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Glynn, Basil ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5880-6486> (2016) The Tudors and the post-national, post-historical Henry VIII. In: The British Monarchy on Screen. Merck, Mandy, ed. Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. 309-335. ISBN 9780719099564, e-ISBN 9781526113047. [Book Section] (doi:10.7765/9781526113047.00025)

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The Tudors and the post-national,
post-historical Henry VIII

Basil Glynn

The Tudors (2007–10) is a prime example of a relatively new type of post-national and post-historical television series that has become an established global alternative to BBC costume drama. Drawing on international rather than specifically British ideals of nationhood, it often runs counter to received history¹ while the use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) gives it a contemporary rather than historical aesthetic. It also constitutes, as Ramona Wray contends, ‘an extraordinarily detailed take on the reign’² of Henry VIII and is ‘with a total of thirty-eight episodes and a combined running time of almost thirty-five hours’, as Sue Parrill and William B. Robinson observe, ‘by far the longest filmic event ever to deal with the Tudor dynasty’.³

SCREENING HENRY BEFORE *THE TUDORS*

As England’s most famous (or infamous) monarch, Henry VIII has featured prominently throughout the history of British national cinema, and his various on-screen incarnations could be argued to have revealed much about Britain and its national character. Raymond Durnat famously suggested that national cinema serves as a window onto the society from which it arises⁴ and Deborah Cartmell and I. Q. Hunter, considering British historical drama as such a window, claim that it has long been obsessed with periods associated with national greatness such as the Tudor, Jacobean and Victorian eras. The persistent representation of such eras, they argue, reflects ‘both a British desire to revisit history in the wake of new definitions of Britishness’ and the need to reassess ‘the meaning of Englishness in a devolved nation now that England’s myths have been degraded by revisionism’.⁵ Such a case could be made for certain British heritage productions such as *Chariots of Fire*, *Brideshead Revisited* and

A Room with a View, all of which Tana Wollen identifies as being ‘nostalgic in that their pasts were represented as entirely better places’.⁶ This ‘splendid’ past, presented also in many BBC costume dramas such as *Middlemarch* (1994) or *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), is usually represented as refined and sophisticated and, as Robin Nelson suggests, invites audiences to ‘take pleasure in the cultural myth of “Englishness,” of tradition, stability and fair play’.⁷

Yet in many important respects Henry VIII on film and television has seldom held up this mirror for England, partly because the screen monarch has not been presented as an ambassador for cultural myths of Englishness such as ‘fair play’, nor as a representative example of English sophistication nor as the ruler of an era that was an entirely better place. Furthermore, he has rarely offered a mirror for England because he has infrequently been ‘English’ on screen. Indeed, from the earliest years of cinema Henry has proved a popular subject for filmmakers outside Britain, particularly with continental filmmakers. In 1912 he appeared in the French production *Henry VIII et Jane Seymour* for Pathé Frères (director unknown) and again in 1913 in *Anne de Boleyn* (director unknown). In 1920 he featured in a particularly lavish German film, *Anna Boleyn*, which was released in America as *Deception*. Directed by Ernst Lubitsch, it starred Emil Jannings as Henry and reportedly cost ‘8.5 million marks’ to make and had ‘4,000 extras’.⁸ Since this prestigious picture, Henry has continued to appear in continental productions, such as the French 1937 films *François premier* (Christian Jaque) with Alexandre Rignault as Henry, and *Les Perles de la couronne* (Sacha Guitry) with Lyn Harding as the King.

In addition to his continental characterisations, Henry has appeared in numerous and varied American productions. In 1935 he featured as a miniaturised monarch in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935), with A. S. ‘Pop’ Byron playing Henry. He was a female-obsessed cartoon character voiced by Mel Blanc in the Looney Tunes cartoon *Book Revue* (Robert Clampett, 1946). A half century later, in the ‘Margical History Tour’ episode from the fifteenth season of *The Simpsons* (Mikel B. Anderson, 2004, 20th Century Fox Television) he was played by Homer Simpson (Dan Castellaneta). He even turned up in the pornographic film *The Undercover Scandals of Henry VIII* (Charlton De Serge, 1970) with Steve Vincent as a lustful liege. Unusual renditions aside, Henry has also appeared in more traditional manifestations in US film and television productions. He featured in Vitagraph’s 1912 *Cardinal Wolsey* (Laurence Trimble) with Tefft Johnson as Henry and in 1933 when Richard Cramer played him in the Mack Sennett comedy film *Don’t Play Bridge*

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with *Your Wife* (Leslie Pearce). Rex Harrison took on the part in 'The Trial of Anne Boleyn' episode in the television drama series *Omnibus* (1952, CBS) and in 1953 Charles Laughton played the role in the film *Young Bess* (George Sidney). In 1969 Richard Burton won an Oscar nomination for best actor for his performance as the King in *Anne of the Thousand Days* (Charles Jarrott).

Henry has also featured in different versions of the same story. Charles Major's novel, *When Knighthood was in Flower*, was filmed in 1922 (Robert G. Vignola) with Lyn Harding as Henry (a part he would again play in *The Pearls of the Crown*, 1937) and also in 1953 by Disney under a new title, *The Sword and the Rose* (Ken Annakin), with James Robertson Justice playing the King. Philippa Gregory's novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* was adapted by the BBC in 2003 (Philippa Lowthorpe) with Jared Harris as Henry and was made into a feature film in 2008 (Justin Chadwick) with Eric Bana portraying the King. After being broadcast as a BBC radio play in 1954, Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* was screened as a live BBC television drama in 1957 (directed by Peter Dews) with Noel Johnson as Henry, followed in 1966 by Robert Shaw's rendering of the King in a film adaptation (Fred Zinnemann) for which he won an Oscar nomination. In 1988 Martin Chamberlain also played Henry in a filmed stage play version that was directed by Charlton Heston.

