

# The Hero in the Classroom

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From my students I have learned that teaching the medieval film hero is both an easy and difficult task, the reasons for which are, in fact, the theses for this essay. The medieval film often owes as much to other cinematic genres as it does to medieval texts. Among these genres and sub-genres are Westerns, Hollywood and cinecitta costume dramas, and science fiction and fantasy films. The result is that students' reactions to the medieval hero on the screen are mediated by their other expectations of medieval heroism or heroism in general. One aspect of these heroisms is the generally ironic treatment of heroism in modern populist cinema; an equal and opposite aspect is the often mythic treatment of the medieval hero on film. These smaller-than-life and larger-than-life qualities (often coexisting) in the medieval cinematic hero often have analogues in medieval texts, where conflicting sources and conflicting political and religious agendas produce similar effects. The challenge in teaching the medieval hero on screen, then, is to make students aware of this largely analogous and homologous quality.

Behind these difficulties and pleasures is the recognition of a larger issue involving medievalism. The Middle Ages no longer offers the critical political and ethical challenge to the modern world that it offered in nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-twentieth-century medievalism from Thomas Carlyle to John Ruskin, William Morris to Henry Adams. Instead, it is medievalism itself, the self-conscious interpretation and reformulation of medieval themes, often ludic and performative, that has become the subject of apparently "medieval" forms in the modern world, resulting in a sometimes self-deluding and sometimes revelatory argument with modernity. The present range of medievalisms (some of

them wonderfully catalogued in Umberto Eco's essential article, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," with its list of ten little Middle Ages) has more to do with other medievalisms than with any positivist Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Because of the special status of film in relation to modernity, this argument is often more clearly expressed than in other cultural productions.

Nowhere is this intertextualized medievalism more obvious than in the representation of the medieval hero, and nowhere are the connections to what might be considered hidden medievalisms more obvious. Over the past few years, the number of courses on medieval literature and film, on medieval history and film, and on medieval film as a subspecies of the genre of historical films has mushroomed. This is the result partly of the convenience of new teaching technologies but also of the rise of the study of medievalism, the postmedieval adaptation of medieval themes and representations of the Middle Ages, as a subject of both teaching and research.

The course that I have taught began with close reading of selected Arthurian texts, including Chrétien's romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. We then screened and discussed a few key medieval films, including John Boorman's *Excalibur*, Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois*, and Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*. Students were responsible for viewing the entire film, either on their own or at scheduled screenings. Class consisted of viewing clips and discussion, with questions provided as guides. This took nearly half of a ten-week term. The next phase of the course consisted of student reports. Students were formed into teams of two to four members. They chose from a list of films I provided, with the possibility of choosing one not on their list after consulting with me. The student teams then presented their reports, which could cover a number of areas, such as the relation of script to sources, the visual reproduction of the medieval setting, the idea of the Middle Ages represented in the film, and the relation between this film and other films, medieval, historical, or not.

A number of problems related to the teaching of film in this context quickly or eventually emerged. I had not realized how much of an influence the instant movie reviews on television news would have on my students. The result was a sometimes uncanny sense of public presentation but relatively superficial analysis on their part. In addition, the tremendous amount of information on the Internet on individual films, many with several Web sites devoted to them, and the expanded background offered on DVD versions of popular films meant that the reports were tilted towards production process. Because of these sources, students were also more likely to emphasize the intentions of directors and screenwriters in their reports. I had to revise my guidelines for the reports

to encourage students to become more analytical and to allow themselves to be critical of the stated intentions of screenwriters and directors, at least as represented in publicity materials.

Where I ascribed my assignment of medieval texts in the beginning of the course to professorial traditionalism (at least they would learn something of permanent and non-postmodern value!), in fact the immersion in medieval texts, which continued through the reports, turned out to be both interesting and revelatory. Students were asked to distribute copies, when relevant, of “source” texts. Again, except for their own sacred texts, such as Tolkien, they turned out to be highly sophisticated about both the context and meaning of the medieval works. Students also understood the complex relation between screen and script and between script and source. As a result, we had interesting discussions of Blind Harry’s *Wallace* and Barbour’s *Bruce* and the changes in historical and literary sources made by Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart*. The text that inspired the screenplay for Ingmar Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring*, the (possibly) fourteenth-century ballad, “The Daughter of Töre in Vänge,” led to an interesting discussion on literary and cinematic genres. I was disappointed by the disjunction between the “literary” opening of the course and the “cinematic” body and ending of it, but my students actually liked it and seemed to see a logical transition that still escapes me.

