

“Too many years lost in history”

Reclaiming historical women’s narrative through genre fiction in *My Lady Jane* and *Six*

This bachelor thesis analyses the ways in which *My Lady Jane* (Cynthia Hand et al. 2016) and *Six* (Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss 2017) portray female figures from the Tudor era in a way that comments on the traditions of portrayal of female characters in fiction as well as on portrayal of historical women in scholarship. *My Lady Jane* does so by portraying the life of Lady Jane Grey as a Young Adult novel that foregrounds feminine adolescence as well as non-human lives as ignored but important elements of history. *Six* in turn contextualises the common knowledge history of Henry VIII wives as a tale of female submission to men and support between one another. As they do so, both texts show an alternative way in which the female historical experience can be portrayed.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a rise in writing on female heroines, female figures who had earlier seemed to be footnotes to biographies of men around them. Sarah Hentges writes about those characters as “heroes [that] have been re-imagined with new strong female leads for the Millennial generation... strong, brave, struggling [ones]” (*Girls on Fire* 6).

This thesis’s purpose is to examine how this trend can manifest and what its consequences are for the audience, using the examples of two works of genre fiction that focus on women related to the Tudor dynasty: the novel *My Lady Jane* and the stage musical *Six*.

My Lady Jane is an alternative history Young Adult (hereafter: YA) novel that recounts a fictional version of the life of Lady Jane Grey. The novel turns the political and religious conflict surrounding the crowning and subsequent beheading of Lady Jane Grey into a story about the persecution of Eðians – people capable of shapeshifting into animals. In this version, Jane is not killed and gets a fairytale-like happily ever after. This change allows for the novel to be treated as more of a play on historical events than a strict adaptation.

Six is a musical retelling of the lives of Henry the VIII’s six wives – of whom two were divorced, two beheaded and one died in childbirth – as a pop concert, throughout which the ex-wives compete to choose the queen that was harmed most by her relationship with Henry. Throughout the runtime of the musical, however, the ex-wives grow closer to each other and conclude that their worth ought not to be defined by their marriages. As the musical draws to a close the characters sing about the possible different ways their lives could have gone if the times had been different.

Those two texts share a loose approach to history utilised for the purpose of a commentary on it and a strong feminist streak that contributes to that. Moreover, both texts have Tudor women as their protagonists, in response to a general interest mainstream audiences have

for the Tudor dynasty. The musical and the novel both explicitly alter historical records, putting to question the accuracy of our knowledge on the dynasty – and by proxy on history as a whole – that the mainstream acquires from fiction. My goal is to show how *My Lady Jane* and *Six* represent a new way of writing on history with a special focus on how they engage with feminist perspectives. The main axes of my analysis will be the genre, the narrative and the relation between these two texts and their audiences.

Six is a musical that utilises primarily pop music, heavily inspired by the styles of contemporary pop stars (Wright “‘Six’ creators reveal...”); at the same time, it is rooted in the rock opera genre, “synthetic art form, born of the synthesis of theater and stage performance rooted in song” (Donchenko et al. 146)¹, in which the story is told mostly through songs, while scripted acting is an optional feature. In the chapter focused on genre analysis I will look at how *Six* uses the features of the genre to tell the story of Henry VIII’s wives anew. Since rock opera is primarily a type of a musical concept album, I will focus on how a close reading of the lyrics of *Six* allows for extracting the musical’s narrative. Finally, as the musical has gained great popularity online, I will look into how it is interpreted by its fans and whether those interpretations correlate with the findings established in the chapters focused on the genre and the narrative.

My Lady Jane is particularly interesting in its narrative: as it creates an alternative version of history it gives more voice to female characters and foregrounds the importance of animals in history, adding a posthuman angle to its deconstruction of history. In this thesis, I will focus on how that is achieved. Moreover, I will look into how the genre informs that deconstruction. YA fiction is usually considered a rather frivolous, feminine genre, one that does not touch upon

¹ Original translation from Russian “Рок-опера – это синтетическое искусство, рожденное синтезом театра и эстрады, которое опирается на песню”

serious subjects (Subissati “Bad Romance”). Linking it then to historical events elevates the genre and disproves the point that works targeted towards young women cannot touch upon serious topics. Finally, I will look into the novel’s perception among readers and ask whether their responses to it correspond to the way *My Lady Jane* portrays female characters.