Heston himself took the role of Henry in the 1977 film *Crossed Swords* (Richard Fleischer), an adaptation of *The Prince and the Pauper*, and this Mark Twain novel has hugely contributed to the appearances of the monarch on screen. In 1909 an Edison version (J. Searle Dawley) featured Charles Ogle as the King,⁹ followed in 1915 by another American version (Hugh Ford and Edwin S. Porter), in which Robert Broderick played Henry. In 1920 an Austrian version (*Prinz und Bettelknabe*, Alexander Korda) cast Albert Schreiber as the King, followed by a US version in 1937 (William Keighley) that saw Montagu Love in the role. A Russian adaptation appeared in 1943 (*Prints i Nishchiiy*, Erast Garin) and 1957 witnessed Douglas Campbell playing Henry in *The Dupont Show of the Month* version of *The Prince and the Pauper* (Daniel Petrie, CBS). After performing the King in a 1956 episode of the BBC Sunday Night Theatre, Paul Rogers played Henry for a second time in the *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* episode 'The Prince and the Pauper: The Pauper King' (Don Chaffey, 1962). In 1976 Ronald Radd acted Henry in a BBC series version (Barry Letts) and Alan Bates played the King in 2000 for Hallmark's take on Twain's tale (Giles Foster).

Not surprisingly, Henry has appeared in numerous British productions. On television he was played in 1947 by Arthur Young in *The Rose without a Thorn*

(Desmond Davis, BBC) and by Basil Sydney in 1952 in a *BBC Sunday Night Theatre* episode of the same story, again entitled 'The Rose without a Thorn' (Michael Barry). Paul Rogers took on the role of the King in a different episode in the *BBC Sunday Night Theatre* series in 1956 called 'The White Falcon' (Rudolph Cartier). In 1970 Keith Michell played the King for the BBC's six-part television series *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (and would do so again for the BBC in 1996 for yet another television version of *The Prince and the Pauper* (Andrew Morgan)). John Stride was Henry in the BBC's 1979 version of Shakespeare's *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth*. In 1999 Henry appeared again in *The Nearly Complete and Utter History of Everything* (Dewi Humphreys, Paul Jackson, Matt Lipsey, BBC) played by Brian Blessed and 2003 saw Ray Winstone taking on the role in ITV's two-part television drama, *Henry VIII* (Pete Travis). In 2015 Damian Lewis appeared as Henry in an Anglo-American television adaptation of Hilary Mantel's Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Wolf Hall*.¹⁰

British films featuring the King include *Henry VIII and Catherine Howard* (1910, director unknown). The following year Arthur Bouchier took the title role in a version of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* (William Barker), described by historian Rachael Low as Britain's 'first really important feature film'.¹¹ Not only did it bring Shakespeare to British film production, allowing exhibitors, as James Park puts it, to 'attract a better class of customer',¹² but it also ran at half an hour when most films prior to it were no more than 10 minutes in length. Henry appeared next in 1926 in *Hampton Court Palace* (Bert Cann) with Shep Camp as Henry and again in 1933 with Charles Laughton as the King (a part he would reprise in 1953 in *Young Bess*) in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Alexander Korda), a Henry production that for the second time was dubbed the most important British film made up to that date. It was, as Roy Armes states, 'a phenomenon' in the 1930s, 'immensely popular in the United States'¹³ and, as James Chapman reports, 'the first British talking picture to become a significant commercial success in the international market'.¹⁴ Greg Walker proclaims it 'probably the most important film produced in Britain before the Second World War'.¹⁵

Yet the divisions between continental, British and American productions in this, by no means exhaustive, catalogue of screen Henrys are not always easy to justify. *Crossed Swords*, for instance, was a multinational co-produced 'Europudding', partly financed with American money and filmed in the UK and Hungary. *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, despite being, as Chapman asserts, 'the film that is seen as making the breakthrough for British films in the American market',¹⁶ actually had multiple international dimensions from the outset, not

the least being that it was ‘written and produced largely by European émigrés’. As Armes points out, it had ‘a Hungarian producer-director (Korda himself), designer (his brother Vincent) and co-scriptwriter (Biro), a French cinematographer (Perinal) and an American editor (Harold Young). The only Englishman to play a major production role in this archetypically British film was Arthur Wimperis, who was largely responsible for the dialogue.’¹⁷ From the outset, producer-director Alexander Korda saw the project as an ‘international film’, one that would ‘appeal and succeed abroad’.¹⁸ British films featuring Tudor monarchs have often featured such international dimensions. Robert Murphy, for example, excluded films such as *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (Charles Jarrott, 1971) from his history of British cinema, attributing them to an international, American-dominated style of filmmaking.¹⁹

As Parrill and Robinson argue, ‘[T]he sensational elements of Tudor history have been appealing to British, American, and continental movie makers and audiences from the early days of film.’ Initially, this was because ‘[I]n silent films no language barrier existed to prevent films about Henry VIII’s excesses and Mary Stuart’s plight made in Italy, France, and Germany from finding audiences in England and North and South America.’²⁰ Yet even with language barriers, the ‘sensational elements’ of the story of the King and his six wives have ensured to this day that they remain global subjects of film and television. Henry has proven particularly suitable for sensation because he is largely free of the mythical significance of his daughter Elizabeth or Queen Victoria in relation to the status of the English monarchy or Anglo-British culture and fully free of their virtuous reputations. He holds a place in history for murder, multiple marriages and (selfishly) laying the foundations with the Reformation for the Protestant country that Elizabeth (unselfishly) built into a great nation. He is a figurehead belonging to the other side of the coin to the cultural idol that is ‘the quasi-religiously adored virgin Queen Bess’.²¹ Elizabeth is memorialised on screen as a queen who placed the needs of her nation above her sexual and reproductive desires, sacrificing ‘the “natural” destiny of a woman, marriage and children, trading personal happiness for public power’.²² Her self-negation is linked to a glorious reign ‘of imperial and creative supremacy’²³ in films such as *Fire Over England* (William K. Howard, 1937) and *The Sea Hawk* (Michael Curtiz, 1940). In *Jubilee* (Derek Jarman, 1978) and *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998) she firmly stands ‘for the era of Shakespeare, Marlowe and Spenser, the Golden Age of English culture’.²⁴ In contrast to such a golden age, Henry’s reign is popularly

remembered as one in which he personally sacrificed nothing except his waistline and his wives in his quest for power and pleasure. It is not his reign but Henry himself who colourfully dominates in the popular consciousness and so it is hardly surprising that 'King Bluebeard'²⁵ has been the subject of so many screen biographies from so many countries.

