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Thorvald Steen

## The Play Shakespeare Never Wrote

Four hundred years after Richard the Lionheart's death, William Shakespeare wrote several plays featuring English kings and queens. But nothing about Richard I. Even his brother John warranted a play. But why would Shakespeare have wanted to write about the Lionheart?

In Shakespeare's lifetime, 1564-1616, the Richard I they were familiar with in England was unsuitable for a drama: a flawless crusader king, so perfect that the pope called him "God's sword".

I

Richard is referred to in two places in Shakespeare's *King John*, 1595. In Scene 1, Act 1:

*"Bastard:*  
[...] Robert Faulconbridge –  
a soldier by the honour-giving hand  
Of Coeur-de-lion knighted in the field."

And again, at the end of this scene between Lady Faulconbridge and the Bastard:

*"Lady Faulconbridge:*  
King Richard Coeur-de-lion was thy father.  
By long and vehement suit I was seduced  
To make room for him in my husband's bed.  
Heaven lay not my transgression to my charge!  
Thou art the issue of my dear offence,  
Which was so strongly urg'd past my defence."

Her son isn't the least upset, his reply concludes:

"*Bastard*:

[...] Who lives and dares but say thou didst not well  
When I was got, I'll send his soul to hell.  
Come, lady, I will show thee to my kin;  
And they shall say when Richard me begot,  
If thou hadst said him nay, it had been sin.  
Who says it was, he lies; I say 'twas not."

The first scene of Act 2 continues with what, for Shakespeare, is an unusually one dimensional exposition of Richard's role:

"*Philip*:

[...] Arthur, that great forerunner of they blood,  
Richard, that robb'd the lion of his heart  
And fought the holy wars in Palestine, [...]"

Richard doesn't merely lack subtlety, he can also do as he likes. He not only gets away scot-free with deeds others would have been punished for, but he is admired for them as well. John on the other hand, like most of Shakespeare's roles, is depicted as a complex character in constant development.

Shakespeare's understanding of Richard is the same as the one I grew up with. A hero without stain or blemish, as in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819). Even though there really was a Robin Hood of Locksley, he lived roughly a hundred years later than Richard, during the reign of Edward III. He was a middle-ranking yeoman descended from the gentry. *Ivanhoe* and the hated Templar, Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert, were Scott's creations. The King Richard that both Robin Hood and *Ivanhoe* were fighting for, is the pure Lionheart familiar to Shakespeare.

But who was Richard I? He was born at Oxford in 1157. The son of Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and King Henry II of England. Who was this man who never spoke anything but French, hated Jews and led the massacre before the walls of Acre in June, 1191? Can we understand the history of the Middle East without understanding him? Some historians believe that they need no help from the historical novel in uncovering more of the truth. But truth is large. So large that there ought to be room for both the historian and the novelist.

## II

Up to the time the Wall came down in 1989, I had written four collections of poetry. As the official East and West in Europe bombarded each other with political recriminations, I became fascinated by what united East and West. It was then that I "discovered" how Charles Darwin, that child of the Enlightenment, was regarded as a hero in both camps. Capitalism and communism each share a belief in knowledge and reason, and each thinks it represents progress. I asked myself the question: who was Charles Darwin? And in particular, who was he at the age of twenty-four when he made his first discoveries south of Buenos Aires from HMS Beagle. I followed in his footsteps to gather material for what were to become the historical novels *Don Carlos* (1993) and *Giovanni* (1995). There is a rich seam of biographical material about Charles Darwin. In addition, there are good sources showing what Buenos Aires looked like in the years 1831-36, the date he visited the city. And last but not least, he himself wrote brilliantly about his journey aboard HMS Beagle.

