

Review: Robison, William B. (ed.), *History, Fiction, and The Tudors: Sex, Politics, Power, and Artistic License in the Showtime Television Series (Queenship and Power)*, Palgrave Macmillan; 1st ed. 2016 ISBN-13: 978-1137438812 Hardcover: 402 pages

Many historians have an ambiguous attitude towards historical fiction, for there is a thin line between necessary historical authenticity and artistic licence. One of the most popular fictional historical TV series in the past years, Showtime's *The Tudors*, is no exception. Experts on the Tudor dynasty criticise the inaccuracies of the series, but they also acknowledge that its popularity can be a tool to promote an interest in the *real* Tudors. After all, a TV series of this kind tells stories with, ideally, compelling characters and plot lines.

William B. Robison takes up this point to explain the intention of the various authors contributing to this work. Their goal is to provide a *guide* to the TV series, explaining what is accurate and what is not accurate about it (Robison, "Introduction", p.6f). He stresses that neither he himself nor his co-authors intent to simply criticise the series, but to make clear what each of them approves of. However, the editor notes that the appeal of the series heavily depends on "lots of good-looking men and women, brightly (if inaccurately) costumed and frequently naked" (p.7). In fact, it is quite the consensus among the authors that the series's focus on eroticism and characters conforming to modern-day beauty stereotypes is one of the major drawbacks of the series, because "intellectual subtlety" is lacking, in their opinion (p.7).

Robison proceeds by briefly summarising the following chapters and their main arguments. The topics being dealt with include: the depiction of Henry VIII (Ch.2), Catherine of Aragón (Ch.3), Anne Boleyn (Ch.4), Henry's children (Ch.6), Henry's ministers (Ch.10), crime in the Tudor era (Ch.15) the difference between humanism and humanitarianism (Ch.16), fashion and costumes (Ch.19), "Gender, Sex and Rape" (Ch.20) and diseases and cures (Ch.21).

The author of this review will focus on the two papers most relevant to her own research: Chapter 2: **Susan Bordo: "The Tudors, Natalie Dormer, and our „Default“ Anne Boleyn"** and Chapter 20: **Megan L. Hickerson: "Putting Women in Their Place: Gender, Sex, and Rape in *The Tudors*"**.

Susan Bordo: "The Tudors, Natalie Dormer, and our „Default“ Anne Boleyn"

Susan Bordo presents a slightly altered extract from her highly commendable work *The Creation of Anne Boleyn*. She makes a great effort to compare how Anne Boleyn has been presented in both non-fictional and fictional works. When it comes to creating a fictional Anne Boleyn, Bordo focuses most of all on *The Tudors*, but also on Hilary Mantel's novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, which were adapted into a TV series as well. Bordo puts forward, at the beginning of her paper, a quote from Hilary Mantel, whom she had interviewed: "'All historical fiction is really contemporary fiction [...]. We always write from our own time'" (Bordo, p.77). Bordo encourages the viewer/ reader to take this statement to heart when dealing with historical fiction (ibidem). She emphasises that both Mantel's works and the Showtime's series "make selective use of historical material, fill in certain gaps while creating others, and service their own representational agendas" (p.79). She skilfully briefly sums up the *career* of the fictional Anne Boleyn (for more details, see her stand-alone work mentioned above). She particularly (and, in the opinion of the author of this review; rightfully so) takes issue with Mantel's Anne, who is nothing but "[m]anipulative. Calculating. Ambitious. Cold-hearted" (ibidem). Bordo makes it quite clear that Mantel's Anne is actually the Anne of Eustache Chapuys, meaning the "ambassador of Emperor Charles V at the court of Henry VIII", who maligned Anne Boleyn in every possible way in his reports, being a fervent supporter of Catherine of Aragon and of Catholicism (p.80). Anne, who replaced Catherine as Henry's wife, and who promoted the Reformation, was therefore Chapuys' *enemy*.

For the most part, Bordo concentrates on Anne Boleyn as she is portrayed by Natalie Dormer (the actress who plays Anne in *The Tudors*), respectively by Michael Hirst (writer of *The Tudors*). What Bordo stresses the most is that Hirst presented Anne in the first season as almost nothing more than the *temptress*, meaning she was “hypersexualiz[ed]”, thus reduced (p.83). According to Hirst, this hadn’t been his intention. Both Bordo and Natalie Dormer, however, can’t help thinking that at least on a subconscious level Hirst fell into a trap of “cultural stereotypes” in terms of the Anne Boleyn—Catherine of Aragón dualism/antagonism (p.83f). Bordo, who extensively interviewed Dormer, stresses that it was indeed the actress who persuaded Hirst to portray a historically more accurate Anne in the second season (p.84). Bordo argues that this Anne Boleyn, who is indeed historically more accurate, had not made “an appearance in popular culture” up to this point (ibidem).

Bordo proceeds by going into detail of Anne Boleyn’s religious side (p.86). She takes the opportunity to assess other historical scholars writing about this point, respectively failing to mention it altogether (ibidem). The author commends the changes in the portrayal of Anne in the second season of *The Tudors*, initiated by Dormer. This *new* Anne “was still sexy but brainy, politically engaged, a loving mother, and a committed reformist” (p.88). Bordo cements her argument by presenting statements from young women, who lauded the *new* Anne (ibidem). It is further interesting to note, according to Bordo, that the viewers’ interest in the series visibly declined after Anne’s death (p.90). She concludes by *warning* of the other fictional stereotypical Annes, who still resemble Chapuys’ *evil Anne*, because “as representatives of ‘history’—or even of human beings—they are far too simplistic to let pass in our season” (p.92).

