Rhetorical Analysis of the musical Six

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Introduction

Written in 2017 by then students at Cambridge University, Lucy Moss and Toby Marlow, the musical SIX was intended as a project for the Cambridge University Musical Theatre Society, to be presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was not undertaken as a serious historical retelling of the lives of the wives of Henry VIII.

Through their marketing and slogans, we can see that they call their fans "QUEENS" in an effort to reclaim the title for the common woman and demystify it. Their website says that the musical will "remix five hundred years of historical heartbreak into a Euphoric Celebration of 21st century girl power"[1]. The media has crowned this musical as a feminist anthem of sisterhood. However, the way the media has received this creative work leaves much to be desired; because they have given it far more importance as a feminist work in a predominantly male and white industry, it places on the musical more burden than it can do justice to. Just because the cast were all women and non-binary actors, doesn't necessitate the story they are telling to also be inclusive and feminist. I disagree with Russo saying that the musical was a story of feminist sisterhood[2], the casting might have been color conscious and gender conscious but the story itself was, as Barnes says, "a reduction of the abuse and murder of women into a fun night out… dressed up as female power".[3] The representation in it seems tokenistic and derivative.

The lyrics and style of the songs have a comic side to them, made as entertainment, with the purpose of catching the attention of the viewers. The songs are upbeat with catchy tunes and great musical backdrops, this makes it easy to not read into the lyrics as

[1] "SIX on Broadway." Sixonbroadway.com, sixonbroadway.com/.
[2] "Divorced, Beheaded, Live in Concert: Race-Ing Henry's VIII's Queens in Six." The Scholar & Feminist Online, 3 Nov. 2022, sfonline.barnard.edu/divorced-beheaded-live-in-concert-race-ing-henrys-viiis-queens-in-six/. Accessed 11 Apr. 2023.
[3] Barnes, Grace. (2020). 'My sleeves may be green but my lipstick's red': Deconstructing the 'feminism' in Six. Studies in Musical Theatre. 14. 137-148. 10.1386/smt_00028_1.

keenly, to not delve into the fact that the whole musical is these six women competing over which of them suffered the most at the hands of Henry VIII and whom he preferred the most at the end of it all. The women make joke of their individual endings, their deaths and beheadings, trivializing their lives to connect with a modern audience.

To make my arguments I am going to be presenting evidence on two main arguments; firstly, how the musical perpetuates the idea that enduring abuse is a sign of virtue in a woman and secondly, how the portrayal of over-promiscuity hurts the narrative of these women and goes against the guidelines put down by its creators in their Six Point Plan.

Opening sequence foreshadowing the rest of the musical

To begin with, the opening sequence is called "Ex-Wives", it is a short introduction to each of the queens, with them emphasizing that they used to be "six wives" but now they're "ex-wives". Marlow and Moss stated that they "want to provide a different perspective on the six Queens separate from their status as wives"[4]. The title of the song directly opposes this aim. Along with this, each of the queens' individual verses in the song only address the parts of their lives that happened after their entanglement with Henry VIII. Catherine of Aragon's sings, "So if you try to dump me, you won't try that again" which is pointing to Henry needing to separate from the Church to divorce her. In her verse, Anne Boleyn boasts that she "broke England from the Church" and addresses that she lost her head because "[her] sleeves may be green, but [her] lipstick's red!". This serves to portray her as a promiscuous woman, when in fact she was an educated, smart, and influential woman of the court. Jane Seymour sings about being "the only one he truly

[4] Moss, Lucy, and Toby Marlow. *SIX on Broadway, Teacher Resource Guide*. Six on Broadway.

loved" as though it was a prize, but we know that she endured several hardships while being married to Henry. Katherine Howard openly accepts her extra-marital relations and tauntingly tells everyone to "lock up [their] husbands, lock up [their] songs, K Howard is here and the fun's begun", this could be viewed as her owning her sexuality, but in fact it reduces her to only her sexual appeal. Catherine Parr says that she "saw him to the end of his life, [she's] a survivor'. While this can be seen as a symbol of her perseverance and loyalty to Henry, it can also be seen as a lifetime of abuse and torment that she had to endure, and she is still celebrated as his final wife. This song sets up the stage for the rest of the musical being about their lives with Henry, not without.

