

# The Middle Ages on Television

## *Critical Essays*

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## William Webbe's Wench

### *Henry VIII, History and Popular Culture*

SHANNON MCSHEFFREY

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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

*The Tudors*, a Canada-Ireland co-production made primarily for the Showtime 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

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*.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> *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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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* is among a recent wave of intended-for-American-cable series that might best be called, to use critic Mike Hale's apt term, "frequently-removed-costume dramas"<sup>11</sup>: they feature graphic violence and as much nudity and sex as television standards will allow. *The Tudors*, inspired by historical dramas on HBO such as *Deadwood* and *Rome*, was a commercial success, and so in turn it begot other historical television series on American cable networks: *The Pillars of the Earth*, *Camelot*, *World Without End*, *The White Queen*, *The Borgias*, and *Vikings* (the latter two involving the same production team as *The Tudors*). The other series, save for the Renaissance-themed *Borgias*, all have medieval settings, and in many ways *The Tudors* fits happily within the phenomenon of television medievalism. Henry VIII's reign—more so than that of his daughter Elizabeth, also of course a frequent subject for popular media forms—carries many of the same signifiers as the Middle Ages in modern Western culture. Like the medieval period, the Henrician age is pre-industrial, bucolic, and "traditional." Violence is frequent, bloody, and too often unjust; socio-political hierarchies are rigid, kings often despotic; people live in castles and manor houses; costumes are sumptuous; ladies are beautiful and aristocratic men look chivalric and virile whether in their armor or in their hose and high leather boots.

Yet *The Tudors* does not quite fit the medievalism paradigm, and indeed is the best-known recent example of the cultural phenomenon scholars have labeled "Tudorism," a cousin of the much-better-studied medievalism.<sup>12</sup> In particular, while the Middle Ages stand in popular culture as the obverse face of modernity, both in its embrace of "traditional" values of honor, bravery, and chivalry and in its rejection of technology, progress, and rationality, the Tudor age by contrast is characterized as standing on the threshold of the modern age. Like other Tudorist products, *The Tudors* presents to its viewers the attractions both of castles, armor, and velvet gowns, and the sense that its characters—who see the Reformation, New World explorations, and technological advance—live at the dawn of "us."

The particular popular interest in Henry VIII also means that *The Tudors* centers on a figure who is much better known to audiences than perhaps any historical medieval figure. Probably for as simple a reason as his colorful marital history, Henry is memorable. The creators of *The Tudors* thus had both challenges and opportunities posed by audience expectations for Henry VIII that historical characters in the recent medieval-set television dramas, such as Queen Maud, Edward III, Edward IV, or Rodrigo Borgia, did not present. The challenges and opportunities inherent in depicting historical periods that readers and listeners already think they know are very familiar to academic historians, who face these issues routinely in the classroom and in any writing they do for students or general readers. This essay will both consider how the creators of

*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.<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> *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.<sup>15</sup> 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 mewling, brattish, present media form" that emphasizes "flash, superficial beauty and surface," the series does not embrace a post-modern rejection of "historical accuracy" to nearly the extent that de Groot claims<sup>16</sup>—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.<sup>17</sup> No doubt to some viewers the question of "accuracy" is irrelevant—both for those who like the show and for those who don't.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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"<sup>21</sup> (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."<sup>22</sup> 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").<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup>

Many of these projects engage historical advisors, which often represents a rhetorical claim to scholarship and accuracy more than it indicates any signifi-



cant 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*).<sup>26</sup> 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*.<sup>27</sup> 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).<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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

