Butterfield's *The Historical Novel: An Essay* was published in 1924), it is Lukács' book *The Historical Novel* (1937) which has arguably had the greatest impact on modern scholarship with regard to the historical novel. This Marxist study dated the birth of the genre specifically to Scott's *Waverley* (1814), and tasked the genre with explaining major social transformations, such as the rise of Hitler in Germany. Lukács, however, questioned whether any issues were unique to historical fiction, saying, 'one could go through all the problems of content and form in the novel without lighting upon a single question of importance which applied to the historical novel alone' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 242). If, as this statement suggests, there is little that is distinctive about the historical novel, and, therefore, no challenge to be met by the writer, other than that presented by any other type of novel, then it seems understandable that Lukács fails to define the genre. As a writer of historical fiction, my own practice leads me to disagree.

Fleishman's critical examination of the genre *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott and Virginia Woolf* (1971) offers the following definition:

Most novels set in the past – beyond an arbitrary number of years, say 40-60 (two generations) – are liable to be considered historical, while those of the present and preceding generations (of which the reader is more likely to have personal experience) have been called "novels of the recent past." Regarding substance, there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of "historical" events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters.

One further criterion is to be introduced on *prima facie* grounds. There is an obvious theoretical difficulty in the status of "real" personages in

“invented” fictions, but their presence is not a mere matter of taste. It is necessary to include at least one such figure in a novel to qualify as historical. The presence of a realistic background for the action is a widespread characteristic of the novel and many panoramic social novels are deep in history. The historical novel is distinguished among novels by the presence of a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person amongst the fictitious ones. When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel’s characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel (Fleishman 1971, 3-4).

The differentiation between texts set in the ‘recent past’ of which ‘the reader is more likely to have personal experience’ and texts which are ‘historical’ is interesting, in that it is the reader who is the focus. Looking at the position of the reader opens the possibility of contemporary novels becoming historical over time, as when the text was authored is not relevant. Butterfield disagrees:

although in a sense every novel tends to become in time a historical novel, and there will come a day when “Sonia” will be useful to the historian for a certain kind of information, yet a true “historical novel” is one that is historical in its intention and not simply by accident, one that comes from a mind steeped in the past (Butterfield 1924, 4-5).

That a novel must be *intended* to be an historical novel to be a ‘true’ representation of the genre makes the role of the author central. A novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* could be considered historical under Fleishman’s definition, but Austen might take issue with this as it was never intended to be an historical novel, but ‘pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in’ (Austen, quoted in Kasmer 2012, 1). Austen’s ‘I’ can be seen both as the author ‘I’ who writes, and the individual ‘I’ who experiences such ‘domestic Life’, making her work both contemporary and based on her own experience. Kasmer found correspondence that shows Jane Austen was asked by a proxy of the Prince Regent to write an historical romance based on his family line. Her response was a polite rebuff, on the basis that that she could not write such a novel to save her life (Kasmer 2012, 1). Austen’s juvenilia included *The History of England*, so she had experience of writing history, but did not choose to bring this into her novels (Kasmer 2012, 2). Fleishman does not consider the position of the writer, instead linking the ‘arbitrary number of years, say 40-60’ to the likelihood of this being a time the reader would have lived through (Fleishman 1971, 3). He is not bold enough to state that it must be outside the reader’s lived experience. This may be due to increasing lifespans requiring a gap of more than a hundred years between the period in the novel and publication, to ensure events would be outside living memory, and this is a step too far for Fleishman.

Fleishman’s next criterion is that the ‘plot must include a number of “historical” events’, and no rationale for this is given, beyond an ‘unspoken assump-

tion'. He may accept this, but the breadth of historical fiction precludes this as a requirement. The historical novel can bring to light events not previously within the public sphere, or use fictional situations to explore character, without this having an impact on its claim to be 'historical'. The demand that the novel includes 'real' people seems to be, within Fleishman's mind at least, a defining characteristic. He states that 'when the novel's characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel' (Fleishman 1971, 3-4). The requirement to include 'real personages' could also keep the historical novel from exploring marginalised groups and less well documented stories, as 'what the historical record has rendered invisible will remain so unless we avail ourselves of the power to fictionalize' (Kadish 2018).

