



**From *Ivanhoe* to *Ironclad*:
Excavating Layers of Tradition in a Medieval Film**

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It is the winter of 1215. The forces of King John have built a siege tower that they hope will allow them at last to take Rochester Castle, which they have been besieging for weeks. Suddenly, using a catapult they've built, the castle's defenders hurl flaming projectiles at the siege tower, blowing it up. As John rages in frustration, an official, perhaps the royal historian, scribbles in a big book (pre-bound for convenience). John rips the pages out of the book and yells, "Don't record that!"¹

By calling into question the trustworthiness of the historical record, this scene, from the 2011 film *Ironclad* directed by Jonathan English, could be the filmmaker's pre-emptive strike against those who would criticize a film's historical accuracy.² Curiously, English does not avail himself of the excuse he gave himself. He makes no mention of this scene in the director's commentary included on the film's DVD; on the contrary, he insists on the film's historical accuracy. He states numerous times that the events in *Ironclad* were "based on fact," that he wanted to depict what the Middle Ages were "really like."³ Rather than insulating himself from charges of inaccuracy, statements like this invite interrogation of his claim. And in fact, the claim does not hold up; *Ironclad* contains numerous errors of fact. Such analysis, while important, suggests that only two historical moments matter when considering a historical film: the filmmaker's time and the time in the past in which the film is set. Interpreting the film then becomes a simple matter of judging how well the movie conveyed the time period. But this binary past-present dichotomy is insufficient for the interpretation of historical films, and especially of medieval films. Our encounter with any medieval subject matter always involves medievalism; it is always mediated through a tradition. This tradition is multi-layered, and a full interpretation of a medieval film must excavate all these layers. For *Ironclad*, these layers include not only the events of 1215, but also, since the past for a filmmaker also includes the movies of the past, other movies. In addition, *Ironclad* partakes of both the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions of medievalism. *Ironclad* has a complex relationship with *Ivanhoe*, one of the most influential works of Romantic medievalism. Ultimately, however, *Ironclad* is an Enlightenment movie.

¹ Jonathan English and Erick Kastel, *Ironclad*, dir. Jonathan English (Santa Monica, CA: Arc Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

² It works best, however, for events in the movie that are not known to have happened, and not so well for events that are known not to have happened.

³ All references to and quotations from J. English come from the Director's Commentary included on the *Ironclad* DVD.

When I heard that Paul Giamatti was set to appear as King John in a movie about Magna Carta, I expected it to dramatize the barons' grievances against John and their rebellion against him, culminating with the granting of Magna Carta at Runnymede in June 1215.⁴ Contrary to my expectations, *Ironclad* dispenses with these events with a brief sequence at the beginning of the movie. Charles Dance, who plays Archbishop Stephen Langton, does a voiceover narrating a summary of the events of John's reign, against a backdrop of manuscript illustrations that the commentary informs us were modeled on the Morgan Picture Bible, interspersed with some live action scenes, including a recreation of John's signing the charter. The focus of the film is not what led to the Magna Carta but what followed from it. The voiceover ends, "What is not remembered is what John did next."⁵

The action of the film begins with John taking bloody revenge on the members of the baronial rebellion who had signed Magna Carta.⁶ The rebels ally with Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, who negotiates with French king Philip II to offer the English throne to his son Louis. The rebels occupy Rochester Castle, which controlled the road from Dover to London; the siege of Rochester takes up the majority of the movie. The castle is inhabited by Sheriff Reginald Cornhill (played by Derek Jacobi) and his much younger, sexually starved wife Isabel (played by Kate Mara) and defended by a small band of misfits led by Baron William Albany.⁷ They are besieged by King John's army of blue-painted pagan Danish mercenaries, who eventually succeed in taking the castle. King John, however, goes on the run as his kingdom is invaded by Prince Louis of France. The film ends with John's death from dysentery in 1216 after his treasure is lost in the Wash.

