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“An impossible quid pro quo”: Representations of Tomás de Torquemada

Cover Page Footnote

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“An impossible *quid pro quo*”: Representations of Tomás de Torquemada

Carolyn Salomons

The famous parable of the Grand Inquisitor, from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, describes that figure as an “old man of almost ninety, tall and straight, with a withered face and sunken eyes, in which, however, there is still a fiery, spark-like gleam.”¹ As he confronts Christ in the streets of Seville, “a shadow has settled on his face. He knits his thick, grey brows and his eyes flash with an ill-boding fire.”² The Grand Inquisitor has Christ arrested, and then, confronting him in a prison cell, he furiously demands an explanation of the Lord: “Why have you come to get in our way? For you have come to get in our way, and you yourself know it. But do you know what will happen tomorrow? I do not know who you are, and I do not want to know: you may be He or you may be only His likeness, but tomorrow I shall find you guilty and burn you at the stake as the most wicked of heretics....”³

Certain writers have been quick to conflate Tomás de Torquemada with Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, a characterization which is both erroneous and misleading in several aspects. On a very simplistic level, Torquemada died long before his ninetieth birthday. But more problematic is the description of a religious fanatic with flashing, sinister eyes, so convinced of his own righteousness that he would send Christ himself to the stake to be burnt as a heretic.

How is it that such a zealous caricature has come to signify Tomás de Torquemada? Dostoyevsky is not the only one: representations of Torquemada as a fanatical sadist abound. Victor Hugo wrote an entire play about the man wherein the character, also aged ninety, wears an iron skullcap to protect himself from assassination, and condemns the lovers who saved him from being buried alive because they tore an iron crucifix off a nearby wall and used it as a lever to open his tomb, an act which defiled the crucifix and thus merited death.⁴ Contemporary writers are also quick to condemn Torquemada: among the many

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 233.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 234.

⁴ Victor Hugo, *Torquemada and Esmerelda: Two Short Plays* (Amsterdam: Freedom Books, 2001) I, vii and viii.

examples of the “popular” histories of which he is the subject includes a book in a series for elementary school children, entitled *Wicked History* – a series which also includes studies on Vlad the Impaler, Genghis Khan and Grigori Rasputin.

Yet little is known about the actual man: his biography is sparse; and though he was undoubtedly an ascetic Dominican, he was far from unique in that regard. Is it simply his position as the first Inquisitor General of the Holy Office of the Spanish Inquisition that has tarnished his reputation? Other Inquisitor Generals to follow were equally as rigid in their beliefs and practices, yet their names are forgotten to all but specialists. Torquemada, on the other hand, has become a target for amateur historians to judge and he, along with the Holy Office of the Spanish Inquisition, has become something of a cliché by which to offer a critique on intolerant or prosecutorial aspects of contemporary society. My aim in this paper is to trace the roots of this tendency, not to offer an apology for either Torquemada or the Spanish Inquisition, but rather to understand what it is about this man that has made him such a prevalent subject for fiction and popular histories.

To begin, we know few biographical facts about Torquemada. He was born in 1420 in either Valladolid or, more likely, the nearby village of Torquemada. Little is known about his family, other than that he was the nephew of Cardinal Juan de Torquemada. There is a general historical consensus that the family were former Jews, based primarily on Hernando del Pulgar’s statement that Juan de Torquemada’s *abuelos* were converts from the Jewish faith.⁵

We do know that the younger Torquemada followed in the path of his uncle and entered the San Pablo Dominican monastery in Valladolid at a very young age. There he excelled at his studies, particularly in theology and canon law, and at some point was appointed prior of the monastery Santa Cruz in Segovia. The exact year of his transfer to Segovia is not known, neither is the date of his introduction to the princess Isabel (later Isabel I of Castile), though that likely occurred in Segovia after she was summoned to her brother Enrique IV’s court

⁵ Norman Roth points out, however, that *abuelos* can also mean ancestors, and thus the Jewish connection could be so far removed from the generations of both Juan and Tomás as to render it meaningless for both men. It should be noted that Roth stated this while making the argument against the notion that the excesses of the Inquisition were engendered by a *converso* element within that institution. Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2002), 225.

there, sometime in the early 1460s.⁶ Torquemada served for some time as Isabel's personal confessor; he was present at her coronation in 1474, and remained an advisor and confidant to both Isabel and her husband, Fernando II of Aragon, until his death.

Torquemada was one of the first to be appointed inquisitor to the newly instituted Inquisition in 1482 and the next year he was named its first Inquisitor General, a position he held until his death in 1498. During his tenure as Inquisitor General, Torquemada published a set of instructions for inquisitors, which were amended several times both before and after his death. It is true that these instructions advocated the use of torture in order to verify "half proven" crimes, but included the caveat that if the victim revoked their confession after torture, and publicly abjured the error of which they were accused, they were to be "treated mildly."⁷

It should be noted here that Torquemada did not newly instigate torture. Medieval inquisitions had at times made use of the tactic to persuade "unreasonable" heretics. Innocent III wrote in 1208, regarding the Albigensian Crusade, that at times, "vexation" was needed to bring forth "understanding."⁸ Bernard Gui echoed this sentiment when he argued that certain obstinate heretics ought to be imprisoned for many years, so that "vexation might bring about understanding."⁹ However, as Christine Caldwell Ames points out, while torture was included in inquisitorial manuals from 1252 onwards, it is largely absent from medieval trial records, leading scholars to concur that torture, while approved, was seldom practiced.¹⁰

Contemporaries, when writing about Torquemada, spoke mildly of him. Chronicler Sebastian de Olmedo famously styled Torquemada as "[t]he hammer of heretics, the light of Spain, the saviour of his country, the honour of his order." Hernando del Pulgar, who knew the man, described how Torquemada, in his role as one of the first

⁶ There is some debate over when exactly Torquemada met Isabel; Peggy Liss offers a succinct overview of the historiographical debates in Peggy Liss, "Isabel La Católica: Topics and Topicality," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 85, no. 3 (2008): 264-265.

⁷ Gaspar Isidro de Argüello, "Instructions of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, Handled Summarily, Both Old and New," in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. and trans. Lu Ann Homza (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 61-79 pp. 67-68.

⁸ Quoted in Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Judicial Torture in Canon Law and Church Tribunals: From Gratian to Galileo," *Catholic Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 2015): 754-93 p. 783 n. 105.

⁹ Quoted in Christine Caldwell Ames, *Righteous Persecution: Inquisition, Dominicans, and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

inquisitors, established tribunals in various cities throughout Castile. While Pulgar goes on to detail the workings of those tribunals in their early days – including the claim that 15,000 were quickly tried, and 2,000 burnt – he says little about Torquemada’s character and certainly nothing to paint him as a sadist bent on destroying as many lives as possible.¹¹ Indeed, there is so little real information about the man and his character that historians have attempted to mine as much as possible from the very sparse documentation.¹² Yet despite the lack of information, he is inextricably linked with, and often seen as the cause of, the Spanish Inquisition.