A paradox also became evident from the student reports. As a literature professor, I had to repress the desire for fidelity to the text, for a literary authenticity. In teaching a course on film, I also had to make students aware of the independent aesthetic of a film, of its own requirements as an art form. But I turned out to be more troubled by this than my students were. They were comfortable with pastiche and with what seemed to me jarring conglomerations of film style. This was because most of them had their cinematic coming-of-age in the 1990s, when commercial film had become so dominant that “art” film could exist only by knowingly and ironically alluding to dominant commercial forms. For the same reason, they were also much more visually knowing of the successes and failures of special effects than I was. My own cinematic coming-of-age was in the early 1960s, dominated by French New Wave and post-neorealist Italian cinema, including the now enshrined pantheon of the last great wave of auteur directors around the world (Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Godard, Truffaut, and many others). I also had a somewhat more unusual immersion in “underground” and experimental film as a result of organizing a college film society in the days before film became a widely taught academic subject. While acknowledging the provincialism of my own dated sophistication, however, I was equally taken aback at the literalism of my students when their sacred texts were at stake: they could not judge movies such as Peter Jackson’s *The Lord*

of the Rings: *The Fellowship of the Ring* by any standards other than fidelity to Tolkien's text.

These generational differences also accounted for some interesting perspectives on the nature of heroism. From the 1960s through the early 1970s, representations of heroism had taken an increasingly ironic turn on the typical hero of, say, Westerns or war movies. The postwar disillusion reflected in cinema noir, the redefinition of heroism as refusal in the civil rights and antiwar movements, the demilitarization of military heroism as a result of the Vietnam War, wherein survival or witness became as heroic as action, all these had extended the life of the existential hero through the early 1970s, after which many of my students were born. At about that time, traditional heroism was given a new twist by means of vehicles connected to medieval themes directly or indirectly. One of these was *Excalibur* itself, which, whatever groans it may elicit from professional medievalists, has an iconic status even today among younger enthusiasts of medievalist popular culture. Another was George Lucas's *Star Wars*, with its debt to medieval romance, on the one hand, and its quotation of World War II flyboy heroics on the other. Although not a medievalist theme, the enormously popular *Rambo* series rewrote heroism as both obedience to and defiance of authority, as a kind of tortured exorcism and reenactment of the right-wing theme, from Algeria to Vietnam, of betrayal of the military by politicians. In this reinvention, it is not heroism itself that is revised, as it was in the previous existentialist phase, but the contexts and services of heroism. This was an important change, for it portended yet another change in the nature of the cinematic hero, one that is surprisingly reconnected with medieval themes.

For by the late 1980s and through the present, the medieval haunts technology and is represented through it. The earliest computer games were variations on chess, itself a medievalist (as well as medieval) pursuit in its earliest history. With the advent of more power and visual capacity, computer games quickly adapted the motifs of such popular obsessions as "Dungeons and Dragons" and converted them into a panoply of Gothic fantasies. Drawing on the fascination with a westernized idea of "Oriental" heroism that equates the samurai with the medieval knight and drawing on the worldwide popularity of even poorly made kung fu movies, the medieval was fused with the oriental in a cultural appropriation that is familiar from the Romantic period (as in Raymond Schwab's book, *Oriental Renaissance*, with its account of the Romantic "discovery" of the Orient as equivalent to the Renaissance rediscovery of classical antiquity) but which has an even prior history. However fascinating these cultural lineages may be, their narrative and visual cinematic expression tended towards disturbing formulae: a stylized violence and a gamelike emphasis on repetition and recursion.

In this new Middle Ages, violence is removed from a moral context. It is framed or condemned or justified only by magical intervention, by leading to bad luck or a wrong turn. The gamelike mapping of the action hero's plot allows tests to happen again and again, allows the hero to stand up, dust off, and try again. The result is a suspension of moral judgment on the part of the viewer. The hero may or may not be on the right side; it is not that he consciously chooses evil, but that good and bad sides keep shifting valences, or, as in that archetypal medieval romance, *The X-Files*, all sides may be equally untrustworthy. Scholars who have been pointing to the centrality of the Grail myth to modern art and literature have a point: twenty-first-century heroism's starting point feels and looks like that of the Grail continuations, designed to question the chivalric heroism of high Arthurian romance, emphasizing the wastefulness and anarchic cycle of violence, which it must describe at length, and narrating a well-nigh impossible quest, which requires constant renarration and repetition. It is a world where, as in the subgenre of action hero movies, heroism devolves into an alternating cycle of masochism and sadism, of sacrifice as much as resistance.

