**Chapter Ten**

**Kingship in *The Tudors***

**Glenn Richardson**

Henry VIII first appears in *The Tudors* wearing a crown. It is so that we know he is the king—for we might not otherwise. He arrives to chair a meeting of his council. Jonathan Rhys-Meyers’ Henry wears something like an über version of the gold cardboard crowns much favoured by the three kings in school Nativity plays. As with the best of those, it is pointy and glittery. Wearing it, the king looks every bit as authentic as the child kings *imagine* themselves to be before their disbelief-suspending audience. It is thus an apt symbol of the simulacrum of kingship presented in this television extravaganza.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In the century before the Tudors became the English royal dynasty, the concept of European kingship was comprehensively reinvented. Throughout most of Europe, monarchs encountered serious challenges from their own most powerful subjects. They faced rebellion and civil wars, not least of them the Wars of the Roses, which eventually brought the Tudors to power over the last Plantagenet king. Monarchy was forced to reassert and, to some extent at least, redefine itself in response to these challenges. New fiscal and legal mechanisms were developed whereby the power of rulers was more effectively brought to bear upon “over-mighty subjects.” Though many were novel in operation, they were presented in high-flown rhetoric as things of ancient authority and time-honoured precedent. Kingship’s rights, responsibilities, and limitations were fused into a complex model of sovereignty—now often referred to as “Renaissance Monarchy.” This derived in some measure from forms of rule in the ancient world, from those of the Germanic tribes of the early Middle Ages, and from the medieval experience of monarchy. It was characterised by a belief among the principal European rulers that they must show themselves to be effective governors, great patrons, and—above all else—great warriors.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Sixteenth-century European monarchs, Henry most of all, saw themselves as ultimately accountable only to God for the exercise of their divinely ordained power. All Renaissance commentators agreed on the importance of equipping those born to rule with the knowledge and skills needed to do so justly and effectively. Education was therefore crucial. Classical languages, literature, and philosophy and the study of history were the chief tenets of a curriculum sometimes called the *studia humanitatis*, from which we ultimately derive our sense of “the humanities.” There was a world of difference, however, in Erasmus of Rotterdam’s neo-Platonic “ideal” ruler, described in his treatise *The Education of a Christian Prince* (dedicated at one point to Henry VIII), and those espoused by Machiavelli in *The Prince.* There is a general sense in *The Tudors* of Henry having begun his reign more or less as the schoolboy to Wolsey and Sir Thomas More, which—albeit crudely done—does correspond with the historical record. We see the young king discussing humanist principles (and, anachronistically, even Machiavelli) with his two mentors, comprehending the potential advantages of Wolsey’s plans for a “universal peace,” and generally appreciating that ideas are important, even if these “conversations” are short and meanly scripted.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The education of the prince in good government was crucial, but—like all European monarchs—Henry also operated within personal and constitutional frameworks designed to protect his subjects from purely arbitrary rule. Fifteenth and sixteenth-century authors drew upon Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca, among others, for models of ideal leadership. According to most such authorities the capacity to maintain justice was the key attribute of kingship. This meant not only the making and upholding of fair laws but also equitable dealing with all subjects. Henry’s government involved a significant degree of negotiation between the crown and the powerful vested interests. These included the Church, the nobility and gentry, the wealthy merchants and town councils, as well as lawyers and even the crown’s own administrative and judicial officers. The Parliament and his own judges were the formal sources of law making, advice, and restraint upon Henry. The royal (eventually the Privy) council was the primary executive body of the realm and the final court of appeal. The importance of good “counsel” occupied political commentators greatly. Most warned against overly large councils or ones too narrow in compass and membership. Kings were warned against the flattery of self-serving councillors, and there was a strong anti-courtier tradition in the literature in England going back at least as far as Walter Mapp in the twelfth century.