The works chosen for this thesis share interest in a historical time that is of great interest to mainstream audiences (Starkey “The Six Wives...”). However, they both approach their subject treating the historical narrative as a virtual framework that can be malleable and used to tell new stories, ones that force the audiences to question how they perceive historical female figures and why. The question that this thesis poses is: How can genre fiction transform peripheral female historical figures into heroines of their own stories in the examples of *My Lady Jane* and *Six*?

The Genre

My Lady Jane and *Six* are not focused on historical accuracy, which the genre choices reinforce. *Six* was created in the tradition of rock opera. That already alludes to how that kind of musical loosely adapts its source material. Works from the genre that have gained the greatest commercial success were loose historical adaptations such as *Hamilton* (Jurberg “Why ‘Hamilton’ Became a Success.”). *My Lady Jane* in turn is written as an alternative history novel in a convention similar to “alternate universe” fanfiction – a type of retelling of a fiction text in a significantly different version of the in-text-world. *My Lady Jane* itself is not exactly fanfiction, as fanfiction is a text that is produced by a fan – usually an amateur in the field of writing – and “that derive[s] from forms of media, literature, and popular culture” (Black 385). *My Lady Jane*, is filled with narrators speaking to the readers directly, which can allude to the type of relationship readers have with creators of online-published fanfiction where the author often personally addresses the readers before or after the written story. Moreover, as fanfiction is primarily written by young women and teenage girls, there is a substantial overlap between fanfiction creators and readers and YA audience (“The Case for Fan Fiction” Ellis and Weekes). *My Lady Jane* belongs to YA, a genre that has risen to great popularity just in the last few decades.

YA literature is a relatively recent genre aimed at readers broadly between the ages of twelve and eighteen (Russell 58). The 1967 *Outsiders* has been referred to as the origin of the YA genre, the greatest recognition of YA, however, occurred in the 90s with the spiking popularity of the *Harry Potter* series (Wells “Themes found in young adult literature...”), and consequential success of other titles. From 2002, in which 4700 titles were published, the number more than doubled, with over 10 000 titles published in 2012 (Peterson “Young Adult

Book Market...”). “[R]eaders were hungry for young adult stories that blended reality and fantasy, adventure and romance” (Hentges 5) The *Lady Janies Series*, then, has been created for a fertile market, and by writers already experienced with the YA genre. The genre, then, is not coincidental, but an element of the novel that serves to spread its message. It encourages the YA readers’ demographic to engage with the subject.

Moreover, genre analysis means looking at the conventions that rule over that genre. *My Lady Jane* engages with those conventions, in particular with the popular trope of “Girl on Fire” –described by Hentges as “complex, intelligent, brave and a triumphant survivor of impossible situations” (5). A Girl on Fire is a heroic female figure who often additionally to being a leader of social change also must find her place in the world as she is growing up. Another popular trope of the genre is the character who is Not Like Other Girls. She is a female character primarily defined by her exceptionality among other girls and women, an exceptionality mainly defined by her lack of interest in traditionally feminine activities and her focus on either so-called masculine interests or an intellectual development that, too, is often coded as masculine or unfeminine (*TvTropes*, “Not Like Other Girls”). *My Lady Jane* is not a dystopian novel and Hentges defines the Girl on Fire trope as strongly tied to that subgenre. As there is a rather noticeable overlap between the Not Like Other Girls trope and the Girl on Fire trope and the novel being of a subgenre that is not associated with the latter, it might seem that Jane-the-character is more of a Not Like Other Girls figure. Out of three focalising protagonists of the novel, she is the only female one. She is a passionate reader and is clearly different from her surroundings in her views on Eðians and lack of interest in romance: all characteristics of a Not Like Other Girls character. The novel, however, treats those characteristics ironically. Jane’s interest in books is not portrayed as proof of her being in any way exceptional, and lack of