In many respects, the true “father” of the Holy Office was not Torquemada at all, but Cardinal Pedro González de Mendoza, archbishop of Seville and then Toledo. Mendoza was the one who spearheaded the negotiations with Rome which led to the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition.¹³ As well, there were other inquisitors whose character was more than questionable – Diego Rodríguez Lucero, for example. Appointed inquisitor in the city of Córdoba in 1500, he was known for his ruthlessness in prosecuting supposed converts (*conversos*) from Judaism who maintained Jewish practices, also known as *judaizers*. Within a year of his appointment, the city council could no longer stomach his behaviour and tried to oust him, to no avail. He had the backing not only of the court, but also of the new Inquisitor General, Diego Deza.¹⁴ And while Sixtus IV praised Torquemada’s zeal as to the “benefit of the orthodox faith.” Julius II authorized the arrest of Lucero to answer charges of cruelty and fraudulent behaviour, in which Deza was also implicated, and which led to his resignation of the office of Inquisitor General in 1507.¹⁵ Yet Torquemada’s name is the one that casts the shadow.

¹¹ Hernando del Pulgar, *Crónica de los Señores Reyes Católicos Don Fernando y Doña Isabel de Castilla y de Aragón* (Valencia: Benito Monfort, 1780), 137.

¹² See, for example, Angel Fernández Dueñas, E. Doblaré Castellano, and A. García del Moral, “Aproximación a la patobiografía del inquisidor general fray Tomás de Torquemada,” *Real Academia de Córdoba de Ciencias, Bellas Letras y Nobles Artes* 119 (1990): 109–21, which attempts to explore Torquemada’s character by parsing a list of medicines and unguents he ordered from Jaén in 1489 or 90; an analysis of his signature; and his image in the painting, *La Virgen de los Reyes Católicos*.

¹³ Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 182.

¹⁴ John Edwards, “Trial of an Inquisitor: The Dismissal of Diego Rodríguez Lucero, Inquisitor of Córdoba, in 1508,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 37, no. 2 (April 1986): 240–257.

¹⁵ Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 183; Henry Charles Lea, “Lucero the Inquisitor,” *The American Historical Review* 2, no. 4 (July 1, 1897): 624.

Examples of this shadow abound, especially in contemporary “popular” histories of the Spanish Inquisition. Brenda Ralph Lewis, a British writer who publishes on a rather eclectic range of topics, from the wedding of Prince Charles to then Lady Diana Spencer, to a series on books for children on dinosaurs, has written a series of “dark histories” including one entitled *Dark History of the Popes*. Though not a pope, Torquemada is included, as Lewis claimed he was

. . . a sadist whose name is still a byword for excessive harshness and fanaticism more than five centuries after his death. Torquemada was willing to use any means, however bestial or dishonest, if it meant rooting out heresy and exposing the false *conversos*, the Jews and Muslims whose pretended conversion to Christianity had been designed to deflect persecution.¹⁶

Leaving aside the overly simplistic (and somewhat flawed) definition of *conversos*, the assertion is also problematic as Lewis offers no citations to bolster her claim. While some reviewers praise popular histories that are not “bogged down” with footnotes, it is very difficult for professional historians to take such works seriously. But clearly professional historians are not the market audience, and just as clearly, there *is* an audience for these works.

In a similar fashion, novelist Simon Whitechapel has written several nonfiction books, on topics such as Nazi culture, the Marquis de Sade, and Mexican serial killers tormenting the women of Ciudad Juarez. He has also written a book entitled *Flesh Inferno: Atrocities of Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition*. In his introduction he forthrightly admits to despising the Catholic Church, along with Nazism and Communism. He then goes on to compare Torquemada to Hitler, Stalin, and Jack the Ripper.¹⁷ A few pages further, he labels Torquemada – and indeed, all inquisitors – as “psychopaths” and “sadists.”¹⁸

Whitechapel shows little regard for the passage of history, making a sweeping and simplistic conflation of Nazi Germany with fifteenth through seventeenth century Spain, calling the similarities between them “uncanny.”¹⁹ He equates the marriage of Isabel and Fernando, and the Hapsburg dynasty, to the *Anschluss*, ignoring the copious evidence

¹⁶ Brenda Ralph Lewis, *Dark History of the Popes* (London: Amber Books, 2012), 122.

¹⁷ Simon Whitechapel, *Flesh Inferno: Atrocities of Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition*. (London: Hushion House, 2003), 5–7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

regarding how Castile and Aragon remained distinct, separate kingdoms, albeit sharing a ruler, during this period. As John Elliot explained: “other than the fact that henceforth Castile and Aragon would share the same monarchs, there would, in theory, be no change either in their status or in the form of their government.”²⁰ Whitechapel further describes the reigns of Isabel and Fernando and their descendants as an “autocracy,” which conveniently ignores the influence on the Crown of the *cortes* and the Church, as well as such events as the revolt of the Catalans. There is more: according to Whitechapel, there was a “black-clad secret police” (presumably he means Dominican monks) whose sole purpose was to “seek out and destroy actual and potential opposition,” much like the Gestapo.²¹ The Spanish empire was rooted in both military might and the favour of God, just like the Third Reich.²² Finally, both early modern Spanish society and Nazi Germans were obsessed with “pure blood,” with non-pure blood specifically referring to Jews.²³

Whitechapel is not alone in his conflation of the Third Reich with fifteenth century Spain. This is a trope used not only by other popular historians, as we shall see, but also underlies a certain strain of historiography: the lachrymose conception of Jewish history, which sees European Jewish history as a teleological trajectory of prejudice and persecution.²⁴

It also needs to be noted that Whitechapel sees both correlation and causation in what he calls a “wave of rabid anti-Semitism ... rolling itself south from England, which in 1290 had expelled large numbers of Jews.... In 1306 France expelled large numbers of Jews too... before expelling them *en masse* in 1394.”²⁵ Whitechapel evidently has no

²⁰ J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1469-1716* (London: Penguin, 2002), 24.

²¹ Whitechapel, *Flesh Inferno*, 33.

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

²³ *Ibid.* In a foot note, Whitechapel discounts Henry Kamen’s assertion that the “obsession” with pure blood is overstated by claiming that the “very existence” of purity of blood certificates signifies obsession.

²⁴ This historiographical trend was coined by its most fervent critic, Salo Baron. See Salo W. Baron, “Newer Emphases in Jewish History,” *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 4 (1963): 235–48.

²⁵ Whitechapel, *Flesh Inferno*, 35. For more on the expulsion of the Jews from England, see Richard Barrie Dobson, *The Jewish Communities of Medieval England: The Collected Essays of R.B. Dobson* (York: The Borthwick Institute, 2010); Robin R. Mundill, *England’s Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262-1290* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For France see Emily Taitz, *The Jews of Medieval France: The Community of Champagne* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood, 1994).

problem viewing events a century apart as part of the same cultural mindset, ignoring contextual local factors.

