Henry VIII's Medieval Queens in Popular Media

Studying the queens of Henry VIII is inevitably complicated by how they are portrayed in popular culture. Since their deaths, these Queens have lived thousands of literary and televised lives, and the continual telling and re-telling of their stories make the historical truth "increasingly…difficult to locate."[1] History "is a form of narrative which has much in common with fiction" as both try to tell a story that, no matter the setting, is influenced by the time of its writing.[2] This idea is part of a broader movement known as poststructuralism which encourages historical researchers to accept that their distinct positionality influences their interpretation of historical texts. The historical narratives accepted today are influenced by a combination of all of the narratives which have come before, the historical facts, and the modern sensibilities of the historian who is undertaking the interpretation. The Queens of Henry VIII are victims of their own mythology; "the familiar outlines" of their lives are known because they have been presented in popular culture over and over again.[3] This paper analyses the popular conception of two of Henry's six queens, Catherine of Aragon and Jane Seymour, in order to better understand these popular representations and from where they originate. This essay will argue that Jane Seymour and Catherine of Aragon's modern representations are heavily influenced by reputations established much earlier in history, which (somewhat paradoxically) mean both queens are portrayed as medieval queens operating in an early modern society, given the media's characterization of the two as Catholic, virginal, and

[1] Greg Colón Semenza, "Introduction: An Age for All Time", in Greg Colón Semenza (ed.), *The English Renaissance in Popular Culture* (New York City, 2010), pp. 1-24, at p.4.
[2] Diana Wallace, "Difficulties, Discontinuities and Differences: Reading Women's Historical Fiction", in Katherine Cooper and Emma Short (eds.), *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and Hampshire, and New York City, 2012), pp.206-221, at pp.212, 211.
[3] Cicely Palser Havely, "Fact or Fiction? *Wolf Hall* and the Historical Novel: Cicely Palser Havely Looks at the Booker Prize-Winning Novel in Relation to the Contested Genre of Historical Fiction", *The English Review*, 20:4 (2010), p. 28: William B. Robison, "Stripped of Their Altars: Film, Faith, and Tudor Royal Women from the Silent Era to the Twenty-First Century, 1895-2014", in Julie A. Chappell and Kaley A. Kramer (eds.), *Women During the English Reformation* (New York City, 2014), pp. 145-178, at p.147.

victimized queens in a court of Protestant, sexually promiscuous, and politically active early modern women.

The distinctions between modern, medieval, and early modern provide key insights into the depictions of Jane and Catherine. Loosely speaking, in the Western historical discipline, the medieval period is considered to stretch from the fall of Rome to the fifteenth century. From then until the French Revolution in 1789 is the early modern period, and from the French Revolution onward is the modern period. However, in this paper the contemporary sensibilities of the authors of the popular media under discussion blur the edges of these theoretically distinct time periods. When speaking of the early modern period, many authors present apparently modern sensibilities as normal early-modern practices. So, it is not necessarily true that Catherine and Jane exhibit medieval characteristics, but they do fail to embody modern characteristics, which make them seem from an older medieval world. Catherine and Jane's Catholicism, virginal character, and victimization are not necessarily representative of actual medieval queens, but they *appear* medieval in comparison to women who exhibit supposedly modern sensibilities.

The Catholic Queens

The popular British Whig narrative of history made the Catholicism of both Jane and Catherine seem outdated and medieval. British Whig history celebrates aspects of the national past, including the Church of England, and tends to emphasise a Protestant narrative of progress towards modernity starting with the English Reformation.[4] In the Whig narrative, the coming of the Reformation sparked the dawn of modernity, leaving behind the medieval and corrupt Catholicism of the past. This Protestant narrative is popular today not only in Tory political circles, but in popular representations of the Tudor age.[5] The Whig narrative is evident in

[4] David Cannadine, "British History as 'a New Subject': Politics, Perspectives and Prospects", *Welsh History Review = Cylchgrawn Hanes Cyrmru*, 17:3 (1995), pp.313-331, at p.317: T.G. Ashplant and Adrian Wilson, "Whig History and Present-Centred History", *The Historical Journal*, 31:1 (1988), pp.1-16, at pp.2-4.
[5] Cannadine, "British History", pp.313-314.