interest in romance does not mean that she acts like a girl not of her times. Jane is much more of a Girl on Fire: she does not fight to assert her own independence but rather the independence of an entire social group. She is forced to stand against oppression eventually, but it is not her goal nor something she wants to pursue: as the novel ends, she does not take the throne. Finally, Jane, while having to face and defy oppression, is majorly focused on her personal life and relationships. While in the case of a Not Like Other Girls character her love life might be a “reward” for exceptionality, here it is simply a part of Jane’s journey: a Girl on Fire might need to battle injustice but is still very much a person. While *My Lady Jane* is not a dystopian YA, then, its eponymous character has characteristics typical for a dystopian YA novel’s protagonist.

Similarly to how *My Lady Jane* was created in the heyday of YA fiction, so, too, did *Six* come out at the height of interest in historically oriented rock opera, caused by the 2015 rap opera *Hamilton*. *Six*, which premiered in 2017, was created in the context of newly aroused interest in the genre. That interest was also the cause of criticism, in particular one on the topic of historical accuracy (Keller “The Issue on the Table”). The genre started to be treated very differently. Historical musical, particularly one of the rock opera variety has never been particularly focused on historical accuracy and works such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* had played fast and loose with their source materials. In the post-*Hamilton* scene, *Six* could, then, have been easily buried under such criticism. However, *Six* very clearly cuts short any pretenses of being a historical account. From the inclusion of props such as cell phones, through “colorblind” and “genderblind” casting (Wood “Six Announces Open Casting...”), to the concert formula, the musical conveys that it is not in any way treating itself as a factual representation of history. Firstly it engages with pop music in a very open way (Wright), which shows how it cuts itself off from high culture. Secondly, in the lyrics themselves, *Six* acknowledges the abundance of

assumptions and myths that had grown around Henry VIIIth and his wives. For example, the musical alludes to the tale that the ballad “Greensleeves” was written by the king about Anne Boleyn by the line “My sleeves may be green, but my lipstick’s red” in “Ex-Wives”. By doing this, the musical positions itself as closer to fiction than truth, but with an added awareness of its own historical inaccuracy. Finally, the musical has many meta-qualities. This is not unique, as musical theatre has meta-qualities deeply embedded in it. The audience is not supposed to forget that they are watching a fictional narrative. “[A]ny reason to include a song is a good reason: we have musicals because we enjoy hearing stories told with music, regardless of *why* or *how* that music is there” explains the website *TvTropes* about the convention (“Musical World Hypothesis”). *Six* runs with this idea, it acknowledges that it is a stage play within the words themselves. This is so starting with “Ex-Wives”, in which the queens tell the audience that they will “tell [them] a story”, to the final song “Six”, in which they acknowledge that their time to speak for themselves is ending because the musical is coming to a close.

Both *My Lady Jane* and *Six*, then, while taking historical figures as subjects are interested in presenting their characters in new ways. The genre choice only supports that. Additionally, the chosen genres are very popular, especially among young, female audiences, but reach an age-diverse demographic. Finally, the formulas of both works – the metatextual narrative of *Six* and the fanfiction-like the narrative of *My Lady Jane* – invite the audiences to engage with the texts not only as passive receivers. In the next chapter, I shall look closer at the audience-engaging aspects of the works.

The figures that this thesis focuses on are by no means unknown to the general public, even among those not interested in British history. There are multiple documentary series on Henry VIII’s wives as well as an abundance of scholarly writing on both them and Jane Grey.

The texts that I chose are also not the first fictionalised accounts of their lives – just over a decade ago BBC released a historical drama *Tudors* that viewers were “eating up” (Gates “The Royal Life...”). What, then, is unique about *My Lady Jane* and *Six*?

