HISTORICAL INACCURACY IN FICTION

Iskra Fileva

ABSTRACT

I ask whether and when historical inaccuracy in a work of art constitutes an aesthetic flaw. I first consider a few replies derived from others: conceptual impossibility, import-export inconsistency, failure of reference, and imaginative resistance. I argue that while there is a grain of truth to some of these proposals, none of them ultimately succeeds. I proceed to offer an alternative account on which the aesthetic demerits of historical inaccuracies stem from a violation of the conversational contract between author and audience. The key question is what that contract implies.

INTRODUCTION

In a phone conversation once, my father mentioned that he was reading Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis*.[1] I asked if he liked it, and he said he liked it very much. I am usually disinclined to argue with my father, but this time, I felt a need to say something. *Quo Vadis* is historically inaccurate, and that bothers me. While Sienkiewicz's writing is, no doubt, beautiful, and a reader can see why the Nobel committee should have bestowed on Sienkiewicz the (always controversial) Nobel award, the novel paints a rather idealistic portrait of Christians and their role in history. There, Christians are portrayed as kind and all-forgiving, an epitome of sensitivity and moral progress. This depiction strikes me as an apology for Christianity rooted in romantic visions rather than in facts. And being as I am concerned with truth even at the price of romantic visions, I voiced my misgivings.

My father, much to my surprise, agreed with my assessment. He admitted that the novel is likely historically inaccurate and in just the ways I mentioned, but he insisted that the inaccuracy is, in this case, not a flaw. In his view, the wider message of the importance of forgiveness—and my father is by no means a religious man—justifies the liberty Sienkiewicz took with history: that message, he argued, makes for a better book. Our disagreement, I realized, was philosophical. We both found the novel historically inaccurate, but we differed with regard to the question of whether inaccuracy is a flaw in this case. How, if at all, can such a dispute be resolved? Here, I wish to pose this question in a general way. I am interested not in this or that particular work of fiction, but in the larger problem. Is historical inaccuracy ever a flaw, and if so, when?[2] I will focus on historical inaccuracies in fiction but will suggest that the essence of the proposal is applicable to other forms of art. I will return to Sienkiewicz at the end and offer an assessment in light of the preceding discussion.

The first thing to note is that historical inaccuracies are not always a flaw. Historical fiction is expected to be inaccurate in various ways. That, I wish to suggest, is our default assumption, at least upon reflection. And I am not talking about Hollywood "epics" such as *Gladiator* or *Troy*, for I am not certain those

actually count as *historical* fictions; I am talking about indisputably historical fiction, such as James Clavell's *Shōgun*[3] or Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*. For the most part, this is as it should be. Even scholarly history books are constructed to some extent. History does not come to us in a narrative form, but we expect historical exposition to be largely narratival. We want stories that can help us "make sense" of the past, understand it, and remember it. Historians respond to this demand—they fill in gaps, choose angles, and produce coherent narratives on the basis of the disjointed bits of available evidence. Sometimes, these narratives are both engaging and compelling, but they are bound to be to some extent inaccurate. That's probably particularly true of narratives describing the very distant past—thus, Isaac Newton once, after studying ancient history extensively, wrote that historians have made the Antiquities of Greece three or four hundred years older than they are.[4] It is, then, perhaps fair to say that a historically accurate fiction would be fiction true not to *history* but to the officially accepted story in the history *books*.

The departure from the historical record is bound to be much more pronounced in the case of a literary work. That also is as it should be. For one thing, history as it is in the books may not be exciting enough to work as fiction. And many aspects of it—for instance, the language and pronunciation used by the characters—plainly need to be adjusted (Nicole Kidman once said in an interview that were she to try to imitate Virginia Woolf's voice in the movie *The Hours*, it would sound comical[5]). Another problem is that our historical knowledge is typically incomplete in at least two senses. First, no amount of evidence about a long-dead person such as Claudius would give us enough material for a full-fledged character. Yet lack of detail, while acceptable in a history book, would be a major flaw in a work of fiction. The fiction writer is expected to create a detailed portrait of a figure on the basis of a spotty historical record. Both guesswork and imagination will no doubt have a role to play in bridging the gap. Second, our knowledge of various events is often uncertain. For instance, there is some evidence that Henry VIII wrote the song Green Sleeves, but we are not sure whether he did or didn't. *The Tudors* series portrays him as composing the song.[6] History buffs may complain *apropos*, but try changing that part of the movie so that it reflects our historical knowledge, or the lack thereof, accurately—what would it be like? A quantum-mechanics-inspired bit in which he both composed it and did not compose it? A sequence *à la* David Lynch that leaves the reader wondering whether the king did or did not write the song? The latter is a possibility, indeed, but taking that route will turn the movie into a perhaps brainy reflection on what history is and on whether there is any such thing as historical truth, and that's not what we expect from historical dramas.

