



Author Response to a Review of:

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

William B. Robison

Author Response to a Review of *History, Fiction, and "The Tudors": Sex, Politics, Power, and Artistic License in the Showtime Television Series* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Published in *Royal Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (2017).

I am grateful to Elena Woodacre, Editor-in-Chief, for publishing this response to a recent review of *History, Fiction, and The Tudors: Sex, Politics, Power, and Artistic License in the Showtime Television Series*, a collection of essays I edited, in *Royal Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (2017). Paradoxically, the reviewer accuses me, and by extension my contributors, of “trying to make *The Tudors* into what [I want] it to be—or what [I think] it should be—rather than what it actually is” (262); however, he reviews the book not for what it actually is but based on what he wants it to be—or thinks it should be—even if he never makes clear what that is. He notes that “*The Tudors* has garnered limited attention from scholars” but criticizes us for ignoring the “burgeoning field of adaptation studies” (258), fails to acknowledge that we engage with—and have written a good bit of—the relevant literature on the Tudors on film and television, and offers no examples of the “vast scholarship on historical adaptations” he chides us for slighting (261). In any case, though, we are uninterested in conforming our thinking about history and film to the theoretical precepts of any particular sub-discipline.

The reviewer upbraids me for “hostility” to *The Tudors*, though I explicitly disavow that in my introduction, as he notes. As proof of my alleged animus he cites my comment that the series’ “apparent promise of concern for historical accuracy is one on which four seasons and thirty-five hours of the hugely popular cable television series largely fail to deliver” (258), yet he offers no contrary evidence and would be hard pressed to do so.¹ He dismisses examples of “anachronism, time compression, distortions, and outright inventions” (my words) as an “unhelpful list” (his words), though why it is unhelpful—or irrelevant—he does not say (258). In a particularly condescending passage, he laments: “Robison’s indignation that entertainment value trumped historical accuracy ... is ... frustrating for the many scholars who engage with popular depictions of the past in a meaningful way that moves beyond so-called ‘accuracy’” (262). The reviewer claims that hostility reappears “throughout the book” (258), though his own comments on certain chapters, including one of mine, belie that. In fact, some chapters are more critical than others because some aspects of the series warrant more favourable commentary than others, and because as editor I did not seek to impose a unified interpretation on contributors with varying opinions. For

¹ My statement explicitly refers to the series’ tagline, “You think you know a story, but you only know how it ends. To get to the heart of the story, you have to go back the beginning.”

genuine hostility to *The Tudors*, one should see David Starkey's critique of the series.² However, the reviewer seems resistant to any criticism of the series, even by established Tudor scholars, especially if it concerns historicity.

The reviewer describes as "problematic" (258) my unfavourable assessment of the characterization of Henry VIII in Michael Hirst's script and Jonathan Rhys Meyers' performance in Chapter 2, "Henry VIII in *The Tudors*: Romantic Renaissance Warrior or Soap Opera Playboy?"; however, he labels as "welcome" (259) my more positive opinion of Maria Doyle Kennedy's role in Chapter 3, "Catherine of Aragon in *The Tudors*: Dark Hair, Devotion, and Dignity in Despair." He criticizes Retha Warnicke for her "unhelpful focus" (259) on historical accuracy in her careful analysis of the series' treatment of Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr in Chapter 5, "The Last Four Queens of Henry VIII"; Carole Levin and Estelle Paranque for their "problematic emphasis" (259) on historicity in their nuanced discussion of "The Significance of the King's Children" in Chapter 6; and Kristen Walton for "disappointingly reinforcing the volume's unhelpful theme" (260) in her clever take on "The King's Sister(s), Mistresses, Bastard(s), and 'Uncle'" in Chapter 7. He also faults Anne Throckmorton for observing that "factual integrity is lost" (260) with regard to "The King's In-Laws" in Chapter 8; Keith Altazin for failing to engage the historical inaccuracies he painstakingly documents in Chapter 14, "Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy: Conspiracy and Rebellion"; and Carlie Pendleton for commenting in Chapter 17, "All That Glitters is (Fool's) Gold: Depictions of Court Entertainment," that with her subject "history rather than fiction dominates compared to other aspects of the show" (261). He faintly praises Caroline Armbruster's sophisticated discussion of religion in Chapter 13, "'The Dyer's Hands Are Always Stained': Religion and the Clergy," as "in some places insightful" but does not say where, and responds to her contention that the series is a "frustratingly superficial depiction of religious life in Tudor England" by asserting that she ignores the show's purpose (260), though he never says what that purpose is.