Mantel's *Wolf Hall* series (2009, 2012, 2020). Mantel's Thomas Cromwell is "a thoroughly modern man" whose rival, Thomas More, is an "inhabitant of a thornier medieval world."[6] Mantel's world is divided between Cromwell's Protestant allies who hold his Whiggish modern mindset, and those who, like Thomas More, are Catholic medievalists opposed to Cromwell's reform.[7] Mantel's pro-Protestant narrative means that Catherine and Jane's Catholicism characterizes them with More as medieval. The dichotomy which the Whig narrative creates between modern Protestantism and medieval Catholicism is perpetuated today in modern representations of the Tudor era, making Catherine and Jane seem outdated.

Catherine of Aragon's devout Catholicism was present in popular representations dating back to her own lifetime, allowing her to easily fit into the Whig narrative of Catherine as a medieval queen. In *A Newe Enterlude Drawen Oute of the Holy Scripture of Godly Queene Hester,* written in 1529, Queen Hester speaks to the King in defence of the Jewish people, an allegory for Catherine speaking up for the Catholic clergy prosecuted during the Reformation.[8] The play was written by a pro-Catholic author who sings Catherine's praises as a defender of the Catholic faith.[9] However, as the Whig narrative started to dominate British history in the Victorian era, representations of Catherine as an active defender of the Catholic faith began to disappear, while images of her devout Catholicism continued unabated.[10] Both Strickland, in her *Lives of the Queens of England* (1840) and Ollier in *Cassel's Illustrated History of England* (1870), stress Catherine's deep religious devotion.[11] Ollier gives detail into just how often Catherine prayed, fasted, confessed, and took communion, comparing her life to that of

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[6] Lucy Lethbridge, "A Man for This Season", *Commonweal*, 136:18 (2009), p.33.
[7] Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (New York City, 2009).
[8] "A Newe Enterlude Drawen Oute of the Holy Scripture of Godly Queene Hester", 2nd ed, in Walter Wilson Greg (ed.), *A New Enterlude of Godly Queen Hester: Volumes 5-6* (Vaduz, 1963), pp. 3-46: Greg Walker, "'To Speak Before the King, It is No Child's Play': Goldy Queen Hester in 1529", *Theta,* 10 (2013), pp.69-96, at pp. 71-72.
[9] Ibid., p.72.
[10] Cannadine, "British History", p.315.
[11] Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, *from the Norman Conquest, a New Edition*, vol. IV and V (Philadelphia, 1850), p. 141: Edmund Ollier, *Cassells Illustrated History Of England: New and Revised Edition*, vol. II (London, 1873), p.162.

"inmates of convents."[12] Early movies of the reign of Henry, such as *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1969), continue depictions of Catherine's deep religious devotion, showing Catherine at prayer while the rest of the court feasts and dances.[13] Moreover, later television representations of Catherine such as *Henry VIII* (2003) and *The Tudors* (2007-2010) constantly show her praying.[14] These contemporary representations do not pay much attention to the depth of Catherine's religious devotion or activity in the church besides her prayers.[15] These shows have no interest in the aspects of Catherine's religious devotion that enacted positive social change, such as alms giving or donating to educational institutions, only the "superstitious" aspects of her religion like prayer and blind-faith, which further entrenches the suggestion of Catherine's religion as something which is outdated or superstitious.

Jane Seymour's religion was unclear in her own time, but since her death, popular memory has treated her as a devout Catholic. Eustace Chapuys' ambassadorial letters to Emperor Charles V suggest that Jane was a friend to the Catholic Princess Mary.[16] This friendship between Jane and Mary has been interpreted in popular literature as a sign of Jane's Catholicism. Nineteenth-century authors also hint at Jane's Catholicism, as she begs Henry in *Anne Boleyn: A Dramatic Poem* (1826), not to close the Catholic monasteries.[17] By the twentieth-century, Jane's Catholicism becomes explicit in her representations. In the 1970 production, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, Jane shows devotion to the Catholic church, specifically when the closing of the monasteries causes her great dismay[18] In *The Mirror and*

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[12] Ibid., p.162.
[13] *Anne of the Thousand Days*, dir. Charles Jarrott (National Broadcasting Company, 1969). Amazon Prime Video.
[14] *Henry VIII, dir. Pete Travis (*Granada Television*, 2003).* Youtube: The Tudors, s.1, ep.5, dir. Michael Hirst (Showtime Networks, 2007-2009).
[15] Robison, "Stripped of Their Altars", p.147.
[16] "19 May: Eustace Chapuys to the Emperor", in Pascual de Gayangos (ed.), *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers Relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain, Preserved in the Archives at Simancas, Vienna, Brussels, and Elsewhere*, vol. 5, pt. 2, (London, 1888), pp.122-131, at p.124.
[17] H.H. Milman, *Anne Boleyn: A Dramatic Poem* (London, 1826), p. 65.
[18] *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, ep. 3, dirs. Naomi Capon and John Glenister (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1970). Amazon Prime Video.

