

## INTRODUCING THEORETICAL ISSUES THROUGH POPULAR HISTORICAL FILMS

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Having enjoyed (or endured) linguistic and cultural turns, we historians are now faced with a "pictorial turn."<sup>1</sup> As a number of commentators and practitioners in the rapidly burgeoning sub-discipline of "history and film" have observed, we now inhabit a post-literate society in which the majority of people gain historical information from movies and television.<sup>2</sup> After teaching courses on historical film for seven years, I am convinced that popular historical films (Hollywood) provide an effective means of not only engaging (sometimes reluctant) students with the past but also of demonstrating key elements of all historical knowledge and its representational modes.<sup>3</sup> These are professionally-central historiographical and theoretical concerns that are difficult to broach without a degree of abstraction usually beyond the experience and interest of most undergraduates. I now teach a first-year course "History on Film" that coheres around a study of films illustrative of themes, processes, events, and personalities in late medieval and early modern Western Civilization. The following discussion outlines the introductory class in this course and its connection with later teaching themes and strategies. It shows how popular historical films provide a uniquely effective means whereby students can acquire "high-order [historical] skills."<sup>4</sup>

In all my teaching, I take care to construct the initial class in a course as a miniature version of the entire course. I outline the content and model the skills that

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<sup>1</sup>See Sol Cohen, "An Innocent Eye: The 'Pictorial Turn,' Film Studies, and History," *History of Education Quarterly*, 43 (Summer 2003), 250-61.

<sup>2</sup>Robert A. Rosenstone is perhaps the most prolific and accessible commentator on the relationship between history and film. See particularly his "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *American Historical Review*, 93 (December 1988), 1173-1185, and *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). For a brief survey of the sub-discipline see Robert Brent Toplin and Jason Eudy, "The Historian Encounters Film: A Historiography," *Magazine of History*, 16 (Summer 2002), 7-12.

<sup>3</sup>As John E. O'Connor remarked: "Once involved in the discussion of authenticity and historical representation in film and television, students will begin to ask the same questions of what they read." "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," *American Historical Review*, 93 (December 1988), 1208.

<sup>4</sup>Seán Lang, "Mushrooms and Snake-Oil: Using Film at AS/A Level," *Teaching History*, 108 (September 2002), 44-48. Note this journal called *Teaching History* is published in the United Kingdom.

I expect students to acquire throughout the semester. In many ways, the rest of the course provides reinforcement, elaboration, and practice in these themes, skills, and content.

The students initially watch a four-minute clip from *A Knight's Tale* (2001), directed by Brian Helgeland, a romantic costume drama in which a young commoner, William Thatcher (Heath Ledger), disguises himself as a noble to compete in a series of jousting tournaments so as to become wealthy, famous, and, as he puts it, "change his stars." The clip shows two heralds introducing their respective knights prior to the knights engaging in a jousting competition.

Students then comment on the ways in which they thought the clip was or was not "historical." After a few minutes of discussion, the class arrives (to the surprise of many) at the realization that important, historically valid facts *could* be derived from a film the primary objective of which is entertainment rather than historical accuracy. Firstly, it demonstrates that late medieval European society was very hierarchical. Secondly, it shows a predominantly oral culture: Most people in this society were illiterate and the spoken word was vital. Students decided that the clothing was reasonably accurate, but was more a late-twentieth century fashion designer's attempt to make the general styles of the period interesting and attractive to modern audiences. The jousting itself was realistically rendered: The class learned that while competition could be dangerous, its objective was not to kill people. Importantly, students discovered that jousting was a contest that everyone could watch but in which only a select minority could compete. Many of the film's dramatic and comedic elements relied ultimately on this historical fact.

Clearly, the language employed in the film was unhistorical. I tell students—as some of them already knew—that in the time and places depicted in *A Knight's Tale* most people would have spoken medieval French or Middle English. Then discussion moves from the particular to the very general. Obviously, the translation of medieval languages into modern English in *A Knight's Tale* enables the film's audience to understand the story. I encourage students to consider whether other forms of "translation" occur in the process of representing other times and cultures. Given the variety of topics about which historical comment could be made that are raised by or represented in the film clip, I ask students to specify what it is that historians do. They decided that historians discover, analyze, and understand the way people in the past lived: how they worked, what they ate, thought, felt, how they dressed and enjoyed themselves, and so on. The discussion then explores the notion that historians also want to be able to *communicate* this information to other historians and to the public at large. We decided, then, that a key element of the historical enterprise is the business of *translating* the past into the present for people in the present.

