

Henry VIII in Film

Dr Thomas Freeman

Research Officer

British Academy John Foxe Project

Most people wish to be remembered after they are dead. Princes and potentates often share this desire and they are in a better position to gratify it than the rest of humanity. In the quest for posthumous fame, the mighty have given their names to cities and regions, they have built churches and palaces, and they have commissioned artistic masterpieces. Thanks to a brilliant portrait by Hans Holbein, a lurid and violent marital history, and the events of his tumultuous yet seminal reign, Henry has effortlessly achieved an enduring and pervasive fame. Everyone has some idea of what he looked like, at least at the period when Holbein painted him, and everyone knows a few facts about him—for example, that he had six wives and that he broke with Rome. Far more than his friend, chancellor and victim, Sir Thomas More, Henry is truly the man for all seasons, with his fame evergreen in succeeding historical eras.

Cinema did not create Henry's fame but it has perpetuated it. With the exception of his daughter Elizabeth, Henry has been portrayed on the silver screen more than any other English monarch, indeed arguably more than any other historical figure. Although he has been a ubiquitous figure on screen, Henry's film career has experienced numerous peaks and troughs, which were caused by fundamental social and political transformations: the rise and fall of Fascism, the onset of the Cold War, the decline of the British Empire and the sexual revolution. Film has reinforced the traditional images of Henry—tyrant, Lothario and Bluebeard—but the emphases have varied from generation to generation.

The Private Life of Henry VIII, produced and directed by Alexander Korda in 1933, was not only the first significant English-language film on Henry, it was also the first, and one of the greatest, international successes ever achieved by the British film industry. Charles Laughton, however, whose performance as Henry won considerable contemporary acclaim, did not portray the king as a great statesman, or even as a forceful tyrant, but rather as a comic, infantile, henpecked monarch. In part, this seems to have Laughton's decision; it was certainly Laughton who insisted, in the

notorious banqueting scenes, on having Henry toss bones over his shoulder, stuff food into his mouth, belch noisily, and then deplore 'the decline in good manners'. But ultimately the portrayal of Henry was shaped by Korda. His motives for depicting a comical Henry may have been founded on commercial considerations; he may have judged (accurately) that audiences would enjoy a treatment of Henry's life as a domestic comedy.

It is also possible that Korda, whose anti-Fascist sentiments were a consistent and prominent feature of his films, may have intended to ridicule contemporary tyrants (it is worth remembering that Hitler came to power in 1933) by ridiculing a famous historical tyrant. This would not have been uncharacteristic of Korda; he helped to inspire Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) by suggesting to Chaplin that he capitalize on his physical resemblance to Hitler to make a satirical comedy about the Führer. However, in the case of *The Private Life*, Korda's shots may have missed their target. Many right-wing critics, who otherwise might have sympathized with Korda's political views, were appalled by the film's levity and irreverence towards an English monarch.

Irreverence was not a charge that could be made about the next historical film in which Henry played a significant role: *The Tudor Rose* (1936). Although largely forgotten today, this film, about the ill-fated Lady Jane Grey, was not only a considerable box office success, it also received more critical acclaim than any of Korda's historical films. *The Tudor Rose* opens with a shot of crowds of people, kneeling in the rain, praying for their dying king. (This must have been a scene of particular significance to cinema audiences for whom the death of George V was a recent memory). As, in the middle of ferocious storm, Henry breathes his last, his courtiers gather by his bedside. One of the most important of those present is John Dudley, the earl of Warwick. (In actual fact, at this point in time, Dudley was merely Viscount Lisle). A henchman whispers to Dudley, 'The passing of a tyrant'. Dudley solemnly corrects him: 'Before he came each man fought for himself under the White Rose or the Red, and when he goes there will be many struggling to grasp the threads of power that fall from those hands'. As the thunder rolls, Henry (Frank Cellier) raises himself on his deathbed to announce both his appointed succession and to pronounce a solemn curse on anyone who tries to subvert it. Warwick dismisses the

curse, but it moves inexorably throughout the remainder of the film to destroy those ambitious magnates, like Warwick, who attempt to seize power for themselves. The storm at Henry's death, the pronouncing of the curse and its fulfilment, underscore not only Henry's authority but the supernatural powers of the throne and the inviolability of the legitimate succession to it.