In *The Tudors* we see Henry meeting his council to discuss war when a young man and after the siege of Boulogne. We seem him summoning Parliament to discuss his marriages and changes to religious practice and several points in the series. There is some sense of advice being offered by the council, minimal though this is, and Henry usually just berates Parliament to get his way—and the real Henry’s agents and minister did indeed bully Parliament into obeying the king’s will. Yet beyond these formal bodies, Henry—like all monarchs—ultimately relied upon his people at all social levels to accept his authority voluntarily and to co-operate with his regime. Otherwise, he could not properly maintain law and order. The series notes this in the episodes dealing with the Pilgrimage of Grace, which was the most serious rebellion ever faced by a Tudor monarch and one that nearly brought Henry down. It was less suppressed than temporised with until it ran out of impetus. Henry was finally saved by his subjects’ loyalty to him.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As Henry’s reign went on, there was considerable overlap between the personnel of the council and the court, and *The Tudors* notes the close proximity of one to the other in the portrayal of the council members and in the rise of Thomas Cromwell—although the latter appears much earlier in time in the series than he did in historical reality.[[5]](#endnote-5) As Baldassare Castiglione advised in his *Book of the Courtier*, ambitious men or women should make their way into service of the prince through the court, maintain favour through displaying the right combination of useful talents and be called to advise him formally or informally.[[6]](#endnote-6) The prime example of this in the historical record of Henry’s reign and in *The Tudors* is, of course, Cardinal Wolsey. Sam Neil’s portrayal in Season One captures well how close was Wolsey’s relationship with the king and how hard he worked to make Henry a powerful ruler at home and a respected one abroad. It captures the friendship between the two men and how Wolsey was to some extent a mentor to the young king but also how completely the cardinal was dependent upon Henry’s favour. It also shows how Wolsey’s influence on Henry was never total and how dangerous “the court” could be for him. The cardinal’s forlorn reverie in his final moments captures that sense of betrayal and final disappointment with himself that we are told the real Wolsey felt in the days before he died a miserable death from dysentery as he was being brought to London for trial. Having his life end in despairing suicide as he cuts his own throat, as happens in *The Tudors*, is just stupid.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Monarchs like Henry were shown respect and interacted with through the complex ceremony and deferential etiquette which daily surrounded them at court. Its details varied considerably across Europe, but royal ritual focused on the times when the person of the monarch was encountered most directly, was also at its most vulnerable, and therefore in greatest need of mystification. Key moments were the ruler’s rising in the morning, retiring at night, and meal times. Some aspects of this ceremony are evoked reasonably often throughout *The Tudors*. Courtiers bow and scrape, doff caps, and curtsey predictably enough and as we expect them to do. They lower their heads and eyes in the royal presence—although the women’s eyes usually rise longingly and flirtatiously to the king’s immediately afterwards. The servants are often shown overhearing, if not actually listening in to, the king’s incessant sexual activity. Inadvertently or otherwise, the series does show how closely notionally “invisible” servants lived to the high and mighty. *Downton Abbey* does the same thing of course for a later age. Like the staff, we are outsiders in this world, but unlike them, we get to see the behind-closed-doors action. [[8]](#endnote-8)

*The Tudors* also hints at some aspects of more formal daily ceremonial and the organisation of the royal household. We see Henry being undressed and put into his night attire by gentleman attendants and being offered a crucifix to kiss before going to be a husband to Catherine of Aragon, in hopes of betting the longed-for male heir. He is shown as having his own apartments separate to those of the queen, the male-only “king’s side” as it was called. Why exactly the king’s chamber should also be populated by two skimpily clad lovelies is not revealed by any surviving Tudor household account books. It is handy that they are there, however, because, finding his wife at prayer, the king returns to vent his sexual frustration on one of them—who has been forewarned by a courtier to stand by for boarding.[[9]](#endnote-9)

High-ranking courtiers such as the Duke of Buckingham are shown attending the king and Cardinal Wolsey. Buckingham spills water from a hand-washing dish on Wolsey’s feet, an intimation of the hostility between them and an episode derived from the real duke’s having served the cardinal with water for ritual washing at the high Mass at the Field of Cloth of Gold in 1520. Buckingham is also shown serving Henry and Catherine of Aragon a platter of food during a meal in which Henry’s doubts about their marriage are first sounded.[[10]](#endnote-10) Aristocrats did personally attend and serve the monarch at times, but not usually in the daily round at court in the way this scene suggests. Most such service at meal times was undertaken by lower ranking nobles and higher gentlemen who had salaried household offices such as “carver” or “sewer” and who lived at court in these capacities serving the king or queen for about three months a year—or a “quarter” as the wages rolls of the household have it.