What are the origins of the historical novel?

More recent studies by Maxwell (2009), Stevens (2010) and De Groot (2010), have identified examples of historical fiction older than Scott's *Waverley* (1814), and shown the development of the historical novel alongside the novel. (I have not included studies such as Hamnett 2011, which focuses on the nineteenth century, or others such as Wallace's *The Woman's Historical Novel*, 2008, which are only interested in a particular aspect of the genre).

Maxwell notes that most historical fiction appears 'after 1820 or so... thanks to the impact of Walter Scott' (Maxwell 2009, 1), but argues that its true origins lie in mid-seventeenth century France, in texts such as Madam de Lafayette's *Princess of Montpensier* (1662) and *Princess of Cleves* (1678) (Maxwell 2009, 12). Maxwell states that '[de] Lafayette pioneered the basic approach and the others worked out their own variations', listing Walter Scott amongst her 'followers' (Maxwell 2009, 12). Stevens, whose book, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, is based on the premise that the historical novel existed before Scott, does not, however, look beyond Britain for its origins. She identifies Thomas Leland's *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762) as the first historical novel, arguing that 'although historical settings can be found in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century fictions, Leland's text inaugurates a new and markedly different wave of historical fiction' (Stevens 2010, 4).

De Groot agrees with Maxwell that the first historical novel is *Princess of Cleves*, but he identifies earlier formative examples. These include Homer, Virgil, Wu Cheng'en, and Chaucer, and he also considers the history plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson, as well as the poetry of Milton, to be historical narratives (De Groot 2010, 12). Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) is examined by De Groot for what it says about how 'fictions of the past might infect the present'. De Groot considers it historical on the basis that 'it takes place "not long since"' (De Groot 2010, 13). Daniel Defoe is mentioned in passing by De Groot, but *Memoirs of a Cavalier* (1720) and *Moll Flanders* (1722) are overlooked by Maxwell, and excluded by Stevens, because

they purport to be factual accounts. Such a framing narrative should not exclude them from consideration. In the absence of a definition, it is unclear on what basis judgements about which novels should be included as historical are being made.

What makes a novel historical?

All of these scholars, while exploring the origins of the historical novel, fail to give a clear explanation of what it is. Stevens notes that ‘identifying a work as an historical novel tells you something about its setting, but little about its artistic aspirations’ (Stevens 2010, 3). She at least identifies ‘setting’ as the determining factor. Later, Stevens outlines her criterion for the texts she excludes from her corpora – ‘novels that were not set in the past or had only the vaguest of historical backdrops I set aside, the others I examined more closely’ (Stevens 2010, 15). She does not relate the location in time to the position of either the writer or the reader, but, as Stevens excludes some eighteenth-century novels with the ‘vaguest of historical backdrops’, her criteria must be based on when the novel was originally written or published.

Similarly vague, De Groot offers a number of aspects of the historical novel that ‘might be taken as a good working definition’ (De Groot 2010, 19), such as writers who create “‘authentic” characters within a factual-led framework, and write stories about them which will communicate as much as is necessary of the past’ (De Groot 2010, 19). Alternatively, he offers the presence of ‘the author’s note, introduction or explanatory section appended to all historical fiction since Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814)’ (De Groot 2010, 217), as the genre’s defining feature. In his first stab at a definition, De Groot’s ‘factual-led’ narrative, which conveys the ‘past’, fails to specify what is meant by the ‘past’. His claim about the inclusion of an author’s note seems slightly facetious; it is improbable that this would be the only basis for such a judgement. Maxwell avoids presenting his own definition for the genre, and instead reports the views of critics, who saw the novel as ‘corrupt’ when ‘mixed with historical materials, creating what was understood to be a deceptive, discordant combination’ (Maxwell 2009, 11). Again, we have the term ‘historical’, without any other terms of reference.

Can’t define or won’t define?

Most recent studies of historical fiction do not provide a definition, and there seems to be a trend in modern scholarship on the genre to avoid proposing one. It is as if, like the famous Supreme Court Justice’s definition of pornography, it is enough to say of the historical novel that ‘we will know it when we see it’. Or, as Avrom Fleishman puts it, ‘everyone knows what a historical novel is; perhaps that is why few have volunteered to define it in print’ (Fleishman 1971, 3).