There was every reason to emphasize these points in 1936, as the crisis caused by Edward VIII's determination to marry Wallis Simpson unfolded. Larger forces were also at work and *The Tudor Rose* was part of an increasingly conservative trend in British historical films. As the world-wide Depression and the threat of war eroded popular confidence, British films became more supportive of the Crown, the Establishment and the Empire. Tellingly, the most popular British historical films of these years were *Victoria the Great* (1937) and its sequel, *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938)—films whose titles succinctly characterize their approach to the monarchy. The prevailing social and political climate of the late 1930s was profoundly uncongenial for further films about Henry. It was almost impossible to make a film about Henry that did not inflame the still sensitive issue of royal marital scandal. *The Tudor Rose* could only depict a majestic and awe-inspiring Henry because it dealt with the final moments of his life and avoided any mention of his marriages.

The risqué and somewhat comic aura surrounding Henry—particularly in the wake of Korda's film—also undermined any chance that Henry would become a patriotic icon during World War II. When British filmmakers looked for historical figures to glorify as part of wartime propaganda, they looked to Henry V, to Lord Nelson, and above all, to Elizabeth I and her sea dogs, rather than the king who had, after all, been credited with founding both the royal navy and the Empire. The wartime need for unambiguously heroic leaders sealed Henry's fall from cinematic grace, which would last—apart from two idiosyncratic exceptions—until 1966. (The two exceptions, both of which were released in 1953, were *The Sword and the Rose*, a Disney adventure about Charles Brandon's elopement with Henry VIII's sister Mary and *Young Bess*, a film about Henry's younger daughter, in which Charles Laughton reprised the part of the king).

Hitherto, apart from the *The Tudor Rose*, depictions of Henry VIII on film were, in varying degrees, comic, but also not without sympathy for the king. However two plays written in the aftermath of World War II, and in the long shadows cast by Hitler and Stalin, decisively shaped subsequent film portrayals of Henry. Maxwell Anderson's *Anne of the Thousand Days*, which opened on Broadway in 1948, dramatized Henry's relationship with Anne Boleyn as the turning point which transformed Henry into a ruthless tyrant. Anderson's play magnified Henry's harsh suppression of opposition to his divorce from Katherine of Aragon into full scale purges, in which—according to Anderson—the altar at St. Paul's stood ankle-deep in the blood of Henry's victims.

Similar themes dominate Robert Bolt's enormously influential 1960 drama about Thomas More, *A Man for all Seasons*. Like Anderson, Bolt emphasized Henry's degeneration into tyranny, and like Anderson, Bolt felt that this degeneration began with Henry's decision to marry Anne Boleyn. Bolt's drama was a considerable international success, with long and critically acclaimed runs on both Broadway and the West End. Part of its popularity was undoubtedly due to the merits of the play, but much of its popularity was also due to its basic themes. The persecution of More, along with his heroic defiance of unjust authority, resonated in a period in which show trials and McCarthyism were recent memories and the struggle for Civil Rights was an ongoing experience. Bolt's play, along Anderson's, made Henry VIII relevant to mid-twentieth century audiences, but it did so by depicting Henry as a corrupt, brutal, tyrant.

The international success of Bolt's play inspired Columbia pictures to gamble on making a movie of it. The film, however, was allotted a restricted budget, and this may have been a blessing in disguise. The relatively small financial investment in the film meant that there was little studio interference and a high degree of creative freedom for Fred Zinneman, the veteran director of the film, and Bolt, who wrote the screenplay for it. And while financial limitations precluded enlisting a major film star for the role of More, there was enough money to hire Robert Shaw, at that time a rising film actor, for the secondary, but crucial, role of Henry. Between them, Zinneman, Bolt and Shaw created what is probably the most influential and impressive depiction of the king in film.

