

The wives of Henry VIII

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Henry VIII is a phenomenon of the British history that is known world-wide. He was the embodiment of kingship to his contemporaries. What made this sixteenth century absolutist monarch so famous is the Reformation. The Reformation not only influenced England but it also isolated it from the rest of the world by creation of its own church. The very birth of this church is also connected to Anne Boleyn – the second wife of Henry VIII. The wives of Henry VIII are the topic this seminar paper is focused on, as these six wives are an inseparable part of the king's life. The relatively big number of wives made this emperor also famous and it is regarded to be the second important thing in his life and his reign.

There are many books about Henry VIII's wives describing them. The main aim of this seminar paper is, however, not to describe each of Henry VIII's wives but to find out which one was the most important and influential. Was it Catherine of Aragon, his first wife, to whom Henry was married the longest or was it Jane Seymour who gave him a long-awaited son and heir to the throne or was it Anne Boleyn who is regarded to be responsible for the Reformation? This seminar paper will try to find the answers to these questions.

Henry VIII was born on June 28, 1491 at Greenwich as the third child of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. From all their sons only Henry achieved adulthood.¹ He inherited his character from his grandfather Edward IV and his fine physique from his mother. His height was six feet two inches, he was strong and muscular. With his fair skin, auburn hair which he combed short and straight and high-bridged nose, he was considered the handsomest prince ever seen.² Henry was very good at languages: he could speak fluent English, French and Latin, some Spanish and he understood Italian well. He also inherited natural ability for music. He played the lute which he got from his father and he could read music at sight. He did not fall behind with sports; he was good at tennis, jousting, archery, hunting and he was a first-class horseman.³

However, as everybody else, Henry had also negative characteristics. Unlike his father, he was cruel, he spent money freely and he was also calculative. Apart from wars, Henry spent much money to have a magnificent court and when he had it, he spent more money to maintain it. That is how all money, his father had saved, was soon gone.⁴

¹ SCARISBRICK, J. 1969. Henry VIII, p. 3.

² WEIR, A. 2002. Henry VIII, p. 2.

³ MORKESOVÁ, E. 1994. British and American History, p. 32.

⁴ McDOWALL, D. 1991. An Illustrated History of Britain, p. 69.

Henry lived in the shadow of his elder brother Arthur and therefore not much is known about his early life.⁵ What is known for sure is that the one who had a big influence on him was his grandmother, Lady Margaret Beaufort. She also brought the tutors to teach Henry in royal school. Supposed to be Archbishop of Canterbury, Henry was being brought up in an orthodox and conservative way in Eltham where he spent most of his childhood. The things changed when Arthur died in April 1502 and Henry became heir to the throne.⁶

Henry ascended the throne untrained to reign. Actually, he was raised in a very strict way. He could not go out except for the park and he had never spoken in public.⁷ As a king of England, Henry was supposed to get married soon. Henry VIII, however, did not get married only once but six times during his life; the first marriage was contracted in 1509 and the last one in 1543.⁸

From all his marriages, the one that lasted the shortest was the marriage to **Anne of Cleves**. Anne of Cleves was Henry's fourth wife and this marriage was contracted from political reasons. Henry mourned his antecedent wife, Jane Seymour, for quite a long time and he was not keen for another marriage. After Cranmer's persuasion and Holbein's portrait of Anne of Cleves he finally agreed. However, as soon as he saw Anne in person, he felt disappointed and deceived. He realized the bride drove him back. On the other side, sending the bride back would be inconvenient from political reasons and so Henry decided to marry her until it would be safe to divorce her. The two did not actually divorced but their marriage was annulled after six months of their marriage – in July 1540. Even if Anne had an influence on people who liked her and admired her, she did not impress the king who did not like her body so much that he even said she was going to stay a virgin.⁹ It is obvious this woman did not influence Henry – he did not like her and they were together just for a short time.

Whereas Henry was not in love with his fourth wife, he surely was with the fifth one whom he married only nineteen days after the annulment of his previous marriage with a German princess and whose name was **Katherine Howard**. This only fifteen-year-old lady made the king besotted with her. She was pretty, charming, obedient and as Henry also supposed virtuous. There is no evidence that Katherine cheated on her husband but her behaviour made her inconstant in the eye of people and finally in the eye of the king as well. Moreover, she was interested only in dancing and new clothes. It is, therefore, obvious she did not have any influence on the king as she devoted herself only to fun and things like politics and religion did not attract her. An aggravating circumstance that contributed to Katherine's fall was her fornication before marriage and the fact she later employed one of her lovers. All these information were used by Katherine's enemies to

⁵ SCARISBRICK, J. 1969. Henry VIII, p. 4.

