

# **“Historical License in Films Narrating British History: Inaccuracies and Point of View”**

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## **1-Summary**

The objective of this essay is to prove that films based on historical events are not reliable sources for academic purpose, as they present historical inaccuracies and biased points of view. It begins with an introduction, in which I explain my reasons for choosing this topic in which I introduce four films that I will analyze to prove this. These films are *Becket*, *Braveheart*, *Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. The first part of the body of the essay is an explanation of how many issues a filmmaker faces when adapting a historical event. The second part is the analysis of the four films. The analysis, which, in each case, begins with a summary of the main events of the film, is followed by a description of the real events on which the film is based and ends with a comparison between the film and the historical facts, enumerating the differences and explaining them. The essay ends with my conclusions and a list of sources which I employed for research.

## **2-Introduction**

English Studies is a degree that deals primarily with the study of literature, linguistics and sociolinguistics. But it also deals with knowledge of the history and culture of English-speaking countries. As I am interested in history, I decided to center my “TFG” on this matter. I am also a cinema enthusiast, so I thought about a way to connect these two topics. In my experience, many people, when watching a film based on real events, blindly believed that everything that appeared on screen truly happened. This is a very serious mistake, as most of the time the real events appear altered. My objective with this paper is to show that films are not reliable historical sources and to examine the kind of alterations introduced, offering possible reasons behind the historical license taken by filmmakers. As we shall see, point of

view is a determining factor in the choice of elements which suffer changes, apart from there being other more mundane reasons. In order to achieve my aims, I will explain the constraints of film production, aided by the work of authors such as John Dean, Kristin Thompson, David Bordwell and James Monaco and I will contrast the events portrayed in four historical films with the real events as described in history books and other sources, relying on the accounts of writers such as Simon Jenkins, Mike Corbishley, John Gillingham or Bruce Webster. I have chosen four films which are relatively well known: *Becket* (1964), *Braveheart* (1995), *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007). All of them depict transcendental events in the history of the British Isles: the first one deals with the complicated relationship of King Henry II and Thomas Becket; the second one is concerned with the life and deeds of William Wallace, the famous Scottish warrior; and the last two portray different moments of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The four of them present a noticeable number of inconsistencies. I have ordered them in chronological order according to the events depicted, which by chance happen to coincide with the order in which they were released. To write this paper, I have researched about the problems that filmmakers encounter when doing an adaptation. My next step was to watch each of the four films and then to read about the historical events and the people involved in the film's plot, allowing me to analyze them with a critical and historical viewpoint.

### **3. The limits of adaptation**

Since the Lumière brothers screened what could be considered as the first films on December 28, 1895, cinema has gradually become one of the most popular mediums of public entertainment. While there are movies based on original ideas, many of them are adapted from diverse sources, such as literature. When adapting a novel, a comic book, a short story or, as

in the case of this paper, a historical event into a film, there are many factors to take into account.

The first factor, and perhaps the most influential one, is that cinema is an industry. This means that it is tied to a number of restrictions that will ultimately shape the final result. As with every industry, cinema aims to produce money. The profits of a film will come from the number of tickets and the number of copies that are sold. When producing a film, you must ensure that people will want to see it. When you pitch a film project to a studio, the proposal has to be attractive for the film to get green-lighted. The executives have to think about whether or not people will be interested in that kind of movie. The script needs to be well done and the characters need to be compelling. Usually, adaptations of historical events have an emphasis on action, as the popular masses usually prefer fast-paced movies that offer a visual spectacle. Many times, historical events, especially those which concern battles or strong characters, lend themselves to the epic genre, which tries to amaze the audience with big and expensive scenes with many actors, special effects, and bombastic music. Often, some events are “embellished” to appear more epic than they really were, exaggerating the magnitude of battles and giving the characters unfathomable courage, as real life is often not exciting enough. Other historical events lend themselves to drama, in which clever dialogues are preferred. These are usually slower-paced than epic films, but they also have an audience. Selecting historical events which are well-known and popular is also important to attract audiences. Many historical films are centered in the figure of a charismatic person, such as a king or a revolutionary.

Another limiting element in film production is the budget. The producer has to work with a certain quantity of money that is given to him by the studio. He has to hire a director, a cinematographer, an editor, a production designer and a unit production manager; and then

these people hire the rest of the crew. They also need to buy the equipment, cast actors and search for filming locations. The shooting schedule is also very important, as the longer the shooting lasts, the more money they will have to spend. Post-production and marketing also take a large part of the budget. All of this means that they are not able to freely adapt a novel or a historical event. In addition, there may be events that are very difficult and expensive to film, as we will see later with the Battle of Stirling Bridge. To save money they usually choose to erase characters from the story, sometimes giving their role to another character or simply ignoring them. By doing this, filmmakers are already changing events and distancing themselves from historical accuracy.

A crucial factor to take into account when making a film is the running time. The average length of films is between 90 and 120 minutes. When a director wants to portray events that span over many years, he or she has to cut many events and abridge other ones to fit into a reasonable time slot. Time skips are essential, and during those parentheses we are already losing information. The events conserved are usually the most famous and essential ones, but with the lack of a proper context their perception may change.

As films tell a story, they need to have coherence. The basic three-act structure of setup, confrontation and resolution is often followed, as Gabriel Moura explains in his website “Elements of Cinema”. The story has to be clear for the spectator. A movie based on historical events has to be scripted in a way that it can fit into this structure. The story also needs to be driven by some kind of objective, like winning a war. A scriptwriter “must be allowed to rearrange, cut and add whatever he feels is necessary to make the material work in cinematic terms” (Packard 41).