In *Remaking History* (2016), De Groot does, however, offer an explanation for the lack of a definition:

Manifestly, the term “historical fiction” is not something definable and comprehensible. This paradoxical, contradictory phrase is unstable, while striving for clarity, a characteristic that might be descriptive of historical fictions themselves. The phrase – “historical fiction” (or replace fiction with “film”, “TV”, “novel”, “game”, and the like) – is inherently contradictory (or a tautology, insofar as all history is fiction) (De Groot 2016, 3).

Putting aside the question of medium⁷ we are offered two opposing explanations as to why historical fiction is not ‘definable’ (De Groot includes discussions of TV, film, theatres etc. as historical fiction in his 2016 book *Remaking History*, but an examination of the differing parameters and constraints of each form of historical fiction deserves its own paper so my definition will focus solely on the novel). Either ‘historical’ and ‘fiction’ are in opposition, one a metonym for truth and the other for falsehoods, or they are *both* fiction. De Groot adds a cherry to his cake by stating that these contradictions typify the genre.

Truth vs fiction?

To examine this further, let us start with the oppositional claim of truth and fiction. In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White traces this idea back to the separation of history writing, which was ‘conventionally regarded as a literary art’ (White 1978, 123), into two distinct disciplines - history and historical fiction. Underlining this break, White notes that historians define their work in opposition to that of the novelist:

In the early nineteenth century, however, it became conventional, at least among historians, to identify truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth, hence as a hindrance to the understanding of reality rather than as a way of apprehending it. History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the “actual” to the representation of the “possible” or only “imaginable” (White 1978, 123).

This dichotomy relies on fiction being something inherently false, but White has been developing an argument over decades that fiction can actually aid the presentation of ‘truth’, as ‘the conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information’ (White 2005, 149). He seeks to dispel the artificial divide between the writer and historian, and advocates ‘literary writing’, confronting the prejudices against using literary techniques head on, saying, ‘the first misconception is that “literature” stands to “history” as “fiction” stands to “fact” and that, therefore, any treatment of such morally charged events as the Holocaust entails a fall from historical realism into fictionalisation’ (White 2014,

17). This gets to the heart of why historians have traditionally rejected any association with the novel, fearing that it could undermine or overwhelm and aestheticize realism.

Maria Margaronis outlines the difficulties of writing an historical novel for the modern writer noting the belief that:

the worst historical crimes of the twentieth century (especially the Nazi genocide of the Jews and Stalin's gulag) are literally unspeakable, and that only those who lived through them – only a Primo Levi or a Nadezhda Mandelstam – have the right to break the silence (Margaronis 2008, 139).

Levi died in 1987 and Mandelstam in 1980 so does this mean that once survivors have gone we can no longer talk about or examine such events as using 'the classical idea of authenticity: the person speaking is the person who saw these things' (Margaronis 2008, 139)? Neither the historical novelist nor, usually, the historian is a direct witness to events but must reconstruct the past, so to claim one is 'false' and the other 'true' is naive at best.

Further supporting White's claim that the divide is simulated, we can identify a parallel move by practitioners of the historical novel towards realism as a result of criticism. This occurs at the same moment as we see historians distancing themselves from fiction in the pursuit of rigour. Stevens investigates not just early examples of the historical novel, but the criticism that accompanied them and, she argues, contributed to popularising the genre. She notes the role of critics in shaping it:

by praising what they saw as good historical fiction, and especially by condemning what they saw as generic failure, reviewers performed a disciplinary function, establishing rules for the genre that still largely obtain today (Stevens 2010, 124).

These 'rules' centre on the presentation of historical events and details. Stevens identified the development of the genre, along with the increasing seriousness with which authors pursue research as:

a movement from the use of legendary tales in the historical romance to a dependence on more scholarly historical and antiquarian works, and the strategies of formal realism in the historical novel involve more detailed portrayals of historical milieus, including authenticating features such as footnotes and learned prefaces (Stevens 2010, 4).

