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1

The Network King: Re-creating Henry VIII for a Global Television Audience

Ramona Wray

A glossy publicity still for the second series of Showtime's *The Tudors* pictures Henry VIII (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) earnestly in conversation with Pope Paul III (Peter O'Toole). The teasing fantasy of a-meeting-that-never-happened speaks to a niche audience capable of understanding – and taking pleasure from – *The Tudors*' edgy and playful approach to the historical record. Staged solely for advertising purposes (Henry and the Pope never meet in the series itself), the photograph purposefully courts controversy, provoking assessments such as David Starkey's that *The Tudors* is 'terrible history with no point'.[1] Other historians have singled out the fact that, in addition to the fictive encounter, the pope in the picture is, of course, the wrong pope (it was Pope Clement VII, not Pope Paul III, who refused the divorce and excommunicated Henry). This 'error' – along with many of *The Tudors*' signature telescopings, temporal switchings, accelerations and substitutions – has been seized on as either a bizarre anomaly ('Quite why the Pope has to be the wrong one is a mystery,' reflects John Guy) or a genuine mistake indicative of poor research.[2] The confusion among the critics is revealing of the gap that currently exists between traditional scholarship and a relatively new mode of television programming, one which often has historical and literary adaptation at its heart.[3] Rather than anomaly or mistake, the image described above is indicative of some of the ways in which *The Tudors* functions to encourage a process now recognized as characteristic of quality television – a 'complex seeing'.[4] The process works in part through intertextuality: because it is O'Toole who plays the Pope, the character is associated with world-weariness, dissoluteness and corruption, qualities that remind viewers of Home Box Office's rival figure, the mafia don, Tony Soprano, and reflect an insouciant reading of faith. By

the same token, Jonathan Rhys Meyers' elegantly febrile looks – and his reputation for playing enigmatic and disturbed roles – creates an impression of a moody, sensitive and self-destructive Henry.[5] The privileging of two star personalities ensures that the break with Rome – and viewers' comprehension of the significance of the Reformation – takes on appropriately seismic proportions. In addition, O'Toole and Rhys Meyers are linked at a celebrity level by their Irish 'hellraiser' reputations and at a theatrical level by the recollection of O'Toole's famous performance as Henry II: the pairing in this case draws on early modern iconography to lend another layer to contemporary understandings of the conflict between England and the papacy as a familial separation between father and son. Thus, the portrayal, while deftly maximizing O'Toole's charismatic performance – and usefully foregrounding the consistently oppositional nature of the forces of Rome – successfully translates the metaphorical complexities of Renaissance ideologies. More broadly, the self-conscious fakery of the meeting – the important element of play – draws our attention to the artifice of the cinematic frame, spotlighting *The Tudors'* foregrounding of interpretation and its concomitant reading of history as inherently unstable. Refuting any easy sense of the 'truth', and insisting on the place of violence in processes of historiography, *The Tudors* illustrates, in exciting and compelling ways, the important role of television in a new making of the past.

Produced by a transnational organization for a multinational audience and winner of prestigious EMMY awards, *The Tudors* is exemplary of a current aesthetics of television. Television, over the last ten to fifteen years, has undergone a fundamental shift. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons argue that, in response to declining network audiences and the growth of satellite and cable channels, contemporary TV has witnessed the emergence of '"must see" television' shows, such as *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing* and *Madmen*, that are not simply part of 'a habitual flow of television programming but ... "essential viewing" ... distinguished by the compulsive ... practices of dedicated audiences who organize their schedules' to facilitate the viewing event.[6] *The Tudors'* re-creation of the life of Henry VIII constitutes just such 'event television' – a television project characterized by a feature-film quality (the series is shot entirely in HDCAM), a budget of tens of millions and a stellar, international cast. Perhaps most distinctive is *The Tudors'* epic scale: series one (ten hour-long episodes) opens in 1509, the year of ascension; series two (also ten hour-long episodes) concludes in 1536, on the day of the execution of Anne Boleyn. Series three (eight hour-long episodes) opens with Henry's wedding to Jane Seymour, while the fourth series

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(ten hour-long episodes) ends with Henry's death in 1547. With thirty-eight hours of television devoted to exactly that many years of history, *The Tudors* constitutes an extraordinarily detailed take on the reign and an unprecedentedly ambitious attempt to televise history. In between the monarch's ascension, marriages and death, viewers are introduced to all the major personalities of the period. Foreign and domestic affairs are generously referenced, while broader European contexts are kept to the fore, with the Reformation a key structuring component of the narrative. Renaissance history has simply not been dramatized on this scale before.