Intertwined with this historical material is a parallel plot involving fictional characters. Alongside the story of King John and his enemies runs the story of Thomas Marshal, a Templar returned from Crusade. When the movie opens, Thomas and some Templar companions are traveling to Canterbury in the company of Abbot Marcus, presumably a Benedictine (he is tonsured and wears black robes). It is implied that Thomas suffers from PTSD; the abbot plans to petition the Archbishop of Canterbury to remove him from the order. The abbot explains,

"I know the Templars placed a heavy burden on you. I know you are deeply scarred. The cross on your tunic is a symbol of your faith in God's will. You should not be full of the torment it now bears upon your soul."⁸

⁴ I know of no movie that does that. The only other movies I am aware of that include Magna Carta incorporate it into the Robin Hood legend: *The Bandit of Sherwood Forest* (1946); *Rogues of Sherwood Forest* (1950); and Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* (2010). On *Bandit* and *Rogues*, see Kevin Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films about Medieval Europe* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1999), 27-28 and 238. On *Robin Hood*, see my article "Magna Carta and Modernity in Medieval Films: *Robin Hood* and *Ironclad*" (under consideration by *Film and History*).

⁵ English notes that this prologue was only added in post-production, when they realized they needed it for the audience to understand the rest of the film.

⁶ It would have made sense to identify these rebels with the twenty-five barons whom clause 61 of Magna Carta charges with guaranteeing John's adherence to the charter, but the filmmakers missed this opportunity. On the Twenty-Five (as they are known), see J.C Holt, *Magna Carta*, 3rd ed., revised and with a new introduction by George Garnett and John Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 402-404; W.L. Warren, *King John* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 239-40; David Carpenter, ed., *Magna Carta* (London: Penguin, 2015), 379-80.

⁷ Cornhill and Albany are both historical figures. Albany's name is more commonly given as d'Aubigny or Albini.

⁸ The dialogue of *Ironclad* is often curiously unidiomatic.

The group breaks their journey at a castle; while they are there, John shows up as part of his revenge tour. The other Templars are killed and the Abbot Marcus' tongue is cut out. Thomas escapes with the Abbot, who then dies in his arms as Thomas vows, "There is worth in every death. And I will see it now in yours." He continues to Canterbury on his own, where Archbishop Langton persuades him to join the rebellion. Thomas accompanies Baron Albany as he recruits some of his old soldiers. The seven of them—Thomas; Baron Albany and his squire Guy; his old soldiers Daniel Marks the archer, Gil Becket, and Joseph Wulfstan; and petty criminal Jedediah Coteral, whom they redeemed from the stocks because he seemed feisty—are the ones who take over Rochester Castle. During the siege, Thomas develops a relationship with Isabel, wife of Reginald Cornhill. When the castle falls, Langton releases him from his vows. The final shot of the movie is Thomas and Isabel riding away from the castle together.

In broad outline, at least, *Ironclad* conforms to the historical narrative of the aftermath of Magna Carta. John did renounce it; the baronial revolt did resume; Rochester Castle, held by Reginald Cornhill, was occupied by rebels led by William d'Aubigny and besieged by a royalist army, which did use a fire fueled by pig fat to undermine the keep, which did collapse. Prince Louis of France did invade England at the invitation of the rebellious barons; John did lose his treasure in the Wash and he did die of dysentery. To this extent, English is correct in his claim that "all the events of the story are actually based on fact." By the film's ending where it did, however, one might gain the impression that England was conquered by France in 1216 and that Plantagenet rule was extinguished. *Ironclad* gives no hint that John's young son Henry was crowned his successor at Gloucester Abbey on 28 October, ten days after his father's death, or that Prince Louis was defeated at the battle of Lincoln on 20 May 1217 and returned to France in September, having renounced his claim.⁹

These, however, are errors of omission—confusing, perhaps, but not actually inaccurate. Sticklers for historical accuracy might point out errors of commission as well as omission. English not only emphasizes the accuracy of his movie, he also emphasizes the research he did to make it that way. He says that he "read many books about these events." Discussing his approach to the "look" of the film, English says, "all of these ideas began to come through really from the source material, the actual research that I was doing while developing the story and writing the screenplay." He did the research all on his own, apparently—the credits list no historical consultant.¹⁰ Given all this research, then, you would think that he would get his facts right. But you would be wrong. Several times, English notes that a particular event in the film occurred "in history." Every time he uses this phrase, it didn't. Consider these statements:

- Stephen Langton "was actually one of the three men who in history actually wrote the Magna Carta."
- "The original siege in history lasted for about nine months."
- "Baron Albany was in history one of the real characters that also went to Rochester Castle and fought in the castle there and died there."