Thus I encourage the class to consider the notion of history as a constructive and creative act. This is more readily observed in filmic histories where, in order to maintain narrative flow, events and characters have to be omitted, compressed, altered,

or even invented.<sup>5</sup> I then ask students to think about the ways in which many of these features of historical representation apply to even the most rigorous and scholarly of *written* histories. I ask them to consider the sorts of evidence they would need—and how they would use (or not use) it—in order to write a “history” of their own lives. For some, but not all, students it becomes apparent that the need to create a coherent and comprehensible history precludes the use of some factoids and privileges the employment of others. Upon reflection, a whole hour or a whole week could be spent fruitfully rehearsing examples of this principle.

We then turn to examine *The Patriot* (2000), directed by Roland Emmerich. I chose this film because many students (even outside the United States) will have seen it or at least have a rudimentary acquaintance with the American Revolution. *The Patriot* is in many ways a more serious historical film than *A Knight's Tale*, not least because it centers around an event about which there is enormous scholarly activity. The characters in *A Knight's Tale* are almost all invented, as are the specific events taking place on the screen. This is much less the case in *The Patriot*. But *The Patriot* has elicited more scholarly interest precisely because it takes an historical process and event about which we have much evidence and willfully ignores and falsifies much of it. I advise students that there are many ways in which the film plays fast and loose with accepted historical facts and opinion.<sup>6</sup> I encourage them, however, to subdue their inquisitiveness regarding the historical veracity of details, in favor of asking more interesting and important questions about *why* the filmmakers manipulated, distorted, or ignored the “facts” in the ways they had.

The class watches a few minutes of the film depicting the Southern plantation-owning Martin family and their happy retinue of African American “workers.” We also see the brutal and sadistic British Colonel Tavington refusing to accept the family patriarch Benjamin Martin’s (Mel Gibson) neutrality and casually shooting his young son Thomas in the back. I then make students aware of a limited number of important and revealing instances of historical inaccuracy. *The Patriot*’s treatment of slavery is commonly identified as a problematic feature by scholars,<sup>7</sup> which is but one reason why

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<sup>5</sup>Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 68-76.

<sup>6</sup>A brief list of these can be found in Robert C. Williams, *The Historian's Toolbox: A Student's Guide to the Theory and Craft of History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 144. A more extensive catalogue of the film's omissions and inaccuracies can be found in William Ross St. George Jr., “The Patriot,” *The Journal of American History*, 87 (December 2000), 1146-1148. I have incorporated some of these findings in my argument without further citation.

<sup>7</sup>See Ron Briley, “Incorporating Films into a History Classroom: A Teaching Note,” *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 33 (Spring 2008), 28-32.

the eminent African-American filmmaker Spike Lee was so critical of the film.<sup>8</sup> Having Benjamin Martin depicted as a South Carolina plantation owner employing free African American workers rather than owning slaves is one of the film's more improbable, if not outrageous, fictions. Yet, if all students were unaware of the general nature and extent of slavery in the Southern colonies at this time, they all could appreciate the moral, aesthetic, and commercial necessity for the film's hero not to be associated with slave owning.

Colonel Tavington is based on a real historical figure, the British officer Banastre Tarleton. While historians agree that Tarleton was no saint, he was far from the genocidal psychopath portrayed in *The Patriot*. Students readily comprehend, however, that Tavington is cast in so starkly poor a light so as to contrast more effectively with Martin, thus emphasizing the film's fairly crude moral dualism. It is clear which side in the conflict is on the side of right. That Tavington is played by Jason Isaacs, recognized by many students as Lucius Malfoy in the Harry Potter films, only helps cement their appreciation of him as an outright villain and of the filmmakers' intentions in portraying him thus.

Clearly, historical facts are distorted and deployed for moral and aesthetic reasons, in order to tell a particular story with a particular point to it. I then ask students to reflect on what they think the moral of this story was. I remind them that when we watch historical films we ought to bear in mind that we are being told a story. Not a "made-up" story necessarily, in the sense of being fictional or false, but something made up in the sense that historical filmmakers actively *construct* and shape the story about the past from materials or evidence available to them. Historical filmmakers are in the business, then, of constructing stories. So are "traditional" historians. At this point, I introduce the important issue of narrative.