But while going beyond the evidence for the sake of fleshing out a character or filling in gaps in the narrative is accepted as a matter of course, other departures from the historical evidence incur the charge of inaccuracy. I would levy this charge against *Quo Vadis*, but the example may be resisted by some, so I will take a less controversial case: Jonathan Mostow's action film *U-571*.[7] This film's historical inaccuracies received considerable attention in the popular press and were discussed in the philosophical literature by Christopher Bartel, whose account I will take as a starting point here.[8] *U-571* is a film about the capture of the German Enigma machine—an electro-mechanical device used by the German navy to transmit encrypted messages during World War II. The machine's capture gave a crucial advantage to the Allies—it was kept secret from the Germans (who knew that the boat carrying the machine had sunk but assumed the machine had sunk along with it), and the Germans continued using the old

codes, feeling safe in the belief that the Allies could not interpret the messages. The codes, however, were broken by British cryptologists, and the Allies were able to interpret the encrypted messages for several weeks. This is a fascinating bit of history, one that deserves attention from film directors. The twist is that the heroes in the actual historical incident were British naval officers, but in Mostow's film, the protagonists are soldiers from the American navy. The inaccuracy has provoked a good deal of criticism and even outrage. One critic called the plot "a slap in the face to history."[9] Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair pronounced the film an "affront" to British sailors.[10] Historian and writer Alex von Tunzelmann, in an op-ed for *The Guardian*, quipped, "A far more entertaining [than Blair's] response would have been for Britain to fund a big-budget revenge epic, in which a small platoon of foppish yet plucky Brits swans over to Vietnam in 1968, defeats the Viet Cong, and wins the war. Moreover, it would be nearly as accurate as this."[11] Bartel says, similarly, that there is something "deeply infuriating" about the film's inaccuracies.[12]

But why should anyone find fault with *U-571* on account of its lack of correspondence with history? After all, the film is not a scholarly work. It is a work of fiction. We all readily permit lack of correspondence between fiction and historical truth when it comes to such things as the accents or physical appearance of long-dead people. Can we draw a line in the sand separating permissible from impermissible inaccuracies? And how could there be any impermissible inaccuracies in a work of *fiction*?[13] This brings us to the heart of the problem.

One possibility is that historical inaccuracies are always permissible from an aesthetic point of view. It is true that historical *accuracy* is often correctly regarded as a virtue in fiction. We praise historical works such as Andzej Wajda's film *Danton* for being

historically accurate.[14] But perhaps historical accuracy is a fiction author's analogue to a supererogatory action: something to be praised when present, but not something obligatory. Yet we can't help but intuit that criticisms of the inaccuracy of certain works—*U-571*, for instance—are justified.

Christopher Bartel has argued that when it comes to historical accuracy, we simply have competing intuitions: on the one hand, we believe that an author has the freedom to create a world that does not correspond to the actual world.[15] On the other hand, we do sometimes criticize works for being historically inaccurate, and we feel quite confident in our criticism. Bartel discusses and rejects a number of ways to resolve the conflict and, finding problems with each, concludes that for now, we have no good solution. The puzzle of historical criticism, as he calls the problem, "will not go away easily," and "it is a puzzle that matters and deserves greater attention."[16] I fully agree with Bartel that the puzzle deserves greater attention, and I too am of the view that it will not go away easily. My purpose here is to try my hand at solving it. In addressing my task, I will discuss a few solutions I derive from othersand then propose an alternative.

I. CONCEPTUAL IMPOSSIBILITY

Following Bartel's lead for now, I would first like to take a page from authors working on a problem detected by Hume and more recently taken up by Kendall Walton.[17] The problem concerns a seeming asymmetry between a fiction author's ability to make us believe factual claims about a fictional world that are false in the real world and his or her inability to make us believe false moral claims. While we seem to have no difficulty accepting a wide variety of fantastical claims—the existence of ghosts, magical rings, time travel, and so on—we stubbornly refuse to accept false moral claims, for instance, that killing a baby is right when the baby is a girl.[18] On Walton's

reckoning, the reason for the asymmetry is that the truth of patently false moral claims is inconceivable, and this is why we refuse to accept them as true even in the fictional world.[19] Perhaps one can argue, similarly, that historically inaccurate worlds are conceptually impossible.

But it would be difficult to make such an argument go through as it is. It is not conceptually impossible that American soldiers should have captured the Enigma machine. Bartel says so as well, and so far, he and I are in agreement.[20] I wish to suggest here that in order for this type of solution to get off the ground, we would have to connect the fictional world to the real world. It is only on the supposition that certain states of affairs obtaining in the actual world also obtain in the fictional world that an incoherence arises. I now turn to a possibility along these lines.

2. Import-export Inconsistency

This proposal is due to Allan Hazlett and Christy Mag Uidhir.[21] Hazlett and Mag Uidhir are interested in a different problem, but the solution they propose to the problem that interests them can be extended to cover the class of cases under discussion here. What they want to know is why fictions are ever criticized for being "unrealistic." There is a puzzle about this type of criticism, and it stems from a conflict between intuitions parallel to those that motivate the historical criticism puzzle: on the one hand, a work of fiction does not *have* to portray the real world accurately. After all, it is a work of fiction. On the other hand, when we criticize a work of fiction for being unrealistic, we imply that the work does have to portray the real world accurately, at least to some extent or in some regard. Historically inaccurate fictions can be seen as a subclass of the class of unrealistic fictions: they are fictions that give an unrealistic portrayal of some aspect of history.

Hazlett and Mag Uidhir offer a solution to the unrealistic fictions problem, one that could potentially help solve the historical inaccuracy problem. On the theory they propose, unrealistic fiction is a species of inconsistent fiction. The inconsistency in this case is "import-export" inconsistency. Works of fiction invite audiences to "import" certain propositions into the fictional world, that is, to assume that various actual states of affairs hold in the fictional world. They also invite viewers to "export" other propositions, that is, to come away believing that some propositions true in the world of fiction are also true in the actual world.