In *Flesh Inferno*, names are destiny. Whitechapel devotes several paragraphs to an explication of how Torquemada's name contains both the imperative form of the Latin verb *torquere* (to twist or wind, or to torture), and *quemada*, the past participle of the Spanish verb *quemar* (to burn). Though he acknowledges that the name originates from the town Torquemada hailed from (which likely refers to a local burnt building) he quickly segues into a discussion of Torquemada's psychological profile.²⁶ According to Whitechapel, Torquemada suffered from "oldest child syndrome," proven by referencing an encyclopaedia entry which describes Torquemada as someone famous for "his learning and his devotion" – clearly a "typical over-achiever."²⁷ This is also borne out by Torquemada's alleged asceticism: he was a vegetarian, who always wore a hair shirt next to his skin (both credible allegations). However, Whitechapel somehow equates asceticism with deep superstition, as he goes on to explain that Torquemada would eat only with the horn of a unicorn or tongue of a scorpion next to his plate as a protection against poison.²⁸

Whitechapel is difficult for professional historians to take seriously. His constant conflation of anti-Semitism throughout the centuries of European history – medieval, early modern, and modern – shows a complete lack of understanding of historical context. Yet the book has a 3.5 out of 5 rating on Amazon.com, and an even more surprising 4 out of 5 stars on Goodreads.com. A comment by a reader states: "Really interesting book. ... I was pleasantly surprised that such a relatively short book could be so interesting and informative."²⁹ Unmistakably, there is not only an audience for books such as this, but an appreciative (albeit uninformed) audience as well.

A similar scenario is the popular book *The Inquisition*, co-authored by Richard Leigh, a novelist, and Michael Baigent, author of various books of nonfiction. (I cannot refrain from pointing out that according to his Wikipedia entry, Baigent is an author and a

²⁶ Whitechapel, *Flesh Inferno*, 51–52..

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁸ *Ibid.* His source for all of this is a now out of print biography by a man named Thomas Hope, published in 1939, entitled *Torquemada: Scourge of the Jews*.

²⁹ "Amazon.com: Customer Reviews: *Flesh Inferno: Atrocities of Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition. (The Blood History Series)*, accessed August 7, 2016, https://www.amazon.com/Flesh-Inferno-Atrocities-Torquemada-Inquisition/product-reviews/1840681055/ref=dpx_acr_txt?showViewpoints=1.

“speculative theorist”).³⁰ It must also be noted that these are the same men who wrote *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, the “history” book on which Dan Brown based his infamous novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. In their overview of the Inquisition, the authors have no trouble conflating Torquemada with Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor; indeed, they find it quite easy “... to imagine Torquemada knowingly sending Jesus to the stake for the sake of the Inquisition and the church.”³¹

The book is clearly more an attack on the Catholic Church as a whole than a history of the Inquisition alone. The last third of the book is taken up with current Catholic practices and how they are rooted in medieval (*i.e.* ignorant, superstitious, pre-Enlightenment) ideology.³² But even the earlier material, which deals more directly with the Spanish Inquisition, is based on out-dated research. The authors lean heavily on the work of Henry Charles Lea, whose *History of the Inquisition* was published in 1888, and who “accepted too readily Protestant propaganda from the time of the Reformation.”³³ Although there are citations from Henry Kamen’s well-regarded book, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, the authors did not seem to have considered his argument for a more nuanced history of that institution, but rather mined his text for quotes from fifteenth century sources.³⁴ Other than Kamen, there are no references to any of the recent scholarship on the Spanish Inquisition. They also follow Whitechapel in conflating the fifteenth and the twentieth century. Regarding the trial for the murder of the *Santo Niño de la Guardia*, who, it is true, did not exist, Baigent and Leigh describe it as “a trumped-up affair as crass as anything perpetrated in our own century by Hitler or Stalin.”³⁵

And again, *The Inquisition* receives fairly positive reviews from readers. One states: “The authors are brilliant at explaining the history

³⁰ “Michael Baigent,” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, accessed August 7, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Michael_Baigent&oldid=731488350.

³¹ Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, *The Inquisition* (New York: Viking, 1999), 66.

³² The last four chapters deal with: the infallibility of the Pope, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith, and accountings of twentieth century appearances by the Virgin Mary. The book is concluded with a chapter called “The Pope is the Problem.”

³³ “Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics,” *The Spectator Archive*, (1 Jan. 2000), accessed August 7, 2016, <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/1st-january-2000/29/lies-damned-lies-and-statistics>.

³⁴ See, for example, the first few quotes from Chapter Four, “The Spanish Inquisition,” almost all of which are contemporary quotes (a letter from Fernando to his newly appointed inquisitors of Aragon, for example) but the citations are all Kamen. Baigent and Leigh, *The Inquisition*, 1999, 62–64.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

in a very simple yet complete way.”³⁶ Another claims that the Baigent and Leigh have written “... a very good, immensely readable and a quite accurate book on a topic where everyone had differing views.”³⁷ While popular histories have different objectives from scholarly monographs, it is somewhat frustrating that consumers of these books accept them as “complete” and “accurate” for no reason other than they enjoyed the lively and compelling narrative.

The situation becomes even more complicated when we turn to popular histories written by those who are attempting to do justice to their topic. These works are not as careless as the two I have just referenced, yet they still offer an overly simplistic and somewhat manipulated account of Spanish history. James Reston Jr. is a journalist turned novelist, who has published what his website refers to as a “...character-driven historical quintet of seminal events in medieval history.” The quintet consists of the following titles: *Galileo: A Life*; *The Last Apocalypse: Europe in the Year 1000 A.D.*; *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*; *Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors*; *Defenders of the Faith: Charles V, Suleyman the Magnificent, and the Battle for Europe, 1520-1536*. He has recently (in 2015) published a new work entitled *Luther's Fortress: Martin Luther and His Reformation Under Siege*.

There is also a website dedicated entirely to the book, *Dogs of God*, which describes that work thus:

Dogs of God chronicles one of the most savage epochs in human history, the years of the Spanish Inquisition. In an effort to consolidate their power on the Iberian peninsula and free themselves of the yoke of the Vatican, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella turned to the priest Tomas de Torquemada, a member of the Dominican order. Torquemada urged an Inquisition that would strengthen the sovereigns' authority throughout Spain, particularly in the coming campaign against the Moors of Granada. When Granada fell, tens of thousands of Muslims were given the choice of converting to Christianity or face death or banishment. Torquemada then turned his ferocity on Spain's

³⁶ “Amazon.com: A Customer’s Review of *The Inquisition*,” accessed August 21, 2016, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R1RP8CYWSOWA96/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0140274669.

³⁷ “A Review of *The Inquisition*,” *Goodreads*, accessed August 21, 2016, <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show?id=194406006>.

