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Why Historical Dramas Set Our World Right

Norman Allen · Thursday, January 26th, 2012

All is well in American television now that *Downton Abbey* has returned to PBS. Rosy sunsets again cast their light over the stones of Lord Grantham's vast home, the downstairs staff rises above their under-educated prejudices and the family upstairs lowers their standards while opening their hearts. And it never rains—in England.

Historical dramas do what literature does best. Bringing order to chaos, they provide a narrative arc for the mess that is human history. We return to the soft glow of *Downton Abbey* or the sexy gloss of *Mad Men* because they suggest that life once had structure, perhaps even purpose. In these semi-factual worlds, mistakes always lead to new learning, each day contains a central dramatic event and people always stay in character.

Historic dramas also give us the pleasure of superiority—we know stuff the characters don't. As *Downton Abbey* concluded last season, news of war with Germany rudely interrupted the Grantham's garden party, and elicited a series of dramatic close-ups identical to the same event in the series' classic predecessor *Upstairs Downstairs*. Servants and masters feared the rigors of war and trembled for their handsome young men, but only we knew that this was the start of a world-wide conflict, which will lead swiftly to a second with its attendant genocide and nuclear warfare.

I was raised on the period epics of the 1960s: Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson in *Mary, Queen of Scots*, Richard Burton and Genevieve Bujold in *Anne of a Thousand Days* and Robert Bolt's brilliant *A Man for All Seasons* with Paul Scofield as the ever-honorable Thomas More. Each of them brings order to the political logjam of Tudors and Stuarts, and each relies upon our knowledge that a bloody scaffold waits at the end of the story. True to the genre's tradition, Bolt drifted far from historic fact. The sainted More was actually a prince of propaganda who oversaw the burning of Protestant heretics. The screenwriter's twisting of the facts, though, served a greater purpose. More's path to the scaffold becomes an exploration of the tension between man's law and God's, and the very nature of truth.

More recent period dramas have veered farther from the facts and with less purpose. Showtime's *The Tudors* used the travails of an exceptionally lean Henry VIII to create a pornography of farthingales and violence. The much-anticipated *Anonymous* sank beneath its near-farcical treatment of Elizabethan intrigue. Closer to our own epoch, Spielberg's *War Horse* used the horrors of World War One to teach us, literally, to keep plowing ahead no matter the obstacle. All three lacked the subtlety, intellect and grace of Bolt's work. *Downton Abbey*, though, comes close. Critics have accused writer Julian Fellowes of creating a simplistic view of a complex moment in history, but for every clunker about a fading world there's a resonant moment that brings that seismic shift to life: the servants gather to stare at a telephone, or the chauffeur glances in the rearview mirror and recognizes a kindred spirit in Lady Sybil. *Downton Abbey* takes a respectful place among its predecessors by bringing order to the mess we made at the beginning of the last

century, and by playing upon our knowledge of what's to come. Like *A Man for All Seasons* it's as much fantasy as fact but provides a model to live by, advocating a life that is open to change and founded on a biding affection for human foibles.

Best of all, it gives us reason to look forward to Sunday night.

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