the Light, Jane specifically pleads for Henry to return to the Catholic faith, and in *The Tudors*, Jane begs for mercy for the Catholics who rebelled against Henry, clearly sympathising with their cause.[19] In order to fit her into the Whig narrative, Jane had to take some definitive side in the religious debate. Her devout Catholicism has grown out of sparse hints throughout the centuries, becoming central to her characterization today as a medieval, Catholic queen.

The Virginal Queens

In addition to the Whig narrative, modern conceptions of women lead to Jane and Catherine's characterization as medieval queens. In contemporary media, sex and sex appeal are hugely important. By characterizing Catherine and Jane as chaste and virginal, authors reinforce the idea that both queens are medieval women operating in a modern society. In today's popular media, women having casual sex outside of marriage for their own pleasure has been normalized.[20] Post-feminism builds on third-wave feminists' sex-positivity. Instead of showing empowering sexual relationships, postfeminism over-sexualizes women, relegating them to objects who desire sexual interaction "because it suits their liberated interests to do so."[21] With postfeminism came the idea that a modern women possesses power if she has the ability to attract male attention, but not on her own merits.[22] The result is that women who are sexually promiscuous viragoes are more interesting than virgins in popular media because they are often more powerful and remarkable characters.[23] For instance, Hickerson writes of *The*

[19] Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light* (New York City, 2020), pp.330-331: The Tudors, s.3, ep.2, dir. Hirst.
[20] Feona Attwood, "Sex and the Media", in Mary Kosut (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, 2012) at p.458.
[21] Brittany N. Griebling, "Feminist Theory: Third Wave", in Mary Kosut (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, 2012), pp.106-108, at p.107: Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of Sensibility", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:2 (2007), pp.147-166, at pp.149, 151.
[22] Lori Amber Roessner, "Sexism", in Mary Kosut (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, 2012), at p.330.
[23] Elena Woodacre, "Early Modern Queens on Screen: Victors, Victims, Villains, Virgins, and Viragoes", in Karl C. Alvestad, Janice North, and Elena Woodacre (eds.), *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers* (Cham, 2018), pp. 27-50, at p.38.

Tudors that the "principal female virtue" is "not sexual chastity, but sexual accessibility."[24] Powerful modern women in *The Tudors,* such as Anne Boleyn, wilfully engage in sexual relationships with men outside of marriage because their sexual relationships with powerful men at court bring them some shred of influence in return. However, both Catherine and Jane are chaste and refuse sexual relationships outside of marriage, staying supremely loyal to their husband, with whom they are never actually seen having sexual relations. Both Catherine and Jane seem outdated, surrounded by sexually active modern women while they are held to the strict chaste standards of an earlier medieval time.

Catherine's early representations in popular media stressed her chastity and virtue which later sources then continued. Though some early pro-Protestant sources such as Foxe intone that Catherine was not a virgin when she married Henry, a fact which was central to legitimizing Henry's marriage to his brother's wife and therefore the Protestant Reformation in England, all sources from this period stress Catherine's singular love for her husband and her supreme loyalty to him.[25] Catherine's love and loyalty carried into the Victorian period, an age whose high moral standards led writers to applaud her for her virtue and modesty, with Strickland stressing that she never wasted time "dressing and adorning herself."[26] Strickland emphasises that Catherine was not looking to attract the attention of other men with her dress, instead choosing modesty and simplicity. In modern depictions of Catherine, viewers quickly get a sense of her modesty based on her differentiated dress. In *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, Catherine wears modest black dresses and the traditional gable-hood instead of the French hood, which covers much more of her hair. Her modest dress

[24] Megan L. Hickerson, "Putting Women in Their Place: Gender, Sex, and Rape in *The Tudors*", in William B. Robison (ed.), *History, Fiction, and 'The Tudors'* (New York City, 2016), pp. 307-328, at p.324.
[25] John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1563), accessed on *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or *TAMO* (The Digital Humanities Institute, Sheffield, 2011). Available from: http//www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe [Accessed: 25.06.2020], p.508: William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (Washington D.C., 1613), p.123.
[26] Ollier, *Cassells Illustrated History*, vol. II, p.118: Strickland, *Lives of the Queens*, vol. IV and V, p.141.

differentiates her from the rest of the court which often wears much lower cut and colourful dresses, again stressing her difference to more modern women. In *Wolf Hall* and *the Tudors*, which are filled with sexual references and gratuitous sex-scenes, Catherine is not portrayed in a sexual light.[27] Catherine's lack of sexual promiscuity makes her seem much older in contemporary portrayals of Henry's court where sex is everywhere. Because Catherine's portrayal has not kept up with changing views on sex, she has become an outdated medieval queen.