The reach and ambition of *The Tudors* are intimately connected to contemporary notions of audience. Against a backdrop of declining audiences, ' "must see" television' is designed to appeal to 'the most *valuable* audiences: affluent viewers that advertisers are prepared to pay the highest rates to address'.[7] In its compulsiveness, then, such television is designed to attract not so much a volume audience as 'highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programmes'; indeed, because of this movement towards and embrace of a so-called 'niche audience', television has been able to acquire and boast a 'greater cultural legitimacy'.[8] Exploring further the meeting place between 'quality television' and the reshaping of history, this chapter argues that historical reconstruction and bodily discourse come together in *The Tudors* in a television phenomenon which reads both – that is, body and history – as text. In particular, I will suggest, series three and four are striking in the extent to which they prioritize the body of the monarch as a cipher for the shifting polarities of politics and nation. One effect of this dialogic method is a powerful sense of the Renaissance as a dystopian juncture, the political complexions and gendered implications of which have a modern purchase. Perhaps, paradoxically, the uncomfortable and unsettling version of Henry that emerges has much in common with the historical controversy that continues to be waged around his person and reign.[9]

I

The Tudors is typical of most contemporary network programming in that it typifies 'transnational productions that bring together finance, personnel and locations from across the globe'.[10] Hence, when David Starkey accuses the BBC of 'squandering' public money on a historical drama deliberately 'dumbed down to appeal to an American audience', he rather misses the point.[11] Filmed at Ardmore Studios, Ireland, *The*

Tudors was made by Peace Arch Entertainment for Showtime, in association with Reveille Eire (Ireland), Working Title Films (UK) and the CBS (Canada). As John McMurria notes, 'the long-format programming that drives network branding campaigns is ever dependent on global audience reach'.[12] Internationally distributed via Sony Pictures, and with lucrative sales to over seventy 'territories', *The Tudors* – and its vast marketing campaign – is just as likely to be experienced in Brazil or Colombia as in the US or the UK.

The movement raises important questions around localization. Although the format of the paratext differs, *The Tudors* does not change content as it goes out locally, which suggests that its particular view of the Renaissance has a general application. Following other historical shows like *Deadwood*, *Rome* and *Carnivale*, *The Tudors*' depiction of the Renaissance is revisionist; in particular, the series breaks clear from any expected 'golden age' heritage-based template. Rather, a conjuration of the Renaissance is characterized by a sense of upset and brutality, with the series paying vivid attention to the unstable materiality of Tudor existence. Post-watershed television visuals elaborate the Renaissance as a graphically traumatic and physically immediate event, and vigorously implied is the journey still to be taken towards more rational modes of situating bodily experience. This is reflected in the 'dark, low-key look' cinematography of the series – paintings, especially those by Caravaggio, are cited as inspiration; lighting is restricted on both set and location; and film stock is shot without filters.[13] For all its splendour and sumptuousness, the Henrician court is dangerous and essentially unknown: angled anti-nostalgically, *The Tudors* situates the past as terror-laden and chaotic, as a period to withdraw from rather than actively embrace. In this sense, the detail of the period re-creation operates so as to steer a global audience away from 'golden age' stereotypes and towards a more variegated and anti-romantic imagining.

The alienating nature of this evocation means that it is not easy to identify with period detail; instead, it is bodies that, in *The Tudors*, make for spectatorial involvement. Much criticism has focused on Showtime's casting of the slimline, twenty-something Jonathan Rhys Meyers as a kingly object of desire. Here, commentators misread *The Tudors*' effort to analogize: although standards of beauty were different in Renaissance England to those of today, they were, of course, equally artificial. But, more important for my argument, a detracting response to *The Tudors* ignores the fact that the series is what has been termed in television studies as a ' "long-format special-event" '.[14] Imagined across thirty-eight hours is, in the words of series creator Michael Hirst, 'the whole arc of

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the character going from young idealistic king to the old tyrant'.[15] Thus, *The Tudors* sets out to understand a life cycle – and to do so it must highlight an alternative beginning. Unlike most appropriations of history, which, as Julie Sanders has demonstrated, rely 'upon the reader's awareness ... of [the] life and the mythology surrounding it', *The Tudors* asks an audience to abandon preconception.[16] A central summarizing voiceover – 'You think you know the story but you only know how it ends: to get to the heart of the story you have to go back to the beginning' – establishes the principles. In this sequence, the torrent of visuals pauses first on the familiar contours of the Holbein portrait, then, seconds afterwards, on a seated Jonathan Rhys Meyers as monarch. The two polarities at either end of a spectrum are highlighted, and in such a way as to stress Holbein as the destination point and Rhys Meyers as the journey towards that end. The process is literalized, for, in the last episode of the final season, we see Henry sitting for Holbein who is completing the iconic painting. At one level, underscored is the way in which, through an aging process, the Henrician protagonist becomes the subject and object of representational tradition. At another level, the scene exposes the disjunction between the sitter (whom the audience apprehends) and the work (which is revealed as seeing in a different fashion). The body of the monarch emerges as a point of negotiation between material form, artistic interpretation, Tudor iconography and postmodern reputation.

