The Middle Ages on Television
Critical Essays

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Henry VIII surely ranks at or near the top of the list of most recognizable kings of the European past. Especially in Holbein’s iconic Whitehall mural portrait, Henry has an instant recognition factor that few of his predecessors or successors could claim.¹ We know he had lots of wives and that he had a penchant for cutting off their heads. Thanks to his sturdy stature in Holbein’s portrait and the enduringly influential 1933 film version of his life, The Private Life of Henry VIII starring Charles Laughton,² he is also known as a man who liked his food. From his association with appetites of all kinds have come “Henry VIII Feasts” (where “serving wenches” bring you roast chicken) and a 2007 chocolate bar television commercial featuring diverse people of the past, including the Holbein Henry, feasting on Snickers bars.³ Until recently, in popular culture Henry was thus almost always a chubby poultry-loving bon-vivant with a bad track record with wives. He was of course a natural, then, for a 2004 episode of The Simpsons, where Homer fulfills all the clichés, eating compulsively and beheading all his queens, except for his first, blue-haired wife, Margarine of Aragon.⁴ The creators of the recent television series The Tudors thus cast deliberately against type when they chose a conspicuously fit and slim Jonathan Rhys Meyers to play Henry VIII.⁵

The Tudors, a Canada-Ireland co-production made primarily for the Showcase cable network in the U.S. and broadcast by the CBC in Canada, BBC2 in Britain, and TV3 in Ireland, was created, written, and executive-produced by

William Webbe’s Wench

Henry VIII, History and Popular Culture

SHANNON MCSHEFFREY
the British television and film writer Michael Hirst. Hirst is known for his historical dramas; he wrote the two Elizabeth films starring Cate Blanchett and a number of other historical films and television series, including most recently The Borgias and Vikings. His version of Henry VIII's court focuses much more on the king's reputation for sexual voraciousness than on his love of chicken. Unlike the Charles Laughton or Homer Simpson versions, this Henry is not at all comic, or at least never intentionally so; the series focuses on a heady mixture of sex, religion, and politics. Henry and many of his closest companions are played by actors far younger than the actual historical figures, and (unsurprisingly) much better looking. Hirst evidently was interested in using the historical setting and relatively well-known dramatic events of Henry VIII's court and life—his many marriages, the English church's split from Rome—to dramatize the conflicts and moral dilemmas faced by those born with beauty, power, and wealth.

Few would argue that the series advances our historical understanding of the period, and of course it was not intended as a piece of scholarship. Whether the series succeeds as television is a matter of taste; it was mostly panned by television critics but has a large and loyal fan base. The Tudors' Facebook page surpassed the 1 million "likes" mark in May 2013 and continues to be very active although the last episode aired in 2010.

The idea of Henry's court as a playground for the young, well-born, and beautiful—and the idea of Henry himself as strapping, handsome, and athletic—is not entirely fanciful. Henry acceded to the throne when he was eighteen. In his youth Henry was tall, slim and well-built, and at his court, surrounded by companions of his own age and a beautiful queen in her mid-twenties, he delighted in sponsoring masques, revels, feasts, and jousting tournaments. Hirst's approach is to telescope Henry's reign, to imagine the young Henry living the Entourage lifestyle at the same time as he implemented major changes to state and church. As Hirst has said, the conceit for the series is that "the courts of Europe were run by people in their teens and twenties... That's why they were so crazy. We have this image now that the court is always middle-aged, but it wasn't true." Hirst is, of course, right; kings were sometimes young and handsome, and the series successfully captures a moment around 1520 when the kings of Spain, France, and England were all young, athletic, good-looking, intellectual, and ambitious men. But just as Henry's court was not always middle-aged, it was also not forever young—and the Master Narrative moments of Henry's reign (divorce, Reformation, and five of Henry's six marriages) occurred when Henry was over forty, and no longer slim, athletic, and good-looking. There would be no point, however, in simply focusing on the early part of the reign when the Entourage comparison would be more appropriate, because those years have none of the well-known events that viewers associate with Henry.
The Tudors navigated what viewers knew about and expected to see regarding Henry, and reflect on the differences between what scholars and scriptwriters make of the remnants of the past with which both work.

“Accuracy” and Screen History

Does it matter that Jonathan Rhys Meyers does not look like Henry VIII? Conventionally, historians have decried the inaccuracies in historical films and television programs, acting as “historian-cops” in pointing out the errors, big and small, in screen treatments of the past. Scholars who study the presentation of the past on screen have urged us to move beyond such “fidelity criticism,” arguing that veracity is beside the point in historical films and television—that historians who hunt out “errors” have misunderstood the ways the past is used in popular culture and have emphasized more than do most working academic historians a positivist approach to the knowability of the past. Jerome de Groot has argued in particular regarding The Tudors that the series deliberately disavows any attempt to know the actuality of history. Hirst, he contends, uses the series to deride academic history as “creaky, unsexy, and ineffectual,” consciously playing with historical tropes about Henry both in order to challenge popular cliché and to argue that “all historical representation is merely a recapitulation of something unknowable,” challenging “the reality of the official discourse of the past.” The Tudors, he contends, makes no attempt to be true to the historical record and to assess it on those grounds is to miss its point.