Similarly, Jane Seymour has always lacked a sexually promiscuous reputation, despite her affair with the married Henry. Chapuys in his letters to the Emperor tells the story of Jane returning a gift and letter that Henry sent her during their courtship unopened as she was not yet married.[28] This modest act from Jane has been repeated in many representations of her since to stress her modesty and chastity. In the Victorian age, Thomson characterized Jane as "pure" and full of "innocence" when she started courting Henry; even sources which see Jane in a very negative light, such as Strickland, do not suggest that she had sexual relations with Henry before their marriage.[29] Early films stress Jane's purity even more, such as *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, where Henry constantly calls her "my little nun."[30] The comparison with the perpetually virgin nuns underscores Jane's desexualised nature and lack of interest in bodily pleasure. In *The Tudors*, even while Jane actively courts Henry, her father makes it clear that he has no questions as to her modesty. Additionally, in *Bring Up the Bodies*, Cromwell is pleased with Jane as a wife for Henrys because she lacks the sex appeal to attract other men's

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[27] The Tudors, s.1-2, dir. Hirst: Mantel, *Wolf Hall*.
[28] "1 April: Eustace Chapuys to the Emperor", in Pascual de Gayangos (ed.), *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers Relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain, Preserved in the Archives at Simancas, Vienna, Brussels, and Elsewhere*, vol. 5, pt. 2, (London, 1888), pp. 79-85, at p.84.
[29] A.T. Thomson, *Anne Boleyn: An Historical Romance*, vol. III (London, 1842), p.100: Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, *from the Norman Conquest*, vol. II (London, 1885).
[30] *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, ep. 3, dirs. Capon and Glenister.

desire.[31] Jane's modesty and lack of sexual attraction makes her appear, like Catherine, as a chaste relic of a bygone medieval mentality.

The Victim Queens

Catherine and Jane's virginal character has further contributed to their victimization at the hands of men. Their lack of agency is at odds with the modern conception of women who have the power to 'save themselves' from such victimization. Because of this, both women seem rather outdated medieval queens who are assumed to lack the power to enact change. As established above, when a women's power seems to come from her sex appeal, which neither Jane nor Catherine seem to possess, they are left passive victims with no power to resist the men in their lives. While at times, both women have some influence over their husband, it is not enough to achieve their goals - Catherine saving her marriage and Jane protecting Catholics. Further, both women seem to be a victim because the virtues they abide by are those that make them good women in traditional society: obedience, modesty, and virtue. However, these virtues are diametrically opposed to the virtues which make a strong female leader in modern popular media: fearlessness, sexual promiscuity, and ambition.[32] Catherine and Jane appear outdated because they fail to keep up with modern virtues for a strong female character. For instance, in *The Mirror and the Light* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, Mantel provides the medieval Jane with a modern foil in her sister Bess. Bess is well-learned, she is sexually attractive, and she is unafraid to tell Cromwell how she truly feels.[33] On the other hand, Jane is described as simple-minded, not very attractive, and, above all, obedient to her husband and family despite what her true feelings might be.[34] Bess ends up in a fairly happy marriage to Gregory Cromwell, and Jane ends up as Queen for a mere year before dying in childbirth, a

[31] *The Tudors*, s.2, ep.8, dir. Hirst: Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (New York City, 2012), pp.215-216.
[32] Kim Golombisky, "Feminism", in Mary Kosut (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, 2012), pp.90-95, at p.95.
[33] Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, pp.201, 480-482.
[34] Ibid., pp.201, 149: Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p.11.

victim of the King's endless quest for a son. Neither Jane nor Catherine possess the character traits of a strong female leader, so fate relegates both to the role of the victim, further solidifying the trope of Catherine and Jane as medieval queens.