But when the young Darwin arrives at Buenos Aires, he's full of the belief that knowledge makes us better people. In fact, it's what nearly all Europeans thought after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and the Great War, and Second World War, until our belief in the future gets torpedoed by yet another war. In my own case, it was the civil war in Yugoslavia that disillusioned me. In my novel I have Darwin (Don Carlos) meet Giovanni Graciani, a Genoese immigrant in the dockside quarter of La Boca in Buenos Aires. An intellectual worker, considerably more melancholy than Darwin. A sceptic and certainly a man with no such overarching belief in progress. The civil war in Argentina, which was raging while Darwin was there, is one backdrop, the struggle for and against French ideals of enlightenment another, and also importantly the battle between science and religious faith. I wanted to write a novel about the meeting between a melancholy sceptic and the optimistic belief in progress. Prose, that "pure", literary expression, was inappropriate. I needed a prose form that could embrace facts, fiction, aphorisms, ideas, in short a prose that the Gyldendal editor, Gordon Hølmebakk, has on various occasions termed "bastard" literature, in the pejorative sense.

The new historical novel should indubitably be such a bastard, and never make any attempt to be pure.

Memories are images viewed from a distance. The same is true of history.

As a boy I balanced atop a very old tortoise in a grimy street in Addis Abeba. The year was 1959. I was five. I was clasping a stick plaited with brightly-coloured string and wire. Behind me walked extremely tall, dark-skinned students from the technical college where my father taught. We paraded in front of Emperor Haile Selassie. The Emperor used to inspect the college students every autumn. I was pale and fair, well suited to the role of mascot and drum major. After the march I was presented with a silver cup bearing the Emperor's emblem.

So far this story has been told as empirically correctly as possible. In the days that followed it was developed and embroidered, often with the help of grown-ups who'd witnessed the event. For years, even after their revision, I always insisted that the Emperor's eyes "were terribly yellow" and that the sky was cloudless. A decade later I met several of the students when they came to Oslo on a visit. They were able to confirm that the Emperor's eyes were indeed yellow because of liver disease, but that the weather was overcast and that the tallest students had been immediately behind me. Of course it's true that memory often lies, regardless of age, but not always. Even though I subsequently leave my own mark on these images, even the vaguest of memories, and even guesses, can be correct. Just as the most outlandish hypothesis about history can be too.

When I relate this personal recollection to friends of a radical persuasion, they shrug their shoulders or comment critically on the Emperor and his brutality and opposition to social reforms in Ethiopia. Despite my reminding them that he led the resistance to Mussolini and fascist Italy's attack on Ethiopia in 1936, their opinion of the Emperor colours their assessment of the spectacle that took place before Haile Selassie's eyes in 1959. Not infrequently they demand to know if I've read Ryszard Kapuściński's book *The Emperor*, about Haile Selassie. If, on the other hand, I relate the story to friends in Ghana, which with Ethiopia was crucial in building The Organization for African Unity, or even more to Rasta supporters, the jubilation is boundless. For them the Emperor was a pioneer of African self-awareness, of Rastafarianism and its religion. He is seen as a descendant of their heroes – King Salomo and the Queen of Saba.

They won't even accept that the weather was dull when I, as a five-year-old, paraded in front of the Emperor.

As far as I know, no one disputes that the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241) must be regarded as the greatest historian of the Middle Ages in Northern Europe. The work which fostered

this renown is *Heimskringla*, the Norwegian kings' saga. So an Icelander, who spent only a few months in Norway, was to write our centuries' long history. Snorri's work was illuminating, but even the historian deserves to be read critically. Not even Snorri understood his own children's history and development, and he certainly didn't understand his wife. Many will recognise themselves in this. I have trouble understanding myself, especially in the evenings, when melancholy descends around sundown.

### III

"This only is denied even to God: the power to undo the past," wrote Agathon (447-441 BC). In contrast to us human beings.

*What Is History?* is the title of a book written in 1961 by Edward Hallet Carr, a professor of history. The book is based on a series of lectures he gave at Cambridge the previous year. One of his conclusions is that history is a continuous process of interaction and correspondence between the historian and his facts, an unceasing dialogue between the past and present. Carr adds: "It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them; it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."<sup>i</sup> What Carr says of the role of the historian, could just as well apply to the author who writes historical novels. Carr, in common with the American historian Hayden White, has pointed out that even an academic historical writer, by which I mean one who is very careful to base his writing on the greatest number of empirical facts, still introduces elements of fiction. And even the most positivistically orientated historians are influenced by narrative convention. According to Carr, the past does not in itself exist. So, anything that is not deduced or described can hardly be called history. We are the ones who give it substance in posterity. That's what history is. The facts of history are selected by historians who, in their turn, are influenced by their times, according to Carr. Millions have crossed the Rubicon, but historians have focused on only one crossing: Caesar's. So far.

