A Knight’s Tale, the first portrayal of Chaucer in a twenty-first-century American film, uses the poet to validate a distinctly American ethos: risk-taking for personal gain.¹ The movie imagines Chaucer as a ne’er-do-well versifier overwhelmed with gambling debt (and debt collectors) who hitches up with William Thatcher, a young peasant making his mark in the world by impersonating a knight. Though William and his entire entourage risk their lives with the impersonation, as a good American hero William overcomes the odds, wins the championships, and gets the girl. Inspired by this success, Chaucer renounces gambling—a form of unmanageable risk-taking—and engages in a form of deliberative risk-taking. Rather than to play it safe with courtly poetry, he chooses to write about a broad range of human interests, ultimately producing The Canterbury Tales.

A Knight’s Tale looks to Chaucer as a role model for embracing the instability in postmodern American culture. The movie projects back onto Chaucer and late-medieval Europe a contemporary American sensibility that abandons conservative sureties in class and instead encourages individuals to stake a claim whose achievement requires a risky maneuver. Once that maneuver is successfully executed by a highstakes venturer, society sanctions that one success, and then reverts back to conservative formulations by keeping that maneuver still risky for others.

Written, produced, and directed by Brian Helgeland, the film transforms late-medieval tournament culture into the setting for an American tale of a young man’s rise from poverty and anonymity to riches and glory. It opens with the young hero, William Thatcher, a commoner’s son long apprenticed to a knight named Sir Ector, facing a dilemma. Sir Ector, needing only

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¹ C. Barrington, American Chaucers © Candace Barrington 2007
to complete a final tilt in order to win a tournament, has just died of dysentery. His death is unknown to anyone but William. Though familiar with tournaments as a result of ten years with Sir Ector on the tournament circuit, William is not allowed to take his place because, according to the film’s basic premise, one must be of noble blood to fight in tournaments. Nevertheless, desperate for the immediate need of food and driven by the long-term desire to escape his station in life, William dons the dead knight’s armor and masquerades as Sir Ector. He wins the tournament and ends up with fifteen gold coins to divide with Sir Ector’s two other squires, Wat and Roland. Not content with his windfall, William persuade Wat and Roland to invest their winnings into his training for the Rouen tournament, the season’s next match where he will compete as the fictitious Sir Ulrich von Lichtenstein. On the road to Rouen a month later, the three encounter a naked man who quickly sees through William’s ruse. The stranger introduces himself as Geoffrey Chaucer—called “Geoff” throughout—and offers his services as a forger of documents in exchange for clothes, shoes, and food.

In Rouen, William not only passes as Sir Ulrich but wins the sword competition. In the process he identifies the object of his affections, the elusive Jocelyn, and the object of his enmity, Count Adhemar, the tournament circuit’s premier jouster and William’s rival for Jocelyn’s affections. Meanwhile, William mangles his armor and must rely on Kate, a woman blacksmith, who eventually designs him a superior suit of armor. Along the way, Jocelyn tells him to prove his love by losing his matches. He obeys until, at last, she releases him to win. Spurred by a new love, protected by superior armor, supported by loyal sidekicks, and boosted by Geoff Chaucer’s rhetorical skills in crowd management, William (as Sir Ulrich) wins several tournaments and eventually returns to his native London for the season’s culminating tournament. There, William leaves the tournament area, sneaks to the working-class tenements, and seeks out his long-separated father. By stepping outside his fictitious role, William risks exposing his ruse and jeopardizes his hard-won status and the beautiful girl. His non-noble background is discovered when Adhemar trails William to his father’s Cheapside room. Arrested, placed in the stocks, and taunted by the commoners, William is eventually rescued and knighted by the Black Prince who, as Sir Ulrich’s frequent opponent in the lists, has recognized the poseur’s essential nobility. Finally able to compete as Sir William Thatcher, he defeats Adhemar and wins Jocelyn.

**An American Knight**

As reviewers frequently remarked, the film is loaded with signs that label it an American tale. A story of upward social mobility, the film features