



*History, Fiction, and “The
Tudors”: Sex, Politics, Power, and
Artistic License in the Showtime
Television Series*

William B. Robison (ed.)

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The *Tudors* is arguably one of the most popular, and influential, television series to depict England's most (in)famous royal house. Despite sustained interest from audiences since the first episode was broadcast in 2007, *The Tudors* has garnered limited attention from scholars—receiving, to date, discussion in only a handful of book chapters and short articles. William B. Robison, in *History, Fiction, and "The Tudors"*, has assembled twenty chapters (in addition to an introduction) from a variety of scholars—the majority of whom are historians—to attempt to provide this long-absent, and much needed, academic analysis. Indeed, Robison remarks that the show's popularity means that "historians of early modern England can hardly afford to ignore" it (2). Unfortunately, Robison makes it clear from the outset how he views the show: its "apparent promise of concern for historical accuracy is one on which four seasons and thirty-five hours of the hugely popular cable television series largely fail to deliver" (1). This hostility (re)appears throughout the book: the very first page provides an unhelpful list of examples where the show engages in "anachronisms, time compression, distortions, and outright inventions" (1).

Robison's introduction primarily expounds the more "technical" aspects of the show, including details about its creator and writer, Michael Hirst; information about the show's broadcast and transmission history; a brief overview of the cast, and the roles played; and a general summary of the show's main plot points. The length of the volume means that the summary of the book's chapters takes up 16 of the introduction's 24 pages of text. This truncated introduction has meant that the book is neither situated within the scholarship of the burgeoning field of adaptation studies, nor is it given a clear intellectual justification to explain its focus on the show's various anachronisms. Robison has potentially attempted to anticipate this criticism by claiming: "the goal of this volume is not merely to do a 'hatchet job' on *The Tudors* but to assess it as a work of art, as a representation of history, as a reflection of modern and perhaps postmodern concerns, and as a potential tool for teaching" (7). These aims are indeed commendable, but Robison continues: "while the contributors express strong criticism where we believe it justified, we also express appreciation for what the series does well" (7). Unfortunately, however, the collection clearly focuses on the former part of that equation, rather than the latter.

The first two chapters of the book are written by Robison. The first, which is by far the volume's longest, is a dangerously problematic assessment

of Henry's characterisation in the show. According to Robison, Henry is "seldom the Renaissance man that he should be, and hardly ever a warrior. He is much more the shallow soap opera playboy. That many viewers still find him appealing is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the phenomenon that is *The Tudors*" (50). This reviewer is also appalled by the offensively heteronormative, and highly problematic, endnote Robison included to that sentence: "Many female participants in my history and film courses (and not a few older adults and professional colleagues) have informed me in no uncertain terms that they do not care whether *The Tudors* is accurate or not, as long as it features abundant images of Meyers and Henry Cavill. That male participants have made similar remarks about various women in the cast is perhaps less surprising" (57n50). Robison's second chapter, however, is a welcome and positive review of the show's depiction of Catherine of Aragon. Robison notes how Hirst breaks with "the typical on-screen treatment of Catherine" by offering "a more fully developed Catherine who is not just a bit player in the story" (8-9).

Susan Bordo, in her chapter, discusses the "default" Anne Boleyn: that is, her depiction as "the manipulative schemer whose motives are entirely those of ambition" (80). She notes that scholarship, even today, still perpetuates this "default", and fails to engage with Anne's reformist ideals, and her demonstrable intelligence. Bordo notes that Natalie Dormer, who plays Anne, personally convinced Hirst to write Anne "not as a one-dimensional sex-object" as she had been in Season One, and instead "pay more attention to [sic] Anne's faith and intellect in Season Two" (9-10).

The last four of Henry VIII's wives are the subject of Retha M. Warnicke's chapter, which essentially summarises the depictions of the four queens, then critiques the relative historical accuracy of their depictions. Warnicke concludes her chapter by proclaiming, "the real story of their [the queens'] lives, although historians often disagree about how to interpret the surviving facts, is far more interesting and compelling than these fabrications that were created for entertainment" (111). In continuing the volume's unhelpful focus on "historical accuracy", Warnicke has chosen not to engage with what these "fabrications" tell us about current perceptions of the past. In their chapter, Carole Levin and Estelle Paranque discuss the depictions of Henry's four children (the three born to his wives, and Henry FitzRoy). While they make some good points concerning these depictions, the chapter is a missed opportunity because of its problematic emphasis on "those instances when what happened historically might have been ... more effective at delivering Hirst's intended message" (116). Likewise, Levin and Paranque, perhaps accurately, conclude, "for all the importance of Henry's children ... the characters who matter most in *The Tudors* are the ones who can engage in

the sex, violence, and political intrigue that propel ... the series" (125). If this is the case, then why not analyse it?

Kristen Walton's brief chapter discusses the depiction of Henry's (fictional) uncle, his sister Margaret (who is a conflation of Henry's two sisters), his mistresses, and his bastard son. The chapter is certainly interesting, but Walton's conclusion disappointingly reinforces the volume's unhelpful theme: "Hirst moves far from history, at times with some ... plot advancing purpose and at times for no observable reason" (136). Anne Throckmorton then discusses Henry's in-laws, and the various conflations and inaccuracies attached to their depictions. While she makes the important observation that "to make it at the real court of Henry VIII, most courtiers had to mask their true feelings and motives, so perhaps Tudor politics got what it deserved in *The Tudors*", she also focuses on how "factual integrity is often lost and some historical personages are unfairly maligned or just disappear ... [and the show] reduces many people with many accomplishments to two-dimensional beings" (150). Victor Stater's chapter is an interesting study of Henry's friends in *The Tudors*. Focused mainly on the historical figures depicted in the show, Stater concludes, "the picture provided in *The Tudors*, while not always historically accurate, nevertheless reveals a great deal about life in the company of England's most famous king" (165).

