London and Inverness: Between Text and Cinematographic Adaptation – Representation of the Two Cities in Philippa Gregory's *The White Queen*, C. J. Sansom's *Shardlake* series and Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander*

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Urban landscapes tend to be a key element in the narrative of historical fiction. They can be recreated in literature, using specific narrative techniques, or in cinematography to give a broader perspective and a new dimension to the novel, in the case of adaptations. Cities such as London form the backdrop of Philippa Gregory's *The White Queen* and C. J. Sansom's *Shardlake* series, whereas Inverness is the primary setting in Diana Gabaldon's first novel of the *Outlander* series. London and Inverness, in the stated works, play a quintessential dynamic role in the narrative. They are not mere settings but rather vital components of the historical plot. Their representation in *The White Queen*, *Shardlake* and the first season of the *Outlander* TV series, respectively, accentuates the major role that a city can play in a historical period's reimagination.

Space and Borders in Shaping the Historical Novel

London

London as a Hub of Power and Conspiracy during the Wars of the Roses

London was the center of power in 15th-century England. During the Wars of the Roses, which lasted more than thirty years (1455-1487), the winning party had to seize London and obtain the Londoners' support.[1]

> Throughout the Middle Ages, control of London was crucial to political success, either for the monarch or for a claimant or usurper. In the Wars of the Roses, both sides were anxious to hold on to London, but while the rulers of the City preferred to play a conservative part, tending to support the government in power (to which they were committed in loans and financial support) until the scales were already tipping in the other side's favour, there was probably stronger Yorkist feeling among the people. In 1461, when the City government was prepared to send supplies to Margaret of Anjou, whose army was threatening the City, the people of London shut the gates and turned back the carts: 'the commons of the city and the heads were two opinions and minds', as a contemporary wrote.[2]

Gregory's *The White Queen* is set in the heart of the Lancaster vs. York turmoil. She uses London as the main city, among others, in which power struggles take place. Locations, such as Westminster and the Tower, are used as theaters of political maneuvering, not merely as geographical locations.

London's majestic facade can be depicted in events such as royal coronations. In *The White Queen*, Elizabeth Woodville describes her coronation ceremonies:

> In the event, it is even richer than he predicted, richer than I could have imagined. My entrance to London is by London Bridge, but the dirty old highway is transformed with wagon on wagon load of sparkling sand into a road more like a jousting arena. I am greeted by players dressed as angels, their costumes made from peacock feathers, their dazzling wings like a thousand eyes of blue and turquoise and indigo. Actors make a tableau of the Virgin Mary and the saints …Choirs sing as I enter the city, rose petals are showered down on me …

1 Hugh Clout, ed., *The Times London History Atlas*, Hammersmith, Times Book, 1991, p. 46.
2 *Ibid*.

> I spend the night before my coronation at the grand royal apartments in the Tower, newly decorated for my stay.
> Next day is my coronation at Westminster Abbey.[3]

Gregory's description of Elizabeth's coronation and how the city was decorated for her sake is realistic enough. The queen consort is said to have had "a lavish coronation at the Abbey on 26th May 1465."[4] Amy Licence states:

> Elizabeth's coronation procession was to be enlivened by pageantry. Evidence survives for only a fraction of the payments made to the guilds for their entertainments staged at various points through the city streets. Elizabeth was met by the mayor and conducted into the city, probably from Shooter's Hill or Blackfriars. London Bridge had been fumigated and sprinkled with sand and she was guided across the bridge by a clerk…Angels awaited her in the middle wearing flax wigs dyed with saffron and wings made of peacock feathers. A choir of twenty-six singers serenaded her from a stage that had been built using 5000 nails and plastered with gold, red, green, black and white paper…Ballads were composed and written upon six boards but no longer survive, nor does the welcome speech delivered by the character of St Elizabeth. There would have been more pageants, speeches and song before Elizabeth reached the Tower, where she was to be lodged in advance of the event.[5]

Though no precise description of Elizabeth's coronation procession has survived, these ceremonies were highly codified and unchanging. They were common to all princely and royal entries and other celebrations of glory since the 13th century. Philippa Gregory only needed to draw her inspiration from London chronicles (*The Great Chronicle* details Catherine of Aragon's reception into London on November 12th 1501)[6] or from John Lydgate's famous *King Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London*.[7] The vivid descriptions of the city, implying colors, luxury and courtly rituals, evoke its predisposition to be raw material to cinematographic adaptations.