I explain to students that the most common way for historians to arrange facts is to use a narrative, which I define thus: "At its simplest, a narrative is a story with a beginning, middle, and end. It is an account or description of events or activities or lives which moves chronologically, and in which the details are presented and interpreted so as to give an overall sense of unity or coherence." I then apprise students that the essence of what we will look for in the course is the overall *historical* sense or message of the films we view. I stress that this is something other than the "overt narrative" or story,<sup>9</sup> but is, rather the overall *shape* the filmmaker has given to the details of the film. I then tell the class that traditional *written* histories have also been

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<sup>8</sup>"We both came out of the theatre fuming ... For three hours *The Patriot* dodged around, skirted about or completely ignored slavery. How convenient ... to have Mel Gibson's character not be a slaveholder ... *The Patriot* is pure, blatant American Hollywood propaganda. A complete whitewashing of history." "Spike Lee slams *Patriot*," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2000.

<sup>9</sup>Neil Liss and Cameron White, "Films for Our Time: Using 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers' to Teach Recent American History," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 26 (Spring 2001), 16.

similarly shaped.<sup>10</sup> All narrative histories, which means most histories, have a few themes or theses or arguments that the author wants readers to take away with them, the kinds of things one would put in a summary. That is, a few ideas which the book or essay is about, an overall *interpretation* of historical phenomena which the details of the book or essay support.<sup>11</sup> These themes are often easier to see in filmic histories than in written histories, because of the compressed scope of films. That is, a book can take days to read, while a film takes only two or three hours to watch.

Students then ponder the notion (radical for most) that histories are constructions. An effective way to make this central point is to consider fictional narratives such as novels, which virtually all students can be presumed to have read. Fictional narratives have a storyline or multiple storylines or subplots. They have characters who do things and to whom things happen. I use the example of *The Lord of the Rings* because it has certain local resonances for my students—my university is an hour's drive from "Hobbiton"—and also because most, if not all, students have seen the movies if they haven't read the novels. We decide that in this text there are hobbits who go to certain places and do certain things and there are numerous allied stories about people and elves and wizards and so on. The narrative traces the activity of these characters chronologically.

So much for the main story or narrative. But novels also have a theme or message or moral, something the story as a whole "is about." A number of themes or morals can be elicited from class discussion; yet while it is worth pointing out that multiple themes can coexist in any narrative, I have found it best at this stage to conduct explanation in terms of one of these themes. Thus, one might say that *The Lord of the Rings* is about the capacity of great power to corrupt even the best people. That is the main theme, or message, or purpose of the story, the moral of the story, one could say.

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<sup>10</sup>Hayden White has addressed this general issue most fulsomely in works like *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). See also White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). White also specifically explored the similarities between filmic and written histories in "Historiography and Historiophoty," *The American Historical Review*, 93 (December 1988), 1193-1199. White claims that whether we are talking about written history or filmic history, neither are "mirror image[s]" of the historical events or processes under discussion. Both are "a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification ... It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which the messages are produced." This "constructivist nature of the historian's enterprise" suggests that just as written histories don't merely show us a fact but position it, contextualize it or deploy it in ways which give it often complex significance, so can and does film. According to White, facts become historical facts only when we predicate something about them, that is, when we endow them with significance.

<sup>11</sup>In this way Rosenstone has fruitfully and sympathetically evaluated Sergei Eisenstein's classic film *October* (1928) by placing it alongside a number of notable written histories of the Russian Revolution. See "October as History," *Rethinking History*, 5 (July 2001), 255-74.

It is the major principle around which the action and characters are organized. In a sense, the action and characters exist to serve this purpose.

I then explain that history is like fiction in this respect, although things are (ideally) the other way around: In history, good history anyway, the historian examines action and characters and tries to come up with a way of understanding and summarizing their importance, their meaning. Here I mention one of the most famous works of narrative history in the English language, Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88). This work has, as one of its main themes, the notion that civilizations will fall where superstition gains dominance over reason. This is the meaning Gibbon finds in the evidence and it informs the way he tells his story. It is also the dominant impression most readers take away from *The Decline and Fall*. I tell students that dominant themes are evident in all narrative histories and that their main concern in the course is to locate these in the films we view and discuss.