⁹ English does mention these later events in his commentary. On the events following the siege of Rochester, see Warren, *King John*, 247-56; Stephen Church, *King John and the Road to Magna Carta* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 235-242; David Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: The Penguin History of Britain, 1066-1284* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 297-99.

¹⁰ Although the film did employ a chain mail specialist, an armourer, and an assistant armourer (you can see what kind of expert advice they thought was important enough to pay for).

Every one of them is factually incorrect. Stephen Langton is no longer considered to have been the sole author of Magna Carta.¹¹ In the movie, the siege of Rochester goes on for months and extends into the winter; in reality, Rochester was besieged for only seven weeks, in October and November 1215.¹² William of Albany is shown being gruesomely tortured by King John at the end of the siege and dying of his injuries, but he actually lived until 1236.¹³

Ironclad got other facts wrong as well. Rochester is defended in *Ironclad* by “less than twenty men” (a number that diminished even further as the siege wore on); the defenders of the historical Rochester Castle numbered over a hundred.¹⁴ The movie’s Rochester Castle stands by itself in open countryside; the real Rochester Castle was (and is) surrounded by the city of Rochester, including a rather large cathedral.¹⁵ John’s real mercenaries were Flemish, not blue-painted Danish pagans—and had he hired Danes in 1215, they wouldn’t have been pagan, they wouldn’t have painted themselves blue, and their captain would likely not have been named Tiberius (especially if they were Norse pagans). The director of *Ironclad* was very proud to have included a scene in which John dictates a letter requesting his justiciar to send him “forty pigs, the kind least good for eating,” which is a quote from a surviving letter.¹⁶ However, the pigs are shown being herded into a tunnel beneath the castle’s foundations, implying that they were burned alive, while presumably they would have been slaughtered first and their fat rendered.¹⁷ Reginald Cornhill, who hangs himself in the movie when it becomes clear that the defenders are doomed, also survived the siege in real life.¹⁸ In the movie, Stephen Langton is in Canterbury at the beginning of the siege, left for France partway through to hurry up the French, and then arrives with the French forces at the siege’s conclusion. In reality, Langton departed for Rome to attend the Fourth Lateran Council in September 1215 and so could not have participated in the

¹¹ On *Ironclad*’s treatment of Magna Carta, see my “Magna Carta and Modernity.”

¹² In addition to English stating in the commentary that the siege “in history” lasted nine months, viewers of the movie itself hear a voiceover during the siege montage stating, “weeks turned into months.” On the siege of Rochester, see Warren, *King John*, 246-47; Church, *King John*, 227-28; Holt, *Magna Carta*, 301-302.

¹³ On Albany/d’Aubigny’s later career, see Dan Jones, *Magna Carta: The Making and Legacy of the Great Charter* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014), 172; id., *Magna Carta: The Birth of Liberty* (New York: Viking Press, 2015), 228-29.

¹⁴ According to W.L. Warren, *King John*, “though ill-provisioned, the castle was well manned by ninety-five knights and forty-five men-at-arms” (247).

¹⁵ This point is made in a Youtube commentary, one of a series posted on the channel “Lindybeige,” created by Nikolas Lloyd on the film’s historical accuracy. The observation about Rochester Castle is from Part 1, “The Buildings.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0zYZhJXELQ>. Accessed June 13, 2017. There are four additional segments:

- Part 2, “Costumes.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGKkiQ76cI>.
- Part 3, “Weapons.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtMMY-QqRYQ>.
- Part 4, “Women.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAlpizMxU-8>.
- Part 5, “Tactics.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4-MkDLJjeA>. All accessed June 13, 2017.

¹⁶ Warren, *King John*, 247; Marc Morris, *King John: Treachery and Tyranny in Medieval England: The Road to Magna Carta* (New York: Pegasus, 2015), 271.