The most important of such courtiers under the real Henry VIII were the Gentlemen of the King’s Privy Chamber, who occupied the private space of the monarch and helped to dress and undress him, assisted by Grooms. They kept the king company, gambled with him, hunted, jousted, and danced with him, and escorted him informally wherever he went. The office had developed during the first decade of Henry’s reign, finally modelled on an analogous one at the court of Francis I of France. The leading Gentleman was known as the Groom of the Stool because he attended the king when he used the close-stool or toilet, a position of great trust and esteem because this individual attended the monarch when he was at his most humanly vulnerable. In the early years of Henry’s reign the Groom was Sir William Compton. While *The Tudors* offers no indication of Compton’s important court office, he appears in the series as a close friend of the king—and, bizarrely, sexually infatuated in the 1520s with a young Thomas Tallis, who did not in fact appear at court until about twenty years after Compton’s death. In Season One he and his fellow courtiers show us “the pastime with good company” that characterised the early years of Henry’s reign, when he and Catherine were happy and presided over one of the most glamorous of European courts. The whole subject of the Privy Chamber, its staffing, and the implications for how its politics worked has been among the principal developments in the historiography of Henry’s reign. It was a major impetus in the foundation of the field of academic “court studies” in Britain during the last two to three decades.

Understandably, perhaps, one observes little that is specific about court structures and office-holding in *The Tudors*, but the series does show “the court” to be wherever the king is. It is shown to have wide and narrow spaces and places, as well as public, private, and secret ones, and there is a general sense that life there is competitive. Personal and family advancement was at heart of Tudor politics, and the series shows well enough that it was a risky and at times downright dangerous business dealing with a king like Henry. One point the series hammers home is that getting and safeguarding one’s access to the king is vital for status and political power. Several characters scream “majesty, majesty: at the moment of their downfall and usually towards the retreating king’s back. More mundanely, who is in his favour and who is not obsesses the characters in *The Tudors* in believable ways and the power of the royal “favourite: is clear. We have noted Wolsey’s closeness to Henry, but it is Henry Cavill’s Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, who is the first real star “favourite” of the series. He appears onscreen more than anyone but the king and always as the “boon companion” or best buddy in all his enterprises—just as the real Suffolk was described as being. His sexual charisma and technique match or exceed Henry’s, made explicit in his winning their 100 crowns bet about seducing Buckingham’s daughter.

Suffolk is also the first favourite to be seen to lose royal favour but, unlike so many others, also to recover it. The invention in Season One of his marriage to the king’s older sister Margaret after her fictional marriage to and murder of the king of Portugal is only one of the many fatuous attempts by the scriptwriter to “improve” on history. For reasons unfathomable, Suffolk’s unauthorised marriage to Henry’s youngest sister, Mary, which took place in France in early 1515 after the death of her first husband Louis XII, is confusingly and ludicrously elided with Margaret Tudor’s second marriage, to Archibald Douglas, 6th Earl of Angus after the death of her first, James IV of Scotland, at Flodden in 1514 (though the series makes no references to the Scottish king). Henry is infuriated, banishes his friend from court, and threatens to have him executed. They are eventually reconciled through an arm-wrestling bout, which Suffolk wins. The real Wolsey made the most of the king’s anger in securing the gratitude of the couple as he assisted their rehabilitation in royal favour. Suffolk submitted abjectly to Henry but in reality his life was never seriously in danger. In fact, Suffolk, Thomas Howard, 3rd Duke of Norfolk, and William Fitzwilliam, 1st Earl of Southampton, were the three great survivors of Henry’s reign. All were deeply involved in its various machinations, yet none died at Henry’s hands, albeit only by a hair’s breadth in Norfolk’s case. By contrast, the tragic consequences in Season Two for the Boleyn family of its vaunting ambition are conveyed movingly in the scenes around Anne’s arrest and execution, especially in her father’s abandonment of his two children.