Some of the “inaccuracies” in The Tudors do indeed knowingly play with audience expectations, especially the most obvious disjuncture between “fact” and The Tudors—everyone knows what Henry VIII looked like, and that he looked nothing like Jonathan Rhys Meyers. Rhys Meyers’s anti-Henry was part of the show’s schtick: a good deal of the publicity surrounded Rhys Meyers’s not being the corpulent ginger-haired man you expect. But if The Tudors is in some ways iconoclastic, “a mewing, brattish, present media form” that emphasizes “flash, superficial beauty and surface,” the series does not embrace a postmodern rejection of “historical accuracy” to nearly the extent that de Groot claims—in fact it uses claims to the “historical truth” of what appears on screen as an important element of its appeal to viewers.

As Richard Burt has argued, turning away from “fidelity” has allowed us to understand more fully the uses of the past in modern media, but it has prevented serious discussion of an important aspect of those cultural products: their invocation of a real, authentic past. No doubt to some viewers the question of “accuracy” is irrelevant—both for those who like the show and for those who don’t. For many others, however, historical television and film dramas attract precisely because they are about a “real” history, and the creators of historical dramas are very attentive to those desires in their viewers. Although the purpose of a show like The Tudors is not to present scholarship but to entertain, to give the viewer pleasure, the entertainment value of what happens on the screen cannot be entirely divorced from its historicity. Historical dramas draw on the attractions and the pleasure of narratives “based on a true story”; whether or not the story told actually bears a close relationship to “what really happened,” clearly the claim of authenticity is thought to resonate with audiences.

In the publicity that accompanies historical television series and films, directors, producers, writers, and actors repeatedly invoke the copious amounts of “historical research” that underpins what appears on the screen. As Burt has commented, new media forms have only increased the resources film and television producers provide viewers. Paratexts that accompany the depiction on screen—DVD features, commentaries, onscreen pop-up bubbles, apps, Facebook groups, Twitter feeds, and so on—often focus on the “real history” that lies behind the scenes. The Tudors are no different; in a DVD feature for Season 2, for instance, entitled “The Tower of London,” Tom Stammers, identified as “Tudors historian” (not Tudor historian, but Tudors historian), leads Natalie Dormer, the actress who plays Anne Boleyn, around the Tower to visit the site of Anne’s final days. Repeatedly the dialogue emphasizes the historicity of the scenes in the program: “How historically accurate is that?” Dormer asks about a particular plot point; “Undoubtedly accurate,” Stammers replies. Presumably this rhetoric of authenticity and truth is so frequently used because it works as a marketing tool. The Tudors writer, Michael Hirst, has emphasized the substantial research he conducted for the series’s scripts. Although he concedes that he played around with chronology, Hirst claims that the show is “85% historically accurate”; Hirst in fact says that he created The Tudors to “correct” the public’s perception of Henry as “he appears in the famous Holbein portrait, all ruffs around his neck and bulging belly.” He also emphasizes his avid reading of works of history and his fascination with footnotes (“I get a lot of juice out of the footnotes in history books”). A fan page for The Tudors has established a wiki that links the scenes in the show to the historical works that verify their “truth,” complete with a quotation from Michael Hirst at the top which again emphasizes his reliance especially on footnotes “in very dry and learned texts.” Other historical television series and films have similarly emphasized deep research in dusty tomes or even original archival documents: a “making of” feature on the DVD of Luc Besson’s Joan of Arc film The Messenger claims, for instance, that the film “was based on six months of extensive research in the archives.”

Many of these projects engage historical advisors, which often represents a rhetorical claim to scholarship and accuracy more than it indicates any signifi-
ciant academic influence on the products. Some of the historical consultants are professional "providers of historical content," as is Justin Pollard, named as historical consultant on The Tudors (his many and diverse credits include the films Pirates of the Caribbean 4 and Les Misérables, and the television series Geldof in Africa and Egypt's Golden Empire). Others are academics; a University of Warwick art historian, Jenny Alexander, appears for instance as historical consultant for the loosely historical Pillars of the Earth. As one documentary-maker has put it, these academic advisors are employed primarily as "a public relations gambit" and rarely have any "meaningful input" into the projects, even in documentaries (presumably even less so for historical dramas).