Apart from the glamorous side related to royal celebrations, London was also a place of agony. Westminster Abbey served as a sanctuary for Queen

3 Philippa Gregory, *The White Queen*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2010, pp. 73-75.
4 See link to the Westminster Abbey website (accessed 2 July 2026).
5 Amy Licence, *Edwards IV & Elizabeth Woodville: A True Romance*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, p. 131.
6 *The Great Chronicle of London*, A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley, eds., London, George W. Jones, 1938.
7 John Lydgate, « Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London », Claire Sponsler, ed., *Mummings and Entertainments*, Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, 2010.

Elizabeth twice.[8] This fact is told in *The White Queen* through Elizabeth's experience as a protagonist and first-person narrator. The female gaze, indeed, serves as a narrative technique used by Gregory to dramatize events and locations, such as the Abbey and the Tower.

The Tower of London is not only a royal residence, but also a place linked to imprisonment and death. King Henry VI was imprisoned there in 1465,[9] and it was the place of his death in 1471 – "most probably murdered".[10]

After King Edward IV's sudden death in 1483, his 12-year-old son Edward V was his legitimate heir. Edward IV's brother, Richard of Gloucester, was to take the position of Lord Protector until the boy came of age. However,

> The young Edward was to remain on the throne for only two months before Richard had him seized and placed in the Tower of London. It was then announced that the boy's father's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville had been illegal, invalidating the youngster's right to rule. Richard had himself proclaimed king in Edward's place, being crowned that July in Westminster Abbey; Edward and his nine-year-old younger brother Richard, the 'princes in the tower', were never seen again, seemingly having been killed on Richard's instructions.[11]

The story of the Princes in the Tower has long been a matter of interest to historians as well as novelists. In Gregory's novel, Elizabeth Woodville reflects: "I don't like the Tower: it gives me a shudder … 'I don't like my boys being here.'" (p. 74) In this passage, Elizabeth refers to her Grey sons, nevertheless, it is a known fact that Edward IV's two sons were placed in the Tower by their uncle, the usurper Richard, but their fate remains blurry to this day. Whether they were murdered under Richard's instructions, Anne Neville's plot, or Margaret Beaufort's ambition, the truth is unclear. Both princes' disappearance has been a mystery to historians ever since. The only fact that seems to be consistent is that they were last seen in the Tower. Nearly 200 years after the incident, skeletons belonging to two children were found in a chest in the Tower.[12] They are supposed to be the bones of the two murdered princes.[13]

8 Link to the Westminster Abbey website (accessed 2 July 2026).
9 Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Oxford History of Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 233.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 234.
11 *History of Britain and Ireland: The Definitive Visual Guide*, London, Dorling Kindersley, 2024, p. 123.
12 Link to The princes in the tower (accessed 2 July 2026).
13 Link to the Westminster Abbey website (accessed 2 July 2026).

London as a Center of Transformation and Religious Upheaval in Tudor Times

Throughout the *Matthew Shardlake* series of historical crime novels, Chris J. Sansom makes the reader travel through London in King Henry VIII's era. In *Dissolution*, the first novel of the series, though the setting is not located mainly in London but rather in the fictional town of Scarnsea, several places of London are mentioned in passages where Matthew Shardlake goes to the city, such as Southwark (p. 2), London Bridge (p. 2), Ludgate Hill (p. 3), Fleet Street (p. 6), Temple Bar (p. 6), Westminster Palace (p. 6), Whitehall (p. 6) and the Court of Augmentations (p. 6). Shardlake describes one of his passages to London: "We rode through a London that was just awakening and onto London Bridge. Glancing downriver past the fierce bulk of the Tower, I saw a great ocean-going carrack moored by the Isle of Dogs, its heavy prow and high masts a misty shape where grey river met grey sky." (p. 32)

At the beginning of his second novel, *Dark Fire*[14], Sansom presents a map of London as imagined in the story in 1540.