The instance is exemplary of the way in which, in this adaptation, costume functions less as a manifestation of historical reconstruction than as a visual aid to direct interpretation and to facilitate audience response. As in the climax to *Elizabeth* (dir. Shekhar Kapur, 1998), where the young sovereign turns herself into the Virgin Queen, Henry grows incrementally into the costuming associated with his monarchical counterpart. Across all of the episodes, Henry's costume – in a slowly paced and piece-by-piece development – modifies in relation to alterations to his bodily contours. The protagonist is represented as going grey, acquiring wrinkles and putting on weight: he assumes proportions that, if they do not make him the facsimile of popular tradition, certainly suggest that he is more materially substantial. Crucial is the addition of layers of padding, with Henry gradually assuming darker hues and fur-lined outfits that correspond to a less upbeat and affirming outlook. Joan Bergin, costume designer for the series, describes 'an extraordinary journey ... unrivalled in film or TV ... it begins with a concept of [Henry] as a kind of a rock star of his time ... through to the state he is at the end ... which is ... sour, decaying, disillusioned and disappointed.'[17] Costume in this

formulation, then, expresses not only the effects of growing old but also a physical and psychological interconnection.

Discharging a parallel purpose, and also in part filling in for Henry's obesity, is the attention given to the ulcerated leg. Henry is represented as receiving the wound after a joust goes awry in the first series; as the costuming becomes more excessive, so is the inflamed and pustule-marked limb of the monarch increasingly prioritized until, by the third series, we are treated to frequent scenes of painful suffering and the shocked reactions of the assembled courtiers. This is far from the excited and exciting display of the stripped male body that characterized earlier episodes. If, previously, the twin tropes of sex and sport undergirded the erotic energy of *The Tudors*' visuals, this is summoned later only in order to be inverted, with the emphasis falling instead on debilitation and crisis. The body that is laid out here is not for sexual admiration or activity but for medical comment and intervention. It is notable that, in the third series, the first occasion on which we witness Henry naked is when he is being examined by his doctors. Even if it gestures backwards to the aesthetics of what has gone before, then, the scene reveals an ironic treatment of some of the series' governing representational strategies.

But it is with the treatment of Henry's impotence that *The Tudors* questions most forcefully the protagonist's status as an object of sexual desire and a sexually desiring subject. The first hint of a lack of function is given when the king states, in series three, 'It'll take a good sport to make me amorous again', the comment suggesting difficulties concerning arousal. In this context, it makes logistical sense that we see Henry as a stud horse struggling with the kingly duty to be reproductive. Scenes between Henry and Anne of Cleves (Joss Stone) are revealing here, for the dominant tone is one of awkwardness, and underlined is a sense of mutual disgust. In particular, the wedding night episode is dominated by the motif of the failing phallus, characterized, as it is, by the camera focusing on Henry launching himself at Anne of Cleves, losing his erection, masturbating and finally admitting defeat. In the disaster of the encounter, both parties are implicated: Anne of Cleves frets afterwards, 'If I cannot please the king, will he kill me?' And, as the detailing of the 'smell' of Henry attests, central is the diseased 'leg', which, itself operating metonymically as a signifier of phallic incapacity, underwrites the series' concern with a bodily predicament.

The series links its concentration on bodies decayed and decaying with what is constructed as the period's dangerous medievalism: in describing those who attend on him as 'quacks and charlatans',

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Henry is represented as articulating a prescient awareness of Renaissance medicine as hopelessly underdeveloped. The Renaissance is imagined as distinctive above all in medical respects, for this is a world wanting the global march of medical science. Hence, *The Tudors* deeply personalizes issues of child mortality, birth and infertility – issues which have, of course, become intensely medicalized in modernity. Insisting upon daily scrubbings of Edward's accommodation (Henry's son is played by both Eoin Murtagh and Jake Hathaway), the king is discovered as ahead of his time in terms of spotting the association between cleanliness and infection. Nostalgic for the power of forms of modern medicine without even realizing what they are, Henry, ironically, finds that his requests for cures and solutions will only founder because the relevant knowledge has not yet been acquired.