Nat Cohen (head of production at EMI when the BBC TV series *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* was adapted for the cinema) described the potential profitability of Henry's global stardom when he declared that he remains 'a subject for the world market',²⁶ and in the case of the TV series he was right. It 'was sold to countries as diverse as Japan, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Finland, Belgium and West Germany, and was bought by the CBS network which broadcast it on American television'.²⁷ To underscore this global popularity, it is worth noting how seldom England's most famous king has been played by an Englishman, even in Anglophone productions, being portrayed by the Australian-born Keith Michell, American Charlton Heston, Irish Robert Shaw, Welsh Richard Burton, South African Syd James and, in *The Tudors*, the Irish Jonathan Rhys Meyers.

The international dimensions of British historical film and television production are actually unsurprising because they both depend on international distribution and exhibition. The financing of expensive BBC costume dramas on television, as Nelson points out, has long been possible only because of their 'world sales' potential.²⁸ The same is the case with cinema, where, as Chapman explains, 'the historical film has generally been among the most expensive British productions and is therefore dependent upon overseas markets for its ultimate profitability. The British production sector as it currently stands is too small and unstable to support the consistent production of large-scale historical films.'²⁹ In order to assure international demand, international appeal has become built into the British historical production itself with non-British stars proving a crucial aspect. By way of illustration, Julianne Pidduck cites Tudor-set films like *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, UK/US, 1998, Polygram/Working Title/Channel Four Films) and *Shakespeare in Love* (US, 1998, Universal) which benefited from the marketability of American stars like Gwyneth Paltrow and Ben Affleck, Australians such as Geoffrey Rush and Cate Blanchett and French ones such as Vincent Cassel and Eric Cantona. 'Aside from commercial motivations', she further suggests an aesthetic function in the inclusion of such actors as 'this mélange of accents, star personas and acting styles suggests the pleasures of make believe so central to costume drama and historical fiction.'³⁰

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HENRY VIII AND *THE TUDORS*

The Tudors and the internationally co-produced historical TV drama in general similarly integrate international appeal in order to accommodate a modern international audience. In addition to making use of internationally known stories and stars, they also foreground new technology, exploit explicit sex and violence, take advantage of tax incentives and relatively cheap shooting locations such as Ireland (*The Tudors*), Hungary (*The Borgias*) and Belgium (*The White Queen*), and dwell on the fictional aspects of historical fiction.

In *Television in Transition*, Shawn Shimpach explores television's constantly changing nature and, in particular, the new structures of production and distribution in today's 'new, international, multi-channel universe', suggesting that it is white 'futuristic' heroes such as Doctor Who and Superman who are at the forefront, constantly featuring in stories in which they are being 'asked again and again to help save the day'. Yet while these futuristic heroes have become globally successful, other protagonists from the past have also become hugely significant in this 'new international, multi-channel universe'.³¹ Spartacus (*Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010, Starz)), Julius Caesar (*Rome* (2005–7, BBC/HBO)), King Arthur (*Camelot* (2011, Starz/Take 5/CBC/Ecosse/Octagon)), Alexander Borgia (*The Borgias* (2011–13, Showtime/Take 5/Octagon/Mid Atlantic Films)), Leonardo da Vinci (*Da Vinci's Demons* (2013–, Starz/BBC Worldwide)), Elizabeth of York (*The White Queen* (BBC/Company/Czar Television, 2013)) and Henry VIII (*The Tudors* (2007–10)) have become the central characters of internationally produced and distributed television series in the last decade.

Unlike Superman and Dr Who, these white historical figures tend to be less interested in 'saving the day' than seizing the day in their quests for personal power, vicious retribution and passionate sex. They also feature in series that are notably 'international' in aspects such as production company partnerships, filming locations, financing and casting. *The Tudors*, for example, has a complex national status. It is the creation of the British Working Title Films (whose parent company is the American NBC Universal), Octagon Films, Canadian Peace Arch Entertainment, American-based Reveille Productions (which was taken over in 2008 by Elisabeth Murdoch's Shine Group) and Showtime (which is a subsidiary of CBS). It has an international cast including the English Henry Cavill, Northern Irish/New Zealander Sam Neill, Canadian Henry Czerny and Swedish Max von Sydow, and it was filmed in Ireland. Like many other such international productions, it took advantage of tax inducements offered by

more than one country, investment incentives provided by the Government of Ireland with the participation of the Irish Film Board and the Canadian Film or Video Tax Credit.

It is advantageous to consider *The Tudors* within the context of this recent flourishing in internationally produced historical television drama because these productions share important features. One is that they make little claim to historical fidelity and overtly fictionalise the past. Another is that they also regularly use computer generation or locations that look suitable but have little or no relation to the actual sites of historical events. (Tudor England in *The Tudors*, when not computer-generated, is largely recreated at Ardmore Studios near Dublin.) The past in these dramas is populated with characters who are lustful, devious and pathologically brutal and the productions are immensely explicit in showing their sexual activities and bloody exploits. A glimpse at any one of the numerous scenes of torture that occur throughout *The Tudors* serves to signal this violent past as a much worse place than today. The show brings us, among other scenes, the spectacle of a prisoner about to be boiled alive ‘mercifully’ offered the option of jumping into a scalding vat of water head first to minimise his suffering (series 2, episode 1–2.1). It also offers the burning of Simon Fish (1.10), a view of Bishop Fisher’s beheading from the subjective camera perspective of the basket into which his head will fall (2.5), the botched beheading of Thomas Cromwell with the drunken executioner repeatedly hacking his back with his axe (3.8), George Boleyn’s head graphically severed from his body (2.9), George Smeaton being stretched on the rack after having his eye crushed (2.9), the hanging of Robert Aske from the battlements (3.4), John Constable having a red-hot poker thrust up his rectum (3.3), and so on.