Just what propositions a work of fiction invites the audience to import depends on the work's genre, according to Hazlett and Mag Uidhir. Works of most genres invite viewers to import propositions about the laws of nature into the fictional world—we do not need to be told explicitly that the characters in *Henry VIII* are subject to the law of gravity in order to expect that they would fall if thrown onto the ground. Science fiction and fantasy, however, do not invite such importation. Historical fiction invites its audience to import knowledge of history in addition to knowledge of the laws of nature—for instance, we do not need to be told that a character in *Henry VIII* cannot take the plane to London, no matter what hurry he's in. But fictions also invite audiences to export propositions from the fictional into the actual world. We may thus learn from a work of historical fiction various things about the actual world: for instance, how French women wore their hair during the reign of Louis XIV, or how far a particular English village is from London.[22]

Inconsistent fictions, according to Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, give consumers incoherent sets of instructions—they invite the audience to import certain propositions and to export other propositions that contradict the imported ones or contradict their implications. Thus, the TV drama *ER*, Hazlett and Mag Uidhir tell us, in virtue of being a "realistic drama," invites viewers to import knowledge about medicine

and medical treatment, such as knowledge that Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) is effective only about five percent of the time. On the other hand, *ER* depicts CPR as successful more often than not, inviting viewers to export a proposition concerning the success rate of CPR which contradicts the proposition they have been invited to import.

A similar solution can be offered to the historical inaccuracy problem, and Hazlett and Mag Uidhir are sympathetic to this idea. Consider another example discussed by them: the TV series *The Tudors*, a historical drama. *The Tudors* depicts Cardinal Wolsey as committing suicide in prison—incidentally, an act that the real Wolsey would have considered sacrilege. In actual fact, Cardinal Wolsey died of illness *en route* to London where he was expected to answer charges of treason. The inaccuracy, on Hazlett and Mag Uidhir's reckoning, seems to be an aesthetic flaw.[23] Let us assume for the sake of argument that it is. Why is it a flaw? We can say that *The Tudors*, in virtue of being a historical drama, invites viewers to import knowledge of various historical facts, including knowledge of how Wolsey died. However, it also invites viewers to walk away believing that the Cardinal committed suicide (though, even if taken as historical drama, the film does not invite viewers to believe that, say, Wolsey died wearing the particular clothes that the actor playing the dying Cardinal wears in the movie). Thus, viewers of *The Tudors*, presumably knowledgeable about the relevant part of history, are, on this account, given an incoherent set of instructions: on the one hand, in virtue of conventions that regulate the genre "historical fiction," they are invited to import their knowledge that the Cardinal died of illness into the fictional world; on the other hand, they are invited to come away believing that the Cardinal committed suicide. According to Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, a fictional work that gives consumers such inconsistent sets of instructions is *prima facie*

aesthetically flawed because these types of inconsistencies interfere with the consumer's imaginative "uptake" or engagement with the work—it is difficult for us to follow incoherent instructions.

There is a twist: we sometimes may, instead of charging the work with inconsistency, revise our assessment of the work's genre—if we see *The Tudors* not as a *historical*, but, rather, as a *period* drama, meant to depict accurately the time and the mores, but not the events in the lives of the characters, then there will be no flaw.[24] Thus, a prima facie import-export inconsistency may be explained away through a genre revision. I would add that inconsistency may even, in some cases, be a virtue, "a feature, not a bug," so to speak. This observation is compatible with Hazlett and Mag Uidhir's account. In absurdist theater, for instance, contradictions may be licensed by the genre and used to great aesthetic benefit. The problem according to Hazlett and Mag Uidhir is not with allowing a contradiction per se, but with the fact that, when it comes to imagining a contradiction in works of certain genres, the viewers' engagement with the work—or their "imaginative uptake"—is obstructed. Historical fiction can be said to be among those genres.

Does this solution work? It is unclear whether historically inaccurate fictions invite viewers to believe inconsistencies. We could say, following Walton, that the authors of fiction have complete authority over the "primary truths" in fiction and can simply stipulate those truths by writing down lines in the text.[25] If any fact in the actual world contradicts what the author explicitly says, then that fact should not be imported into the work. And if no contradictory fact is imported, inconsistency internal to the fiction will never arise. Going back to *The Tudors* example, according to Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, the instructions the author gives to the audience (on the assumption the series is a *historical* rather than a *period* drama) will be: "Imagine

both that Cardinal Wolsey died of illness *en route* to answering charges of treason *and* that he committed suicide while in prison for treason." On a Walton-type view, however, the instructions will be, rather, "Forget what you know about Cardinal Wolsey. I am in charge here, and I say he committed suicide." If there is nothing inherently contradictory about imagining the Cardinal committing suicide, *The Tudors*, and historically inaccurate fiction generally, must be flawed on some ground *other* than presenting viewers with inconsistent sets of instructions.

3. Imaginative Resistance

Another possibility is to say about historical inaccuracy something similar to what Tamar Gendler says about false moral claims in fiction. As noted earlier, Walton, in his discussion of morals in fiction, suggests that fictional worlds in which a mother can justly kill a baby on the ground that it is a girl are inconceivable, and that this is why we refuse to accept them as true even for the purpose of engaging with fiction. Gendler responds that the problem is not that we *can't* imagine the truth of a patently false moral claim, but that we don't *want* to: we resist the invitation.[26] Her answer comes in two parts: First, we can in fact accept as true in fiction various conceptually impossible claims (for instance, that 5+7 both is and is not the sum of two primes because God has so decreed). And second, our resistance to what we perceive as false moral claims arises in cases that clearly have nothing to do with a conceptual impossibility but rather with an unwillingness on our part to look at the world in a certain way. Gendler gives as an example resistance to engage with a fable about hardworking white mice and lazy black mice because we see the fable as an allegory playing on the crudest stereotypes about race. To agree to play the game of make-believe would be to "export" a way of seeing things from the fiction to the real world, and we resist the invitation to make the export.