The gap between contemporary and early modern forms of bodily understanding is graphically illustrated in a sickbed episode so severe that Brandon (Henry Cavill) calls upon the barber-surgeons to operate on Henry's leg, taking upon himself personal responsibility for what is imagined as a precarious outcome ('I will answer for it,' he states). In the extended elaboration of the act of lancing, a powerful impression of early modern horror is provided.

Most importantly, emerging from this moment of potential corporeal catastrophe is a connection between the body of the monarch and that of the nation.[18] Crucially, the scenes leading up to Henry's surgery are intercut with shots of the civil unrest sweeping England, unrest that culminates in the representation of the Pilgrimage of Grace. Unlike many US television shows, *The Tudors* showcases a series of different directors who bring a unique signature to particular narrative sequences. Ciarán Donnelly, who directed the four-hour storyline of the Pilgrimage of Grace episodes, was chosen, in his own words, because he was 'visually cinematic in television terms . . . could handle action [and] battle scenes' and was known as a 'strong character actors' director'.[19] His remarks point to a distinctive approach; thus, even though the exterior scenes devoted to the Pilgrimage of Grace would seem, in their big-budget and large-scale effects, to belong to a different category from the interior scenes concentrating on the monarch's medical emergency, they mirror them conceptually. Henry's body rebels at the point where his nation also erupts, and the strife of the country is written upon his own corpus.

A figuration of intersecting crises is relevant here. As Henry's sickened condition reaches its climax, news comes in of the taking of Pontefract Castle in Yorkshire by the rebel forces: the timing of the two events

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points to an escalation of kinds of disaster both of which are given, in the series, a national dimension via the deployment of intercut scenes. Immediately afterwards, we are shown Henry's own point of view; the protagonist is revealed in his chamber limping towards a balcony in order to greet his people, and because the camera mimics the effort involved, and because of aural accompaniments of laboured breathing, the audience is invited to participate by proxy. More tellingly, the construction of the scene introduces not only a politics of vulnerability but also a politics of performance. Privately, Henry is in agony; publically, he presents himself as impregnable to a crowd of well-wishers. It is a significant moment that opens a gap between the king's 'actual' body and a performance of royalty, and, as viewers, we are implicated in the pretence. Interior and exterior, objective and subjective, come together in a discovery of two different bodies (material and conceptual) and, as a result, an increasing divorce between monarch and nation.

As the body sickens from the inside, so does its owner, Henry, become concomitantly more tyrannical in his external conduct. Political extremity, in this conception, has a physical point of origin. The link is nuanced in the identification, in the ranks of the rebels, of a young man with a strawberry birthmark on his face: later, his head, dismembered from the body, is seen ghoulishly suspended as a public warning. Because these scenes articulate the perspective of the commons, who are represented as entertaining genuine grievances, the balance of empathy shifts, with Henry, despite his own sufferings, appearing in a more negative light. To experience *The Tudors* is to participate in a balancing act and to be directed to a number of conflicting positions of viewer engagement. And, if the *mise-en-scène* highlights the symbolic capital of the individual, it also exploits the emotional resonances of the mass. As Brandon states, the Henrician aim is to set 'a terrifying example'. The Pilgrimage of Grace culminates in wholesale destruction, as is revealed in a spliced montage that shows, on the one hand, the leaders in the Tower in chains, and, on the other, the butchering of peasants, including women and children, in a field. Panoramic sweeps of the camera testify not only to the scale of the discontent but also to the excess of monarchical reaction: in the bodily spectacle is encapsulated a charged indication of royal policy out of control.

By pinpointing male children among the corpses, a more pervasive interest in relations between fathers and sons is demonstrated, which reflects on Henry's own situation. Several characters, including Brandon and Cromwell (James Frain), are humanized via their role as parents to sons. Key is the body of the young Edward (described by the nurse as 'the

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most precious baby in England') and, in particular, the distinctive 360° panning shot that shows Henry spinning his son around in semi-ecstatic reverie. The pace slows as the bond is affirmed; it is the only time the monarch is truly at peace. Yet, in the same moment, Henry is shown as planning a Machiavellian operation: because he understands paternal joy, it is suggested, he can attack his enemies at a primal level. When Henry is unable to capture a traitor, he will capture that traitor's family instead, a strategy that is pursued most stringently in relation to Master Pole, nephew to Cardinal Reginald Pole (Mark Hildreth); scenes of the child playing in the Tower, cradling his wooden horse, are distributed throughout series three and in such a way as to stress the development of the protagonist's vengeful approach. Henry's pronounced limp at this point, moreover, functions to evoke Shakespeare's Richard III and a stereotypical association with political tyranny that expresses itself at a familial-generational level. When Master Pole is finally executed, Henry gloats: 'There you are, Pole – eat your heart.' The moment takes its energy from a conjunction of a term of endearment and an implied act of cannibalism, which is all the more unsettling because of the accompanying idea of the king's personal investment in the realities of paternity. The emphasis underlines again – this time with a ruthlessly material complexity – the difficulty of any final appraisal of the protagonist.