¹⁷ Regarding the pigs, English explains, “So this is all true. A mine was dug at Rochester Castle. It was not uncommon to dig mines underneath castles. You filled them with pigs; you set fire to the pigs and they used—they would burn pigs because apparently they burn at an incredibly high temperature and the pigs would melt—they would burn the wooden props and the ground would collapse. The foundations of the castle would collapse and this is what we see about to happen. So all of this happened at Rochester and that’s why it’s in the film. We, of course, did not harm any pigs at all, and I mean that. Those were local pigs, a rare breed of pig.” A review of the film in *The Guardian* that details many of these historical inaccuracies concludes, “Somebody should have exploded a pig-bomb beneath this catastrophe of a movie.” Alex von Tunzelmann, “*Ironclad*’s historical credentials are made of mulch,” *The Guardian*, 12 April 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/apr/12/ironclad-credentials-mulch>. Accessed 5 June 2017.

¹⁸ Ifor W. Rowlands, “King John, Stephen Langton and Rochester Castle, 1213-15,” in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill, Christopher J. Holdsworth, and Janet L. Nelson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1989), 267.

siege in any way.¹⁹ Finally, the French army didn't show up until May 1216, months after the siege had ended.²⁰

Even if Jonathan English had paid scrupulous attention to known historical facts, he still would have failed in his desire to depict the Middle Ages as it actually was. Jeffrey Richards points out that historical movies are not only based on history; they are also based on other movies: "This habit of borrowing from earlier films rather than from history has now become the norm in Hollywood."²¹ This is certainly true of *Ironclad*, which English openly admits was partly inspired by *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Seven Samurai*, and *Braveheart*.²² *Ironclad*'s mercenaries painted themselves blue because the soldiers in *Braveheart* painted themselves blue—even though the actual warriors who painted themselves blue did so in Roman Britain, hundreds of years before either film was set. Furthermore, like all movies, *Ironclad* is also affected by the expectations of its genre, in this case the action movie. English admits that they built the siege tower only so they could blow it up.

English is probably unaware, however, that his approach to the Middle Ages also draws on a venerable historiographical tradition. Historian Marcus Bull has observed that there are two major historical sources for our present-day understanding of the Middle Ages. One, rooted in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, sees the Middle Ages as the "Dark Ages"—a time of irrational superstition, ignorance, and barbarism. The other, in reaction to this, comes from the Romantics and is a much more positive appraisal.²³ We in the 21st century have inherited both views of the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment and the Romantic; both are resident in our minds. The medievalism of *Ironclad* is Romantic in its inspiration but Enlightenment in its execution.

Although one might not expect it from a movie whose taglines were "heavy metal goes medieval" and "blood will run," Jonathan English is not immune to the lure of the Romantic Middle Ages. He says he "was always a huge fan of the medieval period." He mentions some childhood experiences that betray an early enthusiasm for a romanticized view of the Middle Ages. For example, he describes childhood visits to castles:

As a child I loved walking around and visiting castles, and I had the opportunity to go to many, and I loved all these little features and tunnels and hidden passageways and the portcullis . . . , and then the portcullis winch, and how there was another portcullis inside the castle. . . . I loved all those features.

I can easily imagine him as a little boy playing with his toy knight figurines. He says he saw the castle as a character in the film and made sure to highlight those features in the filming. English also recalls learning of John's lost treasure as a child:

¹⁹ The Fourth Lateran Council met from November 11-30, 1215—completely overlapping with the siege of Rochester. Church, *King John*, 232-33.

²⁰ On the French intervention, see Warren, *King John*, 248-56; Church, *King John*, 234-37. Several of these historical inaccuracies are noted in the Internet Movie Database (imdb) listing for *Ironclad*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1233301/trivia?tab=gf&ref=tt_trv_gf; accessed 23 June 2017.

²¹ Jeffrey Richards, "Sir Ridley Scott and the Rebirth of the Historical Epic," in Andrew B.R. Elliott, ed., *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the Twenty-first Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 22.

²² English also mentions *Warlord* (1965), starring Charlton Heston, as another inspiration.

²³ Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 7-34.

As a schoolboy I remembered hearing stories of one of the most famous lost hoards of English treasure was King John's treasure, when he lost it while fleeing from the French. It was only when I started researching this project that I connected those two stories.

What could be more romantic than a story of lost treasure?