The rhetoric of copious research and accuracy often places those doing publicity for the films or programs in a double bind—because (as those historian-cops have frequently complained) historical dramas on film and television almost always subordinate "accuracy" to the narrative demands of the story on screen. This forces those writers and directors into making internally contradictory statements: the film or program is "all true," but it's a fiction so we've taken liberties; it's accurate, but historians cannot agree anyway and so our interpretation is as good as theirs; it's based on rigorous research, but it's only a movie. As Hirst puts it:

As a whole, The Tudors is remarkably true, but it's drama, not history. You have to condense things and highlight things, but my only resources are books by historians, which I read avidly. All historians disagree with one another anyway, so the idea that there is one forensic truth is itself a lie.

Despite reading historians' works (and especially their footnotes) "avidly," Hirst questions whether they in fact know anything at all:

It's not like any of the historians were actually there. So what you read in history books, is that historically accurate? Not necessarily. And in any case I'm not writing a documentary.

Although Hirst and others involved in these productions are happy to allude to postmodern challenges to "truth" in history when it suits their purposes, fundamentally their approach to "historical accuracy" is firmly positivist. Although Hirst on the one hand invokes a right to speculate on the points where "facts" are not clear, he maintains that what he has done is as true to the historical record as it can be—until, that is, someone points out that Henry VIII had two sisters rather than the one composite character who appears in The Tudors, at which point "creative license" is invoked.

This is not to say that claims of research are entirely spurious—and this is what makes The Tudors a particularly curious historical drama. Unlike most other recent historical costume dramas, which have been based on popular fiction (such as The Pillars of the Earth and World Without End, both based on

William Webbe's Wench (McSheffrey)
asylum. Neither royal nor local civic officials could arrest those who had been
given the privilege of sanctuary. Several of these sanctuary precincts, in which
rental housing was built for those who wanted or needed to live within the bounds,
became communities in themselves, with some people living in them for years and
even decades. Perhaps the most important sanctuary in the realm was at West-
minster Abbey, which was located right next to the royal palace at Westminster. 37

On 9 September 1537, Thomas Cromwell, then titled “Lord Privy Seal”
and effectively second-in-command to the king, received a letter from a man
named Harry Atkinson, who was imprisoned in the “convict house,” or prison,
inside the Westminster sanctuary. Atkinson, a friend of one of Cromwell’s
underlings, wrote to the Lord Privy Seal to explain that William Webbe, the
keeper of Westminster sanctuary, had unjustly imprisoned him; he hoped that
Cromwell would order him to be released. 38 Atkinson explained in his letter that
he had expressed concern about a scurrilous story regarding the king that was
spreading through the sanctuary precinct, for he knew that this story constituted
treason. The story also involved Webbe, and Webbe had, in a rage, thrown Atkin-
son in prison. As a result of Atkinson’s letter, Cromwell mandated a semi-official
enquiry to report to him. Witnesses appearing before the enquiry each testified
that they had heard, at third- or fourth-hand (never from Webbe himself), that
William Webbe had been going around the precinct telling the following story:
Webbe had been riding a fair gelding, near one of the royal palaces southeast
of London, with “a pretty wench” (never named) behind him. The king met up
with them on the road and he said to Webbe, “Webbe, thou art never without
such pretty carriage behind thee.” Webbe answered that she was a pretty piece
for a poor man to pass the time with, and the king “plucked down her muffler,”
kissed her, and commanded her to alight from the horse. He then took her off
and “had his pleasure of her” (the wench’s response—whether this was at her
“pleasure”—remaining unstated, irrelevant to the men who told and heard this
story). The king thus took the woman away from Webbe, who had “kept” her for
two years before this. In some versions witnesses told, Webbe swore “a vengeance
on him for taking away of my wench.” Most of those testifying to the enquiry
ended the story with the conclusion, “and thus the king lived in adultery.” 39

This is a colorful and interesting story, but Cromwell and his enquirers
apparently decided not only that the encounter it describes between Webbe, the
wench, and the king had not actually happened, but also that William Webbe
had never told the story in the first place. Although no judgment is recorded—
it was an unofficial commission of enquiry and any decision was likely taken
informally by Cromwell, perhaps with the king’s input—we can infer from a let-
ter to Cromwell from one of the commissioners that the story’s genesis was
attributed to a certain Robert Sharpe, who had devised the tale for his own mali-
cious purposes. 40 Sharpe coveted William Webbe’s job. He hoped that by telling
everyone that Webbe was accusing the king of adultery that Webbe would come
under suspicion of treason. This would neatly, Sharpe hoped, remove Webbe
from his position in the sanctuary. Sharpe’s tactic, however, did not succeed;
Webbe emerged from this episode unscathed, continuing to govern the West-
minster sanctuary for years thereafter (Sharpe’s and Atkinson’s subsequent
careers are unknown). 41 Although we cannot simply accept the judgment of these
kinds of ad hoc political enquiries as established fact, in this case the commis-
sioners’ judgment seems the most likely scenario. The evidence thus points to
the tale of William Webbe’s wench as a fiction rather than as a real episode in
Henry VIII’s life; even the association of William Webbe himself with the story
appears to have been invented. It was an interesting tale, though, and it is not
too surprising that the enquiry’s evidence indicates that it flew easily, through
supper-table talk and social chit-chat, among sanctuary men, sanctuary func-
tionaries, visitors to the precinct, servants to the king, and beyond the sanctuary
among the inhabitants of the town of Westminster.

