The Tudors: The Showtime Series

The Tudors (2007–2010) Showtime Series, written by Michael Hirst, offered an unrealistic view of the court of Henry VIII (Jonathan Rhys Meyers). His courtiers frequently gathered together, partying with music, dancing, and card playing. Henry joined them, sometimes eating alone amid the revelry, although the real king usually ate privately in his privy chamber. In this fantasy world of the royal family, the women appeared mostly slim and beautiful, the English wives, for example, wearing long, low-cut dresses that fell provocatively around their shapely bodies. This sexy clothing did not reflect Tudor fashions. The English wives also possessed long, lovely hair that hung below their shoulders, pleasing modern viewers' tastes. In reality, Tudor gentlewomen washed their hair about once a month and usually had it tucked into some kind of hood or hat. Hirst thus created an elite society of unrealistic celebrities. After briefly discussing Henry VIII, this review will turn to the wives and two other women to indicate how inaccurately Hirst portrayed them.
Rhys Meyers, a relatively slight man, was the wrong choice to play Henry VIII, who was a tall, rather large man over six feet in height; in this series the actor portraying Francis I towered over him, which would not have been the case historically. Apparently, Rhys Meyers refused to gain weight or appear old except for a sprinkle of gray hair and an inexplicable Scottish accent. Too many sexual scenes appeared in the series to analyze, but it is noteworthy that of his wives, the audience viewed him having sexual relations with only the two accused of adultery, Anne Boleyn (Natalie Dormer) and Katherine Howard (Tamzin Merchant); he proved impotent with Anne of Cleves (Joss Stone) but, after their marriage’s annulment, invited himself into her bed. Katherine of Aragon (Maria Doyle Kennedy), Jane Seymour (Anita Briern replaced in the second season by Annabelle Wallis), and Katherine Parr (Joely Richardson) had no scenes in which they interacted sexually with him.

All Henry’s consorts wore clothing representing their roles as queens. Creating Katherine of Aragon as a devout, traditional Catholic and ignoring her patronage of Christian humanists, Hirst chose to emphasize qualities that he viewed consistent with her Spanish heritage, giving her dark hair and dressing her in dark gowns, albeit with gold interwoven in them. The real Katherine actually had blond hair. A somber woman in the series who strove to maintain her union with the king and protect their daughter Mary, Katherine had an imaginary dream in which Mary visited her on her death bed. Katherine’s character contrasted sharply with that of Anne Boleyn, who appeared cruel and manipulative before her royal marriage. When queen she wore bright and bold colors, as befitted her personality. As her character developed, she became more likeable, expressing religious beliefs and undergoing the tragic miscarriage of a deformed infant. This child was apparently conceived during a bout of rough sex, an inexplicable invention, for early modern Christians believed they needed God’s blessings to conceive a child and would never have expected Him to bless lusty relations like this. Anne also gained sympathy because of her brave execution. After the death of Katherine and then Anne, played by the actresses who gave the best female performances, the series lost much of its compelling tension and energy.
As to the other consorts, Hirst could not make up his mind about Jane Seymour, who when not dressed in the white and silver of a maiden of honor, wore pale pastel colors to convey innocence. Nevertheless, at first she appeared willing to become Henry’s mistress, but later, hoping for marriage, she returned gifts from him unopened. Afterward, while ironically she sat on Henry’s lap, he said that they should meet only in her relatives’ presence, thus indicating a wish to guard her reputation. These last two events, which Hirst reversed chronologically, might not have even occurred; rumors repeated by the Imperial ambassador, who was not at court, and a later Catholic writer, Nicholas Sander, remain the only sources for them. After Jane’s death following childbirth, Henry agreed to wed Anne of Cleves, who wore unattractive, allegedly German hats from which various decorations hung around her face. The real Anne did have on a German hat upon arriving at court, but the chronicler, Edward Hall, claimed that she soon changed it for a fashionable French hood. These unattractive hats served to distract observers from her obvious beauty, but it was not her face that disappointed Henry, who, like the real king, found the size of her breasts and stomach incompatible with those of a virgin.