Ken Follett novels; *The White Queen*, based on several Philippa Gregory novels; *Game of Thrones*, based on the G. R. R. Martin series), Hirst clearly does use “history books” in writing his scripts. He has not simply designed the dramatic arc from a schematic outline of Henry’s reign, as de Groot suggests he does. Almost all the characters, major and minor, are grounded on historical persons, or at least bear their names, and scenes are often inspired by, if not precisely based on, the historical record.<sup>34</sup> Watching the series while working on a project involving reading archival manuscript sources from Henry’s reign, on several occasions I had the strange sensation of seeing acted out, in a scene from *The Tudors*, an obscure scenario that I had just read about in an archival document—often wrenched out of its context, but nonetheless recognizably linked to the original evidence. In episode three of the second season, for instance, a sword fight between two courtiers that ended in the death of one of Charles Brandon’s retinue was the subject of a brief scene, used by Hirst to show the spiraling quarrel at court between Charles Brandon, the duke of Suffolk, and the Boleyn family. The original records of the subsequent homicide case at the court of King’s Bench show a much more complicated situation, which (understandably enough) the three-minute scene does not explore.<sup>35</sup> Hirst employs these kinds of obscure vignettes not because the viewer would expect them—indeed few viewers would be able to distinguish the “strange but true” stories (as *The Tudors Wiki* puts it) from those that Hirst invented—but primarily because, as Hirst himself says, sometimes the stories are so good that he couldn’t *not* use them.

Where, precisely, did Hirst find these stories? How did Hirst employ historical scholarship for his conceptualization of the series and for the details of his scripts? What is the relationship between the flourishing industry of history publications on the reign of Henry VIII—from über-scholarly journal articles to accessible academic books to populist histories—and his portrayal in 21st-century film and television? To explore these issues, I will look more closely at a short scene from the second season of *The Tudors* that corresponds to a little-studied set of records from the 1530s, dealing with a man named William Webbe and his wench.

### *William Webbe and His Wench in the Historical Record*

First, the 1530s version. I found the documents, a set of files relating to an informal enquiry undertaken at chief minister Thomas Cromwell’s behest, in the voluminous set of records in the National Archives known as the State Papers. I came across them while researching the subject of sanctuary in the late medieval and Tudor period.<sup>36</sup> Sanctuaries were small territories attached to religious houses where accused criminals, debtors, and illegal foreign workers could seek

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 Westminster Abbey, which was located right next to the royal palace at Westminster.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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 Atkinson 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 he 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."<sup>39</sup>

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 letter 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.<sup>40</sup> 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 nearly, 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 Westminster sanctuary for years thereafter (Sharpe's and Atkinson's subsequent careers are unknown).<sup>41</sup> Although we cannot simply accept the judgment of these kinds of ad hoc political enquiries as established fact, in this case the commissioners' 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 functionaries, 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 documents 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 recent miscarriage, 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 curtsy 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?"

"William W-Webbe, Your Majesty," the man stutters.

"No. Your sweetheart's name," Henry says.

"Bess, Your Majesty," Webbe answers, looking mystified.

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

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.<sup>42</sup> 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 queens' sexual reputations. He does not treat it as an actual event.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup>

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 connoted 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*.<sup>46</sup> 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.

Apart from the dating, Weir's text is clearly the germ of the scene that appears in *The Tudors*; the wresting of the narrative from its context was Weir's work, not Hirst's, and in this case he is actually very faithful to his source, with one obvious difference—the meaning of the sexual encounter, as titillating or distasteful. That meaning is determined largely by the divergent characters of the king in the two narratives—the story of the king taking William Webbe's wench has an entirely different valence when the hunter is young, sexy, and fit, than when he is overweight and old before his time. In the TV series, Henry is played by a slim, good-looking actor, who was about thirty when the second season was shot. The real Henry about whom the sanctuary men told the stories in 1537, and about whom Weir wrote in her telescoped version of the story, was a very large and unfit 46-year-old.