Enduring abuse veiled as being a model wife

Catherine of Aragon's song, "No Way" is mainly about her questioning why Henry wants a divorce when she has been a loyal wife to him for several decades. There are many lyrics that show us that she often silenced herself in their marriage: "I've never lost control", "Have my golden rule, got to keep my cool", "No matter what I heard, I didn't say a word", "I put up with your shit every single day". She also repeatedly had to ignore the affairs Henry was having with younger women, evidenced by the lyric, "running around with some pretty young thing". Then she proceeds to plead, asking what Henry thinks she has done wrong, when she's "been humble, been loyal" and swallowed her pride all along. This is damaging to the women and teenage girls hearing her describe how she has been a model wife and begging him to not divorce her.

Jane Seymour song's "Heart of Stone" is a testament to how much she endured while being married to Henry. It shows to women and girls who listen to it that her redeeming quality was that she stayed even though he would tear her down and do his best to break her, her unconditional loyalty was supposedly the reason he loved her. This

is particularly dangerous because it can perpetuate a skewed idea of what it means to be a good partner. This discourages women from leaving abusive situations. It can deceive women into thinking that persisting through the abuse is what will make them truly good wives. Jane also mentions that she knows his love for her is dependent on the fact that she gave him a son, saying, "without my son, your love would disappear, and though it isn't fair, But I don't care 'cause my love will still be here".

Katherine Parr's song "I don't need your love" is a song of helplessness and having no choice when the King chose her to be his wife. She had to give up her lover, Thomas Seymour, when she married the King, she sings, "If Henry says "it's you" then it's you, no matter how I feel, it's what I have to do". Katherine wrote and published her own books and continued to be a supporter of women's education during her reign as Queen.[5] In the song she acknowledges that she disappears without him and that's why she had no choice in marrying him. This song does to some extent reflect history accurately, with her being unwilling to marry him but thinking of it as her duty and fulfilling her role with grace.

Over-promiscuity as their main characteristic

There is an interlude of the other queens referring to Anne Boleyn as "the temptress", "the one with the plan to steal the man", "the one who chased the king". This wrongly portrayed Anne Boleyn as this scheming woman who stole the king from Catherine of Aragon, when in fact, historical records indicate that it was Henry who pursued Anne for seven years before she finally agreed to marry him[6].

[5] "Katherine Parr." Historic Royal Palaces, www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace/history-and-stories/katherine-parr/.
[6] Historic Royal Palaces. "Anne Boleyn." Historic Royal Palaces, Historic Royal Palaces, 2017, www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/anne-boleyn/.

In her song, "Don't Lose Your Head", Anne Boleyn is portrayed as a shallow, gold-digging woman. Within the first few seconds of the song, she says she wants to "dance and sing" and that politics weren't her thing. While Anne was indeed an accomplished dancer and played several musical instruments, she was also an active participant and influencer in Henry's religious and educational policies. Along with being a patron of the arts, she was the first royal patron of Hans Holbein, a decorated court artist.[7] That line makes her seem like an uninvolved spectator at court who didn't enjoy being a part of the political sphere. Throughout the song she sings "Don't lose your head" as a supposedly funny reference to the fact that she was soon beheaded, only three years after her marriage to Henry. The song also makes claims about Anne possibly also cheating on Henry as revenge for him "sleeping around". However, there has also been serious debate that Anne was innocent and the trial and verdict against her was in fact conspired by her enemies[8]. So, for the musical to so flippantly make it seem as though her death happened because she decided to flirt with a few men at the Tudor court trivializes her life and struggle.