In this graphic depiction of violence, historical series such as *The Tudors*, *Spartacus Blood and Sand* and *The Borgias* distinguish themselves from restrained historical and costume dramas such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Downton Abbey* (UK, 2010–, Carnival), the likes of which also continue to be produced and exported by British television companies very successfully. In contrast to the anachronistic propriety in series such as these, in which simmering desire remains largely unspoken and ‘foreplay is basically hanging your clothes properly’,³² *The Tudors* and its ilk offer a diametrically opposed approach. Character behaviour is explicitly up-to-date rather than elegantly out-of-date. Unlike those period dramas which have tended to present a bygone sensibility to modern television audiences, series like *The Tudors* choose to infuse a bygone era with a modern sensibility. As its costume designer Joan Bergin declares, *The Tudors*

was never intended to be respectable because its producers ‘didn’t want a rigid BBC costume drama’,³³ a point echoed by the executive producer Morgan O’Sullivan, who adds that it ‘has a contemporary feel about it. It’s not stiff and starchy in the way they normally do period dramas.’³⁴

In the budget-limited world of British television, the ‘rigid’ and ‘starchy’ dramatic reconstruction of the past has more often than not been conveyed through modest sets and costumes, with the word rather than the visual style privileged. This verbal emphasis has contributed to British television costume drama’s reputation for literariness and restraint, and has helped imbue it with a theatrical quality, served as it has been by an unobtrusive ‘“flatness” in the depiction and construction of space, as if the camera’ is ‘afraid to move through the fourth wall and interrupt an established environment’.³⁵ In spite of the merits of script, performance and dramatic effect, such stylistic conservatism with dialogue to the forefront and camerawork to the background is certainly evident in the BBC Tudor dramas *The Shadow of the Tower* (1972), *Elizabeth R* (1971) and *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1970).

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, it is not only in BBC historical dramas that the Tudors have been presented in such a conservative style. They have also appeared via many of the same conventions on the big screen. In some cases this is understandable when Tudor-set films have been heavily influenced by television source material, as in the case of the film *King Henry VIII and His Six Wives*. Yet even when not drawing on television directly for inspiration, the presentation of the Tudors in the cinema has often evoked the theatrical. Chapman, for example, locates the Tudor-set film *Anne of the Thousand Days* within the theatrical tradition of British television drama as a result of its ‘cultural and aesthetic conservatism: respectable, literate, wordy’ script and ‘sober visual style of sensitive colour cinematography and predominantly frontal staging’.³⁶ Such theatricality was explicable in this case because *Anne of the Thousand Days* was an adaptation of a stage play by Maxwell Anderson. Indeed, numerous films depicting Tudor monarchs have been based upon Anderson’s plays including *Mary of Scotland* (John Ford, 1936), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939) and the US television movie *Elizabeth the Queen* (George Schaefer, 1968, Hallmark). Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* and Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons* are other obvious theatrical sources for Tudor-set film and television adaptations.

Yet, as well as referencing television and the theatre, reference, and to a certain extent deference, to the past itself has also contributed immensely to the

conventional style in which the Tudor period has customarily been conveyed in the cinema. In addition to generic conventions established by previous renditions, it has been governed by the use of historical locations when recreating the period. Bleak weather-worn exteriors and dank ancient interiors of actual (if not always the correct) castles, cathedrals and manor houses feature as the major settings in films such as *Anne of the Thousand Days* (which made use of Hever Castle in Kent, home to the Boleyns during Anne's lifetime), *Mary, Queen of Scots* (Alnwick Castle in Northumberland), *Henry VIII and His Six Wives* (Allington Castle in Kent) and *Elizabeth* (Durham Cathedral, Haddon Hall in Derbyshire and York Minster). In spite of the colourful costumes and glamorous stars decorating these films, an unappealing sense of the past pervades. Pidduck describes how the castles and cathedrals in *Elizabeth* 'ooze an inky gloom'.³⁷ A bleak dreariness pervades the exterior shots of films such as *Mary, Queen of Scots* with its repeated presentation of darkened cloud-covered landscapes and the interiors of *Anne of the Thousand Days* with its cold, drab, stone inner walls cheered only by tapestries and flickering candlelight.

In stark contrast to the real castles and cathedrals that situated its predecessors within authentic stone and mortar, *The Tudors* paradoxically depicts its historical world through computer generation. Rather than using extant buildings constructed hundreds of years ago, its post-production castles and cathedrals are evidently constructed not 'then' but 'now'. Bloody, yet far from gloomy, this pixellated past is vibrantly new. As *Variety* proclaimed upon *The Tudors*' initial broadcast, 'Showtime has freshened up mouldy history.'³⁸ In addition to creating a kingdom 'spritzed with Febreze',³⁹ as Ginia Bellafante described it, a post-produced past helps prioritise the televisual over the wordy or theatrical with its emphasis on the computer-generated picturesque. Unlike Hollywood historical epics which often spend millions of dollars to recreate history, a budget out of reach for most film and all television production, millions of pixels instead provide the spectacular vistas of Victorian London in *Ripper Street* (2012–, UK/Canada/Ireland, BBC/Tiger Aspect/Look Out Point/Element) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014–, US/UK, Showtime/Desert Wolf/Neal Street), Renaissance Rome in *The Borgias* or Florence in *Da Vinci's Demons*.