Another important factor when making a film is originality. A movie can be inspired by previous ones, but ultimately it needs to be its own product. This is crucial when making

an adaptation, as there may be other films based on the same topic, so a director needs to differentiate it, to add its own flavor. This may mean that some events need to be changed, thus being another obstacle in historical accuracy.

One last crucial issue of adapting a historical event, and perhaps the most controversial one, is objectivity. The scriptwriter, the director or even the studio executives will have their established point of view over certain matters. It is especially problematic when adapting history, as such films often portray conflicts between two factions. The film, in most cases, will paint certain characters as the good ones and some others as the bad ones. According to James Monaco in his book "How to read a film", films have changed the way we perceive the world, because it affects our perception by providing "a powerful and convincing representation of reality" (Monaco 261).

There are other limitations when adapting history, such as the actors not looking like the real people or the language being adapted to contemporary times, but these are rather minor in comparison with the ones previously mentioned. Probably the audience would not understand a film if it was spoken in an archaic way, so this kind of alteration is reasonable.

According to John Dean in his article "Adapting History and Literature into movies" (*American Studies Journal* 53), there are three types of adaptation: loose, faithful and literal.

-The loose adaptation allows the filmmaker to make as many changes as he wants, eliminating characters and events without concern. It may also add new characters, subplots and settings. Obviously, some elements from the original source are conserved, or else it would not be an adaptation.

-The faithful adaptation tries to represent the events as closely as possible. Some elements will need to be changed due the restrictions of adaptation, but the final result will stay as faithful to the source as possible.

-The literal adaptation is mostly reserved for theater and performances, as their format already lends itself to being filmed without compromises, so they present practically no changes, being exactly the same as the source on some occasions.

Now that I have made clear that adapting a historical event comprises many issues, I must clarify that the following films are not documentaries, their objective is not to be objective, and their purpose is, above all, to entertain. As cinema is an art, a film should not be judged from an academic point of view. Nevertheless, the purpose of my paper is precisely to demonstrate that they are not reliable historical sources. One must not watch a film with the intention of learning history or studying for an exam. Students should consult reliable sources such as books or documentaries.

## **4-Analysis of the films**

I will comment on the accuracy of *Becket*, *Braveheart*, *Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. To do so, I will start by making a summary of the plot, after which I will describe the actual events on which these films are based, and I will contrast both of them to find the main differences.

### **4.1-*Becket***

*Becket* is a 1964 British-American film, directed by Peter Glenville. It is an adaptation of a French play called *Becket ou l'honneur de Dieu*, written by Jean Anouilh. The film depicts the conflict between King Henry II of England and Thomas Becket, his Chancellor turned Archbishop. The events took place during the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is presented as a slow-paced drama, with a large quantity of dialogue and little to no action.

### **4.1.1-Plot overview**

The film begins with a text which tells the audience that in 1066, the Norman king William the Conqueror conquered the Saxons, and that Henry II, his great-grandson, continues to rule and oppress the Saxons aided by his Barons and the Norman clergy.

After this, the actual film starts with King Henry II at Canterbury, about to suffer penance for the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket, an old friend of his. His strong feelings towards the deceased Becket are evident in his monologue.

The rest of the film is presented as a flashback. The strong bond between Henry and Becket is evident from the very beginning, with Thomas helping the king escape after an affair with a young farmer's daughter. We also learn that Becket is a Saxon and that Henry is the only one at court who appreciates him. Henry also praises his great intelligence. Unexpectedly, the king invests Becket with the title of Chancellor, and then has a conflict with the Archbishop of Canterbury over economic issues. As the film advances, we begin to understand Henry and Becket. The king is portrayed as a very impulsive and immature person. Becket is his opposite, as he is a calm and rational individual. The difference in status is also evident, as Henry II resorts to his power when he wants something from Thomas, and in return, Becket is subservient.

To save a young girl from being raped by the King, Becket pretends that he desires her. Henry accepts, forcing him to promise that he will return the favor. After dinner, Henry wants to take Thomas' female friend as the payment for the promise. Becket reluctantly accepts, but the woman commits suicide. This damages their relationship.

After a time skip, we are taken into France, where there is a British expedition to conquer French territories. A young Saxon priest attempts to kill Becket, but Thomas stops

him in time. After discovering that the old Archbishop of Canterbury has died, Henry elects Becket as the new one, in an attempt to control the Church. This angers Foliot, the Bishop of London. Becket, who claims to have never loved anyone or anything, renews his faith and decides to act as a true Archbishop. A clergyman accused of a crime was executed by Lord Gilbert, a loyal ally of King Henry II. Because the clergyman should have been judged by the Church, Becket announces his intention of excommunicating him. Henry is enraged, and after an argument, Becket resigns from his position as Chancellor. The King falsely accuses Becket of embezzlement, and in response he flees to the continent to seek help from the Pope.

After a period of time, Becket returns to Canterbury. Henry, in a fit of anger, asks why no one will “rid him” of the Archbishop. Four of his barons decide to go to Canterbury, where they murder him. At this point, the flashback ends and we return to the initial scene of the film, observing Henry's punishment. After being lashed, King Henry II publically gives Becket the status of Saint.

#### **4.1.2-The real events**

Henry II (1133-1189) reigned from 1154 to 1189. He was a warrior king, and a very active man. He was very temperamental, although he could also be wise. His principal preoccupations during his reign were the insecurities of his French domain and a desire to re-establish the legal order that was present during the reign of his grandfather, Henry I.