At this point, I introduce a set of concepts with which many students struggle initially, but with which they become familiar by the end of the course. I suggest to the class that the themes that are evident in all histories, whether filmic or written histories, are really stories or narratives themselves. The class then contemplates three levels of historical narrative, as defined by Allan Megill: "(1) *narrative proper*; (2) *master narrative* or synthesis, which claims to offer the authoritative account of some particular segment of history; (3) *grand narrative*, which claims to offer the authoritative account of history generally."<sup>12</sup> As I have observed that it often takes a few weeks before most students are comfortable identifying a film's narrative features, in this initial class I reassure students that a little practice will render them all competent in this skill. I then exemplify the narrative levels in *The Patriot* thus:

The *narrative proper* is the story of the various events experienced (in chronological order) by Benjamin Martin and how these impact upon him so as to cause him to change his mind from opposition to the war with Britain to full-on enthusiastic and committed involvement in it. This is the main narrative proper. In addition, there are numerous minor narratives, what we might call subplots. One example noted by students is the romantic subplot involving Martin's son Gabriel and Anne Howard.

At a deeper level, the *master narrative* exists. I ask students how *The Patriot* sums up this "segment" of history, the American Revolution. (Bearing in mind that not all students have seen the movie, one way general responses can be summarized quickly is to have groups of students read brief scholarly and non-scholarly reviews in class and

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<sup>12</sup> Allan Megill, "'Grand Narrative' and the Discipline of History," in Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, eds., *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 152-53. Megill goes on to define and discuss *metanarrative*. I thought this a little *too* abstract for a first class with first-year students.

report back on the way individual viewers responded to the film.<sup>13</sup>) Generally, we arrive at the view that the film shows how this period of history gave birth to a new nation, the United States, and that the creation of this new polity was driven by selfless, egalitarian individuals who refused to be pushed around by their traditional, mostly corrupt and oppressive, rulers. We agree that the film portrays the Revolution as an unequivocally good thing, an obvious victory for justice and morality. Students then learn that this moral dimension is reinforced by specific narrative choices, none of which are especially “historical.” The central character, previously reluctant to oppose Britain, has no option but to rebel when British rule, in the form of Tavington, is revealed as irremediably brutal, unjust, and tyrannical. Tavington murders not only Benjamin’s son Gabriel but also Gabriel’s wife Anne and others in another invented scene. We can point out how the romantic subplot—Gabriel’s courting and marrying of Anne—thus contributes to the master narrative. It becomes clear that the filmmakers had *historiographical* reasons for fudging *historical* evidence.

Further, less obvious, examples can be mentioned. That Tavington’s troops are shown wearing red when in fact Tarleton’s troops wore green is a minor falsification of the historical record for the purposes of depicting the enemy (“The Redcoats”) in a manner easily recognizable as such. In the same way, downplaying the real extent to which much of the fighting in the Carolinas was conducted between local loyalists and rebels (that is, individuals of similar appearance and speech) falsifies the historical record for a moral and historiographical purpose. The selection, omission, privileging, and invention of particular historical “facts” contribute to the creation of a particular master narrative: The American Revolution was essentially a war of good against evil, a victory for liberty, equality, and morality over tyranny and injustice. Thus, Martin is dissociated from the institution of slavery as he (and the cause of colonial independence) has to be aligned with a *modern* audience’s perceptions of liberty, equality, and justice if we are to arrive at a clear and uncomplicated summation of what the American Revolution was and means. A modern American audience is going to have certain expectations about the American Revolution, and clearly a film that does not meet most of these expectations (if not all of them) will not be successful commercially.

I then explain that we all have expectations about not only what a particular period of history or historical event means, but also about what history itself means. The portrayal of the American Revolution in *The Patriot* as unequivocally *progressive* is a common feature of all mainstream Hollywood historical movies.<sup>14</sup> These films suggest to the viewer that history is the story of things getting better and better. And

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<sup>13</sup>In addition to sources cited above, I have used the following: <http://trivia.com/film/patriot.htm>, <http://www.militarycorruption.com/militia.htm> and [http://www.ciao.co.uk/The\\_Patriot\\_Review\\_527641](http://www.ciao.co.uk/The_Patriot_Review_527641).