Jews, forcing upon them the same grim choice. And in the end, more than 120,000 Jews left their homeland.³⁸

But Reston's goal is not merely to titillate and horrify; he argues for the Spanish Inquisition as the birthplace of a proto-nationalist Spanish culture. Further he attempts to make links between the three signal events of 1492: Columbus' discovery of the Americas, the fall of Muslim Granada to the Christian armies of Castile and Aragon, and the expulsion of the Jews. He backgrounds these events with "... the terrible Spanish Inquisition, and the papacy of a Borgia Pope..." and goes on to call 1492 an "apocalyptic year."³⁹

The problem with Reston's insistence on imbuing 1492 with this much historical weight is that it ignores the historical context; he is only able to interpret the past in light of the present. (He begins his prologue by referencing both 9/11 and the 2004 Madrid bombings.)⁴⁰ But he acknowledges that what he is doing is not "history in the traditional sense," but rather bringing together "converging strands" to construct an "epic... spun from the elements of event and character."⁴¹ And these characters, he proclaims, are "giants" whom Reston tries to "bring to life."⁴² While this may make for compelling reading – a review on Reston's website from *USA Today* proudly proclaims that the book is written "[i]n an energetic style unfettered by scholarly jargon or too many footnotes..." – it sadly makes for overly simplistic and naïve history.⁴³ Even the title misleads: the book is not about the Dominican order, though he conflates the Dominicans with the Spanish Inquisition. In several offhand comments, he mentions that they were known as "the Dogs of God," but he does not take the time to explain the Latin pun, *dominicanus*, from which the sobriquet originates.⁴⁴ Further, Reston often leaps to the same types of conclusions as Whitechapel, Baigent and Leigh and, as stated above, makes direct links between the events of the late fifteenth and the early twenty-first centuries.

³⁸ "Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors," accessed August 21, 2016, <http://www.dogsofgod.com/the-book.html>.

³⁹ James Reston, *Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2006), xvii, xix.

⁴⁰ For a much more nuance examination of the meaning of 1492 in context see Barbara Fuchs, "1492 and the Cleaving of Hispanism," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007): 493–510.

⁴¹ Reston, *Dogs of God*, xix–xx.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴³ "Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors," accessed August 21, 2016, <http://www.dogsofgod.com/reviews.html>.

⁴⁴ Reston, *Dogs of God*, 10; 101, 235.

One of the “giants” of Reston’s narrative is, of course, Torquemada, whom Reston describes as “... tall and pale, with thick eyebrows...[and] a flattened boxer’s nose was the most prominent feature of his face....”⁴⁵ Contemporary sources provide no physical description of Torquemada, and Reston offers no citation for this description. It is likely he is basing it on a nineteenth century lithograph depicting Torquemada, held by the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, which is included with other images in the book, and does concur with his description, but is certainly not authentic.

Reston continues to describe Torquemada in a similar vein as others we have already seen: “[k]nown for his privations, he walked barefoot, slept on planks, and wore the hair shirt beneath the wool of the white and black cowl of his order. For his efficient administrative skill he had risen rapidly in the ranks of the Dominicans.”⁴⁶ Reston goes on to offer a psychological analysis of Torquemada’s antipathy towards heretics and the motivation for such a stance: Torquemada, he claims, burned with a vivid hatred of heresy and of any Christian of whatever background who might conceivably be guilty of it. His grandmother had been a Jew, and this dirty little secret seemed to drive his passion against the Jews and Christians of Jewish heritage into a determined and permanent rage. He longed for the “pure blood” of an old Castilian Christian and believed that Jewish blood was darker in hue as it contaminated the body.⁴⁷

Claims regarding the impurity or uncleanness of Jewish blood were common in medieval time, but impure blood did not necessarily correspond to “darker” blood.⁴⁸ Reston goes on to explain that for Torquemada, the “Old” Inquisition (as Reston refers to it) was not “... good enough for this bloodless fanatic,” the subtext being that an even more rigorous institution was needed.⁴⁹

The narrative becomes somewhat perplexing when Reston segues from this description of a passionately self-loathing man who was

⁴⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ There are certainly equations between Jews and darkness throughout the medieval period, but I have not found any contemporary sources which comment on the darker hue of Jewish blood. For more on medieval beliefs about Jewish and Christian blood see David Bale, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008) and Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan, 2014).

⁴⁹ Reston, *Dogs of God*, 39.

determined to extirpate his own Jewishness by persecuting an entire religious group, with the description of a phlegmatic bureaucrat when he later recounts Torquemada's "superior administrative skills", stating that "[e]very holocaust needs a cold-hearted organization man. To Torquemada, the Inquisition was not about human beings but about organizational charts and clerical appointments and regional commissions...."⁵⁰ It is true that Torquemada was an efficient administrator, but Reston's deliberate use of the word "holocaust" here obviously evokes Nazi Germany and its brutal efficiency.

This is not the only time Reston conflates Torquemada with Nazi Germany. Like Whitechapel, he, too, discusses the infamous trial and *auto da fé* of the men accused of the ritual murder of the *Santo Niño de la Guardia*. He opens by stating that we do not know if Torquemada was in attendance (likely not, as his name would have been included in the list of notables present, which we do have) but nevertheless, he "...hovered like the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse over the entire case" because of his desire to use the case as a strategy for the "final solution of the Jewish problem."⁵¹ Reston's language blatantly evokes the death camps of the Nazi regime and while we have seen that he is not the only one to draw this link between the Spanish Inquisition and the Nazi's "Final Solution" he is perhaps more disingenuous than someone like Whitechapel with his not so subtle insinuations.

Reston next discusses the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Historians do agree that the *Santo Niño* trial very likely influenced Fernando and Isabel to enact the edict of expulsion, as the only way to prevent *conversos* from associating with Jews and possibly backsliding into their former faith.⁵² However, the agency he attributes to Torquemada is startlingly to any historian familiar with the reign of Fernando and Isabel. According to Reston, it was Torquemada who insisted that the condemnation of the accused from the *Santo Niño* trial be read in all the churches of Castile and Aragon, as a warning to *conversos*.⁵³ Fernando and Isabel are invisible in this account, which is an unlikely scenario for two such commanding and authoritative monarchs. Reston goes on to claim that Torquemada's true motivation

⁵⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁵¹ Ibid., 255. For a list of notable attendees, see Fidel Fita Colomé, "La verdad sobre el martirio del santo niño de la guardia, ó sea el proceso y quema (16 Noviembre, 1491) del judío Jucé Franco en Ávila," *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* 11 (1887): 101.

⁵² Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 26; J. N. Hillgarth, *The Spanish Kingdoms, 1250-1516*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 448.

⁵³ Reston, *Dogs of God*, 255.

was a desire to undercut the influence held by the court rabbis: Isaac Abravanel and Abraham Senior. Torquemada felt they had too much sway over Fernando and Isabel and to that end, wrote a memorandum to the king and queen outlining all the things that he felt needed remedying in the kingdom.⁵⁴

Further, Reston claims that it was the Inquisition who insisted that, upon the fall of Granada, any Jews living in the city were to be expelled. The monarchs, Reston writes, “meekly bowed to this request,” a misleading statement on several levels.⁵⁵ For one, it is highly unlikely that Fernando and Isabel ever meekly bowed to anything in their lives, but more importantly, the surrender capitulations firmly stated that all Jews in Granada were to be granted freedom of worship. It is quite true, of course, that they were included in the general expulsion of Jews from Castile and Aragon, an edict issued some three months after the fall of Granada, but they were not singled out for special treatment prior to that.⁵⁶

Despite such obvious flaws, the book was a best seller. The website devoted to the work is replete with praise, much of it conflating the events of five centuries ago with current events.⁵⁷ This is not surprising, since that was Reston’s stated goal. This desire to link the present with the past is common, and indeed, one of the impetuses for studying history is the desire to understand contemporary society. Yet overly simplistic truth claims connecting the past to the present are

⁵⁴ Torquemada did write such a memorial, but it is concerned more generally with issues such as blasphemy and heresy than the influence of courtiers. Archivo General de Simancas, Cámara de Castilla, Diversos, Legajo 1, número 78.