Thomas Becket (1118-1170) was born in Normandy. He was the son of a Norman merchant and former Sheriff of London. His family was wealthy, and he was sent to Paris for his education. In 1154 he met Henry II, who appreciated Becket's intelligence and administrative skills. They quickly formed a bond, and the king named him Chancellor shortly after his coronation. They did everything together. According to Rebecca Fraser, a writer said

said that “Never in Christian times were two men more of a mind” (128). For two years, Henry traveled the country confiscating lands, while Becket was sent on a mission to Paris.

In 1162, the Archbishop of Canterbury died. Henry saw the opportunity to increase his power over the Church: he decided to place Becket as the new Archbishop. Becket was ordained as a priest and the following day he was invested Bishop and then Archbishop. Becket thought that it would be impossible to serve both the Church and the king at the same time, and is said to have told Henry “It will be God I serve, before you” (Jenkins 59).

Becket became an ascetic, and he was “determined to assert the independence of church from state” (Jenkins 59). As a response to this, in 1164 Henry II drew up the Constitutions of Clarendon, which dictated that the monarchy had the maximum authority over civil matters, as in Henry I's reign. With these regulations, everyone in England, independent of rank and status, was subject to the crown, and the clergy was no exception. This destroyed the relationship between Henry and Becket, who reasserted the liberties of the Church. After many arguments, Thomas Becket had to flee to Paris, where he stayed for six years.

During this period of time, Henry had to deal with a number of rebellions, invading territories and formally ending the Norman conquest initiated in 1066 by William the Conqueror.

In 1170, Henry and Becket had a reconciliation, but it was short-lived. Becket excommunicated a number of bishops and priests who aided the king in his crusade against the Archbishop. Henry, while in France, said in a state of anger: “What miserable drones and traitors have I nurtured within my household, that they let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric?” (Jenkins 61). After hearing these words, four of his knights sailed to England. On December 29, they confronted Becket at Canterbury, trying to

arrest him and bring him before the king, but Becket refused, and in response they killed him.

All Europe was outraged by this news. An archbishop being murdered in the house of God on the orders of a king was an incredible scandal. Becket was canonized by the Pope in 1173. In 1174, Henry II humbled himself in public, doing penance at Canterbury and making many concessions to the Church. His last years as king were marked by constant revolutions, as his public perception was weakened after the incident. He died in 1189 and was succeeded by his son, Richard I.

### **4.1.3-Comparative analysis**

As this film is based on a play, many of its historical inaccuracies come from that source. Nevertheless, it is important to mention them. The film also adds inaccuracies of its own.

The film's Becket presents a very significant difference from the real one: he is Saxon, when in real life he was Norman. This change represents a very important plot point in the movie, as Becket is seen as a conquered man, discriminated by every Norman but Henry. His status as a Saxon allied with the Normans also serves as a tool to introduce Brother John, a Saxon priest who first sees Becket as a traitor, but later becomes his most loyal ally. This character is completely invented. His function is to act as a companion and messenger of Becket when he distances himself from the king. He also adds emotional strength to certain scenes, such as when he tries to kill Thomas Becket and when he dies at the end trying to protect him. He represents the discomfort of the Saxons. This plot about the oppressed Saxons was added to the film as a way to add drama. It was also present in the original play. His murder is slightly different, as the knights do not cut his head off. This was probably changed because of budgetary reasons, or to avoid being too gruesome.

The character of King Henry II also presents differences. He claims to be Norman

instead of Angevin<sup>1</sup>, and his persona is greatly exaggerated. While it is true that he was very temperamental and a lover of women, he was also reasonable. In the film, he is portrayed as if he were a teenager acting in capricious and irresponsible ways. He is also extremely dependent on Becket, as if he were his father. In real life, Henry II was an intelligent person and had great skill in diplomatic matters. This adaptation portrays him as an ignorant brute, even admitting it himself. Becket appears to be the most intelligent person in England. Henry's love-hate relationship with Becket is the driving force of the film.

The reason for the conflict between Henry and Becket is also changed in the film. The Constitutions of Clarendon were the cause of the split in real life. In the film, only one article is given a passing reference, and the main source of conflict is the excommunication of Lord Gilbert. It is likely an attempt to simplify the plot for spectators who were not familiar with the story. It is interesting to note that this change is a deviation from the play, as the Constitutions of Clarendon appear in it. While some spectators may be familiar with them, the filmmakers probably thought that it would be better to simplify this part of history for brevity's sake. The earlier source of conflict between both friends in the film was Gwendolyn, the friend of Becket who Henry wanted for himself. There is no evidence that this person existed, and so it is probably an invention.

Other differences are related to Henry's family. In the film he has four sons, but in real life he also had three daughters. He claims to hate them, but there is no historical evidence to support that claim. Henry's mother, Empress Matilda, is alive in the film. In real life, she died in 1167, three years before Becket returned to England. The film version of Henry hates his mother, claiming that she never loved him and that she neglected him during childhood, but there is no proof for this claim. The only member of his family who is reflected in an accurate

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<sup>1</sup>Henry II was a Plantagenet king, from the Angevin royal house, as explained in "The Official Website of the British Monarchy".

way is his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, who appears as a jealous woman who is fed up with her husband's affairs, just as in real life. She even supported the rebellions against her husband after Becket's death. These changes in Henry's family serve one purpose: to make his relationship with Becket even more special, as in this way he is the only person whom he loves and respects.

Last, but not least, there are certain anachronisms present in the film. Becket mentions to Henry his acquisition of a new invention: the fork. In real life, the fork was not introduced in England until 400 years after Becket's death. The purpose of that scene is probably to show how sophisticated Becket is in contrast with the Normans, who ate with their hands. Another example of anachronism is the presence of helmets of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the scene where Henry's children are playing. It was probably a mistake, carelessness, or done on purpose to save money.