Gendler writes, "Cases that evoke imaginative resistance will be cases where the reader feels that she is being asked to export a way of looking at the actual world which she does not wish to add to her conceptual repertoire."[27] Perhaps we can say, similarly, that the problem with *U-571* is not that we *cannot* imagine how the Enigma machine could be captured by the Americans; rather, the problem is that we refuse to export from the fiction the possibility that the Enigma machine was not captured by the British. We don't *want* to play the game of make-believe in this case.

Bartel considers a solution to the problem with historical inaccuracy along these lines but argues that this sort of account fails because historical inaccuracy can be a flaw without any invitation to the reader to export the false claims. Indeed, he argues that there is no such invitation in the *U-571* case:

> There are many cases of historical criticism where there appears to be no intention or expectation that any historical claims are being offered for exportation. The producers of *U-571* explicitly profess that their film is a "parallel history" and not intended to present any historical thesis—in fact, the film ends with a dedication to the British naval officers.[28]

I believe that Bartel's objection to this proposal can be answered. The answer has to do with the sense of "invitation" at stake in the claim that fictions may invite viewers to export certain claims. Gendler (as well as Hazlett and Mag Uidhir) cashes out the concept of "invitation" in terms of conversational implicature—the question is not what the author might have explicitly had in mind, but what the consumers are warranted in inferring on the basis of conventions of genre and mutual background assumptions. To illustrate the point with an example, consider a joke about people in Vermont related by mathematician Raymond Smullyan:

> A Vermont farmer once went to a neighboring farmer and asked, "Lem, what did you give your

horse the time it had the colic?" Lem replied, "Bran and molasses." The farmer went away and returned a week later and said, "Lem, I gave my horse bran and molasses, and it died!" Lem replied, "So did mine."[29]

Lem here is clearly violating the rules of conversational implicature. If he does not want to mislead his neighbor, he has to volunteer the information that his own horse died. The neighbor has a legitimate grievance against Lem even if, perchance, Lem did not intend to mislead. The viewers of *U-571*, similarly, have a legitimate grievance against the filmmakers: it is misleading. It invites viewers, at least for the duration of the movie, to believe that the Enigma machine was captured by Americans. One way to forestall potential misunderstanding would be to start with a disclaimer instead of putting a note at the end—as in the proverbial small print of credit card contracts. A more common way is simply to alter a number of other details, for instance, to rename the Enigma machine and put it in the hands of the Japanese instead of the Germans, cueing viewers to the intention to present an alternate history.

Even if this objection can be parried, however, there is another problem. While there are cases in which we may resist exporting a certain way of looking at the world from the fiction—and the plot of *U-571* may be an example; making light of the Holocaust, as Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* does, according to some, may be another—there are cases of historical inaccuracy in which our criticisms have a different origin. Go back to Cardinal Wolsey. It is unclear why we should resist imagining that he could have committed suicide. If there are any viewers who find the suggestion that the Cardinal committed the sacrilegious act of *felo de se* so offensive that the invitation triggers for them imaginative resistance, they are surely a tiny minority. Yet the inaccuracy, if it is to be truly an aesthetic flaw, would be a flaw for most of us, not just for those few.

4. Failure of Reference

There is a final proposal—courtesy of Mary Beth Willard—I will consider before offering my own. I will call Willard's proposal "reference failure."[30] On this account, the viewer of a historically inaccurate work will not be able to imagine that the work is *about* the characters that it purports to be about. Viewers of *The Tudors* will have no problem imagining that the fictional Wolsey committed suicide, but they will have difficulty *seeing the fictional Wolsey as the real Wolsey*. That's a problem, since arguably, according to the conventions governing the genre of historical fiction, such fiction is supposed to illuminate the past and be about certain real historical persons and events. The audience will try but fail to imagine that the historical fiction at hand is about the characters and events it allegedly depicts.

There is some truth to this proposal. This truth could be made apparent if we were to consider our reaction, while watching the film, to Cardinal Wolsey's suicide: after we see Wolsey taking his own life, we expect the other characters to act on the assumption that he has committed suicide. Even if we know that the actual Wolsey died of illness, we do not expect the other characters to, say, try to find out what illness killed him. In this sense, we've "bought" the story—the fictional Wolsey committed suicide and did not die of illness, however the real Wolsey's life may have ended.

But when it comes to our reaction, this is not the whole story, which leads us to the first problem with the failure of reference view. Following the narrative about the fictional Wolsey will be easier if we either do not know what the actual Wolsey did or do not care about historical accuracy. If we both know and care, a part of us will refuse to follow the story—we will keep thinking that this is just *not* what Wolsey did (rather than thinking that the fictional Wolsey did commit suicide but,

in virtue of that fact, is not the real Wolsey). A part of us, that is, will resist buying into the fictional narrative, and we will experience what Hazlett and Mag Uidhir predict: that we've been given an incoherent set of instructions. In this sense, the film invites us to believe that Cardinal Wolsey both committed suicide and died of an illness.

There is another problem with the failure of reference view. It is precisely to the extent to which we *can* imagine that *U-571* is about the capture of the real enigma machine that we get upset. What grates on our sensibilities is not a failure to see the events depicted as being the same as the actual historical events, but rather, the fact that the movie invites us to believe that the protagonists are American, and such a belief would be false in a way that offends us.

What other solution is there?