⁵⁵ Reston, *Dogs of God*, 257.

⁵⁶ David Coleman, *Creating Christian Granada: Society and Religious Culture in an Old-World Frontier City, 1492–1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 27. For an English translation of the capitulations see Leonard Patrick Harvey, *Islamic Spain, 1250 to 1500* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 314–21.

⁵⁷ “Dogs of God - Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors.” A few examples: *The Washington Post* says “...an engaging and highly readable book...The events in *Dogs of God* may have taken place more than 500 years ago, but there are times when they seem chillingly, worryingly familiar.” *Scotland on Sunday* claims “Reston portrays a vivid sequence of events set in Spain, Portugal and Italy, teeming with detail and colour (sic). His most evocative passages are reserved for the tolerance, learning and culture of Islamic Spain and the tragedy of the Spanish Jews: it is knowledge we would be well advised not to forget.” Jay Winik, author of *1865: The Month that Saved America* writes: “Told with sweep and intelligence, Reston’s *Dogs of God* is a compelling, often provocative account of the ugly terrors of the Spanish Inquisition. More than just a chilling account of this dark chapter of history, its message about the dangers of religious excess has powerful echoes for the world today.” Accessed August 23 2016.

troubling; contexts and *mentalités* are different and that important fact cannot be so summarily ignored.

A similar example is the work of Erna Paris, an award winning Canadian journalist. She has written several non-fiction works, including *The End of Days: A Story of Tolerance, Tyranny and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, which won the 1996 Canadian Jewish Book Award for History, and was republished in 2015 as *From Tolerance to Tyranny: A Cautionary Tale from Fifteenth-Century Spain*.⁵⁸ Despite her journalistic credentials and accolades, unfortunately the book repeats all the same unfounded tropes about Torquemada: that his name was an amalgamation of the words for “twist” and “burn,” that he was a vegetarian, who never wore linen, slept on a board, had a vast retinue of guards, and carried a unicorn horn around to combat poison.⁵⁹ Paris includes a new anecdote, which details Torquemada’s cruelty towards his own sister. Due to his own rigidity and asceticism, he forced her into a life of poverty, and as a result, she was unable to marry and forced to become a nun to survive. Paris offers no sources as proof for this story.

She also claims that his personal tendency towards cruelty set the tone for the entire institution of the Inquisition. Torquemada was able to do this because he was firm in his conviction that the “anarchy” of Juan and Enrique’s reigns were caused by sin, and the Inquisition was necessarily harsh to extirpate that sin and bring order to the realm.⁶⁰ She also claims that Torquemada, after being named Inquisitor General, took to living in castles “for protection.”⁶¹

Part of her section on Torquemada references certain treatises commissioned by Torquemada. One of these describes *conversos* as mules, or hybrids, neither Christian nor Jew. The treatise is anonymous, but came from someone from the priory of Santa Cruz and therefore, Paris insists that Torquemada must have commissioned it.⁶² She then goes on to make the unsubstantiated claim that Torquemada loathed

⁵⁸ “About the Author — Erna Paris,” accessed August 7, 2016, <http://www.ernaparis.com/author/>.

⁵⁹ Erna Paris, *From Tolerance to Tyranny: A Cautionary Tale from Fifteenth Century Spain* (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2014), 157.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 158–59.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 160–61.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 163. Yitzhak Baer discusses this treatise and acknowledges that it came from the monastery of Santa Cruz. Torquemada may well have been aware of the author and this project, but there is no evidence to suggest he commissioned the treatise. Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Spain* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), 394–98.

converso clergy on principle, and while bishops were beyond his reach, lower level clergy were within his grasp.⁶³

Despite these obvious flaws, the book has received great praise. A quote on her website from *The Globe and Mail* calls the book “[i]ncandescent ... Paris uses a historian’s pen and journalist’s eye to find nuance and texture ... She brilliantly revives an old story and lets it speak to our time.” R. John Pritchard, Director of the Robert M.W. Kempner Collegium, Programmes and Publications on the History and Jurisprudence of International Criminal Law called the book “... one of the greatest and most thought-provoking histories I have ever read. It ought to be read by every student of modern politics and by everyone who has an interest in the strengths and weaknesses of multiculturalism.”⁶⁴ Both of these quotes reinforce this conflation of the past with the present, and again, while there is nothing at all wrong with an insistence on the importance of history, these overly simplistic interpretations are troubling.

The past is not only mined to bolster political ideologies, it also serves as a basis for entertainment purposes, including historical fiction. But in some cases, we again see both the past, and, more specifically, *Torquemada*, being used as a lens through which to critique contemporary society. The most egregious example comes from Howard Fast, the novelist and screenwriter (his most famous work is *Spartacus*, both novel and screenplay) who also wrote a novella entitled *Torquemada*. For Fast, a compelling narrative (the novella is not well written) was not the objective. As William du Bois, who reviewed the book for *The New York Times*, stated,

this book is a tract for our times, for all ages... Perhaps Mr. Fast’s moral is even more dire. Perhaps he is reminding us that there will always be persecutors in our midst, that evil (more often than not) triumphs over courage. ... this Grand Inquisitor is an attitude, not a human being.⁶⁵

Fast’s attitude was likely linked to his own personal circumstances. He joined the Communist Party USA in 1943, and in 1950 was called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Refusing to name any of his colleagues, he was cited with

⁶³ Paris, *From Tolerance to Tyranny*, 165.

⁶⁴ “*From Tolerance to Tyranny* — Erna Paris,” accessed August 7, 2016, <http://www.ernaparis.com/works/from-tolerance-to-tyranny/>.

⁶⁵ William du Bois, *New York Times Book Reviews*, Feb 6, 1966.

contempt of Congress in 1947, and jailed for three months in 1948.⁶⁶ Fast published Torquemada years later, in 1966, but rather than any sort of entertaining narrative, it is more a “parable about the dangers of fanaticism.”⁶⁷

The novella concerns Torquemada and his closest friend, Alvero de Rafel. While travelling together, Torquemada discovers that Rafel wears a Jewish amulet around his neck, together with a crucifix. Torquemada oversees the arrest and torture of his friend, all the while urging Rafel to confess to *judaizing*. In the meanwhile, Rafel’s daughter, Catherine, with whom Torquemada enjoyed a close, avuncular relationship, visits the Jewish quarter of Segovia in an attempt to understand the accusations against her father. While she visits the synagogue, a Christian mob attacks and sets the building on fire, killing her and the Jewish congregation within. Though Torquemada is distraught by Catherine’s death, he feels no guilt concerning his role in these events. He does, however, release Rafel on the condition that he leaves Spain at once, never to return.⁶⁸ Since it is a work of fiction, Fast can alter certain facts to suit his story. Christians never torched the synagogue in Segovia, nor did Torquemada spend much time there once he was named Inquisitor General. As well, in the novel, Torquemada meets Isabel for the first time only when he is appointed Inquisitor General.