Research and the methodologies applied by authors are, for Stevens, a sign of the maturing of the genre, and these 'authenticating features', along with the inclusion of author's notes, seek to deflect criticism. Getting the facts straight becomes fundamental for authors as well as critics, as 'in both types of writing a set of concerns emerges, including a concern for the morality of works and their suitability for younger readers, an interest in their depictions of historical

manners and figures, and an identification of anachronistic moments in the novels' (Stevens 2010, 128). De Groot's charge that historical fiction is undefinable, due to fiction equating to falsity, is not borne out by the focus on 'getting it right', so we can move on to looking at whether 'history is fiction' (De Groot 2016, 3).

History = fiction?

Obviously, the past is not fiction, as certain events really did happen, but history and the past are not the same thing; the one being an incomplete and limited representation of the other. To represent the past, De Groot argues, 'both novelist and historian are using trope, metaphor, prose, narrative style' (De Groot 2016, 113), which is true, but it is not clear that this amounts to history being fiction. As noted earlier, White describes the professionalisation of history as premised on the conscious decoupling from the techniques used by earlier historical writings. The historian aims to 'expunge every hint of the fictive, or merely imaginable, from his discourse, to eschew the techniques of the poet and orator, and to forego what were regarded as the intuitive procedures of the maker of fictions in his apprehension of reality' (White 1978, 123). This, however, has not been entirely successful:

Viewed simply as verbal artefacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truth that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of "reality" (White 1978, 122).

White is clear that 'histories and novels' use the same literary form, and, as he also notes, history does not have its own technical language, like a science such as chemistry, so the tools to hand are the same, making the outputs appear 'indistinguishable'. Narrative, in particular, is a shared device, but White made a distinction, even while explaining how close the two disciplines are, describing the novelist as piecing together 'imaginary events, whereas historians are dealing with real ones' (White 1978, 125). He has not adopted the extreme postmodernist stance that history is a variety of fiction, but argued that it makes use of the same toolbox.

There is general agreement that history is narrative, like fiction, with historians such as Tosh having stated 'narrative too is a form the historian shares with the creative writer – especially the novelist and the epic poet' (Tosh 2015, 125). Munslow has gone further; he acknowledges that history is a 'fictive construction' and describes the historian as working with the 'story space' to 'impose an order through interpretation' as well as making 'authorial decisions' (Munslow 2007, 124-7). He concludes that 'the fundamental mechanics

and rules of authoring a narrative do not change' for the historian, as compared to the fiction writer (Munslow 2007, 127). There is a rejection of an opposition between 'history and fiction', but Munslow does not collapse the two terms, retaining a distinction between 'the "non-history narrative" and the "history narrative"' as 'the reality of the past is a fundamental constraint on the nature of the history' (Munslow 2007, 126-8). Even allowing for the possibility that history can be false, intentionally or unintentionally, history is not fiction, although it uses the same techniques.

Is the historical novel different from the novel?

De Groot's argument that "'historical fiction" is not something definable and comprehensible' (De Groot 2016, 3) falls away, if the two terms are neither in opposition nor the same. We must return, therefore, to where we started, with Lukács' contention that the historical novel is not distinct from the novel, as there is no 'single question of importance' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 242) which applies to it alone.

It is De Groot who, amongst the modern critics, has the most to say about the difference between the novel and the historical novel. He argues that:

The historical novel, then, is similar to other forms of novel-writing in that it shares a concern with realism, development of character, authenticity. Yet fundamentally it entails an engagement on the part of the reader (possibly unconsciously) with a set of tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange. The experience of writing, reading and understanding historical fiction is markedly different from that of a novel set in the contemporary world (De Groot 2010, 4).

Setting aside De Groot's assumption that 'realism, development of character, authenticity' are the 'concern' of the novel, it is the contrast between the familiarity of our current world and the difference of the historical past which he initially sees as requiring a fuller 'engagement' by the reader and, implicitly, the writer. As readers, and writers, we are used to imagining ourselves into characters to walk in their shoes. The further that a world is from our own, the more difficult that task becomes, and the greater the demand on the reader's attention. Historical fiction is, following De Groot's argument, different from contemporary fiction, in that it forces the reader to pay more attention. This does not take account of the complexity of the text without its setting.