The word history comes from the Greek and means: "that which is seen". The German historian, Leopold von Ranke, thought that the object of historical writing was to depict the past "as it really was". His "really" certainly didn't just include empiricism, but rather that the aim should be to reveal "the essence of every epoch", its "spirit" or "underlying truth". Large, wide-ranging concepts which contain a number of different elements, such as: weather, dates, names, sexes, the selection of historical subjects to describe, and so on. The road from the strictly empirical to discernment and fiction is far shorter than we are prepared to admit, according to Carr and von Ranke.

Positivism and Marxism were strongly in vogue in much of Europe, including Scandinavia, from the end of the 1960s, all through the 1970s, and well into the 1980s. Nowadays it is a much more acceptable part of the historian's work to encompass the narrative element. The importance of the subject has become a legitimate area of study in history. But this view is still controversial. When Professor Claus Bryld at Roskilde wrote his book *Hvilken befrielse* (What a Liberation, 1995), in which the theme was the Second World War and the legal settlement, Politiken ran a leader article on 12 April 1996 which stated: "Historical truth is not subjective, it is objective. If we don't realise this, the entire basis of public discussion, debate and democracy has disappeared."

Politiken wasn't the first to claim objectivity when dealing with moral truths about important political questions. I, in my time, was a confirmed adherent of historical materialism, which supports the law that each economic peak will be succeeded by another, greater, one. Serfdom was replaced by

feudalism, then came capitalism and finally socialism and communism. This, it is claimed, has the same scientific legitimacy as saying that water will freeze in temperatures below zero degrees Celsius.

Just as objectivity is a word that ought to be treated with care, so it is worth taking note of those who profess certainty that their own literary genre is the only road to that weighty word "reality". In his book *Hva er sakprosa?* (What Is Factual Prose?, 2008), Norway's first professor of factual prose, Johan Tønnesson, gives his definition. The basic minimum for factual prose texts is that they should maintain "the contract concerning the direct, fundamental connection to reality."

Of course the book was aimed at justifying the need for factual prose and demonstrating its importance, but it's impossible to interpret this definition as meaning anything other than that literature doesn't possess this "connection". But what else should literature be connected to other than reality? You don't have to read many works by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to realise that he often uses literary references. And not just in his main work *Distinction*, which looks at how we form our notions of taste. The researcher Élisabeth Badinter sets herself the ambitious task of answering something that impinges on a large part of our existence. The result is her factual prose book *XY: On Masculine Identity*. In order to study the question, she frequently uses literary excerpts as sources. She uses literature empirically for the individual's self-awareness of masculinity and sex. Badinter, like Bourdieu, has realised that chromosomes, genes and discoveries aren't enough to describe the XY-sex.

#### IV

Some people claim that *Don Quixote*, published by Cervantes in 1605, is Europe's first novel. But the Icelandic sagas, written by banished Norwegians, or their descendants, must surely claim that accolade. The sagas have the hallmark of the historical novel: the action in the text happened long before the author's birth. Even in *Heimskringla*, Snorri uses the novelist's technique. Where there were no written or oral sources, he employed fiction. Without batting an eyelid Snorri records, for example, St. Olaf's speech without any foundation except what was inside his own head.

Where the historical novel is capable of arousing a genuine interest in bygone times it can be said to have a positive function, but it may also help to reinforce prejudices about the past. Personifying and simplifying historical events may create engaging narratives, but it's also the greatest weakness of this type of novel.

One definition of the historical novel is that the action is set in a time that is remote from the author's own limits of experience.

The Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) is often reckoned to be the father of the classic historical novel with the publication of *Waverley* in 1814. In a series of novels he explored themes from English and Scottish history. In *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* there is an evident desire to relate details and personal conduct correctly in relation to contemporary thought and historical philosophy. The novels not only threw light on the past, but were also supposed to help explain how modern society had come into being. The literary historian György Lukács views Scott as a model regarding the historical novel. In *The Talisman*, Scott not only makes a study of Richard the Lionheart, but also examines the Muslim general Saladin, his great enemy, in a sober and deferential manner. At that time Saladin was off the radar as far as European historians were concerned.