Megan L. Hickerson: “Putting Women in Their Place: Gender, Sex, and Rape in *The Tudors*”

In “Putting Women in Their Place: Gender, Sex, and Rape in *The Tudors*”, Megan L. Hickerson argues, taking various scenes from the TV series as evidence, that Michael Hirst, in her opinion, advocates an aggressive male sexuality, at the cost of women’s sexual autonomy.

She begins by criticising a seemingly innocuous affair between Thomas Wyatt and Elizabeth Darrell, Catherine of Aragón’s lady-in-waiting, in the second season. Hickerson claims that through Elizabeth Darrell (a devout Catholic, loyal to her mistress), who gives in to Wyatt’s seduction, the series makes a certain statement. According to Hickerson, the series claims that women eventually always succumb to “their natural desire for penetration” (Hickerson, p.312). Taking this particular story line as a starting point for her statements, the author proceeds by giving a detailed overview of different arguments on sexism and gender ideology, not just in relation to *The Tudors*. She quotes Basil Glynn and Adrienne Rich, who are of the opinion that the TV series promotes a “hegemonic masculinity” (Glynn) and “the bias of compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich) (p.312f).

Hickerson further argues that the series relies on what she calls “[e]nlightened sexism”, which means that modern women have achieved so much in terms of equality that bringing back “sexist stereotypes of girls and women” (quote by Susan B. Douglas, by Hickerson) would not harm their autonomy (p.313). The author of this review agrees with Hickerson that this kind of sexism puts women in danger to fall into a certain trap, being too uncritical about the portrayal of heterosexual sexuality on the screen. Hickerson stresses that the female characters are more often than not, for the most part, tied to what Naomi Wolf calls the “beauty myth” (p.313), which is supposed to be vital to emphasise their “sexual desirability” (ibidem). In Hickerson’s opinion, this damages the women’s chance to be respected and actually loved for their own sakes, because they are constantly reduced to their (*self-*) objectification (p.314).

She goes even further by claiming that the *womanising* male protagonists, Henry VIII and Charles Brandon, are used to propagate rape. The author of this review thinks that Hickerson enters dangerous territory here. Granted, there are clear cases of rape in the series (Thomas Culpepper and the gatekeeper’s wife in Episode 1 of Season 4), and it can be argued that Henry simply “taking his

pick” among women at court and on the road alike can be questioned. However, where the author of this review completely disagrees with Hickerson is in her assessment of the affair between Charles Brandon and Brigitte Rousselot in Season 4. Hickerson seems to be absolutely certain that Brandon has predatory intentions towards Brigitte, who had been fighting as a cross-dresser against Brandon’s soldiers and was then taken captive. Hickerson accuses Brandon of “seduc[ing] his French prisoner of war”, and even of lying to her father about treating her honourably (p.318). Nothing in Henry Cavill’s/ Brandon’s words, facial expressions or gestures confirms Hickerson’s accusations.

The author of this review is rather of the opinion that

1. Brandon takes Brigitte captive to save her from getting raped by his men, which, realistically, might have happened;
2. he treats her with respect, sharing his food with her, and starting to fall in love with her because of her wit and spirit;
3. he means to honour his promise to Brigitte’s father.

Brandon doesn’t make any *move* on her whatsoever. He never grabs her or speaks harshly to her. In fact, it is Brigitte who decides to stay with Brandon when she has a chance to escape (Hickerson *diagnoses* Brigitte with Stockholm syndrome, p.318). Hickerson describes the sex scene between them in detail, even emphasising that Brigitte puts “*her* hand on *his* backside, pulling him into her” (ibidem). Hickerson calls this rape, to which Brigitte would condescend, “exonerating Charles of culpability for what will be the sexual consummation of his prisoner’s imprisonment” (ibidem). The author of this review does not agree that this sexual encounter can be counted as rape. Everything in this scene, and in the preceding scenes, indicates that Brandon and Brigitte meet on an equal level and want this affair just the same. The relationship between the two characters further develops into a genuinely tender and respectful one in the last two episodes, when Brandon makes Brigitte his *maîtresse- en- titre*, his official mistress, thus elevating her social status. On a side note, Hickerson quotes Brigitte wrong: Instead of “I proved my promise”, Brigitte says “I broke my promise” (Season 4, Episode 8, 18.29 min).

Although Hickerson makes quite a few good points in judging *The Tudors* for its stereotypical and not very feminist friendly portrayals of heterosexuality, the aspect discussed above is to be criticised and not to be taken at face value from this review’s author’s point of view. Hickerson also fails to mention examples of female sexual autonomy, like the last time Henry and Anne Boleyn have sexual intercourse on screen, in quite a passionate and aggressive way. Anne demands to have her own way in bed, being first on top of Henry, slapping him, and afterwards, when she is under him, scratching his back. Then she’s on top of him again, pinning down his arms (Season 2, Episode 7, 21.55–22.35 min.). In the author of this review’s opinion, this underlines Anne’s demand to be treated by Henry as his equal, at least in this, since he denies her this equality in every other respect. Hickerson completely ignores this.

However, overall the paper is important for raising the viewers’ awareness to the representations of gender and sex.

The other papers in this volume cannot be reviewed here, but the author of this review has read all of them, and also recommends the paper of Samantha Perez on the difference between humanism and humanitarianism. Due to the diversity of the papers, it is also possible to pick and choose, if you’re interested in specific topics. The respective authors know for the most part what they are talking about, especially when they are correcting historical inaccuracies. To conclude, this volume serves as an excellent companion to fans of the TV series *The Tudors* and people interested in Tudor research alike.

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