Yet, as the king’s personal relationships with Suffolk, Wolsey, his wives, and others show us, the individual ruler still had to being to the majesty of the office of king and to education for its correct exercise a personality that could secure the obedience, the loyalty, and ideally the love of the ruled at all social levels. Therein lay the secret of effective kingship. The character traits or “virtues” that might best constitute this disposition, and which might be inculcated through the best education, had been discussed since Antiquity and re-examined in the course of the Renaissance. The pre-eminent virtue was wisdom or prudence, by which the right course could be determined according to correct understanding. Temperance was the next virtue, which meant maintaining a balance, proportion and order, as much in the ruler’s personal disposition as in the affairs of the realm, for the former was held to influence the latter. Fortitude encompassed bravery in action, stamina and patient perseverance in adversity. Mercy, as Portia reminds the Doge and Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice*, was perhaps the most divine virtue of sovereignty. Sparingly and rightly exercised, it had a transformative quality upon all whom it embraced, ruler and subject alike. Like unto it was magnificence, an expansive and sustaining generosity that reassured the subjects—just as surely as its opposites, profligacy and wastefulness, unsettled them. Possessing or, more precisely, being regarded as possessing these supposedly masculine qualities was expressed in the Latin word *virtus* or manliness. *Virtus* compelled respect and obedience from the governed, at all social levels and gave a ruler personal honour and esteem. [[11]](#endnote-11)

Before turning to what, if any aspects of *virtus* are portrayed in *The Tudors,* two aspects of it are conspicuous by their absence. Religious faith was not a prescribed aspect of *virtus* in the writing of most Renaissance political commentators, but it was an assumed by all. The real Henry VIII did not become “religious” in the course of his life and through the trauma of his various marriages as the series suggests; rather, he was profoundly religious from the start. In the opening episodes all the religiosity is done by Catherine, who is frequently seen in her private chapel chanting the rosary and praying before statues of the Virgin Mary. She has been here before on screen, most notably in the 1969 film *Anne of the Thousand Days*. As in that movie, so in *The Tudors*, her piety is contrasted sharply with the wantons of the court, not least Anne herself. In *Anne of the Thousand Days*, it ennobles her suffering as a good wife trying to meet her husband’s need.[[12]](#endnote-12) In *The Tudors* it almost becomes the reason she cannot do so—as in the scene referred to earlier, when Henry goes to be with her and finds her at prayer. Henry is seen praying—a bit. He weeps in or near a confessional over his lack of a son, but there is no sense at all of the complex religious life of the court led by a king who routinely heard five masses and more a day and observed the seasonal festivals and rituals of the Church with great sincerity.[[13]](#endnote-13) As an amateur theologian from an early age, the king genuinely believed himself suited for taking the leadership of the Church in England upon himself when this became the only apparent outcome of the struggle with an uncooperative papacy.

The patronage of architecture and art was an important aspect of the magnificence enjoined upon sixteenth-century monarchs. It often had practical implications such as designing new accommodation for ever-expanding courts.[[14]](#endnote-14) Henry was very interested in a range of artistic endeavours. He took some hand in the designs of Beaulieu Palace in Essex, the temporary palace at the Field of Cloth of Gold, of Hampton Court after Wolsey made it over as a gift, and of Whitehall, the largest palace complex in Europe at Henry’s death. He also oversaw military architecture in the chain of fortifications he ordered to be built around the south coasts of England and Wales. Henry owned a large number of paintings, maps and charts, and numerous musical and scientific instruments, and he patronised the Horenbout family of miniaturists and, of course, Hans Holbein. We get some sense in *The Tudors* of the opulence of the king’s surroundings, of his clothes and jewels. and of gifts given to his favourites and received from them. Henry is shown composing “Greensleeves,” something the real Henry never did, but his claims to musicianship are thereby noted. The vast range of Henry’s artistic and architectural patronage was an important aspect of the projection of his power and status as monarch and of his posthumous legacy.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The concept of *virtus* encompassed actively expressed masculinity. This had formal and informal, public and private aspects. A king had to look the part and express his will clearly and express his authority at all times. In *The Tudors* this requirement upon kings is often rendered as petulant shouting. From the outset Henry seethes with anger and menace. His eyes narrow suspiciously or else stare in the same unblinking fury whether he believes himself betrayed by his heart’s love or his shaving water is cold. At its worst, Rhys Meyers’s Henry resembles a young and ambitious middle manager of an internet sales company, who shouts, shakes his fists, and stamps as he drives his cowed team on to exceed their monthly targets so that he can get a bigger bonus. He is a nasty little bully. At its best, in moments of crisis such at the scene of the Blackfriars’ trial or the immediate aftermath of Anne’s execution, the performance shows us the fallible and delusional inner Henry well enough.[[16]](#endnote-16) We have a sense of a man struggling to make himself and others believe that what he wants for himself is also best for his kingdom. But that is where it ends. This Henry has a brittle, crystalline, magnetism but no real warmth, or that charismatic ease of manner, “the common touch,” that we are led to believe the real Henry had. Though he flashes his teeth at them regularly, this Henry’s courtiers bow to him out of terror, not love or a genuine desire to serve.

