



# **The Six Wives & Many Mistresses of Henry VIII: The Women's Stories**

*Amy Licence*

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For a king renowned for his love life, Henry VIII has traditionally been depicted as something of a prude, but the story may have been different for the women who shared his bed. How did they take the leap from courtier to lover, to wife? What was Henry really like as a lover?

Henry's women were uniquely placed to experience the tension between his chivalric ideals and the lusts of the handsome, tall, athletic king; his first marriage, to Catherine of Aragon, was, on one level, a fairy-tale romance but his affairs with Anne Stafford, Elizabeth Carew and Jane Popincourt undermined it early on. Later, his more established mistresses, Bessie Blount and Mary Boleyn, risked their good names by bearing him illegitimate children. Typical of his time, Henry did not feel that casual liaisons could threaten his marriage, until he met the one woman who held him at arm's length. The arrival of Anne Boleyn changed everything. Her seductive eyes helped rewrite history. After their passionate marriage turned sour, the king rapidly remarried to Jane Seymour. Her death in childbirth left him alone, without wife or lover, for the first time in decades. In the quest for a new queen, he scoured the courts of Europe, obsessed with the beautiful Christina of Milan, whose rejection of him spurred him into the arms of Anne of Cleves and soon after the lively teenager Catherine Howard. Henry's final years were spent with the elegant and accomplished widow Catherine Parr, who sacrificed personal pleasure for duty by marrying him while her heart was bestowed elsewhere.

What was it like for these women to share Henry's bed, bear his children or sit on the English throne? He was a man of great appetites, ready to move heaven and earth for a woman he desired; their experiences need to be readdressed in a frank, modern take on the affairs of his heart. What was it really like to be Mrs Henry VIII?

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