Despite these Romantic elements, most of *Ironclad* clearly draws on the negative, Enlightenment view of the Middle Ages. It is shot, in fact, literally as the “Dark Ages”—Jonathan English notes “strong browns and grays” as the film’s dominant color palette. Bull describes the negative view of the Middle Ages with these adjectives: “bloody, bleak, unrestrained, barbaric, physical, unthinking, brutal, dark, ominous”; these could be a description of the movie.²⁴ In fact, English uses similar vocabulary: he says he “wanted the film to look bleak, and rough, wet, cold.” He emphasized that his aim in the battle scenes was to depict the fighting as closely as possible to the way it would have been, “to show what [medieval] battles were really like” (figure 1). English distances his creation from the Romantic tradition seen in earlier movies like *Adventures of Robin Hood* or *Camelot* when he says that he was interested not in the “opulent” Middle Ages but in its “brutality.”



Figure 1 Battle scene from *Ironclad*

Ironically, perhaps, we can most clearly see *Ironclad*'s Enlightenment stance by comparing the movie to Sir Walter Scott's 1819 novel *Ivanhoe*.²⁵ *Ivanhoe* is one of the most influential sources of the Romantic view of the Middle Ages. It was immensely popular from the day of its publication until well into the twentieth century. While it is no longer widely read, and English does not mention having read it (or even having seen the 1950 movie version starring Elizabeth Taylor), there are nonetheless some intriguing similarities between *Ivanhoe* and *Ironclad*. *Ivanhoe* pioneered the technique in historical fiction of telling the story of ordinary people not only set in the past against the backdrop of historic events

²⁴ Bull, 12.

²⁵Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe: A Romance*; available in multiple editions.

but also interacting with historical figures, as Thomas Marshal does in *Ironclad*.²⁶ Both *Ivanhoe* and *Ironclad* assign some of their fictional characters' names out of medieval history or literature, like *Ivanhoe*'s Gurth son of Beowulf or *Ironclad*'s Thomas Marshal (recalling William Marshal) and Gil Becket (inspired by Thomas Becket).

The closest parallel between the two works, however, is both narrative and visual. Consider this description: at the conclusion of a bitter siege, a knight in a white tunic with a red cross rides away from the smoking ruins of a destroyed castle in the company of a beautiful woman. This sentence describes the final scene of *Ironclad*, where the Templar Thomas Marshal rides away from the smoldering Rochester Castle with Isabel; it also describes a famous scene in *Ivanhoe*, where the Templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert rides away from the smoldering Torquilstone Castle with Rebecca.²⁷

Ironclad's final shot does not parallel only the narrative of *Ivanhoe*. Jonathan English states in his commentary that the scenes of everyday life in *Ironclad* were inspired by the paintings of Pieter Breughel. Perhaps he was unaware that another artistic inspiration might have been nineteenth-century French painting. The final shot of *Ironclad* is strikingly similar to painted representations of *Ivanhoe*'s "Abduction of Rebecca" scene—another, perhaps inadvertent, example of the film's affinity to the Romantic vision of the Middle Ages. Scott's novels were immensely popular in France, part of a French "Anglomania" of the 1830s and 1840s.²⁸ Two artists who participated in this French Anglomania and vogue for Sir Walter Scott were Léon Cogniet (1794-1880) and Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). The two of them painted the same scene from *Ivanhoe*, the abduction of Rebecca. Today, Delacroix is much the more famous of the two, but during their lifetimes Cogniet was equally successful. Cogniet's abduction of Rebecca was painted in 1829, just ten years after the publication of the novel (figure 2).²⁹ While Cogniet's rendition seems excessively calm and perhaps betrays his academic background, the two versions by Delacroix, (1846; 1858) are more dynamic and emotional, as befits a major figure of the Romantic movement (figures 3 and 4).³⁰ Here we have a perfect example of the layering of traditions: the final shot of a 2011 movie set in 1215 is reminiscent of mid-nineteenth-century paintings of a scene from a novel published in 1819 and set in 1194 (figure 5).

²⁶ In *Ivanhoe*, the stories of the fictional characters like Wilfred of Ivanhoe and his family, Rebecca and her father Isaac the Jew, and the evil Templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert occur during the time of the regency of Prince John and the imminent return of King Richard; John and Richard also interact with these characters.