If the story’s spread does not surprise us, some other aspects of it might,
given what we think we know about Henry VIII. The fundamental point of the
story, in all the versions the witnesses told, was that the king “lived in adultery.”
This suggests that Henry was not, as we might have assumed, well-known as a
philanderer, but that even among criminals living in sanctuary such a story had
the power to shock. The tale could be used to smear William Webbe because to
accuse the king of adultery was tantamount to treason. We must recall: this was
a delicate time. The dinner party at which Atkinson said he first heard the gossip
was in early September 1537 and the inquiry held in the later part of that same
month; according to other evidence, the story may have originated in the fall of
1536. The story and its lesson, that the king was an adulterer, was presumably
meant, and taken, as an implicit criticism of the grounds for the execution of
Anne Boleyn, the king’s second wife. Anne was executed for adultery and incest
in May 1536 and the king married his third wife, Jane Seymour, within days. At
the time of this inquiry in September 1537, Queen Jane was heavily pregnant
with the future Edward VI, who was born about two weeks later. Probably also
relevant is the episode’s timing in the midst of a period of profound religious
change; Henry’s role as supreme head of the newly formed Church of England
added another layer to the accusation of sin. All the witnesses were keen to
dissociate themselves from the treasonous statements, each emphasizing that he would
never have told the story, that he had only heard it. A palpable anxiety in the doc-
uments suggests fear that even hearing the tale might lead to the noose or the even
more terrifying execution of drawing and quartering meted out to traitors.

As historical evidence, I would suggest that these records tell us about the
role of rumor in the 1530s and subterranean antagonism to Henry's policies; they tell us about the informal and ad hoc processes through which many legal or quasi-legal issues were handled in the 1530s, skirting formal and public legal prosecution; they tell us about everyday life and local politics in the Westminster sanctuary; they tell us about the purely instrumental role women labeled "wenches" were seen to have in sexual transactions by men in and around the Westminster court; they tell us about Henry's sensitivities to talk about his sex life and the complicated relationship of the king's body to the body politic (about which more below). I do not think they tell us about a real episode where William Webbe and his never-named wench met up with Henry VIII on a road near one of his royal palaces, although of course one never knows.

William Webbe and His Wench in The Tudors

Now for the version of the story of William Webbe's wench in The Tudors. The scene occurs in episode five of the second season. Rather than occurring in 1537, it is placed in about 1535, at a point where Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn has entered a rocky stage. After having given birth in 1533 to a girl, the future queen Elizabeth, Anne has just miscarried a second pregnancy, a boy. Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher languish in the Tower, awaiting execution for refusing to recognize the king's supreme headship of the new Church of England. The king's former brother-in-law and closest friend Charles Brandon, duke of Suffolk, who opposed the Boleyn marriage and was exiled from court for it, has recently been re-admitted to the king's circle.

In this scene, Henry and Brandon are riding through a forest and Henry ruminates on an issue that previous scenes make clear he associates with Anne's recentmiscarriage, which he fears was caused by her rumored promiscuity before their marriage. Henry asks Brandon: "Have any of the women you've ever bedded lied about their virginity?" Brandon laughs and answers, "I'd say it's the other way round: did any of them not lie about it." Looking at Henry's face, he realizes that he has said the wrong thing, and begs Henry's forgiveness; Henry says, "It doesn't matter. I asked for the truth and you told me.

At this moment they encounter a man and a woman riding on the forest road toward them. The guards bark at them to dismount, and Henry, also dismounting, approaches them as they bow and curtsey deeply before him. The man is dressed in non-descript commoner clothing, and the woman wears a long riding cloak over a simple gown, her head wrapped in a shawl. We cannot see her face, as her eyes are demurely cast down.

"Good morrow, Your Majesty," the man says.
"Good morrow," Henry replies. "What's your name?"


Henry approaches the woman, saying, "Come here, Bess," as he bids her rise from her deep curtsey.

As Henry unwraps the shawl from Bess's head, Webbe babbles, "I assure your majesty I have a permit and permission to ride through your forest; I swear it and can easily prove it."

Henry, however, pays no attention as he examines Bess's face (she's remarkably beautiful) and then kisses her. He says, "Come with me," and leads Bess, who is now smiling, to his horse. Webbe is left on the road, trying not to look affronted, while Brandon smirks.

Cut to a big four-poster bed in a royal bedchamber, where Henry and Bess are having passionate sex. "Are you really the King of England?" Bess asks.
"No," replies Henry, "I was only pulling your leg." They climax noisily.

