

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

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*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the French Revolution (Maximilien Robespierre and his close friends and family) demonstrate how fiction can perpetuate superseded historical interpretations, instead of engaging with current research.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, xlvi) 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 Radcliffian 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; Quenedey 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 Mitterrand 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 Pollard'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* marquise', "'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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