Partly as a result of this shift, it becomes culturally possible to toggle the gender of the new medieval hero, who can just as easily now, and perhaps more easily, be a heroine, as long as the plot allows a passive subheroine somewhere else in the story as a retainer of traditional cultural values. None of this will seem new to traditional medieval and early modern scholars, who will be able to cite parallels from Chrétien through *The Faerie Queene*. Indeed, what the redefinition of heroism in contemporary cinema, partly enabled by medieval themes, teaches us, is that heroism is always being redefined in ironic ways because of its accidental and sacrificial nature, which the viewer can never be fully prepared for.

But the medieval film itself, while it alludes to the medievalism of the action hero, seems to the viewer and to my students to retrieve traditional heroism. *Braveheart* is a good example, partly for its intentions and partly for reasons of local culture. I teach at a campus which, when it was founded in the 1950s, chose the "Highlanders" as its logo and name, for reasons lost to history, given a semiarid climate and a research origin in citrus agriculture. For many years its symbolic mascot was a teddy bear dressed in a kilt. A few years ago this image was deemed too meek, and a New York consulting firm was brought in, the result of which was that the little bear was put on steroids, given a rabid face that would allow the park service to shoot on sight, and, of course, painted with *Braveheart*-style blue war paint. In fact, my present students remain as puzzled by these connections as I. But what my students did do was to Americanize the plot, to take it out of the frame of Scottish history and

contemporary British politics and to read its heroism in American terms, as an individual rising to an occasion, throwing off an oppressor and sacrificing himself for a patriotic cause.

Mel Gibson's revision downward of Wallace's class background contributed to this. Gibson himself was born in the United States and went on to make *The Patriot*, which moves the scene of heroism to Revolutionary America, with a decidedly Jeffersonian narrative, so they may not have been far off. American students studying in Scotland at the same time, however, reported the adoption of *Braveheart* as the symbol of Scottish patriotism, which had to redefine itself in the context of a united Europe. The film's appearance coincided with the rise of local nationalisms against weakening European nation-states, as well as with the long tradition of Scottish separatism, which had been co-opted by a new regional autonomy. It became a commonplace to pair *Braveheart* and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* as national myth as opposed to national reality. I tried to suggest that *Braveheart* also reflected Gibson's Australian experience and described some of the remarkable Australian movies of the 1970s and 1980s, with their heroes pessimistically and resentfully opposing colonial and class slights, tyrannies and betrayals. But in general, my students' interpretation of the heroism of *Braveheart* fell into an Americanized narrative of self-motivation and self-creation, in which tragedy consists of the interruption of autonomy by fate.

One surprise in teaching the course was the interest on the part of students in what might be called spiritual heroism and their seriousness in approaching the religious dimensions of medieval movies. In fact, it dawned on me, again perhaps belatedly, that except for genre films explicitly on biblical themes, which more often mined the setting and characters rather than the theology, commercial cinema has never been able to deal in a full and complex way with religion. The great exception, however, is the medieval film. From Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* through Bergman's *Seventh Seal* through Roberto Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis* through Suzanne Schiffman's *The Sorceress* and Chris Newby's *The anchoress*, the Middle Ages becomes a setting in which spiritual states can be explored in a relatively uncontroversial arena. This neutrality contrasts strongly with the vitriolic reactions to, say, Pier Paolo Pasolini's or Martin Scorsese's lives of Christ or the controversy surrounding Jean-Luc Godard's *Je Vous Salue, Marie*, set in modern times. Time and again in my student reports, students observed that, for instance, the protagonists of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* or Dreyer's *Joan of Arc* were heroes or heroines through their spiritual travails. They were equally attuned to the anticlerical themes in, for instance, Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* or the emphasis on action rather than contemplation in Luc Besson's *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*.

The nature of spiritual experience as represented on screen led to some interesting discussions. I had not planned on assigning the classic 1970s and 1980s texts which concerned the revival of interest in female spiritual experience, such as Julia Kristeva's essay on the language of the female mystics and Carolyn Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and *Jesus as Mother*, but there was so much interest as the result of a brief discussion that I quickly put them on reserve.<sup>2</sup> Female students especially were interested in whether heroism could be defined in some way other than male activity, political, martial or aggressive, and could be understood as inward, passive (in the positive sense of the term), and transforming by example. But other students objected that this redefinition came close to essentializing femininity and celebrating a secondary role. These students noted, for instance, that a number of films set in the Middle Ages that we had reports on, such as Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* and Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, depended on rape for the motivation of their plots.