With regard to the ideology of the film, the narration portrays the Saxons as a humble and oppressed people, whereas Normans are tyrannical in nature. Although the Church is portrayed in a positive way, there are also corrupt individuals, such as Foliot, who is extremely jealous of Becket and despises him for his Saxon heritage. The film transmits the message that all Normans are evil, regardless of their rank and status.

In conclusion, we could consider it a fairly faithful adaptation, but with very important changes such as the ethnicity of Becket.

## ***4.2-Braveheart***

*Braveheart* is a 1995 American film directed by and starring Mel Gibson. Set in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it tells the story of the famous Scottish warrior William Wallace. It is based on the epic poem *The Actes and Deidis of the Illustre and Vallyeant Campioun Schir William*

*Wallace* by the minstrel Blind Harry, which talks about the life of the Scottish hero. The poem, however, is not an accurate portrayal of the real events, as factual events are mixed with legends and fiction. This is already a problem, but the film adds even more inaccurate events, and is considered one of the most historically inaccurate films. It is presented as an epic drama, with impressive fight scenes.

### **4.2.1-Plot overview**

The movie starts by placing the viewers in the Scotland of the 1280's. A narrator explains that the king of Scotland has died without an heir, and that the English king Edward the Longshanks claimed the throne for himself. The Scottish nobles fought against him and between themselves. Longshanks invited them to negotiate a truce. One farmer, Malcolm Wallace, discovers that the noblemen had been killed. He recruits more farmers to fight against the Englishmen. After a period of time, his young son, William, finds out that his father has been killed. He goes to live with his uncle who, although distant, teaches him many valuable lessons.

Many years later, Longshanks attends the wedding of his son Edward with Princess Isabella of France. He then gives his noblemen lands in Scotland and reinstitutes an old custom known as "Prima Nocte", which allows the lord of a land to have sex with a woman on her wedding night.

In Edinburgh, the narrator introduces Robert the Bruce, a contender for the Scottish crown. Then we get to meet William Wallace again, who is now an adult. He meets his old friends during a festival, he falls in love with a woman named Murrin, and after a while they get married in secret to avoid "Prima Nocte". In the village, a group of soldiers tries to rape her, but William fights them. Murrin is executed as a punishment. Furious, William and his

friends kill the soldiers. Then he attacks an English garrison, triumphing over them.

Longshanks is enraged by the news of the Scottish attack and orders his son to stop them by any means necessary. William, who gains more allies, successfully defeats any English soldiers who attack them. Robert the Bruce is interested in William's cause, but his father wants his son to support the English king.

At Stirling, a great battle takes place between Englishmen and the Scottish. William skillfully leads his army to victory. After being knighted, he sacks York and kills Longshanks' nephew. The king sends Isabella to negotiate with William. He hopes that he will kill her, thus starting a war between Scotland and France. The plan does not go as expected, and Isabella falls in love with William. The king plans to send an army to invade Scotland, but William is warned by the princess and seeks the assistance of the Scottish nobility to counter the threat. At Falkirk, Longshanks leads his army against William and his allies. Wallace is betrayed by two of the noblemen, losing the battle. Robert the Bruce is also revealed to be a traitor, but he repents and lets William escape.

Wallace kills the two traitors, and wages a guerrilla war that lasts seven years. During this period, he has an affair with Isabella, getting her pregnant. Robert meets with William at Edinburgh, but his father has set a trap and our protagonist is captured.

In London, William is condemned to public execution. Isabella tells a dying Longshanks that she is pregnant with Wallace's child, exacting revenge. William, while being hanged, drawn and quartered, stays true to his ideals of freedom for Scotland.

There is a time skip which sets us in 1314. Robert the Bruce, who is now Scotland's king, leads an army on the fields of Bannockburn to formally accept English rule. He invokes William's legacy, and they fight against the English army, at last winning their freedom.

### **4.2.2-The real events**

In 1286, the death of Alexander III, king of Scotland, precipitated a conflict over the succession, as he died without surviving sons. John Balliol and Robert the Bruce fought over the throne. The English king Edward I, known as “Longshanks”, sponsored Balliol, who won the crown. In 1296, the barons of John Balliol forced him to renounce his homage to King Edward. Edward humiliated him, took the Stone of Scone, an object employed in the coronation of Scottish kings, and brought it to London.

A Scottish nobleman called William Wallace started a revolution against Edward, winning many battles against the English, such as the Battle of Stirling Bridge, and was appointed Guardian of Scotland. At the Battle of Falkirk, William was betrayed by Scottish nobles, and had to escape to France, where he was exiled for many years. He was captured in 1305 and brought to London, where he was hanged, drawn and quartered.

A year later, Robert the Bruce crowned himself king of Scotland and fought against Edward’s army. Edward Longshanks died when he was traveling north with his army.

### **4.2.3-Comparative analysis**

As mentioned above, this film is based on the story of William Wallace as reflected in Blind Harry’s poem, which was full of fictitious events. On top of that, this movie adds even more inaccuracies.

The very title of the film is a contradiction. The “brave heart” in Scottish history does not refer to William Wallace, as the film implies, but in fact it refers to Robert the Bruce.

Another problem is present at the very beginning. We are told that the story begins in 1280, after the death of the king of Scotland. Actually, Alexander III died in 1286, so he was

still alive during that year. It also omits the figure of John Balliol, who was briefly crowned as the king of Scotland before Edward took control. In fact, England conquered Scotland only a year before the rebellion of William Wallace, while in the film William is a child when Longshanks seizes Scotland.