Just as 'the arrival of colour broadcasting at the end of the 1960s opened up new possibilities' for historical drama, transforming it into 'one of the significant production trends over the next decade ... exemplified by *The First Churchills* [David Giles, 1969, BBC], *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* [Naomi Capon and John Glenister, 1970, BBC], *Elizabeth R* [Claude Whatham, Herbert Wise,

Richard Martin, Roderick Graham, Donald McWhinnie, 1971, BBC] and *I, Claudius* [Herbert Wise, 1976, BBC],⁴⁰ so too has the contemporary historical series benefited from advances in CGI. Computer generation is serving to disconnect the period drama from 'actual' history because, without being overtly self-reflexive, it foregrounds each show's artificiality. It provides the perfect inauthentic backdrop for each inauthentic account. *The Tudors*, for example, clearly relies on effects rather than location-shooting at historical sites and in the very first episode treats viewers to CGI renderings of Whitehall Palace and Hampton Court as well as panoramic shots of London and Paris. These non-existent settings offer precisely what cannot be offered by the concretised actuality of locations such as Haddon Hall and Durham Cathedral. No longer dominated by what survives of the past, shows like *The Tudors* are now untethered from the stylistic and production requirements of previous film and television historical drama.

However, abandoning authenticity has come at some cost to the reputation of contemporary international historical dramas. By jettisoning long-established principles for representing the past, series like *The Tudors* have also rejected the belief that historical drama should perform a pedagogical function. Required to convey the period they are depicting authentically to a contemporary audience, historical dramas have seldom been immune to accusations of distorting the past, getting facts wrong or producing 'groan-inducing howlers'.⁴¹ Sue Harper, for example, argues that historical drama has a duty to the historical record that other genres, such as costume drama, simply do not have. While 'both reinforce the act of social remembering, costume dramas and historical films are different from each other. Historical films deal with real people or events: Henry VIII, the Battle of Waterloo, Lady Hamilton. Costume film uses the mythic and symbolic aspects of the past as a means of providing pleasure, rather than instruction.'⁴²

By making no such claims to instruction, *The Tudors* was immediately attacked for its unapologetic use of history for drama instead of presenting drama as history. Rather than merely picking holes in it, many critics shredded the entire series as historical drama with no historical value. For example, in his co-authored book *The Tudors on Film and Television*, William Robinson protests that the series offers little more than 'shock value'⁴³ and complains that 'the history is so mangled it might have been simpler to just tell it straight with intermittent gratuitous sex scenes'.⁴⁴ Anticipating this assessment, *New York Times* critic Mary Jo Murphy observed that 'you watch *The Tudors* for the history the way you read *Playboy* for the articles'.⁴⁵

This kind of condemnation should have been ruinous if Ramona Wray is correct in her description of the show's ambitions as 'intimately connected to contemporary notions of audience' and 'must-see television'. Drawing on conceptions of 'quality television' she observes that shows like *The Tudors* are 'designed to attract not so much a volume audience as highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programmes' and as a result are 'able to acquire and boast a greater cultural legitimacy'.⁴⁶ Yet the series avoided the quality pigeonhole to attract a much larger and more lucrative audience. It proved the biggest draw for Showtime since 'the service premiered *Fat Actress* in March 2005'⁴⁷ and scored 'well above'⁴⁸ the ratings figures for the debut of Showtime's *Dexter*, despite Showtime undertaking with *The Tudors* 'the bold move of taking on the Sunday night programming of HBO at the exact period when HBO ... [flexed] ... its muscles with new seasons of *The Sopranos* and *Entourage*'.⁴⁹ Following such initial achievements, *The Tudors* went on, as Sue Parrill and William Robinson put it, to become 'for better or worse, a genuine cultural phenomenon'.⁵⁰ As they explain, as well as being broadcast on Showtime it

appeared on BBC2 in the United Kingdom, CBC Television in Canada, Tele TV3 in Ireland ... has been released through a variety of digital outlets, and is available all over the world on DVD and Blu-Ray, both as individual seasons and in a boxed set containing the complete series. Many of its stars have become international celebrities. It has its own rather sophisticated website and has spawned fan sites, fan clubs, and fan fiction, as well as keeping Tudor blogs abuzz with commentary.⁵¹

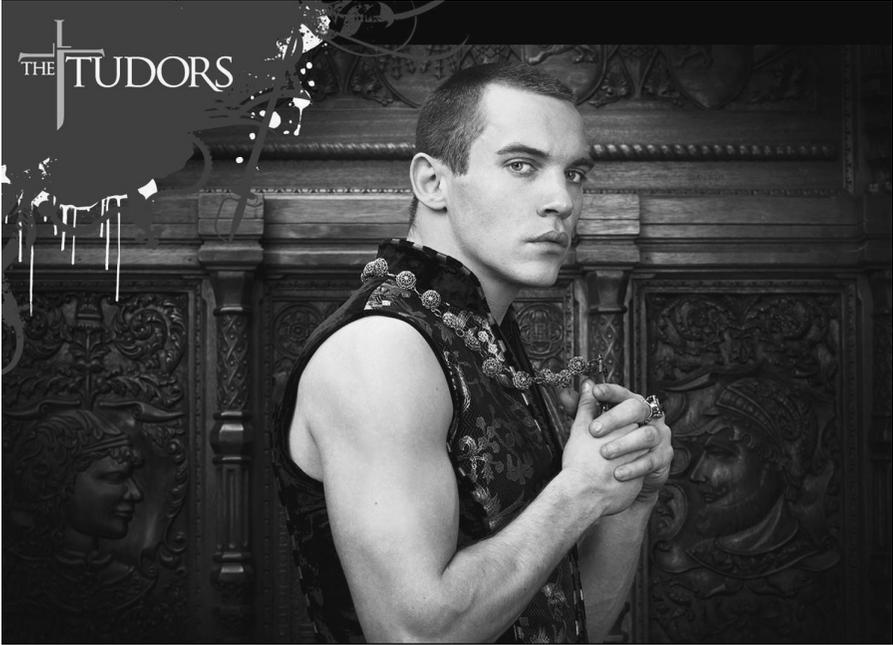
As well as appealing to a mass audience outside and beyond the 'highly educated consumer' of quality television, *The Tudors* happily abandoned any attempt at 'literary quality'. Perceived by *Variety* as at best middlebrow since it had 'the potential to bring together ... critics and elites who might be partial to period pics, and broader commercial aud[ience]s drawn to the sex and shenanigans',⁵² it was similarly identified by Alessandra Stanley of the *New York Times* as being lowbrow but fun, 'a captivating romp, *Ocean's Eleven* in ruffs and doublets',⁵³ In the *New Statesman* Rachel Cooke guiltily admitted to being a fan, while stating that if 'in Tudorland terms' Hilary Mantel's novel *Wolf Hall* 'is like having lunch at Le Gavroche', *The Tudors* is like having 'dinner at Chicken Cottage. ... It's as if your dimly remembered school textbook had been rewritten by someone who used to work on *Falcon Crest*.'⁵⁴

