

authority; while there is no evidence to support that a monkey was ever made consul at this time, filmmakers may have been inspired by the story of Caligula, who is said to have made his horse consul.

The main takeaway from this historical epic is that power corrupts, and justice can only be done by those with the will to take initiative. The focus on Lucius and his journey to find justice contrasts with that of Macrinus, who seeks power through political maneuvering. Both are pitted against each other in a final act that determines the fate of the characters and Rome itself. The general audience will enjoy the visual storytelling, action scenes, and use of practical effects, special effects created without computer-generated images (CGI). On a macro scale, *Gladiator II* is another addition to the ever-growing list of Roman epics depicting ancient history.

*Joseph White*

Ridley Scott, director. *The Last Duel*. 20th Century Studios, 2021.

The historical drama *The Last Duel* explores one of the most well-documented judicial duels during the medieval period in France. Fought between Jean de Carrouges (Matt Damon) and Jacques le Gris (Adam Driver) on December 29, 1386, the duel became a cultural phenomenon whose outcome was debated by both contemporaries and medieval historians centuries later. Of particular concern to writers was the truth of Marguerite de Carrouges' (Jodie Comer) claim: did Jacques rape her? The script is adapted from Erich Jager's 2001 historical fiction of the same name. Historians have praised the film's depiction of French costumes and culture, as well as its exploration of social history, particularly the place of aristocratic women in feudal societies. However, some historians criticize that the events have been morphed to fit its overall feminist message.

The plot can be divided into three parts, each focused on the point of view of a specific main character, Jean, Jacques, and Marguerite. Beginning with Jean, the audience is exposed to the life of French nobility around two key events: the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) and The Black Death (1346-53). Jean comes from a military family, with his father commanding a fortress. His entire life is spent fighting on behalf of the French Crown against the English, causing him to be absent from his home for years at a time. The Black Death killed at least a third of the French population a

generation earlier, leading to labor shortages. Both contribute to Jean's economic woes: his lack of laborers means he cannot pay taxes to his liege lord, and his wife's dowry is seized because her father backed the wrong side in the Hundred Years War. Combined with the denial of his father's captaincy, both lead him into a bitter feud with his overlord, Pierre d'Alençon (Ben Affleck).

The second point of view is that of Jacques. Jacques is a case study on upward mobility in Medieval France's infamously rigid society. He impresses Pierre with his education and is tasked with extracting taxes from the Count's recalcitrant vassals. In exchange for doing this, Jacques receives the captaincy of Jean's father and the land which had been Marguerite's dowry. When the latter is legally disputed, Pierre, as both men's overlord, dismisses the case in favor of Jacques. Jacques later rapes Marguerite when he mistakes her friendliness for sexual interest. After Marguerite nervously informs her husband of her rape, Jean uses the opportunity to bring his disputes with both men directly to the King. These legal battles highlight the structure and inequities of the medieval French social hierarchy: one's feudal lord was also one's judge, and their word was above most law.

The third part focuses on Marguerite's point of view. Like many aristocratic French women in the fourteenth century, Marguerite is treated like human property. Her rape by Jacques showcases this. Jacques and many other French nobles believe a woman always consents. The legal system also favored the charge of adultery against victims of rape since pregnancy was seen as proof of consent. The film gives voice to the suffering of French women at the time. Marguerite's mother-in-law, Nicole de Buchard (Harriet Walter), also relays her own similar experience with sexual violence. While historians have praised this part of the film, they also criticize the historical inaccuracies. For example, there is no evidence that Marguerite was the main impetus behind the rape case being brought against Jacques. The dialogue also includes more modern notions about female sexuality, such as frigidity, that did not exist at this time. Lastly, historians note that the penalties facing Marguerite are overstated. This is because death as a penalty for a false rape accusation was almost unheard of.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Sara McDougall and David Perry, "What's Fact and What's Fiction in The Last Duel," *Slate*, October, 2021. John-Paul Heil, "The True Story Behind The Last Duel—and History's Attempt to Erase It," *Time*, October, 2021. Meilan Solly, "The True History Behind 'The Last Duel,'" *Smithso-*

*The Last Duel* ends with a few lines describing Jean and Marguerite's lives. It leaves out how Jean died nearly a decade later in the Crusade of Nicopolis and his growing involvement with the French king at the time, who was considered mad. Overall, while light on historical details, the film is an interesting exploration of medieval social history. Both history students and experts will enjoy it.

*Kareem Ali*