There are certain differences between the fictional William Wallace and the real one. His origins are completely different in the film. He was not the son of a poor farmer, but a nobleman (Jenkins 85). He was also a knight, while in the film he is knighted after the Battle of Stirling. His wife was not called Murrion, she was called Marion, and also had a noble family. He is also portrayed as a patriot and nationalist. Nationalism did not appear until hundreds of years later, so the ideas he defends are somewhat anachronistic. His execution is also tame compared with what they really did to torture prisoners in real life.

Undoubtedly, the character with most differences between film and reality is Isabella of France. In *Braveheart* she is portrayed as a young woman who falls in love with William and has an affair with him. This is laughable if we take into account that Isabella was only three years old at the time of the Battle of Falkirk, when she and William make love in the movie. For this very reason, she never met William Wallace, and her son, Edward III obviously was not William's. She did not marry prince Edward until after William's execution, and her son was born seven years later. The fact that she was sent on a diplomatic mission is also very unusual for that age, being a woman. A glaring contradiction appears when she talks with her handmaiden in French to avoid being spied upon, as French was widely spoken in the English court. The reason for these massive changes is probably to insert a love story into the film, as they are very popular among spectators.

Robert the Bruce is portrayed in a fairly accurate way, but he did not betray William Wallace at the Battle of Falkirk. This change was added to increase the emotional impact of

the situation.

Edward I is also portrayed with differences. His temperamental personality is exaggerated in the film. He was also a religious man who gave to charity, so the scene where he scoffs at Isabella for distributing gold to the poor is very improbable. He died on the battlefield a year after the execution of William Wallace, and not in bed at his castle at the same time as his enemy. The changes regarding his death were probably introduced to make audiences feel better over the sad death of the protagonist.

The right of “Prima Nocte”, which is an important plot point at the beginning of the film, is regarded as a myth by scholars such as Alain Boureau in his book “The Lord's First Night: The Myth of the Droit de Cuissage”, as there are no credible sources that support the existence of such a right.

The battles as portrayed in this film present many differences if we compare them with the real ones:

-In the film, there was no bridge at the Battle of Stirling Bridge (and thus it is simply called Battle of Stirling in the movie). The narrowness of the bridge was an important aspect of the battle, as the Scottish took advantage of it to fight the numerous English soldiers in an easy way. Mel Gibson admits that he made this change to make the battle more appealing for cinemagoers. The use of pikes to counter the cavalry was apparently inspired by another battle which took place in 1302.

-William Wallace never got to York, nor did he kill Edward's nephew.

-The Battle of Falkirk presents differences in the sense that the Scots and the Irish did not stop in the middle of the battle to greet each other, obviously done to gain a comedic effect. The film also neglects to mention that the French soldiers won the battle thanks to their advanced weaponry. As mentioned before, Robert the Bruce did not participate in the battle to

betray William Wallace. After the battle, Wallace stays in Scotland instead of escaping to France.

-The Battle of Bannockburn is presented as a spontaneous conflict in which the Scottish rebelled against the English. A guerrilla campaign had already been fought for eight years.

There are two flagrant anachronisms in the way the Scottish dress. The face paint that they wear during battles was used when the Romans tried to conquer Scotland, centuries before, and kilts did not appear until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that the English soldiers wear uniforms is also wrong, because the dress code did not become a norm until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and soldiers wore what they had at hand.

In relation with ideology, this film is clearly positioned in favor of the Scottish, who are presented as brave people who love their land and want to be independent. The English are the villains in this film, being tyrannical oppressors and lacking redeeming qualities. In fact, many people have judged the film as being Anglophobic, as Colin McArthur explains in his book "Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots: Distortions of Scotland in Hollywood Cinema". Nobility is also seen as easily corruptible. This was probably the reason that explains why William has humble origins in the film. He is a hero who supports the interests of the poor, fighting against the rule of the powerful.

I can conclude that this film is a loose adaptation of the real events surrounding William Wallace. It acts as an epic story of a brave warrior who fights against an evil king and has love affairs. It is more a piece of fiction than a representation of history. It is closer to other epic works such as *The Lord of the Rings*.

## ***4.3-Elizabeth***

*Elizabeth* is a 1998 British film by Indian director Shekhar Kapur. It is based on the earlier years of Elizabeth I's reign. Starting when she took the throne in 1554, it is centered on her struggles and her evolution from a naive girl to a strong woman. It is a drama in which dialogue and conspiracies are the driving force.

### **4.3.1-Plot overview**

At the beginning of the film, we are situated in 1554. We are told that Henry VIII is dead, that the country is divided into two sides: Catholics and Protestants. Mary, a fervent Catholic, is queen. She has no descendants, and the Catholics' greatest fear is the succession of Mary's Protestant half-sister Elizabeth.

The first thing we see is the burning of some Protestants, and then we meet the Duke of Norfolk, who is informed that the queen is pregnant, but it is just a phantom pregnancy. The queen is informed that a group of Protestants tried to put Elizabeth in the throne, and her advisers suggest she should have her half-sister arrested.

Elizabeth is in the countryside with an old friend and lover of hers, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who is also Protestant. Soldiers sent by her half-sister arrive and take her to the Tower of London, where she is interrogated. Mary tells her that she is dying of cancer, and wants Elizabeth to promise that she will continue to promote the Catholic faith when she becomes queen, something that she cannot promise.

We are introduced to Francis Walsingham, a shadowy Protestant who has just returned from exile in France. William Cecil, the chief adviser, tells Elizabeth that her brother-in-law, King Philip II of Spain, offers to marry her when she becomes queen.