In Norway, contemporary academia has been sceptical, if not condescending, towards the historical novel. Gordon Hølmebakk has been very vocal in his criticism, as has Kåre Lunden, a professor of history. "In historical terms, *Kristin Lavransdatter* is a source of knowledge about Sigrid

Undset and about certain conditions in 1920s Norway, not about the Middle Ages," Lunden writes in *Dialog med fortida* (Dialogue With the Past, 1981). So the historical novel is being attacked by professional historians as well as students of comparative literature, who want pure literary expression, pure fiction and art. These two critical trends are united in the belief that literature should keep to its own territory and not sully itself.

In spite of the scepticism of Norwegian academia, there has been a dynamic development within the genre in Europe. Umberto Eco, José Saramago, Orhan Pamuk and A.S. Byatt have all written important novels. Eco actually wrote, in his postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, that the true historical novel is not what is known as a "romance" – a story pervaded by a timeless or mystical aura, as found in fantasy literature. *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, for example, which depicts many historical characters and events, cannot be called an historical novel, because the plot could have been set a century earlier or later. *The Naked Madonna* by Jan Wiese doesn't fall into the category of historical novel either, using Eco's definition, whereas several of Bergljot Hobæk Haff's books, which deal with real people and events set against a carefully crafted historical backdrop, are – *Sigbrits båtferd* (Sigbrit's Boat Journey) for example.

It's worth noting that a novel with more fictive than historical elements can be much more historical than a novel that's crawling with historical characters.

In his postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, Eco wrote that one crucial prerequisite for the true historical novel is that its contents be clearly anchored in time and place. He explains, for example, that the monk hero of *The Name of the Rose* had to be a Franciscan, because he needed an investigator in England who was capable of interpreting signs in the material world. And that the plot had to be set in November 1327 because Michael of Cesena was in Avignon by December.

The scepticism aroused by historical novels is chiefly due to the trivial literature which disports itself on the fringes of the genre. Such literature is frequently slapdash about the relevant historical facts, and its character portrayals often shallow. Colleagues like Kjartan Fløgstad and Dag Solstad believe that the cynicism shown to the genre in Norway results from the very traditional literary style that historical novelists were employing when modernism made itself fully felt in the 1960s. In addition, positivism was widespread amongst historians.

One problem with the historical novel is the depiction of its characters' inner lives. Crucial here is the author's ability to hold the reader's attention and at the same time maintain the illusion of historical perspective. There is no one-size-fits-all set of instructions for this. And a good thing too. Many authors have clearly enjoyed the freedom to work it out for themselves.

It is often claimed that Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* are postmodern historical novels. This categorisation results from the way they bring together various literary genres and style types, with a fusion of fact and fiction, considerable intellectual ambition and an innovative narrative technique. The historian Agnes Bøttcher wrote: "Postmodern historical novels are no longer as secure in their historical truth as old historical novels once were, they often deal with crises and periods of transition, the confrontation between different types of truth, religious and scientific."<sup>iii</sup>

The label postmodern isn't a very apt one in my opinion. The above could equally have described *Don Quixote* by Cervantes or various of Shakespeare's plays – in which a myriad of styles, timescales and literary genres come together – without anyone taking it into their head to call them postmodern. I believe it's more productive to state that the aim ought always to be to renew and develop the historical novel.

The historian Peter Englund wrote in *Dagens Nyheter* that historical novels are often at their best when written in "lacunae and touching on things we really can't know a great deal about".<sup>iii</sup> In

the same article Englund says that the historical novels we really don't need are those that overlies the material historians have already discovered.

I would add that the historical novelist ought to have an idea of the material historians have already unearthed about the period under consideration. This helps the writer find the lacunae and gaps in history.

Novels like *The Name of the Rose*, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, and *Snow* by Ellen Mattson, about the various reactions to the death of Karl XII, go a long way through their prose to recreating environment, landscape, smells and customs. Of the Middle Ages, 20 AD, and the 18th century respectively. These are literary depictions which don't figure in the information historians provide. Simply because their job is a different one. The literary, the subjective, is a prerequisite for engendering authenticity, not to mention art. The historian's material is clearly of great benefit to novelists, but the most important thing for novelists is that they dare to challenge. "I want to make visible the underlying layers of our collective existence, I want to bring to the surface the things that have been hidden," wrote José Saramago in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (Lisbon, 1989).