Much of the reimagining of *The Tudors*, and consequent commercial success and critical mauling that followed, can be credited to its writer, Michael Hirst, who has recently made his reputation, for good or bad, 'rewriting school textbooks' in a historical genre in which historical accuracy is secondary. Hirst has played a large part in the current direction the internationally co-produced historical drama has taken because he has been centrally involved in several of them. As Parrill and Robinson explain, he 'created and wrote all the episodes for *Camelot* (Starz 2011); served as executive producer for *The Borgias* (Showtime 2011) ... and is the creator and executive producer of *Vikings* (2013), the History Channel's first scripted drama series'.⁵⁵ He was also in a position of great creative power when it came to *The Tudors* because it was, as its executive producer called it, 'a writer's movie'⁵⁶ (in spite of being, of course, television).

Hirst, already something of a 'period drama specialist'⁵⁷ following his historically set screenplays for *The Deceivers* (Nicholas Meyer, UK, 1988), *Fools of Fortune* (Pat O'Connor, UK, 1990) and *Elizabeth*, remarkably wrote all four seasons of *The Tudors* single-handed. He was on set 'almost all the time'⁵⁸ and himself points out how highly unusual this was 'in that most television series are written by a staff of writers'. It was very much his 'baby', he maintains. 'When they started filming, I still hadn't finished episodes 9 and 10. I was literally the only person who knew what was going to happen.'⁵⁹ From this position of control, Hirst argues for a 'need' for the 'historical material to resonate ... and for its themes to be relevant to our own lives'.⁶⁰

In achieving resonance and relevance, *The Tudors* provoked numerous critics to complain of what they saw as deplorable historical inaccuracies. Ginia Bellafante, for example, objected to the 'historical hopscotch' she detected as a result of the fact that 'timelines are abbreviated' and 'papacies are rearranged. ... Henry VIII was a man of extreme faith who attended Mass five times a day', she said, but 'watching *The Tudors* you'd think he spent most of that time shaving'.⁶¹ Indeed, the clean-shaven 'young, buff and lusty Henry VIII',⁶² as Mary Jo Murphy of the *New York Times* described him, was clearly a shock to many. 'In contrast to most depictions of an old, fat, detestable king', Brian Lowry wrote in *Variety*, *The Tudors* 'introduces Henry as a bright-eyed young man with wash-board abs',⁶³ such 'perfectly demarcated abdominals', as Bellafante added, that he looked 'like someone you would hire to be your live-in personal trainer'.⁶⁴

Such condemnation for 'wonky'⁶⁵ history is nothing new for Hirst, who as a writer had already received abundant criticism for disregarding received history with *Elizabeth* alongside the film's director, Shekhar Kapur (who proclaimed



27 Henry VIII (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) as a 'punk-rock' ruler in *The Tudors* (Showtime, 2007–10).

that 'historical facts are only a constraint if you stick to them').⁶⁶ Renée Pigeon accused them both of expressing 'no interest in historical veracity' and denounced their 'invented or grossly misrepresented events and characters'.⁶⁷ Robinson gave them the barest of credit in his appraisal, stating that Elizabeth 'starts and ends well but is nonsense in between'.⁶⁸ Susan Doran judged the film with its 'deliberate trampling over historical fact' to be 'profoundly unhistorical',⁶⁹ while Christopher Haigh invited viewers to 'by all means enjoy *Elizabeth*' with the proviso that they just 'don't suppose that it's telling you anything much about history'.⁷⁰ *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, which Kapur also directed and Hirst co-wrote, fared little better amongst critics, with Vivienne Westbrook objecting to the fact that the film made 'tenuous claims to being fact whilst paying its chief respects to fiction. Put more simply, what is presented as fact is, in fact, fiction.'⁷¹

The disregard for historical veracity in Hirst's two accounts of Elizabeth's reign is also apparent in *The Tudors*, much of whose narrative did not happen to the particular people presented in the drama, did not occur in the particular ways depicted or did not occur at all. Yet does this necessarily indict him

as a sloppy researcher who deems history a mere inconvenience? Discussing Hirst's attitude to his source material on *Elizabeth*, Haigh made the important point that 'the errors in *Elizabeth* are not accidental, they are quite deliberate adjustments of history to meet the requirements of a drama. ... *Elizabeth* was not made in ignorance. You have to know a lot of Elizabethan history to make these mistakes; you have to know what really happened (or probably happened) before you can turn it into this particular story. Real characters are adjusted, real events are amended and relocated, plausible incidents are invented – all to serve the drama.'⁷²

Hirst himself justifies his measured approach to rewriting history by arguing that 'in a film you have to push things a bit. It's not like writing a history book in which you can stand back and be cool and say perhaps or perhaps not.'⁷³ His admission suggests that criticising *The Tudors*' historical errors is akin to forcing a door that Hirst himself is holding open. While he maintains that 'everything I wrote was based on historical research and historical "fact" (as reported, that is, by historians!)',⁷⁴ he qualifies this by stating that only 'about 85 per cent of *The Tudors* is true'.⁷⁵

Part of his reason for rewriting history is to avoid confusion, as with his decision to merge Henry's two sisters, Mary and Margaret, into the single character of Margaret. There was already another Princess Mary in *The Tudors*, Henry's daughter by Catherine of Aragon, and Hirst 'didn't want two Princess Marys on the call sheet because it might have confused the crew. "Which one do you mean, Michael? Who do we dress?"'⁷⁶ As a result *The Tudors* (1.4.) features Margaret (when it was in fact Mary) going to Portugal (Mary went instead to France) to marry the King of Portugal (Mary actually married King Louis XII of France, whereas Margaret travelled to Scotland to marry James IV). Although a convoluted rewriting of history, the use of Margaret and the introduction of Portugal instead of France and/or Scotland did avoid misunderstanding because '*The Tudors* had shown a French king in a different context in Season 1 ... so he just chose another European country.'⁷⁷ While the wrong sister going to the wrong country to marry the wrong king may have perplexed those familiar with the period, such distortion has little negative impact on the narrative sweep of the series. In dramatic terms the King's sister is sent abroad to marry a decrepit king, has sex on the way with Henry's best friend Charles Brandon, suffers an unpleasantly comical form of humiliation and sexual assault at the hands of her royal husband, suffocates him in disgust and revenge for this outrage and returns happily remarried to the aforementioned best friend (although

historically speaking it was Mary and not Margaret who married Brandon). The result is therefore both dramatic and dramatically unhistorical.