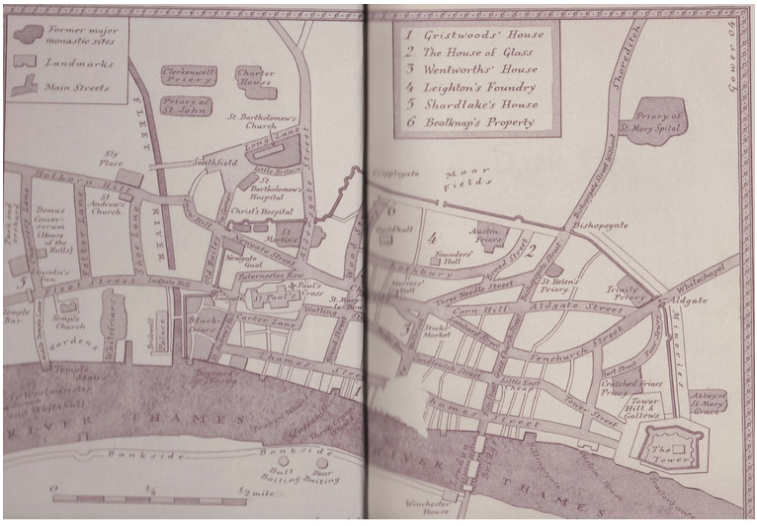

Figure 1. *C.J. Sansom, Dark Fire, London, Pan Books, 2004.*

[Alternative text: A black-and-white map of the City of London in 1540, showing the main streets, principal buildings, the River Thames, and indicating the fictional locations featured in the novel.]

14 C. J. Sansom, *Dark Fire*, London, Pan Books, 2015 [1st ed. Macmillan, 2003].

The Agas panorama (c. 1559), compared to the previous map, indicates that Sansom used the real London construction of 1540 with some additional locations, such as Shardlake's house and other habitations.

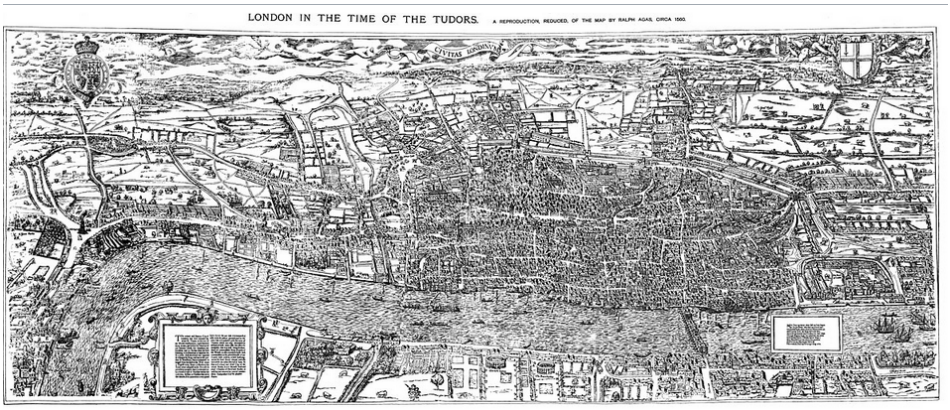

Figure 2. *Ralph Agas's Map of London, link to the map (accessed July 2, 2026).*
[Alternative text: A black-and-white engraved map of Tudor London, featuring detailed buildings, streets, the River Thames, the surrounding countryside, and period decorative element.]

Indeed, Tudor London

> Showed a residential city of gabled houses, royal palaces, law courts, markets, walled gardens and innumerable churches. The north and south banks of the city are linked by the single thread of London Bridge, still surviving from the 12th century. London was poised on the brink of change: although it was still essentially a medieval city, the Dissolution of the Monasteries and its aftermath were to have profound consequences.[15]

The latter marks the core of Shardlake's adventures.

The recreation of London is also achieved through Matthew's memory. He is depicted as a figure who lives during Henry VIII's reign and who encounters real-life events. One of the historical events mentioned in *Dissolution* is the sweating sickness. Shardlake remembers his beloved who had rejected him before her death: "A week later the sweating sickness hit the City like a hurricane. Hundreds began shivering and sweating, took to their beds and died within two days. It struck high and low and it took both Kate and her father."[16] During King Henry VII's reign, the sweating sickness hit

15 Hugh Clout, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 58.
16 C. J. Sansom, *Dissolution*, London, Pan Books, 2015, p. 116 [1st ed. Macmillan, 2003].