V

You'd have thought there was some difficulty in advocating a complete recreation of history. It's still not generally accepted that the aim of authors of both fact and fiction must be to illuminate history and reality from as many angles as possible, and that we therefore need both the good historical study and the new historical novel, because truth is not static, but something that we, at best, can reveal bit by bit. Not unlike the astronomer's desire to know ever more about space.

In 1931 there was a heated debate in the pages of *Aftenposten* and in another newspaper, *Tidens Tegn*. The discussion was about whether there were critical questions to be asked of Snorri Sturluson's historical descriptions in *Heimskringla*. The author Yngve Hauge had claimed in an article called "Sigurd the Crusader's visit to Constantinople", that he'd discovered a letter written by Caesar Bryennius.<sup>iv</sup> Bryennius was married to the historian Anna Comnena, the author of one of the Byzantine period's great works: *The Alexiad I-IV*. The work was written shortly after Sigurd had arrived at Constantinople in March 1111. According to Hauge, the letter corroborated all the details of Snorri's description of what had happened when Sigurd and his great fleet sailed into the Sea of Marmara: it was right in front of the Emperor's palace, there was "a side wind", and the Emperor had covered all the streets up which Sigurd and his men rode to the palace on their horses, with silk. Hauge immediately found a supporter in Professor Worm-Müller, who thought this was "the greatest rehabilitation Snorri could have". But in *Tidens Tegn*, a senior lecturer and Greek expert called Smith claimed that the letter was totally un-Byzantine in form. A few days later, Professor Edvard Bull wrote that the letter had been used to protect Snorri's sources from critical appraisal. There couldn't have been any horses aboard. The sea voyage from the Holy Land to Constantinople was too lengthy for them to survive. And was there room for them? And what about the silk? There was a lot of silk in Constantinople, to be sure, but not enough to cover the thousands of metres to the Emperor's palace.

The scholars grew more and more heated. In much the same way as fundamentalists and revisionists do when they discuss the Bible or the Koran with believers.

What they were fighting over was reality. What they never addressed in the debate or in their careers as historians and authors, was that Sigurd was a crusader who fought seven battles. Snorri mentions them, but doesn't put them into any kind of context. The surprising thing, though, is that

historians don't ask *why* Sigurd was received as a hero in Jerusalem in 1110. It is one of the many gaps in Sigurd's story. Was it connected with the fact that his hosts were Christian fundamentalists, who eleven years previously had massacred all the Muslims and Jews in the city, and wanted military reinforcements to drive the infidels out of the town of Sayda?

Why was it that all Sigurd's men left the Holy City and accompanied him to Constantinople? Was the reason that this great body of men had embarked on the journey to get themselves jobs in the Emperor's mercenary Viking army, in Byzantium?

Who gave Snorri Sturluson the task of writing *Heimskringla*? Most sources think it was Earl Skuli and King Haakon Haakonsson. Well entrenched in the fundamentalist wing of Christianity. Haakon was one of Europe's most powerful kings. The documentation is poor, but it's no less interesting for that to examine the hypothesis that the pope wished for closer co-operation with this enterprising king. The kings' saga was written only a few years after the crusaders attacked and plundered their Byzantine allies in April 1204. After this incident, almost all contact between East and West, and the last remnants of pluralism that existed in Europe, ceased. The Byzantine state, which had Christianity as its official religion, actually allowed Jews and Muslims to practise their faith. What a shock Sigurd must have had witnessing that in Constantinople!

To write complementary academic studies dealing with these questions would, at best, prove highly inadequate. Up to now there have been too many blank spaces and insufficient information for empirically justifiable and meaningful argumentation. The attack on Constantinople, in which the library and university were burnt, has further impoverished this picture.