Neither Bess nor William Webbe appear again in the series.

Both the Tudors version and the Westminster sanctuary gossip version are stories. What is interesting here is looking at the differences in how they are told, and the points they are meant to impart. In the modern version, the story is used to illustrate Henry's freewheeling sexual appetites; not surprisingly given the narrative logic of the series, it is read straight ahead, jumping straight to the purported scene rather than considering it as an unsubstantiated rumor. Unlike the 1537 version, the wench has a name—Bess—and she clearly is pleased by the encounter. The scene fits into the main narrative lines of the episode: it illustrates Henry's doubts about Anne's chastity before they married and their growing estrangement. It also suggests Brandon's satisfaction that Henry has begun to turn away from Anne, which he hopes will result in a shift in the balance of power on the king's council away from the Boleyns and toward him. It also offers an opportunity to provide a sex scene, without which no episode of The Tudors would be complete.

Television History and Source Material

Thus, not too shockingly, the version of a historical moment told in The Tudors strips off the complications, places it in a different time, and focuses on the sex. My surprise in seeing this scene play out on the television screen was not in the way it was used in the series, but that it was there at all. So where did Hirst find the William Webbe episode? It turns up, as far as I am able to determine, in only one scholarly book on Henry VIII's reign, G. R. Elton's 1972 Policy and Police, where Elton (the most prominent Tudor historian of his generation)
interprets it in much the same way I have, treating it as an example of the kinds of rumors that were current in the period after Anne Boleyn’s execution, and as evidence for Henry’s sensitivity particularly about his and his queen’s sexual reputations. He does not treat it as an actual event. If this were where Hirst found this episode, he was thus choosing to interpret it rather loosely. I am fairly sure, however, that Hirst did not use Elton’s book, and that his much-vaunted historical research emphasizes popular histories rather than the “very dry and learned texts” he says he consulted.

The Tudors wiki on Hirst’s historical sources includes an entry on the William Webbe episode, and identifies, correctly I believe, the source: Alison Weir’s Henry VIII: The King and His Court, published in 2001. Alison Weir, a prolific writer of popular history, has written a very readable biography of the king, based largely on published primary sources. Her version of the episode, as the wiki indicates, is not complicated:

In the late 1530s, a man called William Webbe complained that, whilst he was riding in broad daylight with his mistress near Eltham Palace, they encountered the king, who took an immediate fancy to the “pretty wench,” pulled her up onto his horse, and rode with her to the palace where he ravished her and kept her for some time.

Note here that William Webbe is just a man; he is not keeper of the Westminster sanctuary personally familiar to the king, which was a crucial part of the situation as outlined in the actual documents, and the sanctuary itself is wiped out of the telling. Weir here uses the word “ravish,” which connotes abduction and rape in the 16th century, although possibly she means it in a looser sense simply to indicate sexual intercourse; the original sources do not discuss the wench’s agency at all in the episode, but nor do they suggest that the king took her by force. The mediated nature of the tale—the fact that the evidence is not a complaint from William Webbe directly, but rather a third-hand rumor that he had complained—is entirely lost, not to mention the examiners’ evident conclusion that the story had been invented in the first place. Weir not only treats it as a fact that Webbe complained, but also treats as factual the subject of the complaint, Henry’s taking of the wench. Weir relates the incident as one of a number of pieces of evidence that show (she argues) that Henry still had a “wandering eye” even in his later years and was known to have had many casual sexual encounters. Weir herself did not read the original documents in the case, but used the published summaries of the archival material in the multi-volume Letters and Papers of Henry VIII. Some of Weir’s misconstruing of the case is due to the incomplete and (uncharacteristically) misleading summary of the original documents in the Letters and Papers. She nonetheless has taken even that material out of context, focusing on the interesting tale without accounting for why such a story was recorded in the first place.
translates well into a quick punchy scene that is perfect for *The Tudors*, moving the plot along nicely.\(^{56}\)

**Sex, Henry VIII and The Tudors**

Weir’s version of William Webbe’s wench also works better than the scholarly version because—despite the series’ stated determination to challenge the stereotypes about Henry VIII—it comfortably confirms what we already “know” about the king. Henry had a lot of wives, and thus must have been sex-mad, and in any case there were lots of bosoms and wenches back in those days. But do we really “know” this about Henry VIII?