As knights and as the chief military officers of their realms, kings were expected to express their authority and manliness, bravery and aggression in defence of the realm or the prosecution of their territorial rights and claims. Leading men in battle (real or simulated) was *the* authenticating action of kingship. Going to war was seen as part of the magnificence of monarchy, especially as kings sought to focus the loyalty of their nobles upon themselves and to direct their aggressive energies outwards. Whatever the complexities of international treaties and other constraints upon them, such as a lack of resources (financial and otherwise) the desire for personal renown drove young kings on, and no king of early-sixteenth century Europe was more bent on personal renown than Henry. He was proud of his own physicality and strength as a young man and never wasted an opportunity to show himself off.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Here *The Tudors* is typically puzzling. As the narrative begins in 1518 or thereabouts, it completely ignores Henry VIII’s first and in one sense most significant war—that against France in 1513. For this actual “just war” in support of papacy against a schismatic Louis XII, it substitutes Henry roaring about “just causes: for war against Louis’ successor, Francis I, who has “captured northern Italy” and connived at the murder of a fictional royal uncle. Henry talks a good deal about war, has a picture of his hero Henry V in his private quarters, and shows his ships to Charles V when he visits England. We do eventually see Henry at war in the 1544 siege of Boulogne, which is presented almost as a pitched battle at points and before which Henry, dressed in a surcoat of the royal arms and his snazzy crown, does a short pastiche of Shakespeare’s Henry V’s St Crispin’s Day speech before the battle of Agincourt—right down to crying for God, Harry, England, and St George. Henry otherwise shouts and berates as usual over the length of the siege but returns a victorious hero. Of the French counter-attack and the sinking of the *Mary Rose* in the Solent in July 1545 we hear nothing, save a dark warning from Suffolk of rumours of a French fleet assembling. It is not heroic having one of your capital ships sink before your eyes due to the incompetence of the crew, so that incident does not fit with *The Tudors*’ narrative.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Henry was also a master of “quasi-warfare,” the aristocratic sports of the tournament and hunting, in which he self-consciously displayed his masculine prowess. In dozens of tournaments in the early years of his reign, his participation was carefully choreographed to focus attention on his physical strength and paramilitary prowess as a model of aristocratic and royal manliness. In *The Tudors*, the crowd greets his entry to the competition at one tournament with surprised delight and excitement. He unhorses several fictional noble opponents while tilting at the barrier, but we get no sense that here is an exceptional tournament competitor such as the real Henry was. We are told often that the king is out “hunting,” but we actually see him only riding at pace with friends, unarmed, but apparently in pursuit of quarry invisible to us.[[19]](#endnote-19) Of Henry’s legendary skill in archery—which enabled him to demonstrate bodily proof, as it were, of his descent from the great princes whose armies had used archery to devastating affect against the French in the Hundred Years War—we see nothing.[[20]](#endnote-20) We do see him at tennis dressed only in his shirt and hose, which the real Henry is reported to have been when he played. Henry was also practised at the sports of grappling, throwing, and over-balancing manoeuvres now more commonly associated with the martial arts. There is a depiction of the famous wrestling bout with Francis I at the Field of Cloth of Gold, which Henry lost. In *The Tudors* this provokes a complete temper tantrum in which Henry wrecks furniture in fury at being beaten by a better man—and here a taller one in the person of the actor Emmanuel Leconte. It becomes the reason for his repudiation of his alliance with Francis.[[21]](#endnote-21)