The famous Holbein portrait dates from that same year, but this is likely an idealized version, using perspective to make the king look sturdy rather than seriously overweight. Following a serious accident at a tournament in 1536, Henry's health seems to have taken a turn for the worse and he became much less active than he had been, with resulting weight gain. The king's armor in the late 1530s indicates he would have taken an XXXL in today's sizes<sup>47</sup>; a tall man of between 6'2" and 6'4", at that time he probably weighed around three hundred pounds. Weir uses the story to support the general point she makes in that section of her book, that despite his physical deterioration, Henry remained sexually rapacious. By contrast, clearly Hirst had no interest in portraying Henry as a fat and lecherous middle-aged man; indeed he and others explicitly linked the importance of having an attractive actor playing Henry to the abundant sex on screen. As Rhys Meyers himself put it in an interview with the *Daily Mail* in 2009, "The reality is that viewers don't want to see an obese, red-haired guy on a TV series. I mean, I wouldn't like to see somebody who looked like Henry when he was older having sex."<sup>48</sup>

If Hirst relied closely on Weir's biography of Henry as he wrote his scripts, her book is hardly the kind of "very dry and learned text" Hirst describes himself eagerly reading, and by no means could he have spent much time looking at her footnotes, which are highly uninformative.<sup>49</sup> This is not to say that Hirst *should* have used scholarly history with lots of boring footnotes: filming my version of the story of William Webbe's wench, with its required convoluted explanations about sanctuary, its insistence on the third-handedness of the tale, and its conclusion that the scenario itself probably did not happen, would be long, complicated, and perhaps not all that entertaining. It might make an interesting postmodern film that subordinates a straightforward storytelling to multiple viewpoints and an unstable narrative, but it would not suit the kind of television costume drama Hirst devised in *The Tudors*. However Weir's brief version



translates well into a quick punchy scene that is perfect for *The Tudors*, moving the plot along nicely.<sup>50</sup>

### *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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> 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 rapacity 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” [*jus 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.<sup>58</sup> In *Braveheart*, an English lord's determination to take his “*prima nocte*” 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.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> *World Without End* takes the sexual violence furthest, with perhaps more scenes of rape than consensual sex.<sup>63</sup>

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),<sup>64</sup> 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 Bess, 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, prefaces 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?<sup>65</sup>

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 excite 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.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup> 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

in the UK and on Starz in the U.S., was marketed to some extent as a prequel to *The Tudors*.<sup>68</sup> Based on the 15th-century Wars of the Roses, it has a similar look and features some of the same actors; its early episodes focus on the same narrative arc as the first seasons of *The Tudors* (beautiful commoner defies handsome king's demand that she come to his bed as his mistress, to be rewarded for her resistance with marriage and a crown). Yet although the two series, set a mere half-century apart, have much in common with one another and appeal to the same audience, *The White Queen* is situated much more firmly outside of modernity than is *The Tudors*, which repeatedly emphasizes itself as a genealogy of the present. Thus *The Tudors* includes a scene, set in 1535, where the "new" invention of the printing press is unveiled, accompanied by a portentous announcement that "it will change the world"<sup>69</sup>—even though the printing press was invented about 1450 and had come to England in the 1470s. The new world-changing invention would, in fact, have fit perfectly in a chronological sense into *The White Queen*, set between the 1460s and the 1480s, but such forward-looking technology would disrupt the medieval feel of that series.

As the printing press exemplifies, the popular distinctions between what feels "medieval" and what feels "Tudor" are sometimes at odds with historical chronology: historically, for instance, accusations of witchcraft were far more prevalent in the 16th century than in the 15th, and yet in the popular imagination it is the medieval period, rather than the reign of Henry VIII or Elizabeth, that connotes magic and witchcraft.<sup>70</sup> Thus story lines in *The White Queen* are suffused with magic and the supernatural, while in *The Tudors* all plot motors are strictly anchored in this world. Elizabeth Woodville (the titular character in *The White Queen*) and Anne Boleyn were both accused of using necromancy to ensnare their royal husbands; in *The White Queen*, Elizabeth Woodville really is a witch who literally enchants Edward IV, while the viewer of *The Tudors* knows that the charges against Anne Boleyn are without basis.<sup>71</sup> Whatever Anne's faults, they are modern faults of over-ambition and greed, not primitive manipulation of the supernatural. The characters in *The Tudors* act in ways recognizable to viewers; throughout *The Tudors*, the 16th century is signaled as the beginning of "us." This is a theme of Tudorist popular culture: with religious change, New World explorations, and a growing sense of national identity, 16th-century England stands in the popular imagination as a liminal period at the entryway to modernity. Plotlines involving the Reformation, New World voyages, and new technology run through Tudorist works, including *The Tudors*, often in ways that express ambiguity about the nature of those changes.<sup>72</sup>