Although in *The Tudors*, the rampant sexuality of the king and his courtiers is open and unconstrained, in real life Henry’s court was not a sexual playground. Nor, even in private, was his sex life anywhere near as wanton as the modern TV version, despite the multiplicity of wives. Precisely how sexually active Henry was remains a matter of scholarly debate.\(^{51}\) Historians agree that he was not altogether faithful to Katherine of Aragon; he had one acknowledged illegitimate child, Henry FitzRoy, the earl of Richmond, born in 1519, and two known mistresses, Elizabeth Blount, Henry FitzRoy’s mother, and (somewhat ironically) Mary Boleyn, Anne’s sister, with whom he had a relationship in the early 1520s. As he entered the more eventful parts of his reign—the mid-1520s, 1530s, and 1540s, the time period the TV series covers—the evidence that Henry had partners outside of marriage becomes ambiguous. The rumors and stories that circulated in the 1530s, of which the tale of William Webbe’s wench is but one example, have led some scholars to contend that Henry was promiscuous. Those rumors, however, are far from smoking guns, and most historians argue that Henry’s sexual conduct after the mid-1520s was unadventurous and even perhaps entirely confined to the marriage bed.\(^{52}\) Indeed, his biographer in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Eric Ives, states that by the 1530s Henry was “certainly having psychosexual problems,” and may even have been intermittently impotent.\(^{53}\) If Henry was seeking sex outside of his marriage, he did not do so openly nor (as we have seen) did he tolerate speculation about it.

This is not to say that Henry’s sex life, and his fertility, were issues of only private concern. The king’s body in both figurative and literal senses was the body politic, and his generative sex acts were deeply important to the future of his kingdom—perhaps particularly as he lacked (until September 1537) a male heir. If Henry’s advisors sought to suppress any suggestion of the king’s adultery, at the same time they promoted through official portraiture Henry’s fecundity and, necessarily in tandem, his sexuality. Both his fertility and his potency were implicitly in question by 1536 if not before, perhaps in his own mind, as Ives suggests, as much as in whispers among his subjects. His queens repeatedly miscarried and produced only girls, and doubts mounted as his health took a turn for the worse after the 1536 accident. The portraits of the mid- and late-1530s, Kevin Sharpe argues, thus constituted a public relations offensive, designed to counter any doubts about the future of the regime. As Sharpe comments, the famous Holbein Privy Chamber portrait, dating from 1537 before his son’s Edward’s birth, is “priapic,” leaving no doubt that the lack of a male heir thus far had by no means been due to any deficits on his part.\(^{54}\)

If sometimes we feel that *The Tudors* emphasizes sexuality too much, it should be noted that not even that television series emphasizes the male genitals as much as the prominent codpieces in Henry’s actual portraits, and his armor, did.\(^{55}\) One distinct difference between Henry’s actual dress—at least in his portraits—and Jonathan Rhys Meyers’s costume in the television series is the latter’s de-emphasis of genitals. Indeed comparing Holbein’s portrait of Henry with a standard publicity still for the series where Rhys Meyers poses in a similar stance, Rhys Meyers seems almost neutered.\(^{56}\) The prominence of Henry’s codpiece serves not only to highlight the ambiguities of Henry’s public image in the 1530s, but also shows up a contemporary tendency both to avoid explicit references to penises in many cultural representations of masculine potencies, and to de-link priapism from the issue of fertility.

The portrayal of sex in *The Tudors* is one of the most obvious distinctions between this “Tudorist” television series and other recent television historical dramas set in the medieval period. To be sure, as in most medieval series, the plot-lines in *The Tudors* assume that high-status men could take women (or, occasionally, men) at will, the plucking of sexual fruit assumed as an element of aristocratic or royal privilege.\(^{57}\) The use of sex by the men of the royal court in *The Tudors*, however, is somewhat different from the popular view of aristocratic sexual capacity in the Middle Ages, where kings and nobles seize women, especially those of lower rank, without regard for their consent. The 1995 film *Braveheart* revived in the Anglophone world a centuries-old myth about medieval feudalism, that there existed a “right of the first night” [*ius primae noctis*], by which medieval lords customarily had the entitlement, as part of a feudal lord’s rule over his dependents, to deflower the brides of their dependents on the night of the wedding.\(^{58}\) In *Braveheart*, an English lord’s determination to take his “prima nocta” with a local Scottish bride ignites a Scottish rebellion of independence, the lord’s taking of the bride’s body clearly serving as a metaphor for England’s rape of Scotland.\(^{59}\) In the recent spate of medieval television productions, the plot-lines strongly associate aristocratic male sexuality (and in some cases, any kind of medieval male sexuality) with coercion. In *The White Queen*, which chronicles the Wars of the Roses in 15th-century England, most of the
sexual relationships in the dynastic marriages are brutish couplings in which husbands force themselves on their frightened wives; even the central and erotically charged relationship between King Edward and his future wife Elizabeth Woodville begins with his nearly raping her. One of the central turns in the plot of *The Pillars of the Earth* occurs when the earl of Shiring's beautiful daughter, Lady Aliena, is raped by the dastardly William Hamleigh, whose father has usurped the earldom. In *The Vikings*, scenes with female characters, especially in early episodes, seem more often than not to involve repelling rapists, a gesture to contemporary girl-power framed in a medieval world of sex as rape. *World Without End* takes the sexual violence further, with perhaps more scenes of rape than consensual sex.