It was not just in the sporting arena that Henry demonstrated his masculine strength and implied to watching audience his fertility and to some extent at least even his virility. In the series, the camera dwells lovingly on young Henry’s chiselled pecs and six-pack and those of his friend Suffolk, quite as much as on the heaving bare breasts and spread thighs of the women they seduce. This caters fully to modern sensibilities, which eroticise the chest and abdomen and upper arms of the young male body. It contrasts, however, with early-sixteenth European culture, where the primary sites of male desirability were the bearded face, the neck and shoulders, the thighs and legs. Short, wide doublets, stockings and hose, and the legendary codpiece all emphasised these parts of the body to the fullest extent within the bounds of propriety. And they were best displayed while dancing. Henry VIII was an enthusiastic and accomplished dancer. At a banquet in August 1514 he was reported as having spent “almost the whole night in dancing with the damsels.” He had “done wonders” on the dance floor, leaping “like a stag.” As with the tournaments, so in the banqueting hall, his entry and participation were causes of great excitement and wonder to all assembled. And, again, this rather crucial aspect of Henry’s masculine physicality is entirely absent from *The Tudors*. The music and choreography in the frequent banqueting scenes are as aberrant as any other aspects of this production. It veers, often in the same scene, between imagined-to-be medieval fife and drum yomping and the sort of genteel country dancing familiar to the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* but alien to the Tudor court. Henry does none of it. Instead he walks around the guests smilingly, like the mayor of Netherfield (to pursue the Austen analogy), leering at his next potential conquest from a distance. The real Henry would have been at center of the dancing and using it as the perfect way to get up close and personal.[[22]](#endnote-22)

In the end it all comes down to sex. And only sex. The whole complex driving force in Henry VIII’s personality and thus his kingship, that monstrous but profoundly insecure ego, is reduced to his libido and his anxiety over the lack of a male heir. Albeit in a rather serious register, Henry is once more caricatured as an insatiable lothario, a very Casanova or Don Juan of sixteenth-century England and a paragon of priapic potency—even to the point of virtual rape in one scene. This is *The Tudors*’ great disservice to England’s most famous king, whose “real story” it purports to tell. Peddling the myth is presumably meant to make him heroic or at least compelling to modern audiences. It would certainly not have made him so in his own time. As Katherine Crawford and others have observed, contrary to modern expectations, the obsessive pursuit of sex might actually expose a ruler to accusations of effeminacy and tyranny.[[23]](#endnote-23) In patriarchal theory, it was women, not men, who were held to be incapable of controlling their sexual urges. A prince who could not bridle his sexual instincts demonstrated that his own masculinity was insecure, precisely because it risked ceding to women a man’s control over himself and his divinely ordained authority over them. It went further. If a prince was obsessed with his own private appetites, how could he devote his attention to the best interests of his people? How could he be trusted to respect the rights, property (including of course the women) of other men, chiefly those of his peers? These were exactly the accusations levelled at Alessandro de’ Medici, Duke of Florence in the early 1530s. His successor, Cosimo I very carefully and very publicly honoured his marital vows to Eleonora di Toledo and thus secured the approbation of contemporary commentators for respecting and honouring women, and for his wise rule of the duchy.[[24]](#endnote-24) Henry did have known mistresses in Elizabeth Blount and Mary Boleyn—and doubtless some other brief encounters besides—but these relationships were within the patriarchal norms as applied to kings. In contrast to his contemporary Francis I of France whose philandering was notorious, Henry was essentially a serial monogamist.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Henry’s own view of himself in these matters is presented in the most iconic image we have of him, the one that has virtually become his trademark and which is presented in *The Tudors* as essentially Henry’s creation, rather than that of the artist. Hans Holbein’s mural portrait of the king made for the Privy Chamber at Whitehall was painted to celebrate the birth of Prince Edward in October 1537. Much of Henry’s modern and misplaced reputation as an inveterate womaniser (which originated only in the eighteenth century) derives from the pose and costume of the king in the painting. In Holbein’s portrait, the king’s shoulders and his arms held with hands on hips create an inverted triangle. This sits atop another triangle formed by his spread-legged stance. The apexes of the two triangles meet at the king’s groin and there, of course, at the famous codpiece. This has been read as reference to the king’s supposed sexual appetite and capability. The codpiece was actually designed to protect and emphasize the “coddes,” that is the testes (hence the name), and thus the wearer’s reproductive capacity, his own security and maturity as a man, and that of his dynasty.[[26]](#endnote-26) Seen within the painting, which also depicts Henry VII, Elizabeth of York, and Jane Seymour, Henry’s position and stance proclaim his personal legitimacy as a king divinely charged with bringing true religion to England. Holbein presents him as a greater sovereign than his own father and as himself a father, not just to Prince Edward (referenced in Jane), but also to his whole people as God the Father’s earthly representative in the realm.[[27]](#endnote-27) In short, Henry’s stance and costume celebrate not the endless sexual conquests for which *The Tudors* wants to make him primarily famous, but his own sense of his fame and reputation as the religious king of England.