Although in subtle ways Tudorist popular culture differs from its medieval counterpart—especially in its liminal position at the dawn of the secular and technological modern—*The Tudors* has a great deal in common with the

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.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup>

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.

Tatiana C. String, "Myth and Memory in Representations of Henry VIII, 1509–2009," in *Tudorism: Historical Imagination and the Appropriation of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Tatiana C. String and Marcus Bull (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2011), esp. 201–206. The original Whitehall mural portrait, painted in 1537, was destroyed by a fire, but was frequently copied in the years that followed its creation. The Walker Gallery in Liverpool holds an early copy: "The Walker Art Gallery's Henry VIII," [www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/henry/walker.aspx](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/henry/walker.aspx).

2. Alexander Korda, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (United Artists, 1933). For other influential screen depictions of Henry, see Thomas S. Freeman, "A Tyrant for All Seasons: Henry VIII on Film," in *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 30–45.

3. "The Buttery King Henry VIII Feast," [http://www.infoniagara.com/dining/buttery/buttery\\_king\\_henryVIII.aspx](http://www.infoniagara.com/dining/buttery/buttery_king_henryVIII.aspx); "Snickers Greensleeves Commercial," [http://youtu.be/4yuouH4U\\_6c](http://youtu.be/4yuouH4U_6c).

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 conducted with Natalie Dormer, 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.

6. "Michael Hirst," *United Agents: The Literary and Talent Agency*, <http://unitedagents.co.uk/michael-hirst#profile-4>.

7. "The Tudors," Metacritic, [www.metacritic.com/tv/the-tudors](http://www.metacritic.com/tv/the-tudors); for fan response, see *The Tudors Wiki*, [www.thetudorswiki.com](http://www.thetudorswiki.com).

8. <https://www.facebook.com/TheTudors>.

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-*



raphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 159–61, 171–72.

10. Bordo, *Creation of Anne Boleyn*, 206.

11. Mike Hale, "Blood on Their Hands, and Sex on Their Minds," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2010, sec. Television, <http://tv.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/arts/television/23pillars.html>.

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*.

13. Gary R. Edgerton, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether," in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 6–7; Erin Bell, "Televising History: The Past(s) on the Small Screen," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 1 (2007): 5. For the argument that fidelity does matter, see Thomas S. Freeman, "It's Only a Movie," in *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–28; David Puttnam, "Has Hollywood Stolen Our History?," in *History and the Media*, ed. David Cannadine (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 160–66.

14. Jerome De Groot, "Slashing History: The Tudors," in *Tudorism*, ed. String and Bull, 243–60 at 244, 250.

15. String, "Myth and Memory," 220.

16. De Groot, "Slashing History," 243–44, 247–50, 259–60.

17. Richard Burt, "Getting Schmedieval: Of Manuscript and Film Prologues, Paratexts, and Parodies," *Exemplaria* 19, no. 2 (2007): 217–19.

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 twat. 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." "Charlie Brooker's Screen Burn," *The Guardian*, October 13, 2007, sec. Media, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/oct/13/comment.tvandradiarts>.

19. Freeman, "Tyrant for All Seasons," 5–7.

20. Burt, "Getting Schmedieval," 217–18; Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (London: Routledge, 2012), 86–87.

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/tes27@cam.ac.uk>.

22. Chris Curtis, "Michael Hirst, The Tudors," 21 May 2009, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/michael-hirst-the-tudors/5001701.article>. Hirst completes this thought when, in the series' final episode, he has Holbein paint the portrait as Henry is on his deathbed in 1547.