Authors like Gunnar Ekelöf and Jorge Louis Borges travelled to Istanbul in 1966 and 1984 respectively, with the aim of forming the most complete idea of what the city had once been like. They were never able to examine the historical records proving that the city really had been pluralistic, unlike the rest of Europe, with the exception of Moorish Spain.<sup>v</sup>

My own novel *Konstantinopel* (Constantinople), about Sigurd the Crusader's travels from 1108 until 1111, from Bergen to Gibraltar, Jerusalem, Constantinople and back home, was written with reference to historical works, but where their information stretched no further, I used hypotheses, in so far as I was still adhering to strictly academic history, and built on them. Not unlike the situation that I assume Sir Walter Scott faced when he wrote *Ivanhoe*, and even more so with *The Talisman*. His historical sources were limited. But acquaintances had begun to travel in the Middle East and they supplied him with fresh information. As far as Richard was concerned, the material was in large part built on historical sources inferior to those Snorri Sturluson had at his disposal: monks and bards who'd followed the kings, as well as comprehensive historical treatises.

The historical novel was then, and still is in many cases today best suited, both as a tool and in purely literary terms, to extending our knowledge of reality from those epochs of the Middle Ages that affect our world today.

## VI

What is needed to equip the new historical novel to extend our understanding of historical reality?

The traditional historical novel is more like a history book than anything else, building on a set of empirical facts, which language places in context. If the historical novelist merely uses what the historian has already discovered, the best he can hope for is a reworking of the history book. The novelist must, in addition to knowing the existing facts, launch himself into the unknown, assume, prophesy, guess and deceive – if that gives a truer picture of what things were like. Carl J. Burckhardt

wrote: "The writer approaches closest to historical truth," and he goes on to say: "History is the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another."<sup>vi</sup> The historian is frequently hidebound by the conventional attitudes of his age. History is written by the victors, whether it's the Second World War, the medieval Norwegian kings, or the Middle East. Here in Norway, we only gained access to the posthumous papers of our most powerful man, the late resistance leader turned Minister of Defence, Jens Christian Hauge, in 2010. But please note: only the papers Hauge didn't burn, those he didn't consider too "sensitive". Or, perhaps the ones that didn't fit in with the way Hauge wanted posterity to interpret Norwegian history from 1940-45? Large swathes of European history have been partly or entirely expunged after soldiers on the Fourth Crusade plundered and burnt the library and university in Byzantium's capital Constantinople in April 1204. For a hundred and ten years the crusaders and Byzantines had been allies. A century earlier the crusaders had, amongst their other deeds, burnt down the valuable and extensive library in Tripoli. The Byzantine Empire (330-1453 AD) had Christianity as its state religion. But it was a pluralistic regime, just like the Moorish kingdom in Al-Andalus, and the medieval period of the Arabian civilisation, under the rule of such men as Saladin (1167-93). These three permitted religions other than the official one to practise their faith, and allowed active scientific communities and seats of learning to research freely, without the precondition that their findings should serve God, as was the case in the rest of Europe for more than five hundred years. It's hardly surprising that the most important discoveries in physics, medicine and astronomy in the medieval period were made by groups of Jewish and Muslim scholars.<sup>vii</sup>

Personally, I'm in no doubt that the crusaders' Christian fundamentalism, systematic destructiveness and attempts to erase all knowledge which didn't serve their own God, has been the cause of countless gaps in European history.

During 2009, the historian Tore Pryser criticised Kjartan Fløgstad in various forums, because he hadn't used footnotes and sources in his novel *Grense Jakobselv* (Jakobselv Border). But to accede to this would have been to undermine the novel as a genre. And anyway, some historians would hardly be willing witnesses to the truths within literary works. In my own historical novels *Konstantinopel* and *Den lille hesten* (The Little Horse), I studied the existing material about their two main characters, King Sigurd the Crusader and Snorri Sturluson respectively, and used a good deal of it in the novels. But what ought to make them interesting to historians are the bits that can't be documented, but that can be pieced together from Byzantine and Norwegian history, or created through my understanding of religions, ideas and anything else that can help me imagine what Constantinople was like in March 1111, when Sigurd sailed into the Sea of Marmara before the palace of Emperor Alexius I, where the Topkapi Palace stands today. None of this can be documented, the power of fiction is the guiding force. Just as a hypothesis is always the harbinger of what will later turn into science.