II

One of the determining features of contemporary 'quality television' is the need to appeal to women as a significant part of the network audience.[20] In *The Tudors*, with a few important exceptions, female roles are filled out, maximized and treated sympathetically. Such an emphasis bears out a gendered view of history, a view that Michael Hirst cites as a corrective to what he perceives to be the neglect and misogyny of traditional historiography: 'historians ... don't tell you very much about the human relationships that Henry had with his wives,' he states, adding, 'I've discovered through reading and thinking that nearly all these caricatures [of the wives] are nonsense or only tell a little bit of the story.'[21] Accordingly, *The Tudors*' modus operandi is to make available multiple stories and frameworks of explanation which permit viewers to experience a range of gendered positions: we are encouraged to adjudicate between, and make decisions about, competing interpretations of a woman's fall. Hence, Anne Boleyn, as Tom Betteridge argues, 'is portrayed ... as a victim of Henry's burgeoning desire for Jane Seymour, Cromwell's political machinations ... her own

high spirits . . . [and an inability to] give . . . Henry the son he desires.'[22] Via this canvassing of options, women's roles are rendered solidly and the audience participates at a level of pronounced critical attentiveness.

Perhaps more arresting than the multifaceted representation of character are the consistencies inherent in the portrayals of females. Aristocratic women, for example, are invariably discovered as opposing the tyrannical Henry in minor or discrete ways: in Jane Seymour's (Annabelle Wallace) smile at Robert Aske (Gerard McSorley), the leader of the Pilgrimage of Grace, or in Brandon's wife begging him to 'show mercy' to the rebels and their families, a purchase on limited resistance is encoded. Cast in a semi-interrogative mould, these women typify the representational strategies of 'quality television' which, in Jackie Byars and Eileen R. Meehan's formulation, tends to eschew a 'systemic challenge' to social-patriarchal structures and to endorse, instead, 'generally personal' resolutions.[23] (Thus, Jane Seymour is seen as unable to deter Henry from persecuting Catholic dissenters, but she does manage to persuade him to bring her stepdaughter, Mary [Sarah Bolger], to court.) The exception to the rule, of course, is Elizabeth (Claire MacCauley), as when Mary explains her father's jubilation at Edward's birth: 'A boy is more important.' Elizabeth's response – 'I don't think so' – indicates that, at the age of six, the princess is already contesting primogeniture.[24] Moreover, as this forward-looking moment makes clear, elaborated in miniature is the recognizable amalgam of types of male and female familiar from later manifestations of the queen as well as a clearly defined 'systemic challenge'; here, *The Tudors* trades upon the virtues of a narrative futurity.

The fact that Mary is discovered as attending Jane Seymour at the birth is indicative of affirming relations between the series' various stepmother figures. For Peter Krämer, the regularity of television programming produces a cornucopia of intertextual allusions, in part as a way of ensuring that the viewing of some shows is judged essential; in the representation of women in *The Tudors*, we see such allusions working in concerted thematic deployments.[25] A wedding gift – a crucifix once owned by Katherine of Aragon (Maria Doyle Kennedy) – is illicitly passed to Jane Seymour upon her marriage; later, the new queen is seen wearing the religious symbol as an adornment while tending to the poor and tacitly supporting the rebellious cause. As well as granting to Jane Seymour saintliness, the visual detail of the crucifix makes her a type of Katherine of Aragon in manner and persuasion: she emerges as a metaphorical inheritrix and cipher for gendered continuity. Such an idea is brought home in the scene where, the court paralysed

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with fear, Jane Seymour goes into labour with the crucifix clutched in her hands, to be told by Mary, 'Katherine is here with us . . . and will help you.' The reminder of the object's passage through royal generations and across the series itself keeps Katherine of Aragon in viewers' minds (she is recalled as a ghostly entity) and emphasizes the fact that bonds between women occupy a powerful niche. Where male bonds are shattered, female areas of association endure, even in the cases of women who have never met. Underscored is a notion of female empathy that is placed in opposition to male competition via a procedure that encourages us to seize upon, and read, subliminal connections.