<sup>14</sup>Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 55-56.

in this they both appeal to and entrench what is a prevalent and seductive myth in modern Western cultures. This notion or assumption or intimation that history in general is progressive is an example of a *grand narrative*.

In *The Patriot*, I suggest, this is the story of how "in history proper" or in the general course of human events good (ultimately) tends to be victorious over evil, freedom over tyranny, that there is a natural progression from oppressive, unequal, and unjust institutions and modes of life to modes that are freer and more egalitarian. Grand narratives propose that there is an underlying mechanism or structure in the story of human affairs that shapes, constrains, enables and, some would say, *determines* certain outcomes and not others.

Here I found the following illustrations helpful: An early example of a grand narrative in Western historiography is the traditional Christian view that history was ultimately the working out of God's will. That is, the Providential view. Other grand narratives stress that particular human qualities or psychological characteristics ultimately and generally explain the way individuals and societies behave within and across time. In this sense, then, Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall* suggests not only a master narrative in which the Roman Empire fell because superstition gained dominance over reason but also a grand narrative implying that this is a general rule for all civilizations. Then there are *materialist* grand narratives that propose that specific material conditions and economic practices determine human activity in a given historical moment.<sup>15</sup> Finally, I draw students' attention to the Whig view of history that proposes, among other things, that humanity's desire for liberty drives, and is gradually expressed in, the course of history. Whiggism can be seen as a kind of psychological theory of its own, one that suggests that the desire for freedom pushes history in ever-better directions. Whiggism believes in the inevitability of *progress* in human affairs. At this point students can be encouraged to come up with their own grand narratives, their own speculations, intimations, and assumptions about what history in general means or what drives historical change.

I then illustrate grand narrative through a traditional written history before applying the principle back to filmic history. I tell students that the Whigs were a political party in England in the eighteenth century that supported the supremacy of Parliament over the monarchy. "Whig history" was a term applied by the twentieth-century historian Herbert Butterfield to histories of England that saw the gradual triumph of Parliament and, relatedly, that of political liberty as a positive and, in a sense, inevitable process. I then foreground a classic expression of Whig history, Thomas Babington Macaulay's *The History of England* (1848-1861), noting how this was immensely popular and had a huge influence on the way English people thought about their past for over a century. Even though Macaulay did not see every event in

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<sup>15</sup>Here I briefly mentioned Marxism. Later in the course we examine the film *Luther* (2003) and students receive a brief introduction to Marxian and Weberian interpretations of the Protestant Reformation.



English history as positive or progressive, he believed that taken in total the overall story of modern England was a positive and progressive one. His narrative as a whole is shaped this way. And this is the impression the reader takes away from the book. So the progress of England is Macaulay's master narrative, it is his overall view of what characterizes the story of modern England, what the story of modern England means as a segment of history. And this is clearly Macaulay's intention as he states very early on: "Yet, unless I greatly deceive myself, the general effect of this chequered narrative will be to excite thankfulness in all religious minds, and hope in the breasts of all patriots. For the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement."<sup>16</sup>

"Whig" histories, then, are fundamentally progressivist. History, they tell us, generally tends, among other things, towards greater political freedom. And when we use the term now it is applied not just to histories of England, like Macaulay's, but to *all* history. In a sense, it thus becomes a grand narrative. A Whig perspective on history supposes that things are getting better all the time, naturally and inevitably.

*The Patriot* is very much a Whiggish history. At the level of master narrative, the progress from monarchic (British) rule to democratic self-rule is presented as appropriate and, in a sense, inevitable. At the level of grand narrative, the film suggests to us that history, in general, is characterized by the struggle for, and expression of, freedom.

Later in the course I screen and we discuss other films set in late-medieval and early modern Europe. These include *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* (1988), directed by Vincent Ward; *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999), directed by Luc Besson; *1492: The Conquest of Paradise* (1992), directed by Ridley Scott; *Luther* (2003), directed by Eric Till; and *Elizabeth* (1998), directed by Shekhar Kapur. All of these films can be read as narratives of the victory of reason, liberty, and modernity over corruption, superstition, and oppression. This is especially the case with *Luther* and *Elizabeth*. That such progressivism is less apparent or more complex in other films, such as *The Navigator* and *1492*, only renders those films more susceptible to the kind of extended analysis and deep learning appropriate at college level. Moreover, even as straightforward, simplistic, and "unhistorical" a film as *A Knight's Tale* can offer useful ways into the study of other historical and historiographical phenomena.