Katherine Howard's song, "All You Wanna Do" is a story of her continued sexual abuse over her lifetime. This song has been made overly sexual and portrays Katherine as a willing participant in her rape at the young age of 13 by her music teacher, Henry Manox. Even her marriage to Henry VIII happened when she was younger than 18, while he was 49. She was continually pressured and controlled by the men in her life, be it Francis Dereham forcing her to make him her secretary or Thomas Culpepper, a known sexual predator who had previously been accused of rape and murder, courting her as a

[7] Historic Royal Palaces. "Anne Boleyn." Historic Royal Palaces, Historic Royal Palaces, 2017, www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/anne-boleyn/.
[8] "Guilty or Innocent?: The Crimes of Anne Boleyn." Sky HISTORY TV Channel, www.history.co.uk/articles/guily-or-innocent-the-crimes-of-anne-boleyn#:~:text=The%20most%20well%20known%20of.

dangerous suitor.[9] The lyrics in this song completely disregard her age in the events that took place, not taking seriously, the fact that she wasn't even an adult by today's standards when she was killed. Everything that happened to her happened while she was still a teenager. There is an undertone of helplessness in the song, where she questions "I thought this time was different, why did I think he'd be different, but it's never, ever different". There isn't enough emphasis on the fact that this was a girl being preyed on and not someone who was even capable of understanding what was happening to her. Marlow and Moss stated, "We will give female historical figures a voice to tell their own experiences – experiences that have, in the past, predominantly been told by men"[10], however, by making a teenage Katherine Howard a siren of lust for much older men they have simply kept alive the toxic narrative set forth by men.

Anne of Cleves' song, "Get Down" is perhaps the only one of personal triumph because Henry was largely not a part of it, she escaped the torment that she would've experienced as the wife of Henry by apparently not being physically attractive to the King. Throughout the play remarks are made by the other queens about her not being beautiful enough. This sends across a message of needing to fit the Eurocentric ideals of beauty and to otherwise be ridiculed by your fellow women. She sings about owning her own palace and having "acres and acres" of land. Her riches were a reward her being cooperative during the annulment of her marriage to Henry. She got a generous allowance and a property in Kent and remained in the favor of the King until his death. She is, however, portrayed as a "gold digger" in this song, where she acts like she knew the king was going to reject her and planned to get his money, which is clearly not a flattering portrayal of

[9] "Catherine Howard." Historic Royal Palaces, www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace/history-and-stories/catherine-howard/.
[10] Moss, Lucy, and Toby Marlow. *SIX on Broadway, Teacher Resource Guide*. Six on Broadway.

her when it is known that the king picked her because he wanted to strengthen ties with her family, she had no choice in the matter.

Conclusion

Throughout the songs the over-sexualization of these women serves no one but the male gaze, the male fantasy to have them all be schemers who swindled Henry into a marriage, removing all blame from him, and placing it on the women in his life. I think that remixing requires you to hold on to some facet of the truth to keep intact the essence of the story you are retelling. The musical Six might not have done that enough. Nubia talks about wanting to portray history truthfully and diversely. This can be done by remixing a popular viewpoint of history and writing it from the perspective of another character in the story, which we can argue is what Six is, but it is not a historically accurate representation. The importance of diversity of undeniable, but to show diversity in stories where the lesson is to fight for diversity tricks people into thinking the problem is solved.

Marlow and Moss also stated, "We will show that women can tell stories together that are interesting, engaging, clever, and funny – stories told by women do not have to be about or include men in order to be entertaining"[11]. However, even though he is never physically on stage, the entire musical revolves around Henry VIII, which one can argue gives him more power than if he were present and a part of the musical. All these women are singing about Henry and their marriage to him, there is almost nothing about their lives apart from when they were involved with Henry. There is also a problem with the statement itself, it implies that women aren't already telling captivating stories without

[11] Moss, Lucy, and Toby Marlow. *SIX on Broadway, Teacher Resource Guide*. Six on Broadway.

the involvement of men, the stories of Jane Austen would be a prime example of centering the narrative around women.

I think the musical Six is aspiring to be a playful conversation between the queens of Henry VIII but in portraying its story as a feminist platform and the coming together of women, it loses sight of its message and is overtaken by the fact that those were educated, graceful, and intelligent women, who, in the end, suffered greatly and that history was not in their favor. By modernizing their story, the musical somewhat trivializes it.