In the six years between the publication of *The Historical Novel* (2010) and *Remaking History* (2016), De Groot's thinking shifted. He uses the example of Hamlet's 'What's Hecuba to him?' (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 563-4) speech to explore the space between the understanding of then and the enacting of now, which he argues is 'inherent in all historical fictions' (De Groot 2016, 8). The play within the play arouses emotion in Hamlet, and the audience, but both are aware of its falseness. The representation of the past enfranchises the viewer by

showing and revealing, by staging the internal historiographic debate of each text. An audience can see the joins. Fundamental to the encounter with the historical text is the desire for a wholeness of representation that understands that the text is fundamentally a representation (De Groot 2016, 8).

It is not just the strangeness of the past the reader must contend with, but the recognition that there is a performance of ‘pastness’ with which they are being asked to engage; an implicit duality. Yet the readers’ identification with this performance allows empathy to develop, so, like Hamlet, the reader can be moved while under the spell of the narrative. De Groot connects this, in the historical novel at least, with a demand for realism:

The realistic heft is what is looked for in the novels - reviewers regularly emphasize the authenticity, the affective impact, of historical fiction (it smells right, it feels right, the snap and tang of the past are communicated effectively) (De Groot 2016, 14).

De Groot points to this in his review of Hilary Mantel’s novel, *Wolf Hall*, but does not note the trend of having historians, even those whose field is far from the period in question, review historical fiction. An example of the practice is TV historian and classicist Bettany Hughes reviewing *Bring Up the Bodies* for *The Telegraph*.

Hughes’ review of *Bring Up the Bodies* explicitly connects detail with the doubling effect, saying, ‘as with the great mimetic historians of the 19th century, by corralling this kind of vivid detail, Mantel encourages us to be in two times at once’ (Hughes, 2015). The ‘vivid detail’ provided by Mantel helps the reader connect with the past, but they still maintain a connection to the present, a kind of ‘what’s Cromwell to us?’

Different rules for the novelist vs the historian?

In his preface to Jenkins’ *Re-thinking History*, Munslow puts his finger on the fundamental difference between the historian and the novelist, saying, ‘moreover, we cannot empathise with people in the past because not only is it plainly impossible to “get inside someone else’s head”, but to translate another’s intentions from their actions is an epistemological step too far’ (Jenkins 2003, xiii). The historian cannot take the empathetic leap, constrained as they are by theory and practice, but the novelist can. Lukács made the point that ‘the “cult of facts” is a miserable surrogate for this intimacy with the people’s historical life’ (Lukács [1937] 1962, 253). Lukács was an advocate for either a scholarly presentation by the historian, or an artistic one by the novelist. The two were distinct to Lukács, and the artistic presentation must privilege a truthful spirit over facts. He gave as an example the portrayal of his great hero Marx, and stated that what is known from historical sources is not enough to give a satisfying picture; ‘this would all be historically true, but would it bring us any

nearer to Marx's great personality? Despite the authenticity of all the individual features this study could be that of any mediocre scholar or bad politician' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 308). He admitted to preferring a less factually accurate depiction, which has more of the interior of the man, as facts about Marx could only represent the exterior, without succeeding in bringing the character to life. According to Lukács and Munslow, the limitations imposed on the historian do not allow for the engagement with character required by the novel.

In recognising the advantages the techniques of the realist novel provides, Lukács has not accounted for the impact of engaging with the historical record in how the historical novel is approached by the writer and the reader. He has failed to consider how this complicates the 'problems of content and form' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 242). There are clearly similarities between the contemporary and the historical novel, but we should not overlook or minimise the disparities. Different expectations and standards apply, probably due to historical fiction's link to history writing, and the impact of the split with history in the nineteenth century. Having examined both De Groot's and Lukács' separate reasons for not defining historical fiction, and finding the barriers scalable, it is time to move on to developing a definition.

How have the practitioners defined historical fiction?

In the absence of a useful model amongst the academic studies, the Historical Novel Society seems the next logical place to look. It provides the following definition:

There are problems with defining historical novels, as with defining any genre. When does "contemporary" end, and "historical" begin? What about novels that are part historical, part contemporary? And how much distortion of history will we allow before a book becomes more fantasy than historical?

There will never be a satisfactory answer to these questions, but these are the arbitrary decisions we've made.

To be deemed historical (in our sense), a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research).