Catherine has long been the victim in popular media, entrenching her reputation as a powerless medieval queen. In the Tudor era, the idea of Catherine as a victim of the political manoeuvrings of men like Henry is clear. In Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, she begs the King:

> to bestow your pity on me: for / I am a most poor woman and a stranger, / Born out of your dominions, having here / No judge indifferent,…Alas, sir, / In what have I offended you? What cause / Hath my behavior given to your displeasure…And take your good grace from me? Heaven witness, / I have been to you a true and humble wife.[35]

Shakespeare makes it clear that Catherine represented the perfect wife, yet she was still cast off, a powerless victim of Henry's pursuit of a male heir. The Victorians, like Shakespeare, stress that Catherine possessed all the feminine virtues of a perfect woman, yet still she was defenceless against her fate.[36] In 1970 films such as *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, her victimization becomes even clearer, as she sobs inconsolably when Henry tells her he wants a divorce. Yet, she is still shown to have all the graces of an ideal woman, kind, loving, and obedient to her husband.[37] In *The Tudors, Wolf Hall*, *Henry VIII,* and *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, Catherine refuses offers to have an army raised in her defence.[38] A more defiant modern woman surely would have taken such an opportunity, but all the sources stress that Catherine is too virtuous a woman to let such violence happen in her defence, leaving her to suffer at

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[35] Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, p.95.
[36] Georgianna Ziegler, "Re-Imagining a Renaissance Queen: Catherine of Aragon Among the Victorians", in Jo Eldridge Carney, Debra Barrett-Graves, and Carole Levin (eds.), *"Hight and Mighty Queens" of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations* (New York City and Houndmills, Basingstoke, and Hampshire, 2003), pp. 203-222, at p.213.
[37] *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, ep. 1, dirs. Capon and Glenister.
[38] *The Tudors,* s.1, ep. 10, dir. Hirst: Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p.370: *Henry VIII* dir. Travis: and *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, dirs. Capon and Glenister.

Henry's hands. Catherine's victimization is integral to her characterization in popular media, feeding into interpretations of Catherine as a passive medieval queen.

Jane has also long been victimized in her representations, portrayed as the obedient pawn of the men in her life. In a letter from Chapuys to the Emperor, he writes that Jane is being "tutored" by a faction in court looking to bring down Anne.[39] Jane's own agency in these events is stripped away and she becomes a victim of the political aims of the powerful men in her life. Similarly, in Katherine Thomson's early Victorian depiction of Jane, her politically ambitious brothers force her to become Henry's mistress, leading to her eventual death in childbirth.[40] It is in this era where the pure, innocent, and wholly good Jane is corrupted and victimized by the men in her life, a force which she is powerless to stop. Likewise, in *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, Jane is a good, near saintly woman, whom Henry forces to become his queen, much to her discomfort. Throughout Jane's episode it flashed to her delirious, lying on her deathbed, viewing Henry and her brothers, hinting at her victimhood at the hands of these ruthless men.[41] In Mantel's series, Jane is similarly not a happy queen, clearly uncomfortable and positively scared of Henry.[42] Jane possesses all the characteristics of a virtuous and good woman, but she is not a modern woman with the power to challenge the men in her life. Jane's lack of agency has solidified her victimhood, leading to perceptions of Jane as an outdated medieval queen.

Conclusion

Jane Seymour and Catherine of Aragon have long been considered the Catholic, virginal, and victimized queens of Henry VIII, thoroughly out of place in Henry's modern court. Both Jane and Catherine are shown as outdated women, reflecting few modern sensibilities because their historic characterizations in popular media have not been adapted to

[39] "1 April: Eustace Chapuys to the Emperor", in de Gayangos (ed.), *Calendar of Letters*, vol. 5, pt. 2, p.85.
[40] Thomson, *Anne Boleyn: An Historical Romance*, pp.279-280.
[41] *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, ep. 3, dirs. Capon and Glenister.
[42] Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, p.210: Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, p.443.

popular depictions of modern women. Popular representations of both Catherine and Jane show them beside women like Anne Boleyn and Bess Seymour who reflect modern conceptions of women, further solidifying their medieval characteristics. For Bess and Anne, creators have reworked them to fit modern standards, yet no one has decided to try and make Catherine or Jane modern, sticking closely to their established character patterns which lend themselves to a medieval characterization. Further, such characterizations cast assumptions about what medieval women were like which are markedly untrue, giving the period an unnecessarily poor reputation. The trope of Jane and Catherine as medieval women can interfere with historical research because in their own time, neither woman was seen as outdated or out of place in her respective court. Researchers must recognize that this aspect of their character comes from popular media and should try to actively counter that bias in their research.

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