⁶ BOWLE, J. 1964. Henry VIII, p. 26.

⁷ SCARISBRICK, J. 1969. Henry VIII, p. 7.

⁸ HUTCHINSON, R. 2005. Poslední dny Jindřicha VIII, p. 263-264.

⁹ WEIR, A. 2009. Šest žen Jindřicha VIII, p. 380, 392.

send her to the executioner's hand and thus this young vivacious lady died after two years of marriage in February 1542.¹⁰

Katherine's cousin, the second wife of Henry VIII – **Anne Boleyn**, was more successful and influential. Henry fell in love with Anne during his first marriage and the passion he felt towards her was really strong – he waited seven years to marry her and to make love with her. The fact that Henry was in love with this lady is proved by a song he himself composed for her and played in front of the whole court: "The eagle's force subdues each bird that flies; what metal can resist the flaming fire? Doth not the sun dazzle the clearest eyes, And melt the eyes, and make the frost retire? The hardest stones are pierced through with tools, The wisest are with princess made but fools."¹¹ The king longed for this woman so much he was even heard to say that he "would have given a thousand Wolseys for one Anne Boleyn"¹². This citation had to be uttered due to the fact that Anne hated Wolsey and tried to cause his fall in every possible way. Presumably, this wrath towards Wolsey issued from the past when Wolsey did not approve Anne's marriage to Henry Percy. Now she had a chance to revenge herself and she took this chance. Right here it is visible that Anne had an influence on the king and it was not negligible, indeed. It is common knowledge that Wolsey was Henry's right hand and influenced him in many things. His influence was, however, made continuously smaller and smaller because of Anne Boleyn and finally it was Anne who influenced Henry the most. She, together with her followers, started to convince Henry that Wolsey did not make everything to pronounce his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled. When the cardinal denied this accusation, Henry did not trust him anymore.¹³ She even achieved that Wolsey was finally arrested. However, he was not executed as he died on the way to Tower because of illness.

Anne's influence is obvious also because Henry wanted to make her his wife and the queen of England despite the fact that she was unpopular by people. First, people only shouted at her and called her a whore or sorceress but later their anger was escalated. One day a whole crowd of people (seven or eight thousand people) with knives and brooms was heading towards a house when Anne was living with the aim to kill her. Fortunately, Anne must have been informed and escaped and when the people reached her house, she was not there anymore.¹⁴

Anne's popularity grew indirectly proportional to her influence on Henry. In the end of her life when Anne was already almost repudiated by her husband, she presents herself as a godly matron wearing always a book of devotions in her hands, helping others

¹⁰ GRAVES, M. 2003. Henry VIII: a study in kingship, p. 127.

¹¹ WEIR, A. 2009. Šest žen Jindřicha VIII, p. 137.

¹² WEIR, A. 2009. Šest žen Jindřicha VIII, p. 181.

¹³ WEIR, A. 2009. Šest žen Jindřicha VIII, p. 188./ ERICKSON, C. 2004. Anna Boleynová, p. 141.

¹⁴ ERICKSON, C. 2004. Anna Boleynová, p. 143.

especially the poor ones; she provided money for their education and sewed clothes for them.¹⁵

Regarding her influence, it was also weakened by an affair the king had during Anne's pregnancy as ambassador Chapuys hoped. Anne was choleric and therefore she taxed her husband with his love affairs. However, at that time Henry's enamoredness was gone and he was fed up with Anne's behaviour which was quite opposite to Catherine's behaviour. Anne was not like Catherine who never in her life dared to use impertinent words to him¹⁶. Moreover, after three pregnancies of which two were unsuccessful, she lost a considerable part of her influence as well as Henry's love. After her fourth and unsuccessful pregnancy her influence on Henry was null and her fate was decided as the king was tired of her.¹⁷

While Anne had to wait seven years to become the queen of England, her successor – **Jane Seymour** – had to wait only seven months. She drew the king's attention probably because she was quite the opposite of Anne of whom Henry was tired. Her influence on political and religious matters could not be noticeable as she did not intervene in this sphere. Actually none of his latter wives had a great influence on him because Henry did not allow any woman to influence him after the experience with Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn. However, Jane Seymour succeeded in influencing the king in one matter, though. She wanted him to reconcile with his older daughter Mary in which she really succeeded. Henry even said in public that he was sorry not to allow her to meet him and both, Mary and Henry, were thankful to Jane. Henry's recognition was given to her deservedly, also because she gave him his longed-for son.¹⁸

Similar to Jane Seymour (regarding the character) was Henry's last wife, **Katherine Parr**, who finally outlived him. Katherine gained Henry's respect as a good companion and minder.