The Audience

The way historical events are simplified by *Six* and *My Lady Jane* makes the works easy to follow and understand, but renders them compelling enough to keep the audiences engaged. Both texts are targeted at young, primarily female audiences and were created by people who know what can be engaging for them. *Six* was written by two university students (King “Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss...”), and *My Lady Jane* by three female writers experienced in writing YA fiction (Brodi, “The Authors”), who transform historical figures into more relatable, new versions. The queens in *Six* use slang, comedic sexual innuendos and allusions to pop music culture. Both works also balance presenting characters as true to the period that they lived in, with our contemporary sensibilities. Young Jane Grey might live in a version of Tudor times where speaking in quotes from modern texts – like allusions to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* – is normal, but she does not question whether she must be married off, with her thoughts on the matter being written similarly to how modern YA characters might complain about parents or school (*My Lady Jane* 26). While the form of the narratives is drastically changed to fit the conventions of a musical or a YA novel, the core of the historical truth about these Tudor figures remains. David Starkey, a historian and a contributor to a 2001 documentary *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, says this on the series website about the public’s fascination with the Tudors: “[It is] a soap opera that’s real and that’s true. ... You know enough but not too much”(“The Six Wives...”). That pinpoints perfectly why those stories captivate their audiences while at the same time remaining distant enough to allow play with their narratives without cognitive dissonance.

The characters’ complexity and their diversity also add to the relatability of *Six* and *My Lady Jane*. Women who seemingly come from the Tudor times speak in our contemporary registers or allude to pop music. Their problems, while often entangled in greater political schemes, are ones easily recognisable by modern young audiences. Edward in *My Lady Jane*

might be a king in need of an heir but he is at the same time a sixteen-year-old getting excited about the prospect of a French kiss (2). The characters live in quasi-Tudorian times but still think in quotes from Disney movies (265). *Six* and *My Lady Jane* are aimed at young female audiences. The musical is full of references to pop music divas they listen to, *My Lady Jane* conforms to YA romance genre rules – even when it pokes fun at them (Adamus, “‘Moja Lady Jane’ - Recenzja”). While that makes the works approachable, it also means that they are open to a greater potential for criticism. Works aimed at young women face great moral examination and monitoring. The podcast *Faculty of Horror* in the episode on the *Twilight Saga* presents the tension around modern writing directed towards young women. On the one hand, girls need to be protected from corruption, on another there is a push for more feminist messaging. That often results in the promotion of a very narrow version of a female heroine because “women ... need to be protected from *moral and sexual corruption*. We want girls to do whatever they want, as long as they want the things we want them to want”(33-35)² says sociologist Andrea Subbsati on the podcast. Female characters then are to make feminist choices, but not so radical as to deem them morally corrupted. By that standard of avoiding moral corruption then it seems such work as *Six* has no “good” role models. The characters are angry and bossy, childish and frivolous and above all, openly sexual. While sometimes they oppose each other, at the end of the musical they stand united. All queens have equal opportunities to tell their stories in ways they choose. All ways of life that the queens are represented as living through are treated with equal respect. As the queens sing about their never-to-be lives in the show’s finale, their dream lives do not conform to what is either moral or considered textbook feminist choices. Both *Six* and *My Lady Jane* exist in the greater context of an abundance of works that took Henry VIIIth’s wives and Jane Grey as their subjects. Moreover, as Starkey claims, the Tudors are still a very fascinating

² Emphasis added

dynasty, therefore the potential audience already has certain preconceptions about the Tudor women. *My Lady Jane* deals primarily with the potential assumptions about Jane Grey in the prologue which states that “[y]ou may think you know the story” (IX). A blogger and media influencer Magdalena Adamus in her review of the novel writes about how she, and many others do learn of the story: through Delaroche’s 1833’s painting *Execution of Lady Jane Grey* which fixed the moment of Jane panicking before beheading as the primary cultural image of Lady Gray – one based less on the works from the time and more on the 19th-century imaginings of her. *My Lady Jane* does not show Jane being executed, rendering the Delaroche version obsolete in the world of the novel. The importance of paintings as a source of historical knowledge for the common audience is much more foregrounded in *Six: Anna of Cleves*³ complains about how “we all discuss” how she was deemed ugly and divorced by Henry after he saw her to be different from her portrait already in the first number. The greatest criticism, however, comes in the mid-show number “Haus of Holbein”, referencing Hans Holbein the Younger, a painter who created portraits of many of the Henry VIII court including Jane Seymour and Anna of Cleves. The song is sung from the perspective of maids getting princesses ready to be painted by Holbein. It lists a number of drastic measures taken for the purpose of making women more desirable: makeup containing lead or hair cosmetics with urine. The song criticises beauty standards women had to and still need to uphold – the “Haus” in the title can be interpreted as referring to modern fashion houses. The song also portrays the way that paintings may present a very false version of historical figures. That point is only further underlined by how “Haus of Holbein” is followed by “Get Down” of Anna of Cleves in which the chorus focuses on how she “didn’t look like her profile picture” – her Holbein portrait – and how that was the cause of her