Such major, and more importantly, conscious tampering with 'historical truths' marks *The Tudors* out as undeniably inauthentic and Hirst himself clearly expected the backlash that indeed came later, when he admits he had to shore himself 'up against the inevitable hostility of – I should imagine – mainly British academics and historians, who will find (to their secret delight) many errors of fact and detail in the work'.⁷⁸ Yet he endorses his methods on the grounds that even while deliberately rewriting history for dramatic purposes, one can still care deeply about the history one is rewriting because it was only written by someone else in the first place – and not necessarily truthfully. For instance, in relation to Elizabeth bedding Dudley in *Elizabeth*, he argues that while there is no evidence that they did, there is also no evidence that they did not. 'There's plenty of circumstantial evidence that she did sleep with Dudley', he claims, and justifies his decision to have her sleep with him in the film to be little more than 'a small nudge in the direction of romanticism'.⁷⁹ In *The Tudors*, a similar logic towards received history presides. For example, in the drama Cardinal Wolsey takes his own life, contrary to the historical account that he died of an illness. Yet significantly, within the drama, Wolsey makes it clear that 'nobody must ever know' about his suicide (1.10). Viewers, therefore, are offered a privileged view of a hidden moment of history that historians themselves have not had. 'Hirst defends this depiction, contending that this might have been the way things really happened, and that Henry would have covered it up. Wolsey certainly had motive. "He was going to come back to a show trial"', Hirst said, "'and the best that he could get would have been a public beheading in front of all his enemies and a jubilant crowd.'" Hirst 'also wanted to give an acclaimed actor, Sam Neill, a powerful scene: "I didn't want him to go out with a whimper. I wanted him to go out with a bang."⁸⁰

Such an approach is possible because there are certain historical events that audiences tend to be aware of and so long as these are 'ticked off' they will not feel that what they are watching is untethered from historical reality. Thomas More must be executed, for example, and Anne Boleyn cannot be pardoned at the last minute and go on to live a happy life if any dramatisation is going to be seen as authentic. Observing the 'scant respect for actuality' in *Elizabeth*, Moya Luckett claims that it got away with it because 'few viewers' were likely 'to know much more about her reign than a vague connection with Sir Walter Raleigh, Mary Queen of Scots and the Spanish Armada'.⁸¹

Even the scantiest general knowledge can be problematic for historical drama, because unlike fiction it has to contend with the fact that its audience may at the very least know the ending. Many would be aware, for example, that the rebel army would be defeated in the *Spartacus* series and that Cleopatra would take her own life in *Rome*. So too in *The Tudors* would the audience apprehend that ultimately Henry would die and make way for his children, with Elizabeth eventually ascending to the throne. Hirst's rather ingenious way of making use of this biographical knowledge is to bring to a pleasing union the conjectural history we have been viewing and the official history we had been familiar with beforehand. For example, perhaps the greatest surprise of both *Elizabeth* and *The Tudors* had been that the monarchs looked nothing like we had expected, with a young and beautiful Elizabeth and a thin and beardless Henry. The final moments of both dramas rectify this by presenting the official history as not fact but just that, 'official' history. Pamela Church Gibson points out that at the end of *Elizabeth* 'in order to become an idol, venerated by her people, Elizabeth must lose her innocence, deny her humanity and reject her sexuality'.⁸² For the greater part of the drama we had witnessed not the idol projected through history but the young woman discovering herself, but the drama ends with a performance by the Queen as she transforms herself into 'the pearl-encrusted icon of later memory'.⁸³ It is a film, as James Leggott points out, that explores 'the machinery of myth-making'.⁸⁴

Henry, in the final episode of *The Tudors* when he poses for his portrait, assumes, like Elizabeth, the iconic bearing that will carry his image to his people and his memory throughout the ages. The ending shows that the historical alterations that have been so criticised are not unsuitable after all, because they simply counter an already fabricated historical record. 'The unknown story' is contrasted in the finale with the 'official' conception that will become the known story. We therefore witness the erasure from history of the story we have just watched and the authorised history created to replace it. Just as Elizabeth transforms herself into the image of the Queen passed down to us in Nicholas Hilliard's and Marcus Gheeraerts's portraits, so Henry recognises that he has to generate an image that will live on through the ages and demands in the final episode that his defining portrait be painted by a true master, Hans Holbein. He rejects Holbein's first attempt as making him look too weak and is only content with the image that we know today. As Thomas S. Freeman explains, it is this painting that not only preserved the features of the King but also 'partially shaped Henry's historical reputation ... the king, standing like a defiant



28 Creating the myth of Holbein's Henry in *The Tudors*.

colossus, with his legs wide apart, supporting his massive torso, embodies pride, arrogance, authority, resolution and indomitable will'.⁸⁵ Creditably, Hirst took issue with such historical PR:

I think that all the portraits, all the images of rulers are usually lies. The way they present themselves to their public is a calculated way. ... The images of kings that we see are often certainly tampered with. ... Henry VIII had a very strong sense of how he wanted to promote his kingship and himself. So the images of kings that we see are often certainly tampered with. ... This big picture of Henry when he looks completely commanding is how he wanted to see himself and how he wanted others to see him. What I wanted to do at the end, when you see the classic version, I wanted people to say 'well, I see that but we've watched something else. We've watched a man going through all these stories and we've been interested in this. And that was his story.' And the formal ending, the other thing, that's a sort of, that's a piece of propaganda, Tudor propaganda, you know. And I wasn't doing that story.⁸⁶