England and caused many people to die, mainly, as *The Great Chronicle of London* states: "for lack of good care; for they were kept so hot and confined that many were smothered who might have been saved with more moderate keeping."[17] This sickness had several outbreaks in England during the Tudor era. The memory of London being beaten by the sweating sickness provides historical realism and authenticity to history.

The rich historical context in both *Dissolution* and *Dark Fire* makes London appear as a reconstructed, yet real city in the reader's imagination. Through the pages of *Dark Fire*, one stumbles upon descriptions of 1540 London, as in the following passage which reflects the façade of poverty among London's poor class:

> The City was coming to life after the Sunday rest; shutters and shelves clattered as the shopkeepers made ready for the new week, shifting beggars from their doorways with curses. The homeless ones stumbled into the street, faces red and chapped with constant exposure to the sun.[18]

The depiction of decay is also reflected in Shardlake's description of London's lower-class life:

> We passed a dead mastiff in an alleyway, its bloated carcass stinking to heaven. Why did people flock to the City, I wondered, to the ratlike scrabble for subsistence that so often ended in begging on the streets? The lure of money, I supposed; hopes of scraping a living and dreams of becoming rich.[19]

Despite the huge gap between social classes and the presence of beggary and decay, 1540's London was a city in favor of reforms, "… rich and poor living cheek by jowl in a tangle of streets, alleys and courts."[20] After King Henry VIII annulled his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, he became head of the Anglican Church and ordered the dissolution of monasteries. Many religious reforms came afterwards. London became a city where Protestant identities emerged and Catholic structures crumbled. In *Dark Fire*, Matthew Shardlake reflects: "… London's a reformist City …"[21] and "And London was a reformist city: if there was to be anything like a return to the old

17 Julia Boffey, ed., *Henry VII's London in The Great Chronicle*, Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, p. 36.
18 C. J. Sansom, *Dark Fire*, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
20 Hugh Clout, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 60.
21 C. J. Sansom, *Dark Fire*, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

religion it would be unpopular here."[22]. In his last reflection in *Dark Fire*, Matthew says:

> We walked through Temple Gardens. Ahead lay Chancery Lane. Beyond that Smithfield, where the fires would be lit now. Behind us the river, flowing to London Bridge where Cromwell's head stood fixed on its stake. Between Smithfield and the river the roiling city, ever in need of justice and absolution.[23]

Hugh Clout considers that London at the time of John Stow was "a tripartite capital"[24] with the "City at its centre, most of it enclosed by a wall".[25] It was London's beating heart. The second area was on the west, described as "an exclusive suburb stretching along the strand towards Westminster … The landed elite, government servants and lawyers lived in gracious houses along the Thames bank, or in the legal quarter around fleet Street."[26] It was a wealthier quarter than the City. "The third area, a more diffuse suburban growth to the north and east, and in Southwark and its environs, provided a counterbalance to the West End."[27] People who lived in this third area served the ones living in wealthier quarters of the capital.[28]

Thus, London, in *Dissolution* and *Dark Fire*, symbolizes poverty and wealth, decay and prosperity. It is a reformist, renewed city that seeks change, yet holds onto its roots through its traditional sites.

Inverness as a Mystical City Tied to Time Travel and Folklore

Inverness in Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* is a pivotal point, it is the center of the story since time travel occurs at the standing stones in Craigh Na Dun, fictionally situated in Inverness. The first-person narrator, through Claire's perception, suggests that Inverness is presented and viewed through her modern view, since she is a woman from the 20th century who travels in time to find herself in the 18th century. She perceives the city from a skeptical angle. In a conversation with her husband, Frank, and after seeing blood on some doorsteps, he tells her: "There's no place on earth with more

22 *Ibid.*, p. 564.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 576.
24 Hugh Clout, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 60.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
26 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
27 *Ibid.*
28 *Ibid.*

of the old superstitions and magic mixed into its daily life than the Scottish highlands."[29]

Inverness is also presented as a place of myths and rituals. The dancing ritual performed by the women of the village at the top of the hill in Craigh Na Dun, and witnessed by Claire and Frank, reflects the magic of the town and the importance that its inhabitants give to their traditions, however irrational they tend to be.