If most of the recent medieval television series employ a brutalist vision of sex before the civilizing force of modernity, *The Tudors* presents a model of erotic relationships that emphasizes sex as strategy and commodity—a paradigm perfectly in line with modern tales of sex and the single girl from Helen Gurley Brown through *Sex and the City* to *The Bachelorette*. Coercive sex is mostly absent from *The Tudors*; although during the last season and a half the sex turns darker and less fun (including two rape scenes), in the first two seasons, sexual connections on *The Tudors* are free from any hint of force. In contrast to the medieval series—including *The Vikings*, another Hirst vehicle—the women in *The Tudors* do not have to suffer seemingly constant brutal and unwanted sexual advances; instead they are willing partners of men who seduce them, as is William Webbe's Wench, who does not seem at all displeased to be taken by Henry. The tone is set in the first episode, when Henry, bedding his second lady-in-waiting of the hour, prefaches their lovemaking by asking, "Do you consent?" Already naked, she unironically signals both her desire and her recognition of his sovereign status by breathily answering, "Yes, Your Majesty." Yet even if his royal status commands, it is not simply Henry's majesty that attracts women, but his beauty: as Ramona Wray has remarked, "Henry's desirability cuts across any question of consent." What woman would refuse him as bedpartner, king or not?

Not all women, nor all men, are part of this sexual economy in *The Tudors*; there is no suggestion that Sir Thomas More's eye wandered, for instance, nor that his wife or daughter would either excited or accept sexual overtures outside marriage. This is not problematic in the series: those characters signal by the sobriety of their costume and facial expressions that such things are unthinkable, and thus they simply do not arise in the plot. Women whom powerful men might want sexually are marked by their demeanor, physical beauty, and cleavage, and they are willing when asked. The female sexual partners gain, too; the king's attention is in itself a reward for their beauty, and implicitly and sometimes explicitly they are also rewarded materially. If the series assumes that powerful men, especially the king, could have whomever they pleased, they (mostly) want only those who are happy to acquiesce. Anne Boleyn's famous story—as the woman who won the crown by being the only one who held out—drives much of the plot of the first two seasons, but it too ultimately confirms the same assumptions about women and the strategic uses of sex in the series.

**Conclusion**

Michael Hirst sought material and inspiration for *The Tudors* from "what really happened"—both the obvious (the divorce; Anne Boleyn's beheading; the split from Rome) and the relatively obscure (the dispute that led to the slaying of one of Charles Brandon's men; William Webbe's wench). Hirst shaped both the major familiar events and the little-known vignettes (which almost no one in the audience would be able to distinguish from the scenes he had invented from whole cloth) to suit his narrative requirements. Although in publicity for *The Tudors* Hirst has emphasized his deep research in obscure works of historical scholarship—dusty tomes with many footnotes—his sources for those vignettes were instead popular biographies of Henry VIII. As in the case of William Webbe's wench, the intricacies and subtleties of academic analyses of those scenarios would have been poor sources for his screenplays. Popular histories were much more fitting for his purpose, providing him with straightforward anecdotes, already stripped of complications, which could easily be plugged in to meet the narrative demands of his scripts. If many other recent television screenplays have used popular fiction as sources, Hirst was on to something when he sought story lines, even at one or two removes, from "true" history. As many shows with contemporary settings exemplify, stories "ripped from the headlines," or from the judicial and quasi-judicial sources of the past, are compelling. And they are compelling both because viewers have pleasure in knowing what they see on the screen "really happened," and because the stories have *already* been given a narrative form in the original historical records. The archives of medieval and Tudor England are filled with ripping yarns, because those who drew up the documents in the first place had to convince the original intended reader (a judge, a government official) to take a particular action. A riveting tale was the best way to do this. Lawyers and bureaucrats of the medieval and early modern past knew, just as 21st-century screenwriters know, how to tell a good story.

In *The Tudors*, Hirst settled on a formula that reflects and develops recent popular cultural uses of the reign of Henry VIII. The differences between the Tudorism exemplified by *The Tudors* and the television medievalisms of similar recent series are often subtle, as many of the same themes and filmic techniques are on display. *The White Queen*, for instance, which aired in 2013 on the BBC
medieval costume dramas presented on British and North American television in recent years. These series feature sumptuous production values and big-name actors, but scripts that lack nuance. Hirst and other creators—whether they set their stories in the Tudor period or the medieval, or indeed in other far-off places or long-ago times—use the distant past mostly as a place to project fantasies about simple categories and unambiguous choices. Men are men, women are women, and the brave and honorable are clearly demarcated from the villainous. Moral problems are presented in black and white; humor and irony are absent. If technology, rationality, and even sexual pleasure are figured as modern, so also are troublesome complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. As Hirst puts it, I'm not very good at writing about contemporary society.... William James said that for a baby, the world is a buzzing, booming chaos and it's like that for me; I can't make much sense of it. I feel more comfortable with history.