23. Curtis, "Michael Hirst."

24. "Strange but True?" *The Tudors Wiki*, n.d., <http://www.thetudorswiki.com/page/Strange-but-True+%3F>.

25. Quoted in Burt, "Getting Schmedieval," 236; for other examples, see Felix Schröder, *The Making of The Pillars of the Earth*, DVD (Tandem Communications, 2010); Steven Jack, *History vs. Hollywood: Kingdom of Heaven*, Documentary, History Channel, 2005.

26. Pollard operates through the firm Visual Artefact, [www.visualartefact.com](http://www.visualartefact.com).

27. "Jenny Alexander (V)," [www.imdb.com/name/nm4129541](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm4129541).

28. Brian Winston, "Combating 'A Message without a Code': Writing the 'History' Documentary," in *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe*, ed. Erin Bell and Ann Gray (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45–46.

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

30. Curtis, "Michael Hirst."

31. Lina Das, "Lie Back and Think of Olde England! Is This TV's Sexiest Historical Romp?" *Mail Online*, September 7, 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-480475>. Ridley Scott makes a very similar remark in Jack, *History vs. Hollywood: Kingdom of Heaven*.

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.

35. For the original case, see Shannon McSheffrey, "The Slaying of Sir William Pennington: Legal Narrative and the Late Medieval English Archive," *Florilegium* 28 (2011): 169–203. Hirst's source is likely the brief account in Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: The King and His Court* (New York: Random House, 2001), 314.

36. Kew, The National Archives [TNA], SP 1/124, fol. 204r; SP 1/125, fols. 40r–43v; SP 1/127, fol. 201r. I found reference to the manuscript records through the published calendar (summary) of the State Papers known as *The Letters and Papers* (J. S. Brewer, James Gairdner, and R. H. Brodie, eds., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* [London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1862], 12/2:243, 273, 491); as below, I later discovered that G. R. Elton had discussed the records in *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 10–11.

37. J. H. Baker, *The Oxford History of the Laws of England, Volume VI, 1485–1558* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 544–51.

38. TNA, SP 1/124, fol. 204r.

39. TNA, SP 1/125, fols. 40r–43v.

40. TNA, SP 1/127, fol. 201r.

41. He was still acting in this capacity in 1544: TNA, KB 27/1131, rex m. 6.

42. Hirst, *The Tudors*, S2E5.

43. Elton, *Policy and Police*, 10–11.

44. "Strange but True?" Another popular biographer, Carolly Erickson, also tells the story; Carolly Erickson, *Great Harry* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1980), 253. Weir's version seems more likely to be the source for Hirst's scene.

45. Weir, *Henry VIII*, 377.

46. *Letters and Papers*, 12/2:243, 273, 491.

47. Graeme Rimer, Thom Richardson, and J. P. D. Cooper, eds., *Henry VIII: Arms and the Man, 1509–2009* (Leeds: Royal Armouries, 2009), 95. I have calculated the size from the waist measurement.

48. Gabrielle Donnelly, "Question Time with Jonathan Rhys Meyers," *Mail Online*, May 16, 2009, sec. Email, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1180855>.

49. Weir's notes refer only to the general work in which a source can be found, so that the reference for the passage quoted above simply reads (with no volume or page number) "L&P"—for *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, a collection that has about thirty-seven volumes, some of them over 1000 pages, a less-than-precise footnoting system. Weir, *Henry VIII*, 598 n. 13.

50. For a discussion of the influence of earlier popular histories on films such as Korda's *Private Life* and *A Man for All Seasons*, see Freeman, "Tyrant for All Seasons," 34–35.

51. For a survey of historians' views of Henry's sex life, see Greg Walker, "A Great Guy with His Chopper? The Sex Life of Henry VIII on Screen and in the Flesh," in *Tudorism*, ed. String and Bull, 236–37.