After the time travel incident, Claire takes time to finally understand that she is no longer in the 20th century. Her memory of modern Inverness puts her in a state of confusion; looking straight at the city from a distance, she says: "No city lights … But this was peacetime, and the lights of Inverness should have been visible for miles."[30] After some time, she tries to draw logical conclusions:

> I looked back at the rock to check my position, then ahead to the skyline, and my blood ran cold. There was nothing there but the feathered needles of pine trees, impenetrably black against the spread of stars. Where were the lights of Inverness?… At this distance I should be able to see the glow of the town against the sky. If it were there…Inverness had stood in its present location for some six hundred years. Under the circumstances this strongly suggested that there were no electric lights to be had.[31]

With the flow of the story, Claire discovers that she is no longer in 1945 but rather in 1743. Hence, Inverness features a symbolic location in *Outlander* where history and myth are blended.

History's (Re) Creation on Screen: Cinematographic Techniques

Recreating London: The Role of Cinematography in Immersing Viewers in the Past

Late Medieval London

In *The White Queen* series, common life in London is hardly present. Court life, however, is shown in many scenes. In order to recreate medieval

29 Diana Gabaldon, *Outlander*, London, Arrow Books, 1991, p. 20.
30 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
31 Ibid., p. 82.

England, the show was filmed in Bruges "and its surrounding area"[32], not in London.

> The drama is certainly rich viewing as it sets out as a glorious, high summer love story before taking the viewer into the world of the court and its intrigue. Rebecca Ferguson, who plays Woodville, credits the Belgian city with authenticating her performance.
> "It's a mediaeval town where everything is real," she explains.[33]

Professor Michael Hicks, however, has a different view. He argued, in an article published in *The Guardian*:

> … but to make the middle ages look fully convincing today is an impossible task. I can see why they shot it in Belgium: there's a lot of woodland, and buildings that have remained unchanged – like the hunting lodge where Edward shacks up with Elizabeth. Still, it is pretty obvious that we're not in England.[34]

The answer to this argument can be found in an article published in The *Telegraph*, which states that "England lacks unspoiled medieval buildings" and Belgium's architecture "is as enticing as the tax breaks."[35] Moreover, the producers claimed that "too many of England's medieval buildings have been covered in satellite dishes, CCTV cameras and television aerials."[36] "Max Irons, who plays King Edward IV, said: "The great thing about Belgium is that they really take care of their architecture, whereas, we in England have a tendency to stick CCTV cameras on classic buildings and paint the streets with white and yellow lines."[37]

Nonetheless, *The White Queen*'s scenes project the audience into late medieval England's court, with its cheerful as well as tumultuous events. This picture shows a passage of Elizabeth Woodville's coronation day that depicts her passage from The Tower to Westminster Abbey, parading through the streets of London.

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32 Sabrina Sweeney, "*The White Queen*: Women in history rediscovered" BBC New [online], 12 June 2013. Link to the article (accessed 2 July 2026).
33 *Ibid*.
34 Laura Barnett, "A medieval historian's view on *The White Queen*", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2013. Link to the article (accessed July 2, 2026).
35 Claire Duffin, "*The White Queen*: War of the Roses ... as fought in Belgium", The Telegraph, 8 June 2013. Link to the article (accessed July 2, 2026)..
36 *Ibid*.
37 *Ibid*.

Figure 3. *BBC series (2013).*

[Alternative text: In this colour picture, the Queen, wearing a golden gown, is standing in front of the royal coach. A man is holding her hand while two girls and a boy kneel around her, arranging her long cloak.]

These three main city locations depict spaces of power, authority and tension in court.

Tudor London

The first novel of the *Shardlake* series, *Dissolution*, was adapted into a Disney+ mini-series by Stephen Butchard and directed by Justin Chadwick in 2024. Some events and characters belonging to the second novel, *Dark Fire*, appear in this mini-series. Even though the TV show is mainly set in Scarnsea, the fictitious city created by Sansom, we can catch some glimpses of London while watching it.