A better-written novel, though no less prone to similar tropes regarding Torquemada, is C. W. Gortner’s *The Queen’s Vow*, a fictional biography of the life of Isabel. Torquemada obviously plays a large role in the novel, and the tone is set from the first time he enters the narrative. He is described as “... thin and tall, with an ascetic’s ageless angularity....”⁶⁹ Further, he has “brooding eyes... thin lips [and] the voice of a man of strict restraint, who has dominated the unruliness of the flesh.”⁷⁰ There are other references to his unblinking eyes, which are lit by “an inner flame” and are “opaque, like the eyes of a wolf...”; at other times those eyes “smolder in his otherwise cadaverous face.”⁷¹ References to his emaciated body abound: he is described in various

⁶⁶ Gerald Sorin, *Howard Fast: Life and Literature in the Left Lane* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 120.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁶⁸ Howard Fast, *Torquemada* (New York: Open Road Media, 2011).

⁶⁹ C. W. Gortner, *The Queen’s Vow: A Novel of Isabella of Castile* (New York: Random House, 2012), 100.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 101, 206. 207.

passages as a “spectral figure” who is “pale and thin, like an anchorite who had not seen the sun in weeks...” and as a “... skeletal figure of sinew and bone, without any color in his gaunt face. It seemed impossible he could move at all, malnourished as he was; yet his pale eyes smoldered with undeniable fervor.”⁷² Gortner in one passage describes him as “...one of those odious soothsayers who often skulked around court... His feet were bare under his robe’s ragged hem, tinged blue from cold, clotted blood on his toes. He must have walked from the *alcazar* to the monastery without sandals.”⁷³

Gortner’s narrative makes it clear that Isabel experiences growing distaste and unease with Torquemada’s ferocity. At one point, when extracting the titular vow from Isabel – that is, to “cleanse” Castile from corruption and heresy – Isabel describes Torquemada as speaking in “... a voice sibilant with an emotion darker than rage, stronger than hatred – an emotion I didn’t know how to identify because I had never felt it and hoped I never would....”⁷⁴ Yet Fernando constantly feels “the hypnotic draw” of Torquemada, which Isabel cannot understand. She watches him approach in another scene, thinking “[t]o my dismay, the gaunt figure of Torquemada was striding toward us, his cassock swirling like dusk about his ankles, his eyes like agates in his emaciated face, which had grown even more arresting, and frightening, with the passage of the years.”⁷⁵

Clearly Gortner is taking artistic liberties with a historical figure in order to create a lively narrative, something many writers of historical fiction have done. Gortner, who has written novels on other women of the early modern period, including Lucrezia Borgia, Catherine de Medici, and Juana of Castile, Isabel’s daughter, is not indifferent to historical scholarship; his “recommended reading” list at the end of the book includes several notable historical works.⁷⁶ He has also said that he attempts to refrain from judging his historical characters, and regarding Isabel in particular, he “...was more interested in understanding her motivations than exonerating her deeds, ... To my surprise, I discovered that her decisions surrounding the Inquisition

⁷² Ibid., 206. 294.

⁷³ Ibid., 207.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 366.

⁷⁶ For example Tarsicio de Azcona, *Isabel la Católica: vida y reinado* (Madrid: Esfera, 2002); Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*; Peggy Liss, *Isabel the Queen: Life and Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992); William Hickling Prescott, *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella* (Philadelphia: Lipincott, 1904).

were more complex than popular history has depicted.”⁷⁷ Yet can the same be said of his treatment of Torquemada, who he characterizes as a fanatical zealot? Undoubtedly, this characterization is rooted in the same type of spurious history we have already seen.

What about Dostoyevsky’s portrayal of Torquemada? Did Dostoyevsky really have Torquemada in mind as he wrote this scene? While it is true that he had a Russian translation of William Prescott’s *History of the Reign of Phillip II*, and that he admired Prescott’s histories of the conquests of Mexico and Peru, Torquemada is not mentioned in any of those works.⁷⁸ He is, however, mentioned in Prescott’s history of the reign of Fernando and Isabel, where he described Torquemada thusly:

This man, who concealed more pride under his monastic weeds than might have furnished forth a convent of his order, was one of that class with whom zeal passes for religion, and who testify their zeal by a fiery persecution of those whose creed differs from their own; who compensate for their abstinence from sensual indulgence by giving scope to those deadlier vices of the heart, pride, bigotry, and intolerance, which are no less opposed to virtue, and are far more extensively mischievous to society.⁷⁹

Prescott’s psychological characterization is not, however, rooted in any documented historical sources. He offers no notes or citations to explain how he knows that Torquemada was over-compensating due to abstinence. However, in other instances, Prescott does offer citations, and a frequent source is Juan Antonio Llorente’s *Historia crítica de la Inquisición de España*, and it is to Llorente that we can trace many of the myths about Torquemada.

Llorente’s study of the Holy Office began in 1793 when in his role as general secretary to the Supreme Council, he was tasked with writing a report on possible reforms of the tribunal. Some years later, in 1809, Joseph Bonaparte, then King of Spain, abolished the Inquisition (the first of several times it would be abolished, before its final dissolution in 1834), and asked Llorente to write a history of the

⁷⁷ “The British Weekly – The Queen’s Vow: A Promising Read,” accessed August 23, 2016, <http://www.british-weekly.com/?p=9467>.

⁷⁸ Katya Tolstaya, *Kaleidoscope: F.M. Dostoevsky and the Early Dialectical Theology* (BRILL, 2013), 321, note 35; Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 556. William Prescott was the first American to take a serious interest in Spanish history, and the first to write the histories of Hapsburg Spain and its empire in English.

⁷⁹ Prescott, *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella*, 355.

institution. In 1812, he published the *Annals of the Inquisition*, as well as a 257 page ‘paper’ entitled, “*Memoria sobre la opinion de España acerca de la Inquisición.*” Llorente, an *afrancesado*, later fled Spain with Joseph and his other pro-French officials in 1813. He took with him his papers, and while in exile in Paris, published his magisterial *A Critical History of the Spanish Inquisition* in 1817-1818. Although the work is regarded as the first modern history of the institution, and has garnered praise in certain quarters, there are questions about the accuracy of Llorente’s view.⁸⁰ Llorente was writing at a politically fraught moment; Fernando VII had returned to the throne of Spain, abolishing the Constitution of Cádiz and attempting to reassert his absolutist rule, which included re-establishing the Inquisition. Llorente then can be painted as a Liberal hero, defying the *ancien regime* in favour of Enlightenment ideals. The Inquisition, seen as a tool of the crown to keep the people of Spain in both perpetual obedience and superstition, needed to be not just undermined, but maligned.⁸¹

Certainly we see exaggerations, or embellishments, when Llorente discusses the personal character of Torquemada, and it is here that we find the basis for many of the claims made about Torquemada in more recent works. Llorente describes Torquemada as “... an insolent fanatic” whose purported modesty in refusing the archbishoprics of both Seville and Toledo was an affectation.⁸² Llorente further explains that:

The miseries which were the consequences of the system which [Torquemada] adopted, and recommended to his successors, justify the general hatred which followed him to the tomb, and compelled him to take precautions for his personal safety. Fernando and Isabella permitted him to use an escort of fifty *familiars* of the Inquisition on horseback, and two hundred others on foot, whenever he travelled. He

⁸⁰ Henry Kamen feels Llorente worked with a “rare impartiality” and a “deep commitment to the seriousness of his task.” He also feels that Llorente’s work and character were maligned due primarily because his work overturned “old prejudices.” Henry Kamen, *Imagining Spain: Historical Myth & National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 128–29.