Henry appears in only two scenes in the film of *A Man for all Seasons*. The second is a brief scene of Henry at his marriage to Anne Boleyn. It is in the first scene, however, of the king visiting More at his home in Chelsea that an indelible image of Henry VIII is created. Part of this is due to Shaw's virtuoso performance; in a few moments of screen time he conveys an unsettling but arresting mixture of hearty good fellowship, charisma, intensity and menace, laced with hints of paranoia. More than any other actor who has played Henry, Shaw captures the king who struck terror into those around him, but, who also, paradoxically, could command genuine loyalty.

But much of this portrayal is also created by the skill of Zinneman and Bolt, who powerfully depict the effect that Henry had on those around him. The reaction of the courtiers (a sycophantic Greek chorus) when the king jumps off of his barge into the mud—horror at the possibility of the king's displeasure, followed by slavishly concealed distaste as they are forced to join Henry in the muck—is telling. (It is also a subtle reminder that Henry's determination to divorce Katherine of Aragon is leading the king to jump into, ethically speaking, the mire and that those around him, except for More, are only too ready to follow). And, in a brilliant touch, the windows to More's house are shown open, with his family and the courtiers overhearing Henry's conversation with More and reacting with dread and fear as the fires of the wrath begin to lick around More's career.

Despite the studio's initial lack of enthusiasm for their film, *A Man for all Seasons* was not only a critical hit (it garnered six Oscars), it was also among the top ten grossing films of 1966. The unexpected success of *A Man for all Seasons* revived Hollywood's interest in Henry VIII. As a result, Anderson's *Anne of the Thousand Days* was made into a film in 1969. (It is a sign of the influence of *A Man for all Seasons* that Thomas More, a very minor character in Anderson's play, has a considerably larger role in the film). Unfortunately the movie, apparently in a misconceived effort to turn the story of Henry and Anne into a conventional romance (and to capitalize on the casting of Richard Burton, notorious for playing a great lover on and offscreen, as Henry), blurred the themes that made Anderson's play dramatically effective, if not historically accurate. The degeneration of Henry from a potentially enlightened prince into a tyrant is largely omitted.

Nevertheless, Henry is still portrayed as an autocrat and while the references to purges and wholesale slaughter in the play are largely dropped from the film, individual executions are mentioned in the film and More's execution is shown onscreen. Moreover, in both the play and the film *Anne of the Thousand Days*, Anne is depicted as being innocent of the charges for which she was executed. The portrait of Henry is not as incisive in the film as in the play, yet in both versions he is a cruel, and hypocritical, tyrant.

Anne of the Thousand Days only garnered lukewarm reviews, but if it was not the spectacular success the studio had hoped for, it still turned a profit. The recent films on Henry VIII probably inspired the BBC to launch a television series on *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* in 1970. Once again, Henry proved to be a goldmine for filmmakers. The series was an unprecedented success for the BBC in North America, as well as the United Kingdom, and it paved the way for later international successes such as *Elizabeth R* and *I, Claudius*. As the title of the series indicates, its focus was on Henry's marriages, not his reign. This helped Keith Michell, the Australian actor who played Henry, to mingle elements of both vulnerability and comedy into his performance. This was accentuated by the great strength of this depiction of Henry: it covered Henry's entire life, and through the skill of Michell and the make-up artists, the king aged, turning—as did the real Henry—from a handsome young athlete into a grossly obese, sickly old man. Two years later, in 1972, there was an attempt to repeat the television success on the big screen, with Keith Michell reprising the role of Henry, in a film with the same name as his television series. However, the new film was an abject critical and financial failure.

But the year would see Henry VIII return to the screen, if not exactly in triumph, than certainly with considerable fanfare. *Carry on Henry* was a typical entry in the Carry On series, with Sid James as the king, and history rewritten to fit the popular formulas of this series. Sid James's Henry was the last gasp of a tradition going back at least to the Victorian music halls, in which Henry VIII was seen as an aggressively lusty masculine rogue. (The film even shows the king hunting—quite literally—women through the forest). Yet the times they were a changin' and, although *Carry on Henry* did well at the box office, the king was about to be swept from his

cinematic throne by a revolution: the sexual revolution which began in the late 1960s. In the past, patriarchal values had made it possible to view Henry's treatment of his wives as somewhat amusing and even admirably virile. Now in the eyes of a generation influenced by changing sexual attitudes and evolving gender relations, Henry no longer appeared to be bluff King Hal but instead an egregiously abusive husband and father.