Hirst gave Anne of Cleves’s youthful replacement, Katherine Howard, an ahistorical Lolita-like character. She lost her virginity to Francis Dereham at her step-grandmother’s home, and after becoming queen, she appeared in scenes nude about as often as she did clothed. She provocatively dressed in a scarlet gown the morning after having sexual relations with Sir Thomas Culpeper. Although the historical queen probably did not commit adultery with Culpeper, Hirst had her aggressively pursue him and also participate in invented juvenile games, for example, playing in mud with her maidens. Following the unrealistic execution scene, showing the queen excessively frightened, Henry discovered Katherine Parr, whose husband was shortly to die. Her marital status relieved Henry of ascertaining whether she was a virgin, as he had approved a statute making it treason for his consort to conceal her sexual experiences. Two invented scenes seem out of character for this Katherine. With her ill husband, Lord Latimer, nearby in their home, she supposedly flirted with Sir Thomas Seymour. When Henry sent gifts to Katherine, her dying husband refused to hear her explanation. Although preferring to wed Seymour, Katherine
wrote loving letters to Henry while serving as regent during his absence in France. With some alterations, Hirst utilized John Foxe’s story of the king’s encouraging his councillors to arrest her for heresy but then changing his mind when she abjectly assured him that she wanted to learn about religion from him, not teach him. She correctly expressed as interest in scholarship and had a book published during the king’s lifetime, only not the one identified.

For the most part, as the previous narrative relates, the characters and looks of the six consorts did not correspond to those of the real wives. Hirst proved equally inaccurate concerning Henry’s sister Margaret (Gabrielle Anwar) and Anne née Stanhope (Emma Hamilton), the wife of Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford (later Duke of Somerset). Noting that Henry’s younger sister Mary had named her niece and goddaughter, Henry’s elder daughter, Mary, after herself, Hirst decided that it would confuse his audience if the cast included these two royal ladies with the same name. He transferred the name of Margaret, Henry’s older sister, on to Mary and ignored the real Margaret. Because the series began after the death of Louis XII, the first husband of the real Mary, here Margaret/ Mary, Hirst created a fictitious, elderly Portuguese king for her to marry. Subsequently, Margaret/Mary killed him and wed Mary’s real second husband, Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk.

Anne, Countess of Hertford, when later the Duchess of Somerset, had more books, most of them religious, dedicated to her than any other early Tudor woman. Devoutly religious, she sent financial aid to the heretic, Anne Askew. In Lady Hertford’s lifetime, no rumors identified her as an adulteress, although some did describe her as a shrew who insisted her husband commit fratricide in 1549. Indeed, as Somerset, Lord Hertford signed the death warrant of his brother Thomas. In this series, the fictitious Anne, wearing a hat with a heart-shaped brim, committed adultery with Sir Francis Bryan and her brother-in-law, Thomas, as well as flirted sensually with Henry, Earl of Surrey. After conceiving a child with Thomas, she gave the boy his father’s name. Actually, Anne was Hertford’s second wife. He had divorced his first wife who he seemed to believe had committed adultery. Hirst thus tainted the second wife with the presumed character of the first. It is difficult to determine which assertion is the more
outrageous for the characters involved, Mary/Margaret as a regicide or Lady Hertford as an adulteress.

Hirst has asserted in response to criticisms about the series that he set out to entertain, not to write history, a highly believable statement. This widely successful series, which won several media awards, did entertain many observers but did not inform them about actual historical events. Hirst, also the author of the two recent Elizabeth films starring Cate Blanchett, seems oblivious to the reality that it is impossible to improve on the historical narrative. The real events are more entertaining than the modern fictionalized versions of them. In October 2012 at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference in Cincinnati where a roundtable on the series took place, a panelist, Thomas Freeman of Cambridge University, credited this series and other media stories about the Tudors for awakening the public’s interest in the dynasty. As he related, no student ever asks about William IV, Queen Victoria’s uncle and a philanderer of the first order, who has almost no media attention, but many want to know about the lives of the Tudors.

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