⁸¹ Paul Hauben, “Review of *A Critical History of the Inquisition of Spain. From the Period of Its Establishment by Ferdinand V to the Reign of Ferdinand VII.* by Juan Antonio Llorente,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (May 1, 1968): 278. See also Juan Antonio Llorente and Léonard Gallois, “Biographical Notice,” in *History of the Spanish Inquisition: Abridged from the Original Work of M. Llorente, Late Secretary of That Institution* (New York: G. C. Morgan, John P. Haven, and Gray and Bunce, 1826), 23–24.

⁸² Juan Antonio Llorente, *The History of the Inquisition of Spain, from the Time of Its Establishment to the Reign of Ferdinand VII: Composed from the Original Documents of the Archives of the Supreme Council and from Those of Subordinate Tribunals of the Holy Office* (London: G.B. Whittaker, 1826), 55–56.

also kept the horn of a unicorn on his table, which was supposed to discover and neutralize poisons.⁸³

The description is presented without references, and the presence of a unicorn's horn accepted without question. And while Llorente admits that Torquemada's successor, Diego Deza, was equally as intolerant and severe, he dismisses Deza as simply following in Torquemada's footsteps, claiming it was entirely due to "the work of Torquemada [and] the effect of the laws which he formed...."⁸⁴

As we have seen, Llorente's unsubstantiated claims became the source for early historians of Spain in English such as William Prescott. His compatriot, Henry Charles Lea, followed in Prescott's footsteps. Lea was a nineteenth century historian who is credited with inaugurating what is known as the "golden age" of Inquisition historiography.⁸⁵ Born in Philadelphia in 1825, his official career was working in the family's publishing firm. However, his personal interest in science, literature, and later history, led him create one of the most extensive private libraries of the day. Growing increasingly frustrated with the state of medieval European history he was reading, he began to write himself. His frustration stemmed from the idea that medieval history was a product of its own time and culture, and too often, historians were imposing nineteenth century ideologies onto the past.⁸⁶ An interest in medieval legal culture led him to the medieval and then the Spanish Inquisitions, which he believed merited separate treatments.⁸⁷ His *History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* was over 1800 pages; his *History of the Inquisition of Spain*, published in 1906-1907, was even longer. The depth of his research was unprecedented. Unlike the fervent Protestant based antipathy towards Catholicism and its institutions, Lea believed that "the duty of an historian is that he (sic) shall seek the truth and state it without fear or favor."⁸⁸

Despite this attempt to adhere to a Rankean ideal ("how things actually were"), Lea could not refrain from moralizing about the dangers of the Spanish Inquisition, and in particular, in the character of Tomás de Torquemada. He believed Torquemada had incredible influence over Fernando and Isabel, and had long urged them to

⁸³ Ibid., 58.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁵ Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 288.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 288–90.

⁸⁸ Edward Sculley Bradley, *Henry Charles Lea: A Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931), 601.

“vigorous chastisement of heresy.”⁸⁹ While he refrained from repeating some of the more egregious claims about Torquemada discussed elsewhere, he did characterize him as a man “... full of pitiless zeal... [who was] rigid and unbending, [and] he would listen to no compromise of what he deemed to be his duty.”⁹⁰ He also saw him as a formative influence on the institution. On the establishment of the office of Inquisitor General, which Torquemada was the first to assume, Lea thought “[t]he office evidently was one which would be of immense weight and the future of the institution depended greatly on the character of its first chief.”⁹¹ And while Lea grudgingly admitted that “if we cannot wholly attribute to him the spirit of ruthless fanaticism which animated the Inquisition, he at least deserves the credit of stimulating and rendering it efficient in its work,” he later went on to claim that “[t]he men who fashioned it knew perfectly what they wanted and in their hands it assumed the shape in which it dominated the conscience of every man and was an object of terror to the whole population.”⁹²

Prescott and Lea were early historians, working before the discipline became an actual profession, yet they both held to what any historian today would deem professional standards. At the same time, even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries popular histories were also being written, by those we might consider “amateurs”. The novelist Rafael Sabatini, for example, used Llorente’s work uncritically for his own history of the Inquisition, calling Llorente a “historian of unimpugned honesty and authority.”⁹³ Sabatini described, with a novelist’s flair for drama, how Alonso de Hojeda implored Isabel to establish an Inquisition due to the rampant *judaizing* occurring in Seville in the 1470s. Isabel, however, wavered, until:

[a]t that moment, according to Llorente, another advocate appears upon the scene to plead the cause of the Faith – a figure in the white habit and black cloak of the Dominican Brotherhood, a man in his fifty-eighth year, tall and gaunt and stooping slightly at the shoulders... This is Frey Tomás de Torquemada, Prior of the

⁸⁹ Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, vol. 1 (New York : Macmillan, 1906), 157.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:174.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:173.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1:174–75, 181.

⁹³ Rafael Sabatini, *Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition : A History* (London : Stanley Paul and Co, 1913), 6.

Dominican Convent of Holy Cross of Segovia...his influence with the Queen is vast, his eloquence fiery.⁹⁴

Sabatini goes on to describe the “fanatical, contemptuous hatred in which Torquemada held” the Jews of Spain, a hatred which prompted him to eventually persuade Fernando and Isabel to expel the entire Jewish population.⁹⁵ Further, Sabatini is able to analyze Torquemada’s character, and conclude, rather floridly, that it is:

... difficult to conceive of a man climbing from the obscurity of the monastic cell to the fierce glare of his despotic eminence and remaining humble at heart. Humble he did remain; but with that aggressive humility which is one of pride’s worst forms and akin to self-righteousness – the sin most dreaded by those who strive after sanctity. We know that he unswervingly followed the stern path of asceticism prescribed by the founder of his order. He never ate meat; his bed was a plank; his flesh never knew the contact of linen.⁹⁶

But again, there is no clear evidence upon which Sabatini is basing his allegations. And it is these same allegations that find their way, almost verbatim, into contemporary “popular” histories about the Spanish Inquisition.