The Kurosawa film also raised questions of racial and cultural difference, which I was not prepared to answer as fully as I would have liked, especially given the rich ethnic mix of my own campus, where nearly 40 percent of the students are of Asian descent and nearly a third are Latino. The concept of Japanese "feudalism," after all, depends on analogies with Western economy and society. What did the Middle Ages mean in Japanese historiography? And what about such "medieval" films as *Seven Samurai*? Of course, these films also partly derive from the very Westerns and other genres that they in turn influenced in the 1960s, but the question of cultural nostalgia and cultural origin became an important one, especially when we also considered Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (and *Ivan the Terrible*, which we did not screen or report on). I realized that I had understood these films in terms of their politics (post-war Japan and the symbolic place of the Meiji restoration, Stalinist Soviet Union) and not in terms of their national traditions. That is, I had understood these films as always already postmodern, but my students were interested in how they addressed historical tradition.

On the other hand, the interjection of cultural others in such films as Kevin Costner's *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and the Beowulfian variations of John McTiernan's *The 13th Warrior* seemed hardly to require comment on the part of my students, whereas I thought of them as critical to postmodern orientalism and to the relation of heroism to advanced and refined civilization, in these cases represented by the Saracen other. Both films introduce appropriately aristocratic Saracen characters into their Western European medieval settings. Antonio Banderas takes the role in *The 13th Warrior* and Morgan Freeman in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*.



From the left: King Arthur (Graham Chapman) with his knights (Eric Idle, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, and John Cleese; Terry Gilliam- in front) in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975).

What is interesting about these themes and my students' reaction to them is that in the 1970s, when popular medievalism first articulated itself, it had about it an air of white nostalgia, an attempt to escape to a fundamental European past, which in North America could comfortably include Celtic medievalism as part and parcel of whiteness. My present students did not register this at all and in fact were puzzled as to why I thought that Gil Junger's *Black Knight* was such an interesting concept and had been disappointed that it had not worked, largely because, I thought, the critical relation between past and present that informs the best Connecticut Yankee genre of movies was missing.

Once removed from the world of the medieval film's action, however, students can become perceptively critical of movies that attempt medieval nostalgia. Their perspective is shaped by an unlikely mirror: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Almost as ubiquitous as *Excalibur* in the students' frame of reference, Terry Jones's film allows them simultaneously to enjoy and to jeer at the pretensions of medieval nostalgia. This is no accident—Jones's fiercely antiaristocratic demolition in his book, *Chaucer's Knight: Portrait of a Mercenary*, in fact underlies the com-





Ibn Fadlan (Antonio Banderas) armed for battle in *The 13th Warrior* (1999).

edy of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.<sup>3</sup> Again, American students are frequently at something of a loss to decode a humor based on class, region, and a claim to tradition, but they instinctively understand the film's anarchic attack on social illusions. Indeed, as with *Braveheart*, they tend to Americanize its Middle Ages, reading the film as an update of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, which they also paradoxically enjoy for both its medievalism and its antimedievalism.

My professorial conservatism was stronger when I began the course than when it ended, and I learned from my students that important conclusions could be drawn from what I had dismissed as slight material. Television programming was one good example. This was a generation that had grown up on *Xena: Warrior Princess*. They loved—but knew to be a fabrication—the conglomeration of prehistoric, classical, and medieval and characters, scenes, references, and settings in the series. That is, in the same way that the structure of the computer game inculcated a suspension of moral belief, the television show inculcated a willing suspension of historical belief. While the series consciously alluded to (as did Roland Emmerich's *Stargate*, which in its film version distributed publicity about the scientific accuracy of its linguistic codes) New Age mystification of certain historical periods and the possibility of the permeability of time, my students had grown up recently enough to regard such beliefs as a trifle dated and comical. That is, although stu-

dents felt themselves possessed of some arcane trivia as a result of these series (which spent a surprising amount of development time on historical research), they were sufficiently aware of the distinction between a postmodern pastiche of historical moments on the one hand and a philologically and archaeologically correct Middle Ages on the other.