The circulation of the crucifix is an example of the ways in which the series' *mise-en-scène* keeps past wives at the forefront of an audience's imagination: even after they have been beheaded or abandoned, women are still, in important senses, players. Hence, Anne Boleyn (Natalie Dormer) appears in the title frame for the third series despite the fact that she is long gone, the suggestion being that she is still at large, either in the conjurations of the other characters or in manifestations of Henry's cynicism, lack of trust and disappointment. Henry is represented as haunted by his behaviour in relation to his wives. In the final episode of the fourth series, a metaphorical visitation takes on a literal incarnation when the previous spouses return as 'angels of death', their similar costuming pointing up a shared history and mutual agenda. Each is allowed the opportunity to confront the monarch before his solitary death (the scene takes the finale of Shakespeare's *Richard III* as its cue), offering the comeback that drama requires but history disallows.[26] Yet, in view of the fact that the wives have always inhabited the series' *psychic* frame, the episode is neither unexpected nor fantastical: Henry's haunting has been prepared for and emerges from a narrative and episodic continuum.

If spectral encounters are a point of intersection, then so, too, are deathly experiences. Most obviously, Henry is affected by the death of Jane Seymour, which is envisioned as in large part producing the maniacally possessed Henry of *The Tudors*' latter storyline. Staging strategies point up Henry's grief, as in a ruthless cut that moves from his plea that Jane should not die ('Please don't leave me. You are the milk of human kindness, the light in my dark world') straight to the formal 'laying out' of the queenly body. Here, a crane-shot of Henry and the corpse alone in a vast architectural space underscores a stark sense of isolation and desolation. The language of the passage associates Henry with a nexus of infantilization, vulnerability and enlightenment, while subsequent episodes are notably marked by an upgrade in his paranoia: 'I trust

no one but myself,' he warns Cromwell. At an immediate level, Jane Seymour's passing prompts a depressive phase in which, attended only by the Fool, Will Somers (David Bradley), Henry contemplates his condition. The Shakespearean dimensions of the episode – the dialogue, full of double entendre, is faux Renaissance-dramatic, with Bradley bringing to mind a previous history of well-known Shakespearean performances – lend to the proceedings a construction of *gravitas* and authority. At the same time, the Lear-Fool/Henry-Fool equation alerts us to the missing 'mother' in Shakespeare's play, introducing a variation both on the roles of women and the question of abuses of royal power. That suggestion of the transience of royalty is confirmed in the self-conscious spectacle, pivotally positioned at the centre of the third series, of the Fool sitting on Henry's throne and laughing insanely. Who or what can occupy the royal seat? What is a king? These and other questions circulate via the performative substitution, suggesting a critical turning point: Henry himself must stand accused of folly, it is implied; monarchs may be replaced; the nation itself now inhabits a condition of distraction.

The theatrical force of the *mise-en-scène* is in keeping with the series' self-consciousness about other acts of representation. Above all, the *Tudors* enlists modalities of writing (letters, records, statutes and Acts of Parliament) as particularly 'staged' moments. Michael Hirst writes that 'most of the historical sources are tainted or in some ways not to be trusted', and this is borne out in the ways in which acts of writing are seen as mitigating against claims to 'truth'.[27] Aske's hanging (which is characterized by shockingly low-angled and slow-motion camerawork) is intercut with the far more sedate scene of Cromwell blithely writing about it, driving home the gap between interpretation and experience. The disjunction makes literal what has been termed the 'violence of representation'; exposing divisions of this kind, *The Tudors* spotlights discursive forms of power in their 'most benign, defensive and nearly invisible form'.[28] To cite Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse: 'a particular order survives because it is dominant . . . residual or contestatory practices [fail] to find a place . . . because they [are] deemed disreputable'.[29] Ruthless cross-cutting underlines the fact that it is Cromwell's construction that survives into the historical record rather than the felt agonies of the rebel's execution. As authority-figure, Cromwell mediates the world for public consumption and posterity; at the same time, as the series also suggests, all positions of authority are subject to fluctuation and contingency. The notion that historical operation is inherently arbitrary – and in thrall to chaos and contingency – is brought home in

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a later sequence that moves between an act of reading and the scene of Cromwell's imprisonment. Cromwell's letter supporting the king's case for the annulment of his marriage (written while Cromwell is under death sentence) is delivered in a voiceover that merges the minister's now desperate tones with the honeyed voice of Catherine Howard (Tamzin Merchant), who is shot naked in bed with her royal lover. The juxtaposition not only makes a mockery of legal function, but, more importantly, suggests that a key historical text is a worthless – and truthless – document compiled under duress. Tom Betteridge argues that *The Tudors* 'looks back, nostalgically, to a time when the space of history was clear and transparent', but, in fact, the series performs a contrary manoeuvre: it suggests that there never was such a time.[30] Even as it is being written, history is being mystified; even as it is taking place, history is being represented and falsified.