We also consider the following styles of novel to be historical fiction for our purposes: alternate histories (e.g. Robert Harris' *Fatherland*), pseudo-histories (e.g. Umberto Eco's *Island of the Day Before*), time-slip novels (e.g. Barbara Erskine's *Lady of Hay*), historical fantasies (e.g. Bernard Cornwell's *King Arthur* trilogy) and multiple-time novels (e.g. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*) (Lee 2017).

This definition starts by outlining the difficulties involved before offering something partial and 'arbitrary'. Sitting in the middle of Fleishman's '40-60' (Fleishman 1971, 3) year range, Lee gave 'at least fifty years' as the gap needed to make a book historical, but specified that this is between when the 'novel must have been written' and 'the events described'. This makes the author the determining factor in whether a novel is historical, and even allows that the fifty-year rule can be breached, if the novel was written by someone who was not alive at the historical moment depicted. Curiously, there is no consideration of the reader's position. This would mean that the very recent past could be considered historical, as long as the writer approaches that past 'only by research'. This alters the notion that the historical novel is determined from an absolute, if arbitrary, amount of time passing, in the same way that an object becomes an antique once it is a hundred years old. Instead it becomes a relative term, which applies in relation to the specific author. In the hands of a writer born after 1985, for example, the events of the British miners' strike could make for an historical novel, although for a writer alive at the time of the events, it would be excluded under Lee's definition.

Sarah Johnson has discussed a number of alternative definitions. Johnson questions whether any potential definition should be 'relative' or absolute, and, if 'relative,' should this be in relation to the author or the reader (Johnson 2002)? The description 'fiction set in the past' is considered, but is dismissed by Johnson as too simple, as is the contention that 'all novels are historical, but some are more historical than others' (Johnson 2002). She does, however, provide the definition used by the *Historical Novels Review* – 'a novel which is set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience' (Johnson 2002). This has similarities to the Historical Novel Society's definition, in that 'fifty years' is the amount of time which has to pass before a novel becomes historical, but the definitions do not agree, which is curious, as the society produces the magazine. There is no exception to the fifty-year rule, and the author must not be using 'personal experience'. This means our putative book based on the miners' strike will not be considered 'historical fiction' unless it is written in 2035 or later.

When is the past historical?

The question of how far back we have to go before the past is 'historic' is answered by Margaret Atwood as follows: 'well, roughly, I suppose you could say it's anything before the time at which the novel-writer came to consciousness. That seems fair enough' (Atwood 1998, 1510). Atwood's linking of 'historic' to the 'consciousness' of the writer seems to imply that it is the lack of 'personal experience' of the time period which makes a novel historical. This provides the rationale lacking from definitions which impose an arbitrary time

period as a qualification. This also connects to how Jenkins defines history. She states that ‘unlike direct memory (itself suspect), history relies on someone else’s eyes and voice; we see through an interpreter who stands between past events and our readings of them’ (Jenkins 2003, 14). The writer of historical fiction has to access the time period only through sources, and it is the removal of the possibility of direct access to the time period which makes a novel historical. The historic past is not the writer’s past; it belongs to someone else, and must be imagined. This mediation of events through ‘someone else’s eyes and voice’ means the writer has to bridge the gap for themselves as well as for the reader.

Atwood’s language is tentative, and she uses qualifiers such as ‘roughly’ and ‘I suppose you could say’, so I would push the definition further to make it less indeterminate. It might be difficult to assess the age at which a writer became ‘conscious’. Margaronis uses Atwood’s definition to describe *Atone-ment* as Ian McEwan’s ‘first true historical fiction’ on the basis that it is ‘set almost entirely in the time before he was born’ (Margaronis 2008, 141) so let us say that the ‘historic’ past for the writer is what happened before they were born. An individual could not have had ‘personal experience of those events’ which happened before they entered the world, so they must have accessed them only through research. Writers themselves point to the necessity of using others eyes and voices to write historical fiction; as Ian McEwan says, ‘The writer of a historical novel may resent his dependence on the written record, on memoirs and eyewitness accounts, in other words on other writers, but there is no escape’ (cited in Margaronis 2008, 146). The writer has to utilise ‘someone else’s eyes and voice’ and project their own historical imagination, not to a known past of which they have experience, but into the strangeness of a past which exists before the self. It is the act of bridging that gap which makes a novel intentionally historical. My definition is, therefore, that the historic past is any time before the writer was born.