²⁷ *Ivanhoe*, Vol. 3, chapter 1; chapter 31. Some editions of *Ivanhoe* are divided into books and chapters; in some the chapters are numbered consecutively. I provide both references.

²⁸ On French Anglomania, see Christopher Wood, *Victorian Painting* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1999), 33-34.

²⁹ Léon Cogniet, *The Abduction of Rebecca*, 1828, The Wallace Collection. <http://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=65213>. Accessed 5 June 2017.

³⁰ Eugène Delacroix, *The Abduction of Rebecca*, 1846, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438814>. Accessed 5 June 2017. Eugène Delacroix, *The Abduction of Rebecca*, 1858, The Louvre. http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=car_not_frame&cidNotice=8987&langue=en. Accessed 5 June 2017. On the *Ivanhoe* paintings by Cogniet and Delacroix, see Beth Segal Wright, "Scott's Historical Novels and French Historical Painting 1815-1855," *The Art Bulletin* 63 (1981), 268-87.



Figure 2 Léon Cogniet, *The Abduction of Rebecca*



Figure 3 Eugène Delacroix, *The Abduction of Rebecca*



Figure 4 Eugène Delacroix, *The Abduction of Rebecca*



Figure 5 Final shot of *Ironclad*

Despite these visual and narrative similarities, however, there are differences between the two scenarios of *Ivanhoe* and *Ironclad*. *Ironclad* can be seen as the anti-*Ivanhoe*. *Ivanhoe* is one of the sources of the archetypal evil Templar, the character Brian de Bois-Guilbert. *Ironclad*'s Templar is not evil; rather, he fights on the side of the defenders of liberty—the rebels against King John, who has renounced Magna Carta. The situation of *Ironclad* is an exact mirror of *Ivanhoe*. In *Ivanhoe*'s siege of Torquilstone, the bad guys (Bois-Guilbert, de Bracy, Front-de-Boeuf) are inside the castle and the

good guys (Robin Hood and the plucky Saxons, King Richard) are outside. In *Ironclad's* siege of Rochester Castle, the bad guys, the supporters of King John's tyrannical rule, are on the outside and the good guys, Baron Albany, Thomas Marshal, and the other defenders of liberty, are on the inside. In the novel, the Templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert is the attempted seducer and Rebecca resists him. Brian offers to renounce the Templar order if Rebecca will become his mistress; the member of a Crusading order is willing to join up with the leader of the infidels in necessary to be with his lover:

"Listen to me, Rebecca," he added, again softening his tone; "England, nay Europe, is not the world—there are spheres in which we may act, ample enough even for my ambition. We will go to Palestine, where Conrade, Marquis of Montserrat, is my friend—a friend free as myself from the dotting scruples which fetter our free-born reason—rather with Saladin will we league ourselves, than endure the scorn of the bigots whom we contemn."

Rebecca refuses him, not only because he is of a different faith, but also because he takes his vows so lightly:

"A dream," said Rebecca; "an empty vision of the night, which, were it a waking reality, affects me not—enough that the power which thou mayest acquire, I will never share; nor hold I so light of country or religious faith, as to esteem him who is willing to barter their ties, and cast away the bonds of the Order of which he is a sworn member, in order to gratify an unruly passion for the daughter of another people."³¹

In the movie, Isabel does the seducing and the Templar Thomas Marshal resists her advances (at least at first). And this time it's Isabel, not the Templar, who questions the worth of the Templar vows:

Isabel: "Stop hiding behind vows and commandments! The vows speak of loyalty and abstinence and murder, but why never love, Thomas?"

Thomas: "The vows of the order protect my soul from the blood I've spilt in God's name."

