

Juba, the black gladiator who healed Maximus' wound, tells him when he first refuses to play his new role as a gladiator: "Why don't you fight? We all have to fight!" By facing death heroically, one might actually overcome it for the present by defeating one's foe or, by fighting courageously even in the face of overwhelming odds, obtain a degree of heroic honor in defeat that transcended death. Proximo says it all: "Ultimately, we're all dead men. Sadly, we cannot choose how, *but* – we *can* decide how we *meet* that end in order that we are remembered as men."

The lesson of the arena was that by not giving up without a fight even someone who had suffered the all-too-common misfortune of enslavement could become a noble hero. To quote Proximo again: "When you die, and die you shall, your transition shall be to the sound of 'clap, clap.' Gladiators, I salute you." Maximus overcame his reversal of fortune and accomplished one of the deeds that brought the greatest heroic honor and fame: vengeance on his enemy. Thus he redeemed himself. When death had claimed him, Lucilla said: "He was a soldier of Rome. Honor him!" Many willing hands bore him off in triumph.

This powerful film has sparked enormous interest in the history behind it. Perhaps historians of ancient Rome should simply be grateful for its valid general insights and overlook its many factual errors. The *artiste* will say that concern with such details merely reflects the overly punctilious quibbles of pettifogging pedants who cannot appreciate the forest for the trees. Certainly creative artists must be granted some poetic license, but it is still disappointing that the scriptwriters of *Gladiator* did not show at least a little more intellectual discipline and respect for the historical record. Poetic license is not a *carte blanche* for the wholesale disregard of facts in historical fiction or films. In most cases, getting easily determined factual details correct is not incompatible with the drama and excitement needed for a best-selling book or a success at the box office.

In *Gladiator*, for example, the opening battle does not need either the anachronistic German shepherd or the questionable catapults to give us a visceral impression of war on Rome's northern frontier. A more accurate portrayal of gladiatorial arms and armor and their pairings in the arena would not have made the fighting less dramatic. A true portrayal of Marcus Aurelius' death and his relationship with Commodus would not have made it more difficult to make the latter a hated villain. An exciting plot and compelling characters along the movie's actual plot lines could easily have coexisted with recorded events and characters in the proper chronological framework.

First, the opening battle could have been the actual battle of A.D. 179. Then there could have been a quick segue to the death of Marcus Aurelius and to the succession of Commodus a few months later. During this sequence of events, the focus could have been on the historical Quintilii brothers, Condius and Maximus, and their respective sons. These famous men were no friends of Commodus and, with the exception of Maximus' son, suffered execution at Commodus' command after the executions of Lucilla and Crispina. Historically, they could have been present as high-ranking officers and advisors at the battle of A.D. 179 and at Marcus' death, and they could have been sympathetic to Lucilla's plot. Dio's story of the surviving son's escape and disappearance has all the elements of a Hollywood script and could easily have fit the plot of *Gladiator*. When he found out that he was marked for death, he filled his mouth with the blood of a hare, spit it out while faking a fatal fall from his horse, had faithful servants substitute a dead ram for his body in the coffin on his funeral pyre, and disappeared, never to be found despite a massive manhunt.⁶⁰

The scriptwriters could have made this man the hero of their film.⁶¹ He could be wounded by pursuing assassins, fall into the hands of a *lanista*, and become a gladiator with the nickname "Narcissus," the name of the historical athlete who was part of the successful plot against Commodus that involved the emperor's mistress Marcia and others in A.D. 192.⁶² Poetic license would allow the record to be altered somewhat to create a dramatic ending in the arena. Nevertheless, the end could be kept close to the historical record of Commodus' death. In this scenario, "Narcissus," whose true identity has been previously revealed to the audience, could fight as a *retiarius* in a classic match-up with Commodus as *secutor* and, after both lose their weapons, strangle Commodus with his last ounce of strength before dying from tiger-inflicted wounds in an unfair fight similar to the one that now occurs earlier in

60 Dio 72/73.5.3–6.5.

61 Dio makes it quite clear that the son of Maximus had the same name as Maximus' brother, Sextus Quintilius Condius. One would expect that a son of that name belonged to Sextus, and that is how the later *Augustan History* identifies him. Dio, however, was a contemporary who had personal knowledge of these matters. Probably Maximus' naming a son after his brother was a sign of the brotherly affection for which they were famous (Dio 72/73.5.3–6.1, *HA Comm.* 5.9). In that case, it would not be too far-fetched to add "Maximus" to the son's name and keep it in the movie as the name of the hero.

62 Dio 72/73.22.6, Herodian 1.17.11.

the movie.⁶³ In this way, by a combination of rigorous attention to the historical record and creative imagination, *Gladiator* could have been much more historically valid and still have remained dramatically as exciting as it is.

63 The historical Narcissus strangled Commodus in his bath while the latter was trying to shake off the effects of poison administered by Marcia on the eve of his appearing again as a gladiator (Dio 72/73.22, Herodian 1.16.1–17.11). Subsequently, Narcissus was killed by beasts in the arena on the orders of Septimius Severus (Dio 74.16.5, *HA Sev.* 13.9).

CHAPTER FOUR

The Pedant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant

Kathleen M. Coleman

The job of the historian is to try to uncover the truth about the past.¹ This may sound straightforward, but in practice it is not. The historian has first to assemble the available sources; at this stage his enemy is the accident of transmission, since the survival of evidence is either distressingly random, as in the field of ancient history, or overwhelmingly inclusive, as in contemporary affairs. The next stage is to analyze this evidence in a manner so sophisticated as to present a coherent and compelling interpretation that takes account of gaps, bias, inconsistencies, falsifications, and all the other distortions attendant upon any event in which humans are involved. Part of the historian's method is akin to science, as in the painstaking reconstruction of a damaged inscription or the calculation of the time it would take an army of a certain size to march a certain distance under a variety of weather conditions. But another part of the historian's job is much closer to the creative arts than to science. This is the imaginative leap involved in any act of historical interpretation, however modest or limited.

What I have called the "imaginative leap" is usually closer to a series of cautious steps through a morass of uncertainty than to a bold jump

1 This essay is an expansion of an article that originally appeared in Swedish: "Pedanten åker till Hollywood: En rådgivande akademikers roll," *Filmhäftet*, 29.2 (2001), 4–6. I am grateful to Michael Tapper, the journal's editor, for having generously encouraged me to republish my essay in English.

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