The reviewer approves Krista Kesselring's fine work in Chapter 15, "Crime, Punishment, and Violence," though not primarily because she correctly points out that the series "ably conveys something of the violence of Henry's reign" but because she provides what he calls "a productive means of thinking about the way violence of the past is shown today" (261). He also lauds Tatiana String for accurately recognizing the series' "unusually deep engagement with works of art" (261) in her skilful assessment in Chapter 18,

² Nicole Martin, "The Tudors is Gratuitously Awful Says Dr David Starkey." *The Telegraph*, 16 October 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/3210142/BBC-period-drama-The-Tudors-is-gratuitously-awful-says-Dr-David-Starkey.html>.

"Holbein and the Artistic Mise-en-Scène of *The Tudors*," and praises Maria Heyward for her "highly pleasing observation" (his words) in her authoritative discussion in Chapter 19, "Fashionable Fiction: The Significance of Costumes," that costumes were not intended to be authentic but to convey "a sense of the court while also appealing to a modern audience" (her words) (261). While he does not denigrate Megan Hickerson's powerful and all-too-timely criticism of sexual violence in Chapter 20, "Putting Women in Their Place: Gender, Sex, and Rape," neither does he praise it, nor does he acknowledge that the "misogynistic element," "unfavourable stereotypes about homosexuality," and "use (or overuse) of sex as a plot device" might warrant rebuke (261).

The reviewer offers little further analysis of the aforementioned chapters, all of which do far more than carp about historical inaccuracies, and none at all for Susan Bordo's feminist approach to "*The Tudors*, Natalie Dormer, and Our 'Default' Anne Boleyn" in Chapter 3; Victor Stater's thorough account of "The King's Friends" in Chapter 9; Samantha Perez's brilliant disentanglement of "Humanism and Humanitarianism" in Chapter 16; or Elizabeth Lane Furdell's expert and largely positive discussion in Chapter 21, "Incomplete Prescription: Maladies and Medicine." Surprisingly, he passes over the three chapters by Robin Hermann, Glenn Richardson, and Thomas Betteridge in a single sentence. Hermann draws heavily on literature addressing Tudor adaptations in Chapter 10, "Postmodern and Conservative: The King's Ministers," which seems to warrant favourable comment on the reviewer's terms. More surprisingly, the reviewer fails to challenge the withering critique of the series' handling of that subject in "A Cardboard Crown: Kingship in *The Tudors*" by Richardson, one of the leading authorities on Tudor monarchy and Renaissance kingship in general. The reviewer also refuses to engage with the creative approach to discussing the royal court taken in Chapter 12, "*The Tudors* and the Tudor Court: Know Your Symptom," by Betteridge, who—like Richardson—has written previously about Tudor films.

The reviewer seems to believe that assessing the historicity of a filmic depiction of the past has nothing to do with meaningful engagement with the film or, more incredibly, that one can analyse how a modern film depicts the past without considering its relationship to historical evidence of that past. Lest we get caught up in postmodern angst about truth and the reality of the past, consider this: in the past certain conditions prevailed, certain events occurred, and certain people lived, acted, and died in certain ways. Much of the evidence for that is lost, but much survives. The truest account is the one that makes the best use of that evidence to give the most accurate description of that past.

Historians have a responsibility to address the accuracy of historical films, television shows, novels, and so on, and they have no reason to apologize for doing so. Just as science is what it is, history was what it was, and neither is required to be what we want it to be, but like science, history matters. An accurate understanding of both is necessary in dealing with modern issues, whether it is the contest between science and pseudo-science in discussions of global warming, historically based debates over the British or American constitutions, or other matters. There is nothing to stop filmmakers and novelists from going beyond the facts in writing historical fiction or science fiction, but pointing out where they have done so is appropriate for scholars to do. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, when even many well-educated people know little about history or science, it is imperative. It might seem the Tudors have little to do with this, but only recently journalists have made wildly inaccurate comparisons between American President Donald Trump and Henry VIII, and commentators often quote Robert Bolt's saintly Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* rather than the real man.³

Concern for accuracy is not incompatible with aesthetic appreciation of historical films or interest in what those films tell us about the time in which they were made. Most scholarship on Tudor films simultaneously addresses accuracy, aesthetics, and presentism, emphases that are entirely complementary. As recent work on "Tudorism" shows, there is plenty of need and opportunity for such analysis. In addition, movies and television can be excellent teaching tools, especially for historical method and critical thinking. Students are often quite adept at picking apart what is based on historical evidence, what is done to suit the filmmaker's agenda, and how these combine to make a good or bad film. Outside the classroom, knowing where a film toys with the truth can help viewers get filmmakers' jokes or perceive irony, making their experience more enjoyable, not less. *History, Fiction, and The Tudors* accommodates all those interests, and I am proud that it does.⁴