Katherine did not have a great influence on Henry. Similarly to Jane she tried to reconcile Henry with his daughter, this time Elizabeth not Mary, but Henry did not listen to her and left. Katherine tried once again and wrote a letter to Henry asking him again and this time she succeeded – Henry allowed Elizabeth to come to Greenwich where Katherine and Mary already lived at that time. Otherwise, it was Henry who influenced Katherine. Katherine was a protestant reading all the forbidden books and she enjoyed discussing these issues with Henry. This could be fatal for her if she had been stubborn or careless. After Henry issued a warrant against her she realized she should stop it and asked her ladies-in-waiting to get rid of such books. From that time she became a humble and obedient wife.¹⁹

¹⁵ WEIR, A. 2009. Šest žen Jindřicha VIII, p. 265.

¹⁶ WEIR, A. 2011. Pád Anne Boleynové, p. 26.

¹⁷ MAXWELLOVÁ, R. 2001. Tajný denník Anny Boleynové, p. 313.

¹⁸ HACKETT, F. 1973. Henry the Eighth, p. 373.

¹⁹ LOADES, D. 2009. The Six Wives of Henry VIII, p. 136-137.

Apart from the king, Katherine had an influence on people and Edward. Regarding people it was especially scholars who competed for a place in her household wishing that she would become their patroness; regarding Edward, her influence was so visible that she was forbidden to see him what bothered her.²⁰

Last but not least, it is important to mention **Catherine of Aragon** – the first wife of Henry VIII – and one of the two wives who had a considerable influence on this mighty emperor. This Spanish princess was Henry's wife for the longest time and she experienced many bad things during their marriage. On the other side, she could easily influence her husband as he trusted her much. As Weir states in her book *Šest žen Jindřicha VIII*, Catherine influenced Henry in such an extent he did not do anything without her approval, even if it was connected to state affairs. It was even said that she manipulated Henry and that advisors could do nothing against Catherine's decisions.

Once, Catherine was given competency by Henry to administer the kingdom while he was away. It is obvious that Henry trusted her as well as loved her. He used to tell people how he loved Catherine and that they had gotten married from love. His wife returned his love by telling him how amazing he was and calling him "Your Grace", "my husband" or "my Henry". This couple seemed to be happy. They spent time together every day after lunch, ate often dinner together in the Queen's apartments and always prayed Vespers together.²¹

However, Catherine's position was threaten for a while when Henry found out that allies Ferdinand and Maximilian had deceived him. Henry was angry at Catherine who insisted that Henry should follow her father's advices. Thus Catherine's influence was eliminated for a while. Her position improved immediately after her nephew, Charles V, became Holy Roman Emperor. Catherine could again express her opinion during a council and Henry paid attention to her objections. Everything changed when Anne Boleyn appeared on the scene with greater influence than Catherine ever had. Catherine was suddenly kept in isolation and Wolsey kept an eye on her so she could not confide to any Spaniard without Wolsey would have known it.²² That is how disconsolately Queen Catherine ended up and after her almost all of Henry's latter wives.

The wives of Henry VIII were struck by various and not very enviable destinies. The unlucky ones – Anne Boleyn and her cousin Catherine Howard – were sent to prison and subsequently beheaded, Jane Seymour died after giving birth (young but at least with a good conscience she succeeded as a wife and queen), Catherine of Aragon and Anne of Cleves could be thankful the king "only" divorced them and did not let them executed and the last, and the most lucky, one – Katherine Parr – outlived Henry although she was not far from ending up at the stake because of her protestant believes.

²⁰ WEIR, A. 2009. *Šest žen Jindřicha VIII*, p. 474, 491.

²¹ WEIR, A. 2002. *Henry VIII: King and Court*, p. 13.

²² WEIR, A. 2009. *Šest žen Jindřicha VIII*, p. 132.

Each of them, however, influenced Henry to a lesser or greater extent whether their influence fell within personal or family issues as it was in the case of Jane Seymour and Katherine Parr.

The right of the greatest influence cannot be denied to Catherine of Aragon and her successor – Anne Boleyn. These two women influenced the sixteenth century English monarch very much, not only in personal issues but also in the state affairs. It is arguable which one of them was more influential, though. Some historians claim it was Anne Boleyn but this statement is probably made because of Anne's influence while she was not married to Henry and he was absolutely crazy about her. However, as his wife she cannot be considered most influential as the previous queen of England.

Therefore, the conclusion is there is not only one wife who influenced Henry VIII the most but this place is shared by two remarkable women and queens of England – Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn.

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