The poor side of Tudor London is shown in the series at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth episodes. We can see a muddy, soiled and corrupt side of London, which, even though full of merchants and people, cannot escape robbers.

Beggary and the gap between rich and poor are also shown in the same episode when Matthew descends the steps of the Court of Augmentations to see beggars, accentuating the contradictions of fortune in London. Societal decay and injustice are expressed through the ironic look upon Matthew's face, since he is a lawyer who combats unfairness and seeks equity.

Beyond the Screen

On another note, Matthew Shardlake's fans now have the opportunity to walk the same paths that Matthew, the protagonist, traversed in the novels. Guided tours are offered by qualified guides in agencies such as *London Walks*, which offer virtual and outdoor guided walks throughout London. Group as well as private tours are proposed.

> There is so much of Shardlake's London and so many exciting characters real and fictional to cover that we now have two separate walks**.** Much of the early modern City of London which lay within the old Roman walls and gates has disappeared, but the street plan hasn't completely changed and many of the names still exist. Some of the buildings can still be observed today including the priory church of St Bartholomew's, Charterhouse and parts of Lincolns Inn. Many others, such as Staples Inn and Middle Temple Hall were built within the later part of 16th Century. And of course many of the churches and buildings such as St Paul's Cathedral having been burnt down in the Great Fire of London were also quickly reconstructed on the same site in the 17th Century.
> Using new archaeological and historical research, experts have brilliantly reconstructed the City as it would have been in the sixteenth century, so we now have a good idea of the landscape of the City in this period. It is this insight and expertise that we will use on these two accompanying walks to bring Shardlake's London alive.[38]

Other companies offer similar tours, for instance, *Footprints of London where Londoners Walk*. The audience and readers of the *Shardlake* series are thus introduced to the historical Tudor London.

Contrast between Inverness of Claire's Modern World and its Historical Counterpart

Inverness in *Outlander*'s adaptation is presented as a part of the Scottish Highlands with folkloric rituals and hidden mysteries. The Samhain ritual at Craigh Na Dun is dramatized on TV with the use of mystical and rhythmic music. The music itself alludes to something abnormal and ancient that is happening. The lighting, the costumes and the colors all suggest that this ritual, taking place on the top of a hill in Inverness, is a turning point in the story.

38 *London Walks*, Matthew Shardlake's Tudor London, link to the London Walks (accessed 2 July 2026).

In the first episode of the series, Claire is shown wandering around 20th-century Inverness shops, actually filmed in Falkland.[39] Later in the same episode, after the time travel, 18th-century Inverness, filmed in Perthshire, reveals a different time. In *The Making of Outlander: The Series: The Official Guide to Seasons One & Two*, the first episode's director explains the choice of Inverness' filming location:

> … establishing the concept of the show required finding and staging their Craigh na Dun, Dahl says. But that task was not an easy one. "In Scotland, there are plantations and they've planted the trees in straight rows, so a forest doesn't look like a forest," Dahl explains. Locales near their stages were less than impressive, so the team traveled farther out and found their 'magic' spot near Rannoch Moor, Perthshire. Steele's team created the twelve-to sixteen-feet-high standing stones from foam with a hard coating and carefully erected them on location so there was no impact on the ground, which used to host actual historic stones.[40]

Conclusion

Late medieval London, Tudor London and the mystical Inverness are all presented differently in different settings in historical fiction, depending on the narrative's objective and its emotional atmosphere. The narrative techniques used by the authors make the city change roles according to its place in the story. Their reimagination on screens adds further elements to reshape the landscape and vivify long-gone cities. Late medieval London in *The White Queen*, with its famous landmarks, stands as a silent witness to the turbulence of dynastic struggle and where the thirst for power leads human greed. Tudor London, in *Shardlake*, with the realistic description of its streets, serves as a stage for the political turmoil that highlighted religious reformation and social transformation during Henry VIII's reign. Inverness in Outlander depicts a blurry threshold separating history and myth. The (re)constructed cities become, thus, a medium to transmit a historical fiction narrative.

39 *Outlander Filming Locations in Scotland*, link to the filming locations (accessed 2 July 2026).

40 Tara Bennet, *The Making of Outlander*: *The Series*: *The Official Guide to Seasons One & Two*, New York, Delacorte Press, 2016, p. 33.