Mary finally dies, and Elizabeth is crowned. She is informed by William Cecil that

England is bankrupt, without an army, and under serious threat from abroad. She also has many dissidents, like Norfolk or Mary of Scots. She is urged to marry and have a child to secure the throne. Apart from the offer from the king of Spain, she also receives an offer from the Duke of Anjou. She is reluctant, because Mary of Guise, the duke's aunt, has garrisoned Scotland with French troops. Meanwhile, the queen maintains an affair with Robert Dudley.

She receives the news that Mary of Guise has increased the garrison in Scotland and that she is about to attack. She is advised by everyone but Walsingham to fight. Her army is defeated, and she decides to start following her own criteria, while also trusting Walsingham more. Mary of Guise promises to stop the attack if she marries her nephew. She does not want to marry anyone because of her feelings for Robert.

In a meeting with the Parliament, she forces a religious reform known as the Act of Uniformity. Later, she meets the Duke of Anjou. At the Vatican, the Pope sends a priest, John Ballard, to England to begin a plot with the objective of assassinating the queen. During an evening on a barge on the Thames, Elizabeth is attacked by an arrow. Shocked and angered, she decides to refuse the marriage proposals. William Cecil reveals that Robert Dudley is already married, to the queen's dismay. At a party, the Duke of Anjou is exposed as a homosexual.

Lettice, one of Elizabeth's handmaidens, tries on a dress sent by Mary of Guise as a gift to Elizabeth. The dress is poisoned and she dies. In response, Francis Walsingham seduces Mary and kills her in bed. After that, Elizabeth decides to give William Cecil retirement, and names Walsingham as her new chief adviser, who detains all of those who conspired against her, including the Duke of Norfolk, and executes them. Robert Dudley is also involved, but Elizabeth decides to let him live, with the punishment of never seeing her in private again.

The film ends with Elizabeth adopting the identity of the Virgin Queen. An epilogue tells us that she reigned for another 40 years, that Walsingham remained as her most loyal advisor, that she never married and that by the time of her death, England was the richest and most powerful country in Europe, with her reign being called the Golden Age.

### **4.3.2-The real events**

After the death of Queen Mary in 1558, Elizabeth, her half-sister, was crowned. Her coronation was performed with a Protestant ritual. She began a policy of equivocation, ruling passively and often infuriating parliament. She reintroduced her father Henry VIII's Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity, breaking with Rome's authority. Nevertheless, she was tolerant with Catholicism, as she "hoped most of her subjects would accept the Church of England as a 'middle way' between Protestants and Catholics" (Corbishely et al. 196).

She also received many marriage proposals, from Philip of Spain, from the Holy Roman Emperor, from Eric of Sweden... She was wary of marriage due to the experiences of her father and mother, viewing it as dangerous. She was also rumored to be in love with Lord Robert Dudley. Tired of the pressure from the parliament, she asserted that she would never marry. She remarked that if she were to change her mind, she would marry Robert Dudley, but after eighteen years he married Lettice Knollys, enraging the queen (Jenkins 152-153).

In 1559, a religious civil war broke out in Scotland between Protestant John Knox and Catholic Mary of Guise. The conflict ended in 1560 with Guise's expulsion.

In 1570, Elizabeth was excommunicated by the Pope. A number of suspicions fell upon English Catholics. Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's spy-master, uncovered a number of plots to assassinate the queen.

### 4.3.3-Comparative analysis

There are many changes regarding the characters. Elizabeth did not adopt the persona of the Virgin Queen as quickly as the film portrays. Her cult as Virgin Queen did not start until after her first 20 years of reign. It was also very improbable that she had a sexual relationship with Robert Dudley, it is likely that their relationship was only romantic in nature and that she was truly a virgin. She also knew that he was married, while in the film she is shocked after the revelation. In real life she also remained close to Dudley until his death, while in the film she rejects him because of his association with a murder plot. He actually did not participate in the plot. One last important difference in their relationship is that they first met in 1554 while both of them were incarcerated in the Tower of London. The film portrays them as old friends.

These changes regarding the love story between Elizabeth and Robert were made to give the film tragic overtones.

The figure of Francis Walsingham is also changed in the film. He was also not homosexual, neither did he assassinate Mary of Guise. His age is also inaccurate, as he was in his mid-twenties when Elizabeth was crowned.

Mary of Guise died from natural causes, and her conflict with John Knox does not appear in the film, and neither did she send a poisoned dress. Her nephew, the Duke of Anjou, never visited England and did not propose marriage to Elizabeth. He was rumored to be homosexual, but there is not clear evidence of that.

William Cecil, the chief adviser of Elizabeth, was not an elderly man. He was not even 40 years old when Elizabeth's reign began. He did not retire and remained loyal to the queen until her death.

Kat Ashley, one of Elizabeth's friends, has nearly the same age as her in the film. In

real life, she was 31 years older than Elizabeth, and was a mother figure to the queen.

In real life, the Duke of Norfolk was much younger, and his conspiracy draws elements from separate plots. He was also not the strong figure that the film portrays, but rather a weak man easily manipulated by others. This last change was made to turn him into the main villain of the film.

A small change regarding Elizabeth's stepsister Mary is that she did not die right after her phantom pregnancy. Three years had passed before she died.

John Ballard was not involved in the plot of the Duke of Norfolk, known as the Ridolfi Plot, but rather a later one called the Babington Plot. The Ridolfi plot was discovered in 1571, and it involved the Duke of Norfolk and Phillip II of Spain, among others. Roberto Ridolfi, a Florentine banker, led the conspirators, who tried to kill Elizabeth to put Mary, Queen of Scots, on the throne. The Babington plot was a latter assassination attempt in which a man named Anthony Babington and John Balioll exchanged letters with Mary in order to plot the assassination of Elizabeth, but the plot was discovered by Francis Walsingham, and the traitors, including Mary, were executed.

