

Six wives: the real women behind Henry's myth

Tonight, a new BBC drama and documentary will explore the lives of Henry VIII's wives. They have been underestimated by history, says Lucy Worsley. Could they be more important than Henry?



The hunt: William Powell Frith (1819-1909) paints Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn out Deer Shooting.

Divorced. Beheaded. Died. Divorced. Beheaded. Survived.

The names and fates of Henry VIII's six wives are drilled into British school children from an early age. Everyone knows the main characters. There was Catherine of Aragon, the bitter, infertile first wife. Ann Boleyn, the **witch**. Jane Seymour, his favourite. Anne of Cleves, the ugly one. Katherine Howard, the promiscuous one. And Catherine Parr, who nursed the fat, diseased Henry into old age.

But *Six Wives*, a new TV series by the historian Lucy Worsley, will attempt to cast these women in a new light. She says they have been misjudged by history – in reality they were modern thinkers, and fascinating people in their own right.

Take Catherine of Aragon. She was not bitter and infertile at all, says Worsley. The daughter of a fearsome Spanish **warrior queen**, she was pregnant six times, and she helped Henry to rule during their 26-year marriage, even defending England from invading **Scots**

while he was away.

Meanwhile, Anne Boleyn was 'an admirable, forward-thinking woman,' with an ambitious streak that 21st century women can admire. Anne of Cleves, after her divorce, was one of the wealthiest women in England. Katherine Howard was not a 'harlot' but a victim of **child abuse**. Catherine Parr was the first woman to publish under her own name in English.

Modern audiences will recognise something in each of them, says the show's producer. 'They were wealthy, privileged young people who all knew each other. Court life was like *Made In Chelsea*.'

Worsley is not the first historian to focus on retelling the past through female eyes. History has traditionally been more focused on the decisions of powerful men. But feminists in the 20th century began to rediscover the lost tales of important women. This is how we know about people like **Ada Lovelace**, **Sophia Singh**, and **Constance Leathart**.

Could Henry's wives be even more

important than the king himself?

Yas queen!

Of course not, say some. Henry had all the power in these relationships, not to mention the country. It is not sexist to say so – his daughters were both powerful monarchs as well – it is just the way that things were. For a long time throughout history, men were usually in charge. That is beginning to change, but it is foolish to pretend otherwise.

Think again, say others. Henry had the crown, but his wives influenced some of his biggest decisions. When he was in his early years as king, Catherine of Aragon was his closest adviser. He broke with **Rome** to be with Anne Boleyn, a decision that changed Britain forever. Catherine Parr helped to promote Protestantism. Women have always played important roles in history – you just have to look a little deeper.

Q & A

Q: Does it matter who was more important?

A: It matters how we think of the men and women who shaped our past, because this reflects our current attitudes. In March this year, a survey by English Heritage found that

40% of people thought that women did not have as much impact on history as men. This is a fascinating statistic. Is it simply because there were more male leaders? Does that mean that only leaders change history?

Q: I don't know, does it?

A: It's a classic historical debate. More

traditional historians believe that the world's events are driven by the decisions of just a handful of powerful people. More recently, people have begun to think of history as a complex tapestry, which has been intricately woven by every member of society. If this is true, women have been just as important as men.



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HIGH

READING HOMEWORK

1. What claim does historian Lucy Worsley make about Henry's wives?

2. Could it be argued that Henry's six wives had a more significant impact on history than Henry himself? Discuss.