The story Hirst did, while imaginative and purposeful, was not necessarily novel or original. Kara McKechnie, among others, has observed that dramas about the monarchy make up a significant area of British film production and that the lives of kings and queens have been reimagined again and again 'according to the needs of the age'.⁸⁷ In these various reimaginings, depictions that run contrary to the popular image of famous kings and queens are nothing new. 'Iconoclastic or deliberately "inauthentic" approaches to history' range 'from

the avant-garde contributions of Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway to the “vulgar” work of Ken Russell.⁸⁸ Others have shown kings and queens in their youths. Films such as *Young Bess* and *Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009), for example, present their famous and sexually abstinent queens as young, romantically, and even sexually, active. Both *Elizabeth* and *The Tudors*, like these works, constructed ‘countermyths’ to ‘demythologise the past’, and take their place in a tradition of ‘retrovisions’,⁸⁹ to borrow Cartmell and Hunter’s term.

Ultimately, though, *The Tudors* is inimitable in that it sustains its ‘retrovision’ for four seasons and deliberately aims for controversy over respectability in its depiction of Henry VIII throughout. As Wray states, it stands as ‘an unprecedentedly ambitious attempt to televise history’.⁹⁰ It questions not just how we see Henry VIII, but monarchs in general. Robinson, one of many to take issue with the depiction of Henry, complained that Rhys Meyers looked ‘more like a cross between a punk rocker and a soccer player than a king’,⁹¹ but *The Tudors* challenges this very assumption – just what should a king look like? Should on-screen depictions adhere to custom-designed legacies just because they are powerful in the public consciousness? Hirst certainly thinks not, asserting that nobody had departed from the established image of Henry before ‘because of the iconography’.⁹²

The challenges to the King’s ‘established image’ in *The Tudors* exemplify the scant respect paid by the post-national and post-historical drama to received history. The multinational financing, companies, casts, crews and locations combined with modern CGI engender historical creations that are designed to appeal to mass modern international audiences for whom particular national histories are far from sacrosanct. Favouring the extreme, the visual and the sensational, they also cast off the wordy literary/theatrical tradition that had hitherto bolstered British historical and costume drama. Not surprisingly this newly perceived strain of disrespect and excess in a genre associated with a conservative literary respectability led critics to critically downgrade *The Tudors* from ‘Le Gavroche’ to ‘Chicken Cottage’. Yet one might question why such excess should be so objectionable when telling the story of Henry VIII. The accepted image of the King, indeed perhaps the reason for his long-lived fame, is that he was a man given to massive excesses. He worked his way through a veritable army of wives and mistresses and, as portrayed by Holbein, also ate enough to feed one.

Holbein’s portrait memorably evokes a monarch who, as Hirst states, ‘was no matinee idol. ... He was square-headed, bearded and seriously overweight’.⁹³ Despite this, the painter’s powerful interpretation helped make the King, if not

a matinee idol, then at least a matinee favourite, garbing 'every cinema Henry' in 'the flat hat with plumes, the medallion and the dagger'.⁹⁴ Holbein's bulky figure, seized upon and developed by numerous productions, perhaps most influentially in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, has been forged into the popularly perceived image of the 'ermine-garbed, overweight monarch with a turkey drumstick in one hand'.⁹⁵ It is this semi-comical image that *The Tudors* contests with its dangerous, athletic and lustful protagonist.

In *The Tudors* the monarch lords over a very different kingdom than that of Laughton's Henry, a difference perhaps best illustrated in comparable scenes from both versions. In *The Private Life of Henry VIII* the royal palace is depicted as a happy place where, when Henry tells a joke, the camera follows the infectious laughter rolling through the corridors, past soldiers and guests, and into the kitchen where the cooks join in the merriment. In contrast, in the opening episode of *The Tudors*, it is the sounds of the King's passionate lovemaking that reverberate around the palace. It is not happiness but the sovereign's sexual desires that dominate his court and the grunts and moans of intercourse that echo down the corridors as the camera tracks past impassive servants and soldiers who remain stony-faced while listening to his pleasure.

Over the course of its four seasons *The Tudors* explores in detail Henry's domination of his wives, his court and his people as well as his captivatingly contradictory nature. It depicts his affection for friends and lovers and also his brutality towards them and the consequent fear in which he is held. It portrays his love for his wives accompanied by his monstrous desire to kill them and above all focuses upon his self-centredness and egotism as a man who indulges in every advantage kingship can offer. It also rescues the King from the conservatism of prior depictions. In this regard Robinson's appraisal of *The Tudors* as presenting a 'punk-rock' Henry is not entirely unsuitable. It is, after all, a counter-cultural depiction that *The Tudors* offers and one that in many respects does this particular monarch a favour.

NOTES

- 1 I refer throughout to Christopher Lockett's definition of received history that 'refers to the aggregate of stories, images, caricatures, and qualities associated with' a period or figure 'that come to define our expectations in the cultural imaginary'. Christopher Lockett, 'Accidental history: mass culture and HBO's *Rome*', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38:3 (2010), p. 102.

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- 4 Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970).
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- 8 Parrill and Robinson, *The Tudors on Film and Television*, p. 14.
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- 18 Quoted in Stephen Watts, 'Alexander Korda and the international film', *Cinema Quarterly* 2:1 (1933), pp. 13–14.
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- 22 Renée Pigeon, '“No man's Elizabeth”: the Virgin Queen in recent films', in Cartmell, Hunter and Whelehan (eds), *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, p. 8.

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- 64 Bellafante, ‘Nasty, but not so brutish and short’.
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- 72 Haigh, 'Kapur's *Elizabeth*', p. 128.
- 73 Hirst, quoted in Haigh, 'Kapur's *Elizabeth*', p. 127.
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- 84 Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema*, p. 7.
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