5. The Conversational Contract and What It Implies

I wish to suggest first that whatever the solution to the puzzle with historical criticism, it will have something to do with the conversational contract between author and audience. Historical inaccuracy will not be a flaw if, for instance, an interpreter translates the script of *U-571* into French, since the contract between an interpreter and the buyers of her work requires that she translate the *text* accurately, not that she give an accurate rendition of the history depicted in the text. If she is a history buff and tries to produce a more historically accurate version of the script, changing the nationality of the officers from *U-571*, she will be taking impermissible liberties. Of course, historical inaccuracy will still be an aesthetic flaw in the French version, but it will not be a translational flaw, and indeed, correcting the history will lead to a translation flaw. Second, what the contract between author and audience implies will depend on the genre of the work.[31] We do not usually criticize comedies for being

historically inaccurate, or science fiction for giving us an unrealistic portrayal of the laws of nature.[32]

To say this is not enough, however, since my opponents can and some do accept the importance of the conversational contract but insist that the contract implies their own theories.[33] So the more important question is, what exactly *is* the contract between the authors of historical fiction and their audiences? Do our conventions concerning historical fiction enable an author to alter any facts she wishes to alter, or are there stricter constraints on what inaccuracies are permissible?

In my view, the contract implies the following: historical inaccuracy is permitted when used imaginatively in the service of artistic goals more important than accuracy. It is a flaw when due to mere ignorance or sloppy research, as when the movie *Braveheart* suggests that Edward III may have been a son of Scottish rebel William Wallace, when in actual fact, Wallace died seven years before Edward was born and could not possibly have been Edward's father.[34] It is a flaw also when it is so unbelievable that it is not likely to serve any artistic aim—for instance, when a feminist character in a Medieval drama is too patently anachronistic. Again, it is a flaw when the goal the inaccuracy helps to achieve is not artistic but self-serving or propagandistic, as is the case with the movie *U-571*. These kinds of inaccuracies insult the intelligence of the viewer in various ways, for instance by expecting her to be biased or ignorant.

Hazlett and Mag Uidhir make an analogous point with regard to unrealistic fictions: while unrealisticness is, in general, a flaw, the particular way in which a movie is unrealistic may be a virtue. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir discuss the Japanese film *Vengeance Is Mine*.[35] The film is a realistic crime story, but it includes a jarring final sequence in which the cremated remains of a murderous sociopath, when tossed from Mt. Fuji by his wife and father, remain suspended in the air,

not subject to the law of gravity—he is so bad that even the earth rejects his remains. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir suggest that the movie, far from being aesthetically flawed on account of presenting its viewers with inconsistent sets of instructions ("Believe and not believe that the laws of physics apply in the fictional world"), reaps aesthetic rewards in virtue of the particular manner in which it seeks to subvert its own genre.[36] However, the two authors do not pursue this point to its logical conclusion, which is that our assessment of the aesthetic merits of a historical inaccuracy or an unrealistic detail depends primarily on the *way* in which the inaccuracy in question is used—on whether it is a shallow, sloppy mistake, reflects a bias, or, rather, is a tool in the service of higher aesthetic goals.

Shakespeare, without doubt, took some liberties with the history he depicted, but he is not the first to spring to mind when we think of "historically inaccurate fiction." The reason is that Shakespeare, by and large, had good artistic reasons for proceeding as he did. To illustrate, in *Julius Caesar*, he portrays Brutus as vacillating over whether to join the conspiracy because of conflicting loyalties – Brutus is friends with Caesar, but he also wants the best for his great city. In addition, Shakespeare's Brutus is uncertain about the consequences of the plan: he does not know whether Caesar will indeed become a tyrant as the other conspirators claim, so he is unsure whether he will be helping or harming his city and its people by killing Caesar. Shakespeare's Brutus thus sees himself as facing a choice between murdering a friend and allowing a possible tyranny. On the other hand, according Plutarch, on whom Shakespeare appears to have drawn, Brutus had qualms about the conspiracy, indeed, but his reasons were likely mundane: he was afraid that the conspiracy might fail, with all the consequences that that entails for his co-conspirators and himself. Any ordinary person in Brutus's place would have had the sorts of fears Plutarch ascribes to Brutus, but Shakespeare's Brutus is no ordinary man. By attributing to Brutus nobler motives, Shakespeare added gravity and a sense of tragedy to the story.[37] This is not to suggest that a good play in which Brutus was scared for his life and reputation could not have been written (a play is not necessarily shallow because the motive of its protagonist is common); it is only to say that the play Shakespeare wrote was worth writing, and it could have been written only at the price of historical inaccuracy.

This proposal can be extended to cover forms of art other than fiction. For instance, Caravaggio's painting *The Taking of Christ*, which portrays Judas's betrayal of Christ, is better than earlier portrayals—while earlier paintings portray Judas as happy with what he does, Caravaggio shows him as pained by it, and in so doing conveys the complicated nature of betrayal.[38] Caravaggio's painting is better for this regardless of whether or not it is closer to the historical facts.

Now, I do not doubt that pedantic history buffs will take issue with both Shakespeare and Caravaggio. But their complaints with regard to historical art (which, I suspect, some of them watch, at least in part, because it gives them pleasure to catch the author manufacturing history), will sound a bit like the complaint of mathematician and polymath Charles Babbage who, upon reading a poem by Tennyson, containing the lines, "Every moment dies a man, Every moment one is born," wrote a letter to Tennyson suggesting that the verse contains a mathematical inaccuracy and must be changed:

Sir:
  In your otherwise beautiful poem "The Vision of Sin" there is a verse which reads – "Every moment dies a man, Every moment one is born." It must be manifest that if this were true, the population of the world would be at a standstill. In truth, the rate of birth is slightly in excess of that of death. I would suggest that in the next

edition of your poem you have it read – "Every moment dies a man, Every moment 1 1/16 is born."