For all the hype about the series and its sensationalist titillation, the portrayal of King Henry VIII in *The Tudors* is one of the most conventional and least convincing ever offered on screen. Its single distinguishing characteristic is that in the first two seasons it offers us the youngest Henry ever. Jonathan Rhys Meyers’ Henry is famous for never really growing older until the last moments of the last episodes or obese or even credibly ill. The notoriety of the series derives from the portrayal of the dashing and sexually desirable hero that the real Henry certainly was—for a time. Rhys Meyers’ Henry has plenty of exuberance, and he captures the unpredictability, paranoia, and the rather schizoid nature that most historians have detected in the king. The problem is that all of these things are there more or less from the outset. There is some dynamism in Henry as he begins to become his own man through his pursuit of Anne Boleyn, the fall of Wolsey, and the rise of Cromwell. That done, however, the work to establish Henry’s character is essentially finished by Anne’s fall. There is little believable development in the king’s personality across the whole length of the series beyond Season Two. The rest is just repetitious variation on the theme (performed with slightly more facial hair) until the end, which is an exaggerated reiteration of what we saw at the start and the series fails in the face of the complexity of kingship as public office and role in the medieval and early-modern world.[[28]](#endnote-28)

This is less a criticism of Rhys-Meyers’ performance (he won ten acting awards for his Henry, so it must be good) than of the series’ writer and various directors. They were so antagonistic towards the historical record that the resultant plot bars the viewer from ever seeing Henry properly in any kind of plausible context, for all the attention lavished on apparent (though not actual) “authenticity” in costumes, scenery, and so on. As if the record of his life is not extraordinary enough, the sequence of events and even the people who form that record are thrown around so recklessly that virtually anything can, and does, happen. It makes understanding why Henry did exactly what he did *as a king* almost impossible.

*The Tudors* is entertainment, not a history documentary of course. All screen portrayals of historical characters amend and alter the record to fit the dramatic and technical demands of the medium. This is usually done, however, with some sense of respect for the historical record rather than determined indifference to it. Done well, as it has been, it can offering meaningful insight to wider audiences and become part what Robert Rosenstone has called “historical drama.” Such a performance was given, for example, by Genevieve Bujold in *Anne of the Thousand Days*, where she played Anne Boleyn as an intelligent feisty proto-feminist and dynastic politician in her own right. Robert Shaw offered a memorably charming yet menacing Henry in *A Man For All Seasons*—and at least he looked a bit like Henry Tudor.[[29]](#endnote-29) Knowingly or otherwise, both these characterisations worked with the grain of contemporary explorations of psychological motivation in historical characters and a revised view of how Tudor power worked. This is not true of *The Tudors*. Its publicity boasts that it has “redefined historical drama.” It does nothing of the kind because it has no regard for, or integrity in dealing with, the history it ostensibly presents. It remains at best a bare-chested, heaving-bosomed, frenetic, “costume drama.” It has more in common with *Carry on Henry* than any other film about the Tudor period. But while *Carry On* set out to be funny, the portentous *Tudors* ends up being merely laughable because its creators had no real understanding of, or interest in, the driving force of Henry VIII’s life—namely, his kingship.

1. *The Tudors*, Episode 1:1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Glenn Richardson, *Renaissance Monarchy: The Reigns of Henry VIII, Francis I and Charles V* (London: Hodder, 2002), 6-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid pp. 24-7; David Starkey, *Henry, Virtuous Prince* (London: Harper Press, 2008) pp. 118-35 and 172-83 on Henry’s education and his relationship with More; *The Tudors*, Episodes 1:1-1:2. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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