Consistent with the cynicism of these episodes is *The Tudors*' representation of power as a corrosive force. In *The Tudors*, representatives of instituted authority are imagined as mirror images of the larger movements to which they subscribe, with personalities such as Cromwell, Cranmer (Hans Matheson), Bishop Fisher (Bosco Hogan) and More (Jeremy Northam) consistently identified with the discrete agendas and perspectives of the Reformation. Political comment is not direct; rather, it is mediated through oblique reflections on the relative integrity – or not – of politicians and their attendant conduct. A struggle obtains between all the forces invoked, but none can be labelled as belonging to unambiguously good or evil categories. Rather, power expresses itself as a pervasively corrupting influence. For example, characterizing Cromwell's arrival in the place of the corrupt Wolsey (Sam Neill) is an emphasis on renewal and integrity. Yet, by the third series, he is discovered as accepting bribes from landowners agitating to win his and the king's approval; the observation – that the practice allows the minister to assume his place as 'the richest man in England' – exactly rephrases an earlier assessment of Wolsey, which suggests that the possession of dominion circles back upon itself. Corruption is more widely written still. A narrative procession of venal popes and cardinals marks Rome out as a particularly compromised space, but *The Tudors* is at pains to suggest that all the faiths represented invite mutually invidious comparisons. English archbishops function no less powerfully than their Catholic counterparts to point up the symbiotic relation shared between political machination and religious protestation: there is a sense of institutional and social malaise which invites viewers to court contemporary parallels.

This is not to suggest that, in *The Tudors*, there are no 'true' believers; however, as the instance of Cardinal Pole demonstrates (he intends to restore Catholicism by force), belief is invariably imagined as giving way to a fanaticism with affinities to some forms of modern terrorism. Pockets of resistance are distributed across Europe; covert operations are continually on the move; and members of Henry's court are subject to the techniques of guerrilla warfare. Yet, thanks to an assembly of graphically corporeal episodes, it is impossible to forget that, whatever kind of terrorism this might be, it is always matched by state operations. Or, to put the point in another way, *The Tudors* places on display the problem of defining terrorism when state policy and extremist political activity intersect. The contemporary – and international – resonances and debates that are ventilated as a result are striking in and of themselves; they also demonstrate how the series sustains television drama's capacity for 'leaving open, through a densely layered textual composition without closure, the possibility of metaphorical readings'.[31] Hence, judicial procedures are seen to be wholly inadequate, while torture is portrayed as widespread and visually explicit. The filming of violence is a case in point, and it is noticeable that, over the course of the whole series, each execution is granted a particular imprint, guarding against viewer complacency. In the first series, More's traumatic isolation on the executor's platform is expressed in a shot of the crowd from his own point of view; the dynamic is reversed in the treatment of the execution of Katherine Howard in the fourth series, for here the spectators, positioned below the victim, look up to the event in collective horror. Differences obtain, too, at the level of sound, pace, editing and diegesis. Because these scenes and others like them reveal, as Michael Hirst states, an 'individual visual style' and a 'particular meaning', an audience is never allowed to relax into a sense of representational predictability.[32] The tyrannical expressions of the series' protagonist retain their edge, and in such a way that viewers are kept sensitized to the permutations and continuing relevancies of the state apparatus. The current age, preoccupied, as it is, with debating the ethics of government, the uses of torture and the causality of war, has precipitated us into looking at the early modern with much less innocent eyes.

A sense of just how much our collective perceptions of the state have changed is encapsulated in the costuming for one of series four's final spectacles – the siege of Boulogne. In a breathtakingly cinematic sequence which draws heavily on Akira Kurosawa, Henry rides into battle wearing Laurence Olivier's original tabard from *Henry V* (1944). The moment of intertextuality self-consciously points up a representational

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and temporal rupture. For, while Olivier's audience accepted a battle waged on the unproblematic terms of God, patriotism and the common good, the audience experiencing Rhys Meyers contends with the discontinuities of religion, a trajectory of tyranny, the discordant notes of historiography, and a royal body in decline. It is this kind of 'complex seeing' that allows *The Tudors* to function as 'quality television' and to compete successfully in today's global media marketplace.[33]