Other minor characters, such as the Spanish ambassador Álvaro de la Quadra or the Earl of Sussex, were also altered, with their motivations and deaths being changed.

There are other kinds of inaccuracies. For example, a bishop suggests that Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, was executed because she was Protestant. This is not the true reason for her execution. She was actually condemned for a series of accusations regarding treason and witchcraft. The plots to assassinate the queen, which are central to the main plot of the film, were also changed, as mentioned before.

Lastly, there are anachronisms, such as the interiors and exteriors resembling 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century locations rather than 16<sup>th</sup> century ones.

The film portrays Elizabeth as a very sympathetic and strong character, while her enemies are portrayed as evil and ruthless. It is usually clear when a character is malicious. For example, when Mary, Elizabeth's sister, appears, her clothes and her room are completely black, with an eerie mist surrounding the chamber. When Elizabeth is the queen, the palace is well-lit and her clothes are colorful. Mary is also very ugly in comparison with Elizabeth. Ugliness has usually been associated with being wicked. The movie also portrays Catholicism in a very negative light. There is not a single Catholic character who is good, and they are portrayed as fanatics.

After this analysis, I conclude that this is a loose adaptation, as the film changes virtually every character from their real life counterparts, while condensing many events and inventing new ones.

#### ***4.4-Elizabeth: The Golden Age***

*Elizabeth: The Golden Age* is a direct sequel of *Elizabeth*. It was released in 2007. Shekhar Kapur returns as the director, and Cate Blanchett and Geoffrey Rush reprise their roles as Elizabeth and Walsingham respectively, which are the only returning main characters from the previous film. It depicts the conflicts surrounding the Spanish Armada. While still being a drama, it also adds epic overtones.

##### **4.4.1-Plot overview**

The movie starts in 1585. It tells spectators that Spain is the most powerful empire in the world, and that King Philip II, a devout Catholic, has plunged Europe into Holy War. As a Protestant country, only England stands against him.

After this contextualization, we meet Philip II and his daughter. He claims that England is enslaved by the Devil and that he has the duty of helping God's cause, so he is about to launch an invasion.

In England, Elizabeth's advisers warn her about the threat represented by Spain and even the Catholics living in her own kingdom. They also claim that the Catholics want to establish Mary Stuart as their new queen. She refuses to act against the Catholics unless they commit a crime. In Scotland, we meet Mary Stuart, who is under arrest. She is shown to be conspiring against her cousin Elizabeth.

Back in London, Walsingham advises Elizabeth to get married and produce an heir, but she stands firm in her decision to remain single. We also meet Bess, a courtier and close friend of the queen.

In Spain, Philip starts building a massive armada, and sends Robert Reston to England in an attempt to organize a plot against the queen.

A pirate, Walter Raleigh, meets Elizabeth and brings her gifts from the New World, such as potatoes and tobacco. She is fascinated by this adventurous character. Meanwhile, Reston and his allies, including Walsingham's brother, start to plan the plot, communicating his plans to Mary Stuart via letters.

During a party, Elizabeth orders Bess to speak with Raleigh and discover more things about him. He meets the queen in private to narrate his adventures in the New World. They start a close friendship.

Walsingham discovers the plans of Spain to attack England, crown Mary Tudor and assassinate Elizabeth. She is very worried about the future, and she forbids Raleigh to leave England. He begins a relationship with Bess, while the queen fantasizes with him.

While Elizabeth is praying in a cathedral, Anthony Babington, an ally of Reston, tries

to kill her with a gun, but it is not loaded. Everyone related to the plot is detained. Mary Stuart is executed for treason, against Elizabeth's wishes. It is revealed that everything that happened was according to Philip's plan. He wanted Elizabeth to kill Mary Stuart. In this way, he has a justification for waging war, and his great armada sails towards England.

Elizabeth and Raleigh share an intimate moment, and afterward Bess reveals that she is pregnant by Raleigh and they get married in secret. When the queen discovers this, she is deeply hurt, and she expels Bess and arrests Raleigh. Later, she decides to release every prisoner in England in preparation for the battle. Raleigh commands one of Elizabeth's ships. The queen motivates her soldiers with an inspirational speech, and Raleigh manages to sink many Spanish vessels by striking them with burning ships. This act turns the balance in favor of England, eventually defeating the invaders.

Some months pass, and Walsingham dies from natural causes, and Elizabeth forgives Bess and Raleigh. An epilogue narrates the aftermath. It tells us that the loss of the Armada was the most humiliating defeat in Spain's naval history, that Philip II died ten years later leaving Spain bankrupt, and that England entered a time of peace and prosperity.

#### **4.4.2-The real events**

After many conflicts with Spain, Philip II began to prepare an enormous armada to conquer England. In 1586, Elizabeth learned of this plans thanks to Walsingham, who discovered a plot by Anthony Babington to assassinate her and crown Mary Stuart as the new queen. The houses of parliament petitioned for Mary Stuart's death. As Elizabeth could not bring herself to execute her cousin, the council acted in her name. Elizabeth fell into depression and imprisoned the official who approved the execution.