Hirst may situate The Tudors on the threshold of modernity, but he explicitly chooses not to enter fully into the unstable and insecure place that is the modern world.

Notes
1. Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Kit French, Eric Reiter, Tim Stretton, Karolyn Kinane, and Meriem Pagès for their suggestions and comments on this essay, and the history students at Concordia who invited me to present an early version of it to them.


4. Matt Groening, "Margical Mystery Tour: The Simpsons (Fox, February 8, 2004). The Henry VIII story makes up one of three mini-stories told in the episode.

5. Michael Hirst, The Tudors (Showtime/CBC/BBC2/TV3 Ireland, 2007–2010). According to an interview Susan Bordo, who played Anne Boleyn, the producers also wanted Anne to be blonde, and only agreed that she should be dark (as the real Anne was) after Dormer lobbied them. Susan Bordo, The Creation of Anne Boleyn: A New Look at England's Most Notorious Queen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 204–5.


9. For a good summary of Henry's biography and for further references, see E. W. Ives, "Henry VIII (1491–1547)," ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, Oxford Dictionary of National Biog-
Part 1. Personal and Political Desires


12. See especially Tatiana C. String and Marcus Bull, "Introduction," in Tudorism, ed. String and Bull, 1–12, and the other essays in the volume; see also Mark Rankin, Christopher Highley, and John N. King, eds., Henry VIII and His Afterlives: Literature, Politics, and Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Bordo, Creation of Anne Boleyn.


18. See, for instance, television critic Charlie Brooker's remarks: the show 'may or may not be accurate,' but regardless, Jonathan Rhys Meyers's version of Henry is "not a fascinating villain, or even just a flawed human being, but a twit.' I'm giving him two more episodes to show some redeeming qualities. Or even just mildly interesting ones. And if he can't manage that, he can sod off back to Tudorland. Or wherever it was King Henry came from." "Screen's Guardian Screen's Burn/' Charlie Brooker's Screen Burn/' The Guardian, October 13, 2007, sec. Media, http://www.guardian.co.uk/ media/2007/oct/13/comment.tvandradioart.


21. In 2008 when the feature was made, Stammers was a doctoral student in 19th-century French history at Cambridge. http://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/directory/ets27@cam.ac.uk.


29. Freeman, "It's Only a Movie," 5–7.


32. More charitably, Tom Betteridge has suggested that "The Tudors is an exemplary piece of postmodern history. It desires authenticity, makes it a fetish, while at the same time denying its possibility." "Henry VIII and Popular Culture," in Henry VIII and His Afterlives, ed. Rankin, Highley, and King, 215.

33. Das, "Lie Back,"

34. Tom Betteridge comments on how closely the series follows reported speech in its account of the fall of Anne Boleyn. "Henry VIII and Popular Culture," 214–15.


36. Kew, The National Archives [TNA], SP 1/124, fol. 204r; SP 1/125, fols. 40r–43v; SP 1/127, fol. 201r. I thank the Royal Armouries for the records accessed (sponsored and heavily favored by the king) making "buggery" a crime, one that was passed in
59. The screenwriter for Braveheart seems to be responsible for inventing the term "prima nocta," which is a nonsensical rendering of the Latin phrase jus primae noctis. It is now perhaps the most common form of the term in English. This illustrates the influence of the film in spreading the concept, although at the same time the myth-breaking possibilities of the internet have served to create more pages debunking the "right" as defining it, as a google search of the phrase "prima nocta" shows.


62. Michael Hirst, Vikings, History Channel, 2013. There are rapes, attempted rapes, and other violence engendered by sex in episodes 1, 2, and 4.

63. Michael Caton-Jones, World Without End, DVD (Canada, Germany, UK: Tandem Communications, 2012). There are rapes and near-rape scenes in episodes 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 (sometimes more than one per episode).

64. One involves George Boleyn, Anne's gay brother, who anally rapes the woman whom he has been forced to marry on their wedding night (S1E6); the other follows the standard aristocratic rape script as Thomas Culpepper, who will become Queen Catherine Howard's lover, comes upon the wife of a park keeper, and finding her alone, forces himself on her simply because he can (S1E1).


66. One historical figure whom Hirst probably should have put in the "no-sex" category, but made instead into a "mindless tart" (as Susan Bordo puts it) was Marguerite of Navarre, the sister of the French king Francis I. Marguerite was an intellectual known for her piety and virtue, a patron of great significance for the development of the French Renaissance. In The Tudors, she is a busy minx whose brief appearance (S1E4) involves her enthusiastically jumping into Henry's bed. Bordo, Creation of Anne Boleyn, 206–7.


69. The Tudors, S2E6.


72. See especially String and Bull, "Introduction."

73. Freeman, "It's Only a Movie," 18–19.

74. Curtis, "Michael Hirst." (Hirst misquotes James.)

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