



HISTORY

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‘Side Chicks’ or Leading Ladies? Rethinking the Teaching of King Henry’s Wives

‘Divorced, beheaded, died.*

*Divorced, beheaded, survived**’*

*(or rather, *annulled and **outlived, if we’re being pedantic!)*

I’m willing to bet that most adults – up and down the country – would be able to recite this simple but infamous rhyme. More challenging, might be the naming of the women associated, and perhaps even more still, the order of their appearance.

In this article, I want to discuss the possibility of teaching at prep-level, a more nuanced view of the wives of King Henry VIII. Traditionally, our focus on these women has been as a homogeneous group – an almost comical event in British History.

I believe we have been viewing these women through a one-dimensional lens. I am someone’s wife and mother, but this is not all that defines me. Like most, I would be bitterly disappointed if I were to read my own obituary and discover that my life and its achievements, passions and struggles, had been boiled down into:

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Wife of Thomas Osman

Mother of girls

[insert terrible, untimely death!]

I would argue that traditional study at Prep-level, has largely lacked any consideration of the depth of these characters, beyond the cursory acknowledgment of their

reproductive achievements and the manner in which they made their dramatic exits. What do we actually know about these women and why is this important to fostering our pupils’ understanding of the 16th century?

Last term, I sought to bring in a re-evaluation of the “Side Chick” vs. “Leading Lady” Labels. Often, history reduces Henry’s wives to simplistic labels like “the one he divorced”, “the one he executed,” or even worse... “the ugly one”. But each wife has a unique story and legacy. Revisiting their lives allows for a more nuanced understanding of their individual contributions and struggles. That is not to say that we should focus entirely on these women at the detriment of key actors such as Henry VIII, Charles V or Cardinal Wolsey to name but a few; rather, that their stories compliment, add depth and often causation to the actions and behaviours of their male counterparts. Furthermore, many traditional narratives about Henry’s wives, particularly in older historical accounts, have been shaped by biases against women. Revisiting their stories through modern lenses allows us to challenge these stereotypes and provide a more balanced view of history – ultimately richer and more inclusive to our students.

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The Political Significance of Henry's Marriages

The marriages of Henry VIII were not just personal decisions but strategic political moves. His six wives were central to the formation of the Tudor dynasty and the maintenance of political alliances, both within Europe and beyond. Each marriage was, in effect, a tool for securing the future of the newly formed dynasty, navigating the shifting political alliances of 16th-century Europe, and addressing Henry's ongoing concerns over succession.

The traditional narrative often focuses on the dramatic endings of Henry's wives as victims, but we must also emphasize their agency in navigating the complex political landscape. For example, Catherine of Aragon, Henry's first wife, was more than just a "bitter and abandoned" queen. As the daughter of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, she was raised in a powerful Spanish dynasty that valued strong female leaders. Her role as Regent

during Henry's campaigns, particularly at the Battle of Flodden against Scotland, demonstrates her strong political acumen and leadership capabilities. Additionally, Catherine's political significance is crucial to our understanding the break from Rome, as I'll later explain. History has often portrayed her as a 'difficult woman' – after all, she refused to retire quietly. I believe that this is a narrative that, we as History Teachers, should challenge. It is outdated and gives the wrong impression to our students about a woman who should be viewed as 'principled' and 'strong', not 'difficult' and 'stubborn'. Catherine's attitude is significantly ahead of its time; her determination to defend her daughter's rights, not just her own means that both women made a huge person price for her defiance. Should we admire Catherine for her feminist stance or decry her for the chaos and upheaval that this stance inevitably caused? These discussions not only enhance knowledge but also encourage critical thinking, helping pupils develop a well-rounded view of historical narratives.