The death of Mary Stuart, a fervent Catholic, caused an outrage in Europe. Philip

seized the opportunity to launch his attack on England. In April 1587, the pirate Drake sailed into Cadiz harbor and destroyed many Spanish vessels. Philip waited another year to set sail, as he had to restore the damage. The inexperienced Duke of Medina Sidonia was in charge of this 151 ship armada. They wanted to sail to the Netherlands to collect the Prince of Parma's army, but the fast English vessels prevented them from reaching the coast. The Spanish ships were forced to break formation, and a group of them were defeated at the Battle of Gravelines. A great storm also contributed to England's victory.

#### **4.4.3-Comparative analysis**

This film continues the trend established by its prequel *Elizabeth* about sacrificing accuracy for entertainment's sake. In fact, it is even more inaccurate than the previous one.

In real life, Elizabeth was 52 years old in 1585. For this reason, it is implausible that her advisers would tell her to have children to secure the throne. The scenes with the suitors, such as Erik of Sweden and Charles II, Archduke of Austria, happened much earlier in her life, when she was in her twenties. These elements were probably added to reinforce her ideals of virginity established in the previous film. Her speech at the end of the film is different from historical sources. For example, the beginning of her speech in the film is "My loving people. We see the sails of the enemy approaching. We hear the Spanish guns over the water. Soon now, we will meet them face-to-face", while her real speech started like this: "My loving people, we have been persuaded by some, that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery;" (Halsall).

Walter Raleigh actually knew the queen, but this film treats him as her new love interest. There are no sources to back this claim, and it would seem improbable as he was nineteen years younger than Elizabeth. He did marry Bess in secret and have a child with her,

but this happened three years after the Spanish Armada was defeated, not before. His importance in the Battle of Gravelines is hyperbolic. In a heroic way, he nearly sacrifices his life to sink the Spanish fleet with burning ships. In fact, he was obliged to stay on shore to organize land defenses. The truly important figures in the battle, such as the pirate Sir Francis Drake, only appear for a moment in the film. Raleigh's prominence in this adaptation was a result of the filmmakers wanting to recreate a love story like the one with Robert Dudley in the previous film, and to have the figure of the fearless hero which is popular in cinema. As a matter of fact, Robert Dudley did participate in the Battle of Gravelines, but he does not appear, nor he is mentioned in this movie.

There are also many changes related to the Spanish Armada. The battle in the film is completely different from what actually happened, because it was not as epic. The Earl of Nottingham says that they are losing many ships, while in fact not a single English ship was lost. The Armada did not burn like the film shows because the ships were actually scattered and defeated farther from the coast, in part due to a storm. The filmmakers probably thought that the battle would not be very exciting for the audience if it happened in that way.

Another important aspect that has been altered in the film is the Babington Plot. It is portrayed in the film to add intensity. In reality, it was never carried out, as Walsingham discovered it before the conspirators could act. The Jesuit leader of the plot in the film, Robert Reston, is a fictional character. John Ballard was the one who encouraged Babington to initiate it, but he was killed in *Elizabeth*. Mary Stuart's execution was not as swift as portrayed in the film. They had to strike her neck many times to cut her head off. An interesting detail is that Mary speaks with a Scottish accent in the film, while she would probably have had a French accent, because she was raised in France. Often, directors want a specific actor for the role, but he or she cannot imitate certain accents, so it would be

preferable to have a more natural performance, even if the accent is not accurate.

This movie depicts Elizabeth being advised by a man called John Dee. During this period of time, he was traveling on the continent. Her true adviser, William Cecil, has been omitted due to the events in the previous film.

A strange change in the film is related to the age of Isabel, the daughter of Philip II. She is portrayed as a child, while she was actually in her twenties during this period. This does not add anything to the narration, so it is an unexplainable change.

Ideologically, this film is anti-Catholic, like the prequel. King Philip II of Spain is portrayed as a religious fanatic. He was a religious man, but this portrayal is completely hyperbolic. He appears in a rather cartoony way, with exaggerated acting and strange mannerisms. The Spanish are represented as an evil force that only England can stop. The supremacy of England is further enhanced by their great victory over the Spanish Armada, which appears in a very inaccurate manner in the film. Religion appears to be the only reason for the attack of the Spanish. The film opportunely omits any hostilities from England. Elizabeth does not approve the pirate attacks that Spanish vessels suffered, but in real life she encouraged them, and this was an important factor that led to the conflict.

After doing this analysis, I can conclude that this film is a very loose adaptation of this period of Elizabeth's reign, even more than its prequel. The addition of a love story and an epic battle goes against what really happened.

## **5-Conclusions**

By explaining why it is not possible to adapt a historical event without making compromises and by exposing the differences between the four films and the actual events on which they were based, I think that it is clear that films should never be considered reliable

historical sources. While some films will be closer to reality, ultimately they will always have changes. As cinema is an industry, filmmakers are restricted by budget constraints. They also have to make a product that must be compelling to audiences, so many licenses are taken, such as adding more action, love stories, and simplifying the events. These concessions lead to many historical inaccuracies. Some may be minor, but many of them are considerable changes, such as having William Wallace having a child with Princess Isabella or England defeating the Spanish Armada in a single epic battle. Depending on the nationality of the film or the director's point of view, there may be political interests when portraying a conflict between factions. It can be easily observed in the four films. *Becket's* point of view favors the figure of Thomas Becket, *Braveheart* portrays the Scottish as heroes fighting against the English oppressors and both *Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* portray Protestantism as the “good” religion and European kingdoms such as France and Spain as malicious forces against England’s moral “purity”. In conclusion, films cannot be considered reliable historical sources, so people, especially students, should consult books, online sources, and even documentaries for their research. Films should be watched only for the purpose of entertainment, and it would be best if people knew about the events beforehand or researched them after the film out of curiosity, as knowledge is never a bad thing.

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