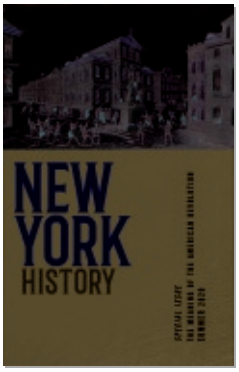
Harriet

Richard Bell



New York History, Volume 101, Number 1, Summer 2020, pp. 172-173 (Review)

Published by Cornell University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/nyh.2020.0021*

FILM REVIEW

Harriet

Focus Features, 2019. 125 minutes running time

Production team includes
Director: Kasi Lemmons; Producers: Debra Martin Chase, Daniela Taplin Lundberg, and Gregory Allen Howard

Offering a scholarly review of a Hollywood film is probably a fool's errand. The new biopic, *Harriet*, is, of course, an unabashedly commercial piece of mass-market entertainment and professional historians had highly circumscribed roles in its development and production. Kate Clifford Larson, the author of *Bound for the Promised Land* (2004), a respected recent biography of Tubman, offered advice on late drafts of the script, but reportedly had little sway upon the end result. Instead, the screenwriters, Kasi Lemmons and Gregory Allen Howard, appear to have leaned heavily on a much earlier biography, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869). A highly varnished hagiography designed to raise money for Tubman's cause and written by Sarah Hopkins Bradford, one of Tubman's friends, it often embellished the historical record to make this single woman's extraordinary accomplishments seem all the more thrilling and fantastic.

In some ways, *Harriet* does much the same. Its titular heroine (played with energy and subtlety by Cynthia Erivo) has visions that allow her to see jumbled images of future events, including her enslaved sister's sale. These visions—which repeatedly compare escaping black fugitives to galloping black horses—render Tubman as a "mystical Negro," a cinematic trope that cultural critics including the director Spike Lee have called out as degrading and offensive. The film also takes multiple liberties with the documented history of Tubman's life. Most notably, the screenwriters invent three of their main characters. One is Gideon Brodess (that family name sounding for all the world like "Brutus" when uttered by Clarke Peters, the actor who pays Harriet's father), the imagined adult son of Tubman's real enslaver, Edward Brodess. As played by Joe Alwyn, Gideon Brodess is a glowering, sneering, unapologetic white supremacist who serves as her on-screen nemesis. A second invention is Marie Buchanan, the free black proprietor of the fictional lodging house in which Tubman stays upon her arrival in Philadelphia. As portrayed by Janelle Monáe, Buchanan is a paragon of prosperity and refinement, but also knows how to fire a gun and

dies during a brutal home invasion as she tries to protect Tubman from capture. Her murderer is Bigger Long (Omar Dorsey), an African-American slave catcher hired by Brodess to track Tubman and drag her back to Maryland. He too is a figment of the screenwriters' imaginations.

Other divergences from the historical record also deserve notice. The filmmakers garble the terms of a will left by a Brodess ancestor and inaccurately contend that the family's motivation to sell Araminta Ross (Tubman's birth name) was that Gideon observed her praying for the death of his father. The filmmakers also erase the presence of two of Harriet Tubman's brothers at her side as she escapes northward (both turned back before reaching Philadelphia) and mistakenly assert that Ross took on her new name upon arrival in Pennsylvania, rather than upon her marriage to John Tubman five years earlier. In addition, the film omits Tubman's first mission back to Maryland to assist female family members, in favor of foregrounding a subsequent mission to persuade her (since remarried) husband to leave. It also situates several other missions prior to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, though they in fact occurred thereafter. And laughably, it imagines that the leaders of the Underground Railroad movement held swanky social events and meetings in a lavishly furnished and gorgeously lit secret headquarters somewhere underneath the streets of Philadelphia.

Still, the truth is that these multiple divergences are actually relatively minor. Movies are not academic monographs and if the goal is to present an intelligible and propulsive story that cinema-goers will pay to see, it seems reasonable to expect that skilled screenwriters will occasionally condense time, invent composite characters, and shift a few events around to get that job done. *Harriet* has certainly been a hit with audiences—and with some reviewers too. It lacks the complexity and sensitivity of director Steve McQueen's masterpiece, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), but has palpably succeeded in drawing new attention to Tubman's heroic deeds. In doing so, it also illustrates and amplifies several important historical arguments. Among them, that nineteenth-century slavery in America was akin to a police state, an institution marked as much by surveillance as by violence; that enslavers used every tool at their disposal to set black people against themselves whenever possible; that the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act gave planters potent new powers to capture and confine fugitives who crossed state lines in search of liberty; that those who tried to escape southern labor camps undertook extraordinary risk to do so; that not everybody could run; and that those unable to escape, like Tubman's doomed sister Rachel, "do what we have to do to stay sane."

Reviewed by Richard Bell, University of Maryland. Bell is professor of history at the University of Maryland. He is the author of the new book, Stolen: Five Free Boys Kidnapped into Slavery and their Astonishing Odyssey Home *(2019).*