The next three chapters focus on Henry and his relationship to the men around him. Robin Hermann's very brief chapter focuses on Henry's ministers; Glenn Richardson discusses the show's "laughable" flirtation with Henry's kingship and the contemporary conceptions of kingship and monarchy (192); and Thomas Betteridge, who has written in the past on Tudor England on film, discusses the royal court in *The Tudors*, noting that in focusing heavily on Henry, the show has "a historical kernel" of accuracy (206).

Caroline Armbruster's chapter discusses religion and the clergy. While certainly interesting, and in some places very insightful, her closing statement, "entertainment triumphs over accuracy, allowing *The Tudors* to provide a frustratingly superficial depiction of religious life in Tudor England" (220), leaves the impression that the show's purpose was resolutely ignored. Keith Altazin's discussion of the treatment of conspiracy and rebellion in *The Tudors* follows, and (unfortunately unsurprisingly) focuses on the way the show diverted from the historical reality. Altazin's unnecessary frustration reaches its zenith in his final sentence: "With a subject of such substance as the reign of Henry VIII, there could have been a better balance of historical accuracy and entertainment" (223). While the balance was never going to favour historical accuracy, it would have been valuable to engage with the various conflations, rather than to simply lament them.

Krista Kesselring's chapter on crime and violence in *The Tudors* is a highlight of the book. Not only does Kesselring make clear the distinction between the past and the past on TV—the show is “something to be watched for what it is rather than derided for what it is not” (235)—but she also notes “the series ably conveys something of the violence of Henry's reign” (237). Kesselring's most important contribution, however, is her offer of a productive means of thinking about the way violence of the past is shown today: “if *The Tudors*' portrayal of crime, punishment, and violence prompt reflection on such issues today, then perhaps a bit of ahistoricism is not at all a bad thing” (244). Samantha Perez then provides an interesting analysis of Renaissance humanism as depicted in *The Tudors*. While the show does a fairly good job of accurately portraying Henry's humanism, she notes that it does (mostly) disappear from the show following the death of Sir Thomas More.

The next three chapters focus on the show's visual engagement with the past. Carlie Pendleton discusses the show's portrayal of court entertainments. Pendleton notes that because “the cult of magnificence” was Henry's “pleasure and duty to cultivate, ... history rather than the fiction dominate compared to other aspects of the show” (278). Tatiana String's brief chapter then discusses how “*The Tudors* has an unusually deep engagement with works of art” (281). It is curious that while String does not focus on the various anachronisms relating to the various artworks—indeed, she speaks of “deliberate restagings” (283)—Robison's summary of String's chapter in the introduction reads like a laundry list of errors concerning the paintings, and their artists, that appear on-screen. The show's costumes are discussed in the next chapter by Maria Hayward, who offers a measured commentary on their relative accuracy, and makes the highly pleasing observation, “the costumes for *The Tudors* were never intended to be an authentic depiction” of Henrician courtly attire, but were instead intended to convey “a sense of the court while also appealing to modern audiences” (303).

In the book's penultimate chapter, Megan Hickerson tackles the difficult topic of sexual violence in *The Tudors*. She carefully dissects the depiction of rape and adultery, as well the show's “misogynist element”, and its depiction of “unfavorable stereotypes about homosexuality”, by focusing on the show's “use (or overuse) of sex as a plot device” (21-22). The final chapter, by Elizabeth Lane Furdell, is a short, but interesting, discussion of illness and medicine in the show.

The number of chapters in the book is perhaps part of the reason the volume offers such a superficial treatment of *The Tudors*. The chapters are relatively short, which means they neither offer a complex analysis of the show, nor do they engage with the vast scholarship on historical adaptations: they instead focus on summarising the show. Likewise, the book lacks a clear

editorial review, as the chapters of the book, when read together, frustratingly repeat the same specific details. For example, more than half of the book's chapters explicitly state that Jonathan Rhys Meyers plays Henry VIII. It is also worth noting that while queens do feature in the book, it is somewhat perplexing that a volume of essays about a TV show that revolves around a king was published as part of Palgrave Macmillan's "Queenship and Power" series. Indeed, Robison notes in his introduction: "Henry's legacy and his place in historical memory—both real and imagined—occupy all contributors to this volume; Henry is the main character" (7).

For this reviewer, the overall impression the volume gives is that Robison is trying to make *The Tudors* into what he wants it to be—or what he thinks it should be—rather than what it actually is. Robison's indignation that entertainment value trumped historical accuracy—"Unfortunately, while *The Tudors* is visually appealing ... no amount of beauty or good acting can rescue it from Hirst having drastically rewritten history without any real justification for doing so" (6)—is both frustrating for the many scholars who engage with popular depictions of the past in a meaningful way that moves beyond so-called 'accuracy', and feels suspiciously like an after-the-fact complaint that the show was not subjected to the rigours of academic peer review.

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