Certain scholars have attempted to address just how professional historians, steeped in the historiography of their field with palaeographic and archival skills, are to respond to the genre of popular history, especially when it is mired in misrepresentations. Jerome de Groot has published something of a manifesto, entitled “Invitation to Historians” in which he expounds on the benefits of the interdisciplinarity of popular culture and explores ways in which this can benefit, rather than hinder, historical scholarship. In large part, he is motivated by the bare fact that “...popular culture is suffused with models of the way the past works ... [and] demonstrates the fecundity of historiographical debate within popular culture.”⁹⁷ In other words, popular culture will continue to insist on mining the past for either obscure narratives or for new interpretations of known stories. De Groot wonders if, rather than dismissing period drama as “escapism” or “fantasy” we might instead view it as some new method for “articulating a historical comprehension.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Ibid., 102–3.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 243; 268.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 260–61.

⁹⁷ Jerome de Groot, “Invitation to Historians,” *Rethinking History* 18, no. 4 (2014): 607.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 608.

The difficulty for many historians is that the notion of a “costume drama” occupies a place of both fact and fiction. As de Groot articulates, art may imitate, but it does not correspond to reality.⁹⁹ Historical films and TV shows are thus easy to dismiss, as they make no pretence towards asserting truth claims; their function is to entertain. And yet they are shaping public perceptions of the past.

The problem becomes more obvious when we think about the genre of popular history, which *does* assert truth claims. David Greenberg tackles the issue in a discussion of David McCullough’s new bestseller, *1776*. McCullough is a journalist who segued into writing history and is an acclaimed bestselling author of numerous biographies and popular history books. Greenberg notes that *1776* will undoubtedly be another bestseller (it was) and will also drive professional historians “up the wall,” but not because of envy.¹⁰⁰ Rather, he believes that there are “legitimate concerns” about a book like this: “the surfeit of scene-setting and personality, the meagre analysis and argument, the lack of a compelling rationale for writing about a topic already amply covered.” At the same time, he acknowledges that none of this will matter to those who consume the book, noting that “they typically have little use for what they regard... as the narrowly focused, politically correct, jargon-clotted academic monographs that dwell on arcane issues instead of big, meaty topics like politics, diplomacy, and war.”¹⁰¹ His solution? Academic historians need to offer the public something better.

Unfortunately, his analysis as to what that something better might be falls somewhat flat. He claims that too often, historians engage with the historiography too much, which weighs down a lively narrative. On the other hand, popular history with its “indifference” to historiography seems “naïve, even empty.”¹⁰² In the end, he leaves us with the rather unsatisfying conclusion that the one group is contributing to history, the other, to what he calls “heritage.”¹⁰³

And yet, how different are these “popular” histories from, for example, “official” histories and the works of court chroniclers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who very much wrote with purpose and an agenda? Richard Kagan’s *Clio and the Crown* points out many

⁹⁹ Ibid., 608–9.

¹⁰⁰ “That Barnes & Noble Dream,” *Slate*, May 18, 2005, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history_book_blitz/features/2005/that_barnes_noble_dream/are_popular_histories_vapid.html.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid..

¹⁰³ Ibid.

of these biases and details how history could be manipulated to support certain claims.¹⁰⁴ However, while these chroniclers “cherry-picked” they did not “wilfully invent or distort the past” and therein lies the answer.¹⁰⁵ There is a difference between choosing one out of the many “seas of histories” to highlight, and creating a mythic figure.

I have already mentioned Richard Leigh and Michael Baigent’s history of the Inquisition. In addition to their certainty that Dostoyevsky could have modelled his Grand Inquisitor on no one but Torquemada, their book also asserts the same claims Sabatini outlines, though they do not cite him. We read again about Torquemada’s vegetarianism, his preference for the “austere garb” of a Dominican, as well as his armed retinue of guards – now grown to three hundred men. The horn of the unicorn is also mentioned, albeit with a certain befuddlement on the part of the authors as to how exactly this “chimerical talisman” would work.¹⁰⁶

This same tale is even repeated by John Edward Longhurst, in one of the only “professional” histories written on Torquemada in English. In the *Age of Torquemada*, Longhurst recounts:

it is said that Torquemada wore a hair-shirt, refused to eat meat, wear linen garments or sleep between linen sheets It is also said that he lived in palaces, that he surrounded himself with a princely retinue of two hundred fifty armed guards on foot and ahorse, that he lived in constant fear of assassination and adorned his table with the horn of a unicorn as a sovereign remedy against poison. He is further reported to have accumulated vast wealth through property confiscations by the Inquisition and to have declined on numerous occasions the offers by his grateful queen of the archbishoprics of Seville and Toledo.¹⁰⁷

However, Longhurst goes on to point out that “[m]ost of these assertions come from ‘prejudiced’ historians who do not like Torquemada; except for the reports about his hair-shirt and his humility in the matter of high episcopal office, such stories are firmly rejected by his ‘impartial’ defenders”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Richard L. Kagan, *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 37–46.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, *The Inquisition* (Penguin UK, 2000), 66.

¹⁰⁷ John Edward Longhurst, *The Age of Torquemada* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1964), 86–87.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

Am I an impartial defender? I would like to think I am not impartial; I would find it most difficult to do my job properly if I were impartial about the history of Spain, a country whose past I know better than the history of my own. Am I a defender of Torquemada? I would also like to think not. For there is no doubt that the Holy Office was an institution which disrupted many lives and caused untold pain and anguish. And those of us who seek to better understand not just the monolithic institution, but the people who ran it, the people whose conception of religion and heresy are so very different to our own, must acknowledge that pain and anguish. At the same time, I believe that as historians, we must nevertheless write without judgement and not hold inquisitors or popes or kings and queens to twenty-first century standards of tolerance and pluralism.

Who was Tomás de Torquemada? Was he in fact an aberration, a sadist, motivated by nothing more than a fanatical hatred to watch Jews burn? Or was he, like others of his time, an austere Dominican who felt impelled to right the dangerous heresies he believed were being committed around him? Is there any way for us to really know who this man was? Might the better question be, does it matter?

John Longhurst may have been right when he wrote “[p]erhaps the hand of Providence has erased much of the personal record of Torquemada's life in order to save us from the distractions of academic bookkeeping. For Torquemada's importance to history lies in his role as an archetype rather than an individual.”¹⁰⁹ In *The Brothers Karamazov*, as Ivan recounts the tale of the Grand Inquisitor, his brother interjects:

“I don't quite understand, Ivan. What does it mean?” Alyosha, who had been listening in silence, said with a smile. “Is it simply a wild fantasy, or a mistake on the part of the old man – some impossible *quid pro quo*?”

“Take it as the last,” said Ivan, laughing, “.... If you like it to be a case of mistaken identity, let it be so. It is true,” he went on, laughing, “the old man was ninety, and might well be crazy over his set idea. He might have been struck by the appearance of the Prisoner. It might, in fact, be simply his ravings, the delusions of an old man of ninety, over-excited by the *auto da fé* of a hundred heretics the day before. But does

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

it matter to us after all, whether it was a mistake of identity or a wild fantasy?"¹¹⁰

Perhaps nothing can be done to redeem Torquemada's reputation from the pages of popular histories and works of fiction. Perhaps in his role as archetype, he serves a larger purpose; a repository for our twenty-first century sensibilities, a locus for us to place our discomfort with an institution like the Spanish Inquisition. In that sense, then, Torquemada does become a *quid pro quo*, though not an impossible one.

¹¹⁰ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 234.