Reader vs author?

In conceptualising a time before they existed, the writer plays with bones, prefiguring their own inevitable mortification or, as Barthes might put it, the author enters their own death as writing begins. In literary terms, ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’ (Graddol & Boyd-Barrett 1994, 170), so how do we reconcile this with a definition centred only on the author? What is the position of the reader in relation to the text? The age span of a reader may vary by as much as century – as mentioned already, ‘suitability for younger readers’ was an early concern for historical novelists and helped shaped the genre (Stevens 2010, 128). If we determine what the historical past is in relation to the writer, must we also apply the same rule for the reader, or is the reader’s position privileged over that of the writer? Foucault con-

ceptualises history as engagement between the writer, their text, and the reader, admitting a role for the author, which Barthes rejects as a limiting factor (Munslow 2000, 109). Even allowing the text primacy, content and form are connected, so we should consider genre. If, as already noted, genre divides the historian and the historical novelist who take the same traces of the past, and who, by applying separate methodologies, produce very different outcomes, then I would argue that methodology separates the writer of contemporary from the writer of historical fiction, as the writer of historical fiction must consider the relationship between their text and the historical record as part of its creation, thereby providing a bridge for the reader. Simply put, ‘for those living in it, the past was their present’ (Atwood 1998, 1511), so contemporary fiction does not become historical fiction over time, as its relationship with the historical record does not change. A novel can only be considered historical when the setting is before the writer was born, as then the writer has to reconcile the historic past with their own time. This is a convention of form in the novel’s creation, and should not limit readings of the text.

The reader’s relationship to the text, however, should not be discounted. Arguably, the imposition of a fixed amount of time before a novel can be considered historical is a mechanism to safeguard against the reader having ‘personal experience’ of the time period, and Fleishman was explicit about this in his definition (Fleishman 1971, 3). Johnson noted that ‘to a reader born in the 1960s, novels set during the Second World War may be considered “suitably historical,” but readers who vividly remember the 1940s may not agree’ (Johnson 2002). She then asks ‘should the definition be relative, so that a novel can be considered historical by one reader, but not by someone else?’ (Johnson 2002), but shies away from exploring this idea further. In the example I used earlier, a novel set during the 1985 miners’ strike would be read very differently by someone who recollected the period, compared to a reader born after 1985. An historical novel may then only be experienced as historical if the setting is before both the writer and the reader were born. For categorisation purposes, the label ‘historical novel’ may be applied in relation to the author, but its status at consumption is also dependent on the position of the reader. We can therefore talk about the historical novel as being a relative concept. Those texts which are set in the past, but do not meet the criterion on the part of the writer, reader, or both, may be termed ‘novels of the recent past’ (Fleishman 1971, 3).

Towards a definition

Having formulated an initial definition, I must come back to the question of the styles of novel enumerated in Lee’s definition for the Historical Novel Society. These sub genres can be seen as outliers within the overall genre, and therefore provide the most challenge to any definition. There are some prag-

matic rules that could be applied, for example, it is an historical novel if more than half the text is set in the period before the writer was born, and this equally applies to the reader. This accounts for what Lee terms ‘time-slip novels’ and ‘multiple-time novels’. De Groot limits the historical novel to one that operates ‘within a factual-led framework’ (De Groot 2010, 19), but the incorporation of some fantastical elements does not necessarily conflict with this. ‘Alternate histories’ and ‘pseudo-histories’ are more problematic. In presenting a distortion, such as Nazi Germany winning World War II, an author is no longer allowing readers to join them on the shared plain of history, but is shifting the action to a parallel realm unlimited by the traces of our past. Therefore, due to their nature, such texts are more akin to speculative fiction; indeed, they could be termed speculative fiction with a historical setting, and might more properly be seen as a separate, albeit related, sub-genre of speculative fiction.

To recap, therefore, a novel is historical when the main setting is a time before the writer was born, and the writer operates within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past with an alternative or pseudo history. The novel is consumed as an historical novel when this is true, and when the main setting is before the reader was born. A novel set in the past but after the writer and/or reader was born can be termed a novel of the recent past, and alternate histories and pseudo-histories can be seen as historically-set speculative fiction.

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