³ Tom Freeman makes a strong argument for addressing accuracy in his introductions to Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman, *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1-29, and Thomas S. Freeman and David Smith, eds., *History and Biography on Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), forthcoming. On Henry and Trump see, for example, Mike Alhadeff, "How Donald Trump's Presidency Will Be Similar to the Tudor Reign of King Henry VIII," *Newsweek*, 19 January 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-henry-viii-inauguration-2017-ruling-modern-monarchy-544670>; Emile Simpson, "Ego-maniac Revolutions Don't Last," *Foreign Policy*, 1 March 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/01/ego-maniac-revolutions-dont-last/>. On misquotation of More, see Matthew T. Mehan, "Getting to Know Thomas More," *National Review*, 25 August 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/215252/getting-know-thomas-more-matthew-t-mehan>.

⁴ Tatiana C. String and Marcus Bull, eds., *Tudorism: Historical Imagination and the Appropriation of the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); William B. Robison, "Blazing Tudors: Comedy and 'History' on Film and Television," <https://thecreationofanneboleyn.wordpress.com/2013/07/15/blazing-tudors-comedy-and-history-on-film-and-television/>; Eric Josef Carlson, "Teaching and Technology: Teaching Elizabeth I With Movies: Film, Historical Thinking, and the Classroom," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 38, no. 2 (summer 2007): 419-28.

Beyond methodology, the reviewer complains unfairly that several chapters repeat details—e.g., the information that Meyers plays Henry—apparently not considering that some readers might consult only one chapter. He also objects to the book being included in Palgrave Macmillan’s “Queenship and Power” series, but that was the publisher’s decision and had the approval of series editors Charles Beem and Carole Levin, both members of *Royal Studies Journal*’s advisory board and the latter a contributor to the book. There are, after all, six queens in the show who are married to Henry and more who are the wives of foreign monarchs.

Finally—and this is unapologetically personal on my part—the reviewer describes my chapter on Henry as “dangerously problematic.” The reviewer finds me dangerous in part because of my observation that Meyers’ Henry is “seldom the Renaissance man that he should be and hardly ever a warrior. He is much more the shallow soap opera playboy. That many viewers still find him appealing is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the phenomenon that is *The Tudors*.” Again, the reviewer says nothing to refute this but he declares that he is “appalled by the offensively heteronormative and highly problematic endnote Robison included to that sentence: ‘Many female participants in my history and film courses (and not a few older adults and professional colleagues) have informed me in no uncertain terms that they do not care whether *The Tudors* is accurate or not, as long as it features abundant images of Meyers and Henry Cavill. That male participants have made similar remarks about various women in the cast is less surprising” (258-259). While the reviewer finds that anecdote troublesome, it is entirely true, and I included it for the same reason that the individuals in question commented to me in the first place, i.e., to be funny, not to project or enforce heteronormativity. The inclusion of this anecdote was never intended to be offensive, merely illustrative of reactions to the series.

History, Fiction, and The Tudors received positive endorsements from Carolyn Colbert, Susan Doran, Thomas Freeman, Ronald Fritze, Catherine Loomis, and Greg Walker, an impressive collection of scholars. But make no mistake—the reviewer is entirely free to dislike or disagree with the book, in whole or in part, just as I am at liberty to object to what I regard as ill-considered criticism of my contributors and myself as the editor of the work. Having addressed my concerns, I hope we all can move on in a more collegial spirit.

WILLIAM B. ROBISON
Southeastern Louisiana University

EDITORIAL NOTE: It is the policy of the *Royal Studies Journal* to allow reviewers to express their own personal opinion of the works that they review for us, in the spirit of academic critique and freedom of expression. It is important to note that the verdict of the reviewers are their own personal views of the works in question, not necessarily the corporate appraisal of the staff or editorial board of the journal itself. However, we do ensure that all reviews in the *RSJ* conform to our guidelines for reviewers, particularly with regard to length and engagement with wider scholarship in the field. We respect the right of authors and editors to respond to reviews in our journal and would encourage responses to be submitted to the journal through the same online process as the normal submission for reviews and articles via our website. Guidelines for author/editor responses can also be found on our 'Submit' page, in the Book Review section.

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