The good historical novel raises its eyes to where historians must and will follow, carefully checking that each step is supported by the evidence.

## VII

Richard the Lionheart is the object of considerable interest particularly amongst British and French historians. Also in the Arab world he is frequently referred to by medieval chroniclers, like Saladin's biographer Behaeddin, and the historian and Saladin critic, al-Athir, who was a great admirer of Richard, both as a soldier and a military strategist.

Historians from Britain, France, and to some extent the Middle East, are affected by their culture and leading historical academics. Richard spent most of his life in France. In their biographies of him, historians concentrate largely on what happened within Richard's own borders. The problem is made worse by the fact that this English king disliked most things English. Richard was born in England. After a few years his parents split up, and his mother took him back to Anjou in France. The other children remained with their father. Henry II and Eleanor ended up at war with one another, a war in which Richard unreservedly supported his mother. It is impossible to discover, even from historians, whether Richard ever opposed his mother. In the choice between following the pope or his mother, he always chose her. His mother's power over him is a lacuna in history, as it was in November 1187, when Pope Gregory VIII appealed to all the monarchs and nobles of Europe. The crusaders had lost Jerusalem to Saladin and his forces. Saladin had chosen not to avenge the crusaders' massacre of Muslims and Jews in 1099 when they'd taken the Holy City. The pope was furious that Saladin opened up the city to all faiths, and initiated the Third Crusade. November 1187 was especially decisive for Richard. It was then that he discovered his life's mission. The pope commanded him to lead the Third Crusade, far away from France and England. Gregory promised Richard and the other crusaders a quick route to heaven if they killed as many Saracens as possible. Killing Saladin and taking Jerusalem were the most important tasks ever assigned to Richard. He didn't succeed with either. Richard had been brought up to adhere and aspire to the chivalric code. How did it affect him when Saladin, the man the pope had marked out as his arch-enemy and condemned as the Antichrist, practised this code more faithfully than Richard and his allies? And the heat which hit him as he went ashore at Acre on 11 June 1191 and enveloped him twenty-four hours a day for the next seventeen months, what did that do to him? The historians are silent.

And then, when he'd finally turned for home in 1194, he chose to employ the last five years of his life waging war against his former ally, King Philip of France, instead of equipping another crusade. Why?

## VIII

Imagine if Shakespeare had had access to Richard's contemporary historians, like Behaeddin and al-Athir. Or Steven Runciman's *A History of the Crusades* 1-3 (1971), Piers Paul Read's *The Templars* (1999), and the French historian Jean Flori's *Richard the Lionheart* (2007). Quite apart from what Shakespeare would have thought if he'd been able to study the literature the infidel Saladin read himself, like the woman poet Rabia al-Adawiyya (717-801) and Farid od-Din Attar's (1146-1220) *The Conference of the Birds*.

Shakespeare would certainly have found sufficient material to develop a multifaceted Richard I. Possibly he would have been surprised at all the sources that had been suppressed. Or would he have preferred to remain in blissful ignorance?

According to Michel de Montaigne it requires some insight to know that one knows nothing. Just how well developed this insight was in Shakespeare's case is something we have no empirical knowledge about.

<sup>i</sup> Edward Hallet Carr, *What Is History?* p.11, 1983, London: Penguin Books.

<sup>ii</sup> Agnes Bøttcher, *Saga i Samtiden – sagatiden i moderne norsk litteratur*. In: Bokvennen no. 3, 2005, Oslo; Bokvennen Forlag.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Englund, *Fantasins två herrar. Om den historiska romanens styrka och svaghet, och om en ny bok om Karl XII*. In: Dagens Nyheter, 25 September 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Yngvar Hauge, *Sigurd Jorsalfars besøk i Konstantinopel*. In: Aftenposten no. 178, 11 April 1931.

<sup>v</sup> Read for example M. Angolds: *The Byzantine Empire. 1025–1204*, 2nd ed., 1997, London: Longman.

<sup>vi</sup> Carl J. Burckhardt: *Judgements on History and on Historians*, p.158, 1959

<sup>vii</sup> Charles Singer: *A short history of scientific ideas to 1900*, 1962, Oxford: Clarendon Press.