The actual figure is so long I cannot get it onto a line, but I believe the figure 1 1/16 will be sufficiently accurate for poetry.[39]

Note that if I am right, there is a limit to the extent to which we can offer a unified account of the reasons a historical inaccuracy may be an aesthetic flaw.[40] There is unity only at a very general level. Since there is a plurality of reasons behind inaccuracy—I've mentioned bias, poor research, anachronisms that lack sufficient verisimilitude, etc.—there will likewise be a variety of reasons why we oppose historical inaccuracy. My claim is that they can all be traced back to the conversational contract between author and audience, and to the implications of that contract.[41]

There are two potential problems I wish to consider. First, it could be argued that there is no objective measure of the importance of artistic goals—that perhaps while the readers and I may think that Mostow's film is biased, propagandistic, and consequently aesthetically flawed, others could insist that promoting a pro-American view of history is a worthwhile goal, so worthwhile that it justifies the historical inaccuracy we've been discussing.[42] My response to this point comes in three parts. First, such viewers are likely to be biased, and a biased viewer may not see his or her own bias as an aesthetic flaw since such a viewer is unlikely to see his or her own bias as bias at all. But not much follows from this. In particular, it does not follow that there is no flaw. Consider an analogy: the readers and I may think that a system that does not allow homosexual people to enroll in the army is morally flawed, but a person who thought that not allowing homosexual people into the army is a good thing could insist that there is no moral flaw here. Yet, I take it, we would not conclude from the fact that there are or might be people who detect no flaw that there is none. Parallel

considerations apply to aesthetic flaws that stem from a bias. Second, I would argue that viewers who would see Mostow's artistic choice as justified in light of goals more important than accuracy do not embody the measure of aesthetic merit. A person more like a Humean critic does: someone free of tribal biases. Third, there may, in fact, be reasonable disagreements about the proper assessment of aesthetic merit. I will come back to this point in the conclusion.

There is a second potential problem, however. If one looks at what fiction authors sometimes say in response to charges of inaccuracy, one may conclude that there is a sort of misunderstanding between authors and their audiences regarding what the conversational contract implies. Some historical fiction writers speak as though they have a license to use history simply as material, in whichever way they please. Jonathan Mostow, for instance, says that *U-571* is "a fictional story that uses elements of history."[43] Similarly, Michael Hirst, the writer of *The Tudors*, responds to the charges concerning historical inaccuracy by saying, "My first duty is to write a show that's entertaining. I wasn't commissioned by Showtime to write a historical documentary." And also, "We didn't bother to put Johnny, Jonathan Rhys Meyers[,] in a red wig and make him fat and put a beard on just because then we'd say, 'Oh, look that's Henry VIII!'"[44]

There are two points I wish to make in response. The first harkens back to what I said earlier about the way to understand the "invitation to believe." A work of fiction can invite the audience to believe a proposition even if it is not the author's intention that audience members export the proposition in question. While historical fiction authors may regard their works as "simply fiction," audiences may nonetheless be warranted in not regarding those works in that way, not unless an author uses artistic means to clearly convey his or her intention to produce a kind

of variation on a historical theme rather than a work of historical fiction strictly speaking.

Second, there is an additional reason for authors to be vigilant here. There is something inherently more interesting and appealing about true stories concerning famous historical figures as compared with invented stories. Plenty of biographies deemed interesting and compelling would be seen as stodgy and unimaginative and would likely fail at the market if sold as fiction. For this reason, an author who issues an invitation to her audience to believe that a given story is a more or less accurate account of real historical events, but who is, in actual fact, not trying to portray history accurately, is attempting to get the audience's attention under false pretenses: the account is likely to be seen as more interesting when accepted as historical fiction than it would be when seen as just fiction. I suspect that this is why authors often do not take the necessary measures to cue the audience to the fact that a work is historically inaccurate (for instance, by changing the names of the characters involved).[45]

Of course, it is entirely possible that a hugely inaccurate script that misleads the audience with regard to its own accuracy would be more likely to get a TV contract and would sell better compared to a more accurate account, so that a fiction author may have justification of a different sort to take this route. But this does not mean that historical inaccuracy is not an aesthetic flaw—only that aesthetic flaws may be justified on other grounds. (Similarly, many "B-movies" are aesthetically flawed in various ways, but the expectation that they will succeed at the box office justifies producing them.)

6. Conclusion

I began with a promise to offer a solution to the problem with historical criticism of fiction. I have now completed my task, but I wish to make one final point before concluding this discussion. Let us make a full circle and return to *Quo Vadis*. Just to give the reader a sense of the sorts of inaccuracies involved, the novel tells of the Great Fire of Rome, portraying the fire as started by Emperor Nero, who later blames it on Christians. There is, however, no adequate evidence either that Nero started the fire or that he blamed it on Christians, and given the rest of *Quo Vadis*'s unabashedly pro-Christian message, the account of the great fire of Rome seems quite biased. Is this inaccuracy justified?

The account I have offered does not, by itself, settle the disagreement, either about this particular inaccuracy or about the novel more generally. There is nothing to prevent a person who, like my father, believes that the larger message of the novel justifies the inaccuracies, from accepting my view. My father's reasons for not viewing the inaccuracy as a flaw are *just* the reasons one would expect from a proponent of my own account (and in this sense, our disagreement may not, after all, be philosophical): what he said, remember, was that the inaccuracy was ultimately justified in light of higher and more important goals: a higher moral ideal that ultimately improves the novel as a novel. Indeed, my account allows for a plurality of argumentative strategies here. One could argue, alternatively, that there are dramatic reasons to portray Nero as starting the fire and then blaming it on Christians—this makes for a more intriguing story.