52. Elton, *Policy and Police*, 9–12; Walker, "Great Guy," 235–40.

53. Ives, "Henry VIII."

54. Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 137.

55. Tatiana C. String, "Projecting Masculinity: Henry VIII's Codpiece," in *Henry VIII and His Afterlives*, ed. Rankin, Highley, and King, 148–51.

56. See "Still of Jonathan Rhys Meyers in *The Tudors*," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm2409073408/nm0001667>.

57. There are two major gay story lines: Sir William Compton, one of the king's retainers, has a sweet love affair with the musician Thomas Tallis before he (Compton) dies an untimely death from the sweating sickness; George Boleyn, Anne's brother, has a more ambivalent relationship with another musician, Mark Smeaton. The series does not ever mention England's first statute (sponsored and heavily favored by the king) making "buggery" a crime, one that was passed in



1533; however, in both gay story lines those involved are careful to be discreet as it is assumed that the relationships must be concealed. On the statute, see Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Reformation Parliament 1529–1536* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 185.

58. Alain Boureau, *The Lord's First Night: The Myth of the Droit de Cuissage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). As Boureau notes, the "droit de cuissage" (the French form of the term) was frequently invoked in media discussion of sexual harassment in France from the 1980s onwards.

59. The screenwriter for *Braveheart* seems to be responsible for inventing the term "prima noctua," 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 propensities of the internet have served to create more pages debunking the "right" as defining it, as a google search of the phrase "prima noctua" shows.

60. James Kent, Jamie Payne, and Colin Teague, *The White Queen* (USA/UK: BBC/Starz, 2013).

61. Sergio Mimica-Gezzan, *The Pillars of the Earth*, DVD, Pillars of the Earth (Tandem Communications, 2010), episode 1.

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, U.K.: Tandem Communications, 2012). There are rapes and near-rapes 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 (S3E6); 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 (S4E1).

65. Ramona Wray, "Henry's Desperate Housewives: The Tudors, the Politics of Historiography and the Beautiful Body of Jonathan Rhys Meyers," in *The English Renaissance in Popular Culture: An Age for All Time*, ed. Gregory M. Colón Semenza (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 30–31.

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 busty minx whose brief appearance (S1E4) involves her enthusiastically jumping into Henry's bed. Bordo, *Creation of Anne Boleyn*, 206–7.

67. See Paul Gewirtz, "Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law," in *Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*, ed. Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 2–13.

68. See Glenda Cooper, "Will the Plantagenets Now Topple the Tudors?," *Telegraph.co.uk*, May 31, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/bbc/10091651/Will-the-Plantagenets-now-topple-the-Tudors.html>; Jolie Lash, "The White Queen Q&A: Max Irons Talks Taking On The War Of The Roses," *Access Hollywood*, accessed January 17, 2014, [http://www.accesshollywood.com/the-white-queen-qanda-max-irons-talks-taking-on-the-war-of-the-roses\\_article\\_83944](http://www.accesshollywood.com/the-white-queen-qanda-max-irons-talks-taking-on-the-war-of-the-roses_article_83944).

69. *The Tudors*, S2E6.

70. Anita Obermeier, "Witches and the Myth of the Medieval Burning Times," in *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen J. Harris and Bryon Lee Grigsby (New York: Routledge, 2008), 226–237.

71. Elizabeth's spells feature in virtually every episode of *The White Queen*; the accusations against Anne Boleyn fall in Season 2, episodes 8 and 9, of *The Tudors*. Historians disagree whether Anne Boleyn was in fact accused of sorcery; see G. W. Bernard, "The Fall of Anne Boleyn," *The English Historical Review* 106, no. 420 (July 1, 1991): 584–610; Retha M. Warnicke, "The Fall of Anne Boleyn Revisited," *The English Historical Review* 108, no. 428 (July 1, 1993): 653–665. The accusations against Elizabeth Woodville were made in Parliament in 1484: Chris Given-Wilson, ed., *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England* (London: British History Online, 2010), <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=116561> (6:240).

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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