As grudging admiration of Henry's marital escapades was replaced with revulsion, the tensions of the Cold War eased and Henry's usefulness as a symbolic surrogate for contemporary tyrants faded away. As a result Henry was once again exiled from the silver screen, this time for the remainder of the century. But the post-war depictions of Henry in film had left indelible, bloody stain on his reputation. Before Robert Bolt, Henry had been popularly known for having been married six times. After Bolt, Thomas More was popularly perceived as a martyr for freedom of conscience and Henry was remembered for having made him a martyr.

Ironically it was Henry's reputation for brutality which helped ensure his return to film in the twenty-first century. And, in another irony, it was two films about Henry's daughter Elizabeth, that directly led to her father's recent, impressive career on both the big and small screens. The dazzling twin successes, in 1998, of Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* and John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, convinced some people in the entertainment industry that the Tudors were still commercial. At the same time, gangster films were enjoying a considerable vogue thanks largely to *The Sopranos*. Henry VIII provided an easy means for producers to combine the Tudor film with the gangster film.

This, at least, was the thinking behind the Granada television series *Henry VIII*, shown in 2003. In the words of Peter Travis, the director of the series, *Henry VIII* was 'the *Godfather* in tights'. Ray Winstone, who played the king, stayed faithful to this conception of Henry VIII as a crowned Corleone. There are probably worse ways to interpret Henry, and it is a strength of this production in that it—uniquely among film treatments of Henry—shows Henry's combination of treachery and savagery in dealing with Robert Aske and his followers. The problem with Winstone's Henry is that he lacks sophistication. Winstone's Henry would have had trouble reading a book of theology, much less writing one.

It would not be surprising if Henry's future film career largely consisted of roles as a ruthless despot. However, the two most recent incarnations of Henry onscreen, deviate sharply from the tyrannical alpha male of most post-war films about the king. In the film *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008), Henry VIII (played by Eric Bana) is depicted as the easily manipulated tool of rival sisters and of a faction led by the Duke of Norfolk. This interpretation of Henry as being influenced by competing personalities and factions is one that some historians would subscribe to. Yet it is less dramatic and compelling than the lustful, masterful tyrant of popular history and, tellingly, *The Other Boleyn Girl* features what is perhaps the most colourless Henry in film.

More problematic is the depiction of Henry in the ongoing Showtime series *The Tudors*. In its first season, the series cleverly invoked the powerful stereotypes of Henry by seeming to disregard them. A narrative during the opening credits assured the audience that they *think* that they know the story, but they only know how it ends. The first season of the series was devoted to the earlier portion of Henry VIII's reign, and it ended just before his marriage to Anne Boleyn. In an attempt to exorcize the spectre of the Holbein portrait, the actor cast as Henry—Jonathan Rhys Myers—is smaller than Henry and his hair is dark rather than auburn. During the first season, Myers was beardless, further distancing himself from the Holbein Henry. The trouble with this approach is that *The Tudors* will run for four seasons, covering Henry's entire life. Eventually, the makers of the series will have to choose between having their star resemble the Holbein portrait or else having him bear no resemblance to the historical Henry at all. Apparently the producers have decided on the second option, as they announced in August 2008 that the svelte Rhys Meyers will not gain weight as the series progresses and that the television Henry, unlike the historical Henry, will not grow obese. At this point, the series turns into nothing more than a soap opera about fictitious royals and *The Tudors* has become just another *Dynasty*.

It is possible that, after *The Tudors*, the interest in Henry from filmmakers will temporarily subside. But Henry's film career is almost certainly not over. The public interest in him, and in his wives, is as strong as ever. If

anything film has only increased this interest, but it has done so by reinforcing popular stereotypes about Henry as a philanderer, and a tyrant. Viewers of films about Henry should remember that they provide a starting point for research on him and not the final word on one of the most complex and important English monarchs.