So, my account may be of limited help. But this is the fate of general theories. Here we come back to the problem of reasonable disagreement that I left open in the previous section. Just as an ethical theory may not suffice to resolve any particular ethical debate, my account might not settle debates concerning the aesthetic merits or demerits of any particular fiction misrepresenting history. I nonetheless contend that the proposal made can help put the debate on the track toward asking the right sorts of questions—what is an

inaccuracy's purpose? What artistic benefits, if any, does it help achieve?

Finally, one may think that the inaccuracies in a "high-brow" work such as *Quo Vadis* may ultimately be of little consequence, since few people read such novels. Perhaps the inaccuracies in a bestseller such as *The Da Vinci Code* (as it happens, a Christianity-bashing work) are much more important from this point of view.[46] But the point of view I've been concerned with here is the aesthetic one. I leave the larger issue of the social harms and benefits that result from historical inaccuracies in fiction for another occasion.

University of Colorado, Boulder

NOTES

1. Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1895).

2. A version of this question was previously discussed by Christopher Bartel in "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 70 (2012), pp. 213–222. I will return to Bartel's discussion shortly. Another author who has drawn attention to historical inaccuracy is Sarah Worth. See her "The Dangers of Da Vinci or The Power of Popular Fiction," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, vol. 14 (2007), pp. 134–143.

3. *Gladiator*, directed by Ridley Scott, Los Angeles, CA: Dreamwork Pictures, 2000, DVD; *Troy*, directed by Wolfgang Petersen, USA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2004, DVD; James Clavell, *Shōgun* (New York, NY: Delacorte Press, 1975).

4. The relevant passage reads, "A little while after the death of Alexander the Great, they began to set out the generations, reigns, and successions in numbers of years; and, by putting reigns and successions equipollent (equivalent) to generations; and three generations to an hundred or an hundred and twenty years, as appears by their chronology, they have made the antiquities of Greece 300 or 400 years older than the truth." Sir Isaac Newton, *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 3.

5. Kidman makes this point in the special features to the 2003 movie *The Hours*, a British-American drama. *The Hours*, directed by Stephen Daldry, USA: Miramax Films, 2002, DVD.

6. *The Tudors*, created by Michael Hirst, Showtime, 2007–2010.

7. U-571, directed by Jonathan Mostow, USA: Universal Pictures, 2000, DVD.

8. See Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism." The example is a very good one, and sticking to the same test case as Bartel will help throw the differences between our respective accounts into relief.

9. Peter Canavese, "*U-571*," *Groucho Reviews* (August 20, 2008), http://grouchoreviews.com/reviews/3197.

10. *BBC News*, "U-Boat film an 'affront', says Blair" (June 7, 2000), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/781858.stm.

11. Alex von Tunzelmann, "*U-571*: You Give Historical Films a Bad Name," *The Guardian* (February 26, 2009), https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/feb/25/u-571-reel-history.

12. Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," p. 213.

13. See Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," p. 213.

14. *Danton*, directed by Andrzej Wajda, France: Criterion, 2009, DVD.

15. Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," pp. 213–14.

16. Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," p. 222.

17. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757) in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 226–249; Kendall Walton, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality/I," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 68 (1994), pp. 27–50; Kathleen Stock, "Resisting Imaginative Resistance," *Philosophical Quarterly, vol*. 55 (2005), pp. 607–624, pursues this strategy as well.

18. Kendall Walton, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality/I," p. 38. I should note here that an anonymous referee for *American Philosophical Quarterly* made a strong case for the lack of asymmetry between factual and moral claims: most of us suspend disbelief in the morality espoused by, for instance, Homer (consider the chauvinistic leanings of the *Iliad* evidenced by the skirmish between Agamemnon and Achilles over a slave girl). It is true, the referee goes on, that there are limits both to our ability and to the advisability of suspending disbelief—thus, we may not be able to suspend disbelief and perhaps may not be well advised to do so if we are watching a Nazi propaganda movie—no asymmetry follows from this, since there are limits to disbelief suspension in the factual case too. I am sympathetic to this point, but I would still argue that there is an asymmetry. One thing to note is that a fiction writer cannot get us to believe false moral claims simply by *declaring* them to be true in the way he or she can get us to believe false factual claims such as one involving the existence of a non-existent city. If we are able to suspend disbelief in the wrongness of chauvinism, that isn't because Homer invites us to, but because we think that people in the epistemic situation of the Ancient Greeks probably could not have known better. If someone wrote the *Iliad* today, we would be much less willing to suspend disbelief in the questionable moral views. Second, and relatedly, if a reader were unable to suspend disbelief in the moral claims made in the *Iliad*, this would be an understandable reaction. If, by contrast, a reader refused to accept any false factual claim, such a reaction would be deficient. Still, I am happy to take the route suggested by the referee and make the next claim conditional: *if* we assume asymmetry between factual and moral claims, *and* we suppose further that the asymmetry results from the conceptual impossibility of worlds in which false moral claims are true, then we can say that historically inaccurate worlds may likewise be seen as conceptually impossible.

19. Walton writes, "The reader will imaginatively condemn the narrator's endorsement of infanticide, not allowing that he is right even in the fictional world in which he exists," *Morals in Fiction*, p. 38. Walton goes on to suggest that this refusal on the reader's part is due to conceptual impossibility.