Isabel: "It was the Church that made you do those things. It was the Templars that gave you a sword and the name of God to wield it. It was the Templars that made you kill. Who were you before them? What was so bad about that man then that makes you resist your desires now?"³²

In *Ivanhoe*, Rebecca stands fast against Bois-Guilbert's assaults on her virtue. During the siege of Torquilstone, when Brian first attempts to seduce her, she is willing to die rather than submit to him:

As she spoke, she threw open the latticed window which led to the bartizan, and in an instant after, stood on the very verge of the parapet, with not the slightest screen between her and the tremendous depth below. . . . As he offered to advance, she exclaimed, "Remain where thou art, proud Templar, or at thy choice advance!—one foot nearer, and I plunge myself from the precipice; my body shall be crushed out of the very form of humanity upon the stones of that courtyard, ere it becomes the victim of thy brutality."³³

³¹ *Ivanhoe*, Vol. 3, chapter 9; chapter 39.

³² More unidiomatic dialogue: "Gave you a sword and the name of God to wield it."

³³ *Ivanhoe*, Vol. 2, chapter 10; chapter 24.

But in *Ironclad*, no one threatens to throw themselves from a parapet. Thomas Marshal, while he holds out for a time, eventually succumbs to temptation and he and Isabel sleep together. In both *Ivanhoe* and *Ironclad* the siege is successful and the castle is destroyed. But, like Brian and Rebecca, Marshal and Isabel survive the siege. As it turns out, there's no need for Marshal to renounce his Templar vows—Stephen Langton, the archbishop of Canterbury, conveniently releases him from them, saying, “The order is over for you, Thomas. You’ve earned your freedom as much as any man.” At this point, Marshal lifts Isabel onto his horse and they ride away together from the ruined castle.

This happily-ever-after ending is perhaps incongruous after all the blood and gore that precedes it. Even English worried that the ending might have been “too saccharine.” But to me the most significant thing about it is not how saccharine it is but how much of an Enlightenment sensibility it betrays. I have argued elsewhere that *Ironclad* presents Magna Carta as a medieval equivalent to the Declaration of Independence that was primarily about freedom.³⁴ Similarly, Thomas is able to ride away with Isabel because Langton released him from his vows, telling him, “You’ve earned your freedom.” The clear implication is that being a Templar was equivalent to being enslaved. The connection between the medieval church and slavery was already hinted at earlier, when John was telling Tiberius, leader of the Danish mercenaries, that the Pope’s plans for Denmark included conversion and slavery: “You will find your lands Christianized, your sons enslaved by the church and your wives serving new husbands.” The oppressive church is a standard part of the Enlightenment narrative of the Middle Ages. But in this movie’s view of the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment has arrived in the persons of the rebels against King John, and so people can be emancipated from their chains. Guy evidences the Enlightenment emphasis on education as liberation when he teaches Jedediah to write. While a Templar, Thomas was a slave, but now Langton—who, though a bishop, is the enlightened author of Magna Carta and therefore a supporter of freedom—has set him free. Thomas “earned” his freedom because he fought for Magna Carta. Isabel was freed from her loveless marriage by her husband’s suicide and now is free to join with a lover of her own choosing. Both Thomas and Isabel survived the siege (life), both are free (liberty) and so together they can pursue happiness.

It’s almost too easy to find historical errors in a film like *Ironclad*. It can be argued, however, that it’s not the job of a film to “get the history right.” A film should be judged on its own merits, as a movie. Using this criterion, *Ironclad* wasn’t all that successful either. Reviews were mostly negative;³⁵ the film’s theatrical release was so brief and limited that it almost could be categorized as Direct-to-DVD;³⁶ it appears not to have made any money.³⁷ *Ironclad* may be historically dubious and cinematically so-so, but it’s a fascinating example of medievalism. Excavating the layers of tradition that underlie this movie reveals a representation of the Middle Ages that, while it owes something to the Romantic imagination, is ultimately a product of the Enlightenment.

³⁴ “Magna Carta and Modernity.”

³⁵ Rotten Tomatoes gives it a 43% rating (i.e., 43% of reviews were positive). <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/ironclad/>; accessed 23 June 2017.

³⁶ *Ironclad* was released in a few cities on July 8, 2011 and never went into general release (it never came to the Washington area where I live, and I was looking for it). The DVD was released just a few weeks later, on July 26. <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ironclad#tab=summary>; accessed 23 June 2017.

³⁷ According to the-numbers.com, *Ironclad* made no money domestically and \$5,297,411 internationally on a budget of \$25 million. <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ironclad#tab=summary>; accessed 23 June 2017.