Notes

1. Maeve Kennedy, 'BBC ought to be ashamed of its Tudor drama series, says Starkey', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/oct/17/bbc-television/print (accessed 14 May 2010).
2. Bruce Fletcher, 'Why "The Tudors" is hilarious bunk', *Telegraph*, 1 August 2008, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3557583/Why-The-Tudors-is-hilarious (accessed 14 May 2010).
3. Alison Weir summarizes this gap when she describes *The Tudors* as 'cracking good drama, but as a historian, my hair's standing on end'. See Sheila Marikar, ' "Tudors": History Stripped Down, Sexed Up', *ABC News*, 29 March 2008, http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=4545935 (accessed 14 May 2010).
4. Robin Nelson, *State of Play: Contemporary 'High-End' TV Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 184.
5. For a full discussion of the casting, see Ramona Wray, 'Henry's Desperate Housewives: *The Tudors*, the Politics of Historiography, and the Beautiful Body of Jonathan Rhys Meyers', in Greg Colón Semenza, ed., *The English Renaissance in Popular Culture: An Age for All Time* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 25–42.
6. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, 'Introduction', in Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, eds, *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry, and Fans* (London: BFI, 2003), pp. 2–3.
7. Jancovich and Lyons, 'Introduction', p. 3.
8. Jancovich and Lyons, 'Introduction', p. 3. For a discussion of aesthetics and quality in television, see Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, 'Introduction: Debating Quality', in Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds, *Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 1–11.
9. For a discussion of Henry and the historians, see Peter Marshall, 'Henry VIII and the Modern Historians: The Making of a Twentieth-Century Reputation', in Mark Rankin, Christopher Highley and John N. King, eds, *Henry VIII and His Afterlives: Literature, Politics, and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 246–66.
10. Jancovich and Lyons, 'Introduction', p. 5. On this subject, see also Nelson, *State of Play*, pp. 56–60.
11. Andrew Hough, 'BBC period show, *The Tudors*, is "historically inaccurate", leading historian says', *Telegraph*, 10 August 2009, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/6005582/BBC-period-show-The-Tudors (accessed 14 May 2010).

12. John McMurria, 'Long-format TV: Globalization and Network Branding in a Multi-Channel Era', in Jancovich and Lyons, eds, *Quality*, p. 83.
13. Louise Bishop, 'Regarding Henry', *Producer: The Digital Production Magazine*, Summer (2007), pp. 8–9.
14. Jancovich and Lyons, 'Introduction', p. 5.
15. See 'Spoilers – Season 4 of *The Tudors*', http://tudorswiki.sho.com/page/SPOILERS+-Season+4of+the+Tudors (accessed 2 April 2010).
16. Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 143.
17. See 'Spoilers – Season 4 of *The Tudors*', http://tudorswiki.sho.com/page/SPOILERS+-Season+4of+the+Tudors (accessed 2 April 2010).
18. For discussion of the Tudor body–state analogy, see Thomas Sorge, 'The failure of orthodoxy in *Coriolanus*', in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, eds, *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 225–43.
19. See 'Spoilers – Season 4 of *The Tudors*', http://tudorswiki.sho.com/page/SPOILERS+-Season+4of+the+Tudors (accessed 2 April 2010).
20. On the complex relationship between women and contemporary 'quality television', see Merri Lisa Johnson, ed., *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts it in a Box* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).
21. See 'Spoilers – Season 4 of *The Tudors*', http://tudorswiki.sho.com/page/SPOILERS+-Season+4of+the+Tudors (accessed 2 April 2010).
22. Tom Betteridge, 'Henry VIII and Popular Culture', in Rankin, Highley and King, eds, *Henry VIII and His Afterlives*, p. 214.
23. Jackie Byars and Eileen R. Meehan, 'Once in a Lifetime: Constructing "The Working Women" through Cable Narrowcasting', in Horace Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 149–56.
24. For a broader discussion of Elizabeth's 'pre-sexual childish body' on screen, see Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson, *England's Elizabeth: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 169.
25. I summarize here from two chapters by Peter Krämer: 'The Lure of the Big Picture: Film, Television and Hollywood', in John Hill and Martin McLoone, eds, *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations between Film and Television* (Luton: John Libbey Media/Luton University Press, 1996), pp. 9–46, and 'Post-classical Hollywood', in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, eds, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 289–309.
26. One of the publicity stills for the fourth series of *The Tudors* shows the six wives miraculously reinstated.
27. See 'Spoilers – Season 4 of *The Tudors*', http://tudorswiki.sho.com/page/SPOILERS+-Season+4of+the+Tudors (accessed 2 April 2010).
28. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, 'Introduction: Representing Violence, or "How the West was Won"', in Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, eds, *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 9.
29. Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 'Introduction', p. 12.
30. Betteridge, 'Henry VIII', p. 215.

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31. Nelson, *State of Play*, p. 106.
32. See ‘Spoilers – Season 4 of *The Tudors*’, http://tudorswiki.sho.com/page/SPOILERS+-Season+4of+the+Tudors (accessed 2 April 2010).
33. My thanks to Conor Smyth for his generous and expert research assistance on this essay.

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