20. See his "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," pp. 218–219.

21. Allan Hazlett and Christy Mag Uidhir, "Unrealistic Fictions," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 48 (2011), pp. 33–46. This is an option Bartel does not discuss though he mentions the Hazlett and Mag Uidhir paper in a discussion of another possibility he does consider: appeal to genre. See Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," pp. 216–217 and footnote 6. The Hazlett and Mag Uidhir strategy as applied to the problem of historical inaccuracy was discussed and rejected for reasons I am sympathetic to by Mary Beth Willard in "Historical Criticism and the Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," delivered at American Society for Aesthetics Eastern Division Meeting, Philadelphia (April 2011). I return to Willard's alternative proposal below.

22. Examples that Hazlett and Mag Uidhir borrow from Tamar Gendler's "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Journal of Philosophy, vol*. 97 (2000), pp. 55–81, quote p. 76.

23. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, "Unrealistic Fictions," pp. 42–43.

24. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, "Unrealistic Fictions," pp. 39–40.

25. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), especially pp. 140–143.

26. Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance."

27. Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance." p. 77.

28. Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," p. 220.

29. Raymond Smullyan, *Reflections: The Magic, Music And Mathematics Of Raymond Smullyan* (World Scientific Publishing, 2015) p. 57.

30. Suggested by Willard in the talk referenced in endnote 21. To my knowledge, this remains an unpublished manuscript, but the idea is worth discussing. I note that Willard does not label her account 'reference failure,' but the label captures the idea."

31. Bartel makes a similar point about genre constraints, but he does not relate genre-imposed constraints to a conversational contract between author and audience, as I do here. See "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism," p. 216.

32. Of course, in *some* science fiction, the standards are even more demanding than normal regarding the laws of nature. For instance, in Andy Weir's 2011 self-published novel *The Martian*, the scientific facts are treated much more seriously than in most fiction, so (what would otherwise be) a minor error about how nature works could be a serious flaw in *that* book. The same is true of Arthur C. Clarke's works, such as *2001* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1968). Thanks to Mike Huemer for these examples.

33. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, as well as Gendler, explicitly appeal to Grice's account of conversational implicature, while Willard follows Grice indirectly by following Nanay, who follows Grice. See Bence Nanay, "Imaginative Resistance and Conversational Implicature," Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 60 (2010), pp. 586–600. Bartel, on the other hand, can easily get on board with the conversational contract idea but argue that the contract does not give us clear guidelines regarding acceptable historical inaccuracy.

34. Internet bloggers have documented a number of inaccuracies in *Braveheart*. See, "*Braveheart*—10 Historical Inaccuracies You Need to Know Before Watching the Movie," *Hande's Blog* (December 5, 2011), https://thehande.wordpress.com/2011/12/05/braveheart-the-10-historical-inaccuracies-you-need-to-know-before-watching-the-movie/.

35. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, "Unrealistic Fictions," p. 39.

36. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir, "Unrealistic Fictions," p. 40.

37. Ernest Schanzer, similarly, suggests that all the character complexity of Shakespeare's Brutus is Shakespeare's own invention. Schanzer writes in this regard, "[F]or all that makes Brutus a dramatic character as distinct from a copy-book hero, his divided mind, his self-deception, his final tragic disillusion, Shakespeare received no hints from Plutarch," in Schanzer's "A Tragedy of Shakespeare's Brutus," *A Journal of English Literary History*, vol. 22 (1955), pp. 1–15, at p. 1.

38. This example was brought to my attention by Berys Gaut, who mentions it in *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 92.

39. Jeremy Bernstein, *The Analytical Engine: Computers, Past, Present, and Future* (New York, NY: Random House, 1964), p. 33–34.

40. Bartel makes an attempt to look for a unified account, but the degree of unity here will be necessarily limited. Bartel, "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism."

41. The situation is analogous to that of lying and misleading people: we may have different reasons to be upset with different kinds of lies. Some are malicious, some are self-serving, etc. But likely, a unified account of the wrongness of lying at a more general level can be offered, tracing the wrongness to something like a duty to speak the truth.

42. Thanks go to an anonymous referee for making me consider this point.

43. Cynthia Fuchs and Mike Ward, "*U-571*, A Conversation with Jonathan Mostow," *NitrateOnline. com* (April 21, 2000), http://www.nitrateonline.com/2000/fu571.html.

44. Alex Cohen, "The Tudors Battles with Truth," Pop Culture, *NPR* (March 28, 2008), http://www .npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89182466..

45. See, for example, Edward Wyatt, "Author is Kicked Out of Oprah Whinfrey's Book Club," *New York Times* (January 27, 2006), documenting the case of James Frey's book *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Random House, 2003), originally marketed as an autobiographical account but later admitted to be substantially fictionalized. Stacie Friend makes a related point also and discusses the Frey case in a thoughtful essay titled, "Fiction as a Genre," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* vol. 112 (2012), pp. 179–209. The Frey case is mentioned by NPR host Ira Glass as well, in an episode called, "Retraction." The episode is a retraction of a story aired earlier, about Mike Daisey's visit of a Foxconn plant in China. Daisey's account was found to be substantially fabricated. At one point in the interview, Glass reminds Daisey that he'd once done a monologue about James Frey in which he'd said that he too, like Frey, had fabricated bits of a prior monologue because those "connected with the audience." Daisey gives a similar rationale for his later fabrications: "I think I was terrified that if I untied these things, that the work, that I know is really good, and tells a story, that does these really great things for making people care, that it would come apart in a way where, where it would ruin everything." See *This American Life*, Episode 460: "Retraction," March 16, 2012. Available at: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/460/ retraction. The quote from Daisey can be found on pp. 14–15 of the episode transcript available online.

46. Many of the inaccuracies are documented by Sarah Worth in "The Dangers of Da Vinci."