³ Spelling based on the spelling in the musical’s book.

marriage annulment. Paintings are, then, deemed biased, and the audience is confronted with the falsehood of not only beauty but also a version of history they manufactured.

“Haus of Holbein” is one of few of the songs of the musical that includes an apostrophe towards the audience, that takes the form of an order: “try these heels”, “you bring the corsets”, “ignore your fear”. The song thus turns into an instruction on what to do to be considered attractive. As the song turns to the listeners it forces them to question the beauty standards that are in place today. Perhaps it is that apostrophe that made the song one of the most popular in the musical. It has led to a “Corset trend” on TikTok – a social media platform for uploading and watching videos of maximally one minute – in which the lines “[y]ou bring the corset/ We’ll bring the crinches/ No one wants a waist over nine inches” are coupled with people demonstrating how tight they can make their corsets or belts (“No one wants ... TIKTOK COMPILATION”). The trend seemingly had little to do with the message of the original song, which is not uncommon, as creators often simply use songs that are popular on the platform to boost their viewership, with no regard for the songs’ content. Moreover, as the creators follow the “instructions” of the song by tightening the corsets, they appear to conform to the beauty standards that the song criticises. That is, however, not the case. Creators engaging with the trend were – as exemplified by the aforementioned compilation – of various genders (1:20, 6:4, 7:58), body types (4:52, 8:37), presentations (1:46, 3:05, 10:21), not only traditionally feminine women that “Hous of Holbein” is about. Them wearing the corsets appears then not to be about conformity to the standards the song criticised, but a celebration of themselves without relating their appearance to how they were perceived by men.

The audience of *Six* and *My Lady Jane* is one primarily composed of young girls and women, the demographic that Alexandra West calls “the most manipulated and also despised”

(16 “Bad Romance”). The novel and the musical then take on a very popular subject of the Tudor dynasty and mold it in a way that firstly is interesting and engaging to that demographic, but also does not engage in shaming or judgment of young women for their interests. The response from the audiences of *Six* and *My Lady Jane* prove that those works succeeded. Both the musical and the novel aim to engage with the demographic of young women presenting their feminist messaging as not one that stands in contradiction to femininity, but one that is intermingled with it. The next chapter shall explore how exactly do the narratives of the musical and the novel present their feminist messaging.

The Narrative

The genres that *Six* and *My Lady Jane* inhabit allow for great freedom in a loose retelling of the stories of Lady Jane Grey and the wives of Henry VIII. The audiences respond with adoration of the works and embrace the feminist tones in them. How, then, does the narrative of the musical and the novel actually present their subject matter in a feminist way?

Both works share a strong meta-awareness of their fictionality. In *My Lady Jane* the narrators address the readers directly, informing them after the characters' adventures that the narrative reunites the official records of Tudor history. The *Six* final song "Six" is a recounting of what might have been if the queens lived in different circumstances. In "Six", the show is called a "historemix", which is a clear in-text acknowledgement of the not-historically-accurate nature of the show. Moreover, it allows the reader or audience to wonder about the official historical records and their possible biases. The works force us to question why the Tudor women portrayed were painted in specific ways throughout history. Katherine Howard⁴ – who got married to Henry at seventeen and beheaded just a year later for adultery on the grounds of treason – has been portrayed as promiscuous up till very recently. In the 2009 book *The Tudor Queens Of England* Tudor historian David Loades titled the chapter focused on Howard "The Queen as Whore" and described her in it as "certainly" behaving "like a whore both before and after her marriage" (139). *Six* portrays Howard