When students view *A Knight's Tale* in its entirety a few weeks later, most can isolate and appreciate its narrative implications. The good guy gets the girl and achieves his social ambitions of becoming a knight. This is clearly a progressive narrative on the overt or general narrative level and on the level of grand narrative we are encouraged to believe that suitably motivated individuals can overcome the

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<sup>16</sup>Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England* (1848-1861) (London: Penguin, 1986), 52. I warn students, however, that not all master and grand narratives are so explicitly revealed as Macaulay's.

constraints of social and economic class. At this point, students can be introduced fruitfully to the structure-agency problematic through exploring the film's master narrative.

Having students uncover what *A Knight's Tale* suggests about the late Middle Ages, specifically, requires a degree of "traditional" historical instruction. To this end, I give a series of lectures introducing students to the following key topics in late-medieval European history, all of which revolved around the theme of "crisis" that most historians agree existed in this period: crises in agriculture and the economy, in religious belief, in public health, and in social structure (with special emphasis on class and gender roles). As supplementary reading, students get a chapter ("The Crisis of the Late Middle Ages") from an introductory text on Western Civilization.<sup>17</sup> I encourage students to use the information supplied by this reading to inform their responses to the films. Once students have the opportunity to view *A Knight's Tale* and to read the associated background material on the late Middle Ages, we do a tutorial class in which they engage with an extract from Christine de Pisan's "The Book of the City of Ladies."<sup>18</sup> The questions attached to this primary source reading encourage students to consider an historical individual (Christine de Pisan) as illustrating broad characteristics of the late Middle Ages. As an advocate of (supposedly) normative social practice in this period, de Pisan's writings enunciate attitudes about female behavior that society saw as integral to its stability and survival. In asking students to consider how sensible de Pisan's advice might have been to medieval women, they necessarily have to reflect on the prevalent structural (social and ideological) conditions with which women of this period generally had to contend.

Students list normative or expected behaviors of courtly women and comment on the social and sexual mores of the *A Knight's Tale's* female protagonist, Lady Jocelyn. The class observes that Jocelyn comports herself in a manner starkly at odds with that stipulated by norms of the times as evidenced in the admonitions of de Pisan. Subsequently, two conflicting loci of discussion emerge. On the one hand, some students suggest that Jocelyn's unorthodox behavior further evidences the film's lack of historical veracity, while some inquire about the extent to which—and the regularity with which—individuals could or might have contested and flouted these norms. Thus, the class debates the nature and extent of structure and agency. This debate is apposite as I frame the late-medieval section of the course in terms of crises characteristic of that period. In discussions of *The Navigator*, I give special attention to the Bubonic Plague, while we examine gender and religious beliefs in *Joan of Arc: The Messenger*. In a

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<sup>17</sup> John P. McKay, Bennett D. Hill, and John Buckler, *A History of Western Society: Volume B From the Renaissance to 1815*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003). Students responded well to this text when I used it previously in a now defunct freshman course on Western Civilization.

<sup>18</sup> McKay et al., 412-13.

discussion of *A Knight's Tale* I am keen for students to locate and explicate the smaller stories of the film's characters within larger patterns of historical change and meaning. From lectures and reading students are aware that historians have long seen the late Middle Ages as a period in which the feudal social, economic, and intellectual order was breaking down to be replaced by a more modern culture characterized by capitalism, urbanization, and individualism. Students are encouraged to interpret the sexual liberty and forwardness of the noblewoman Jocelyn and the commoner Will Thatcher's desire for upward social and economic mobility as historically probably instances of, or responses to, these well-attested structural changes.

Popular historical film need not be used solely as a means of generating and maintaining students' interest in the past. Such films offer unique and accessible means of introducing students to key theoretical and historiographical concepts: constructivism, narrativism, structure, and agency. These are concepts with which all history students should and can grapple.

Note: My thinking on the nature of historical film is heavily indebted to numerous discussions I have enjoyed with Bronwyn Labrum, Luke McKeown, and Gita Rao.