What does such a broad course on the medieval hero on film teach, finally, about the nature of heroism? Despite my emphasis on the unique vision of individual directors, the surveylike nature of such a course leads to a certain stereotyping of heroism, in the sense of a catalogue or cookbook or taxonomy of heroism. Yet such stereotyping can be read in very different ways. My students implicitly (if not explicitly) understood the heavily Jungian bias of many medieval heroic films, many of them influenced by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The similar sequences of so many heroic narratives set in the Middle Ages reinforced, for my students, a profoundly essentialist notion of heroism.

As someone who has lived through the postmodern intellectual revolution, I inevitably assume that heroism is constructed in certain ways and shaped towards certain ends: heroism is a rhetoric and the medievalism that surrounds heroism is part of that rhetoric, inventing an authorizing tradition for a very historically specific notion of what a hero is. The 1960s rewrote heroism as a form of witness and refusal as much as a form of action and rescue, and while the screen action hero and the screen medieval hero of the past three decades have accommodated that new awareness, they do so only as part of a narrative that inevitably retrieves an older form of heroism, one that postwar reactions, such as that of the Lost Generation after World War I, cinema noir after World War II, and the redefinition of masculinity after the Vietnam War had framed as futile, absurd, or contradictory. The appeal of the medieval heroic film depends, finally, on nostalgia for a transhistorical heroism purged of the compromises of modernity even as it builds those compromises into the Middle Ages it purports to recreate. Students respond instinctively to the idealism of the medieval film hero. They react more slowly to a critique of that idealism, and leading them to an awareness of that critique is ultimately the challenge of teaching the medieval heroic film.

## Notes

1. Umberto Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," in *Travels in Hyperreality*, tr. William Weaver (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

2. Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987)

and *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

3. Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: Portrait of a Mercenary* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

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## Filmography

- 1928 *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (The Passion of Joan of Arc)*, d. Carl Theodor Dreyer, with Renée Falconetti, Antonin Artaud. France: Société Générale des Films.
- 1938 *Alexander Nevsky*, d. Sergei Eisenstein, with Nikolai Cherkasov. USSR: Mosfilm.
- 1943 *Ivan the Terrible, Part One*, d. Sergei Eisenstein, with Nikolai Cherkasov. USSR: Mosfilm.
- 1946 *Ivan the Terrible, Part Two*, d. Sergei Eisenstein, with Nikolai Cherkasov. USSR: Mosfilm.
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- 1957 *The Seventh Seal*, d. Ingmar Bergman, with Max Von Sydow. Sweden: Svensk Filmindustri.
- 1960 *The Virgin Spring*, d. Ingmar Bergman, with Max Von Sydow, Brigitta Valberg. Sweden: Svensk Filmindustri.

- 1966 *Andrei Rublev*, d. Andrei Tarkovsky, with Anatoli Solonitsyn. USSR: Mosfilm.
- 1974 *Lancelot du Lac*, d. Robert Bresson, with Luc Simon, Laura Duke Condominas. France: Compagnie Française de Distribution Cinématographique (CFDC).
- 1975 *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, d. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, with Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin. U.K.: Python (Monty) Pictures Limited.
- 1977 *Star Wars*, d. George Lucas, with Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher. U.S.: 20th Century-Fox.
- 1978 *Perceval le Gallois*, d. Eric Rohmer, with Fabrice Lucchini. France: Gaumont.
- 1981 *Excalibur*, d. John Boorman, with Nichol Williamson. U.S.: Orion.
- 1982 *First Blood*, d. Ted Kotcheff, with Sylvester Stallone. U.S.: Caralco Pictures.
- 1985 *Je Vous Salue, Marie*. d. Jean-Luc Godard, with Myriem Roussel. U.K.: Channel Four Films.
- 1987 *The Sorceress*, d. Suzanne Schiffman, with Christine Boisson. France: Bleu Productions.
- 1991 *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, d. Kevin Reynolds, with Kevin Costner, Morgan Freeman. U.S.: Warner Bros.
- 1993 *The anchoress*, d. Chris Newby, with Natalie Morse. U.K.: British Film Institute.
- 1994 *Stargate*, d. Roland Emmerich, with James Spader. U.S./France: Centropolis Entertainment.
- 1995 *Braveheart*, d. Mel Gibson, with Mel Gibson. U.S.: Icon Productions, Ladd, 20th Century-Fox.
- 1996 *Trainspotting*, d. Danny Boyle, with Ewan McGregor. U.K.: Channel Four Films.
- 1999 *The 13th Warrior*, d. John McTiernan, with Antonio Banderas. U.S.: Touchstone Pictures.
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