Anne Boleyn, the second wife, is often remembered as the "original other woman," yet her rise to power was rooted in her ambition and her ability to navigate the patriarchal systems of Tudor England. Her refusal to become Henry's mistress, insisting on marriage, was a significant turning point. Anne's story reveals a woman seeking agency and power, one who navigated the dangerous politics of the royal court, despite her eventual tragic fate. There is more to Anne than a simply a 'witch'. Indeed, we have a duty to highlight the growing body of evidence that flies in the face of centuries of gossip and accusation levelled at Boleyn. Research, including that of Eric Ives (2004), emphasises the lack of proof and the likely intention behind the allegations, which were designed by individuals such as Thomas Cromwell, to tarnish Anne's reputation and justify her downfall. His work is widely regarded as a scholarly effort to counter myths and unfounded claims about Anne Boleyn's life and character, portraying her in a more balanced and evidence-based light. This angle is an effective way to teach children how male-dominated narratives have often shaped our understanding of history. It encourages students to think critically, question established viewpoints, and not accept what they are told as absolute truth without further examination. In a word of fake news, this cannot be a bad thing!

Using Modern Media to Engage Students

One of the most effective ways to make these historical figures come to life for students is through modern media, such as Lucy Worsley's 2016 BBC documentary series Six Wives. Worsley reexamines the traditional narratives about Henry's wives and offers a more balanced and nuanced portrayal – one

which simultaneously highlights their personal suffering and presents them as active participants in the political and religious changes of the time. In the classroom, I used Worsley's series to engage my Year 8 students and offer them an alternative introduction to the complex lives of these women.

Worsley's approach to rethinking the wives, particularly Catherine of Aragon, offers a compelling lens through which students can understand the political motivations behind Henry's actions. Catherine's marriage to Arthur, her early widowhood, and her eventual marriage to Henry had significant political implications. Her refusal to annul her marriage, in line with her devout Catholic beliefs, was a key factor in the English Reformation – much more so than any religious convictions Henry claimed to have had. A common misconception of pupils is that the break from Rome occurs because of the King's own religious convictions. This is an error which can be addressed here by pointing out that Henry remained Catholic until his death, rather than converting to Protestantism (as many students initially believe).

Here, our understanding of Anne Boleyn is also crucial as an illustration of many of the non-religious reasons for Henry's decision. Refusing to adopt the role of mistress (as others had before her), Anne gives Henry no choice. He must end his marriage to Catherine if he is to have what he wants. In his mind, the Act of Supremacy in 1534, allows Henry to have his cake and eat it – marry a 'younger model' and produce that

critical male heir. This is not to diminish other factors such as Henry's increasing financial concerns or a desire to cast off the authority of the Pope, but study of Catherine and Anne at this juncture in time is critical in helping students to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the break from Rome (often a topic on 13+ History Scholarship examination papers) – beyond the narrative of religion.

Exploring the Gender Context of Tudor England

Another crucial aspect of teaching about the wives of Henry VIII is considering the gender norms of the time. Tudor society was deeply patriarchal, and the idea of a female ruler was not widely accepted. Henry's reluctance to accept female rule, even in the case of his daughter Mary, was a reflection of the deeply ingrained societal and legal norms of the period – possible a throwback of the civil war associated with Queen Matilda in the 12th Century. In his mind, the production of a male heir was essential to the stability of the Tudor dynasty.

Looking at his treatment of Catherine from a 21st century perspective, it is easy to condemn Henry's actions as cruel and humiliating. He is callous in the face of infant loss, abandons her after 23 years, flaunts his new mistress by moving her into Catherine's apartments and separates her from her friends and daughter. Here, teachers should emphasise Henry's free will in marrying his brother's widow – a

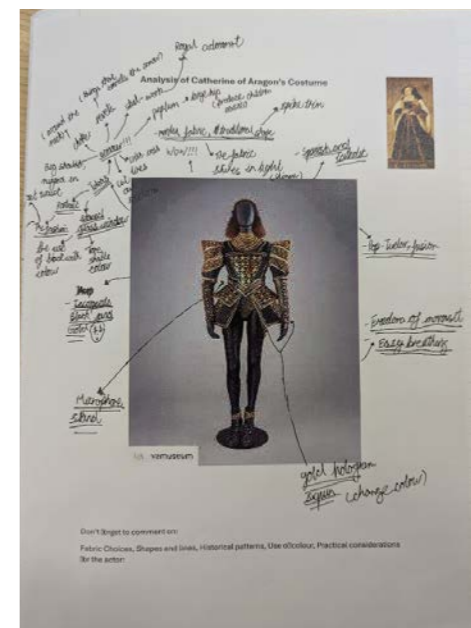
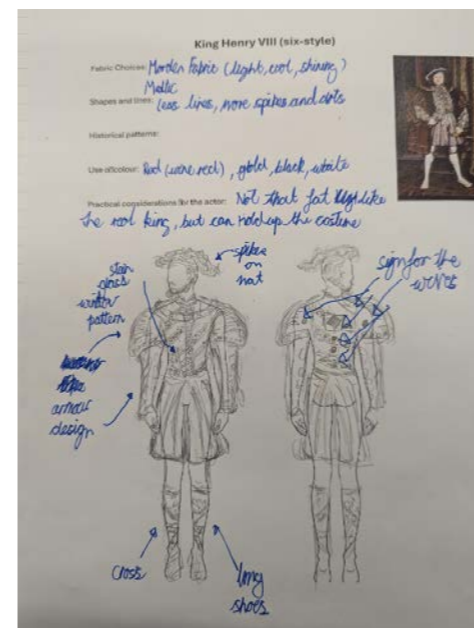
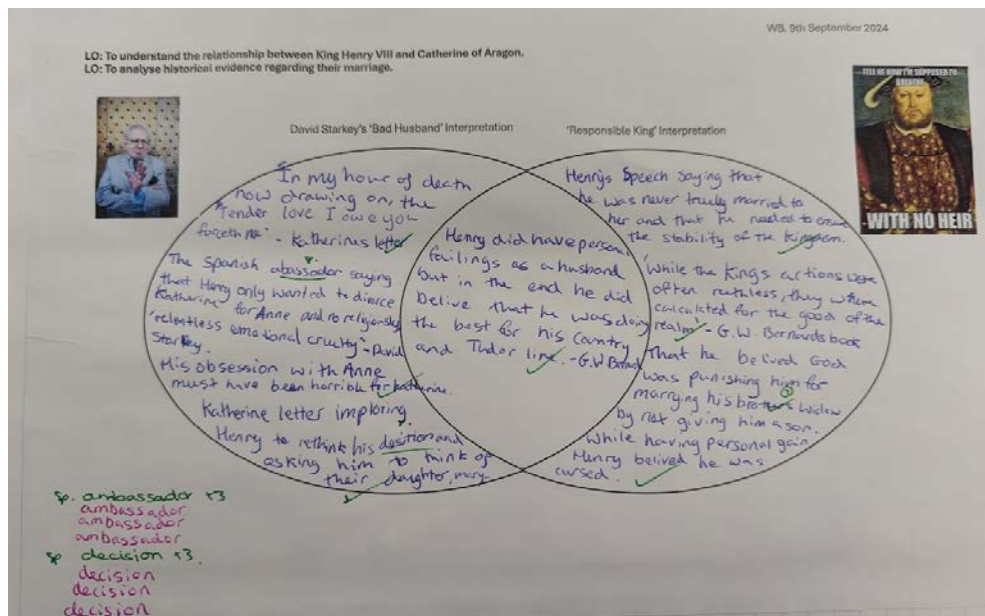
woman he could have sent packing back to Spain. When students realise that this was a couple in love for the vast majority of their marriage, it allows them to understand the complexity of the marriage breakdown in 1527.

Context is all, however, and it is important that pupils gain an understanding that the actions of those operating in different times are governed by norms that many of us would find abhorrent today. Henry did indeed feel immense pressure to produce that male heir, and this is something that we should not underestimate today. Unlike Prince William and Princess Catherine – the first royal parents to be affected by changes made to the line of succession in 2013 which recognised the first born, rather than the first-born son – Henry feared for his newly established dynasty and the threat of civil war was real and terrible.

Catherine of Aragon, however, was a product of strong female leadership, having been raised by her mother, Isabella of Castile, who had played a key military and political role in securing Spain's unity in the 1490s. Catherine's belief that her daughter Mary could rule was in direct contrast to Henry's reluctance to accept a female monarch. This tension over gender roles is a key factor in understanding why Henry pursued annulment and why he ultimately created the Church of England so that he could marry a younger, more fertile wife. The tension between Henry's desire for a male heir and Catherine's refusal to accept divorce is a reflection of the gender dynamics of the time. Students can gain a deeper understanding of the power structures in Tudor England by exploring the ways in which gender played a role in shaping these historical events.

Critical Thinking: Comparing Different Historical Interpretations

In addition to engaging students through modern media, it is also important to encourage critical thinking about disparate historical interpretations. I used two different historical viewpoints to illustrate the complexity of Henry's treatment of Catherine. David Starkey's 2003 book Six Wives suggests that Henry's treatment of Catherine was





“abominable”, while G.W. Bernard, in *The King’s Reformation* (2005), argues that “Henry’s actions were politically motivated rather than driven by personal animosity or cruelty”. By analysing primary sources, including letters and speeches from individuals such as Henry, Catherine and Eustace Chapuys, students compared and contrasted these two interpretations and formed their own evidence-based conclusions.

This approach helps students understand that history is not a fixed narrative but is shaped by the perspectives and biases of those who tell the story. It also introduces the concept that historians bring their own biases and assumptions to their work, which can influence their interpretations of events. Again, this concept is often a popular theme for questions on 13+ History scholarship papers. Encouraging students to critically assess historical sources and viewpoints fosters an appreciation for the complexities of history and the importance of context.

Incorporating *Six: The Musical* into the Classroom

While historical accuracy is crucial, it is also important to recognize the value of contemporary adaptations in engaging students. *Six: The Musical* reimagines the lives of Henry’s wives as a pop group and offers an accessible and entertaining way to engage pupils with the Tudor period. While it certainly takes artistic liberties, *Six* does an excellent job of illustrating the political nature of royal marriages and the struggles for power faced by each of Henry’s wives. Indeed, one of my students’ initial tasks involved a debate on whether *Six: The Musical* could be considered a useful source for Historians seeking to analyse the events of the 16th Century. An exploration of *Six*, enables pupils to explore themes of agency, identity, and personal power. By framing the wives as the protagonists of their own stories, the musical opens

up discussions about how these women navigated a patriarchal and often dangerous royal environment.

I introduced students to the song ‘No Way’ – performed by Aragon in the musical; a punchy number arguing against annulment. Students then watched an interview produced by the V&A Museum with Costume Designers Gabriella Slade and Justin Allin, where they explored the historical inspirations for their Tudor-Fusion Aragon costume. Drawing upon portraiture of the period, Tudor coats of arms, religious symbols, armour, period fashion such as the square neckline and peplum, and stained-glass windows, this video demonstrates the successful fusion of historical and contemporary culture. Students were subsequently tasked with designing their own modern King Henry VIII costumes for the musical, drawing upon their own research into historical imagery and present-day pop culture. The results were striking and proved a particularly successful strategy to facilitate both historical reflection and foster creativity.

Conclusion: A More Nuanced Approach to Teaching Henry’s Wives

Rethinking the way we teach the wives of Henry VIII allows us to offer students a more complex and engaging understanding of these historical figures. Moving beyond the simplistic labels of “divorced,” “beheaded,” and “survived,” we can present a more nuanced view that highlights the political, social, and personal struggles these women (and men) faced. By focusing on the political significance of their marriages, the challenges they faced in a patriarchal society, and their struggles for agency, we can empower students to view these women as active participants in history. In this way, we can see elements of ourselves in these wives, challenging the notion of History as somewhat irrelevant and removed from our 21st century lives. This approach not only makes history more relevant and interesting, but also encourages our students to think critically about how history is shaped by the perspectives of those who tell the stories. By teaching Henry VIII’s wives as leading ladies, rather than mere footnotes in history, we can challenge traditional views and foster a more inclusive and balanced exploration of the past.

References:

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- Ives, E., (2004), *Anne Boleyn: A New Life of England’s Tragic Queen* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing)
- Starkey, D., (2003), *Six Wives: The Wives of King Henry VIII*, (London: HarperCollins)

Useful Links:

- V&A, 2025. *Costume design: SIX the Musical – Catherine of Aragon*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zIIXX6CY9U>
- Worsley, L., (2016), *Six Wives with Lucy Worsley*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer>
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Nicole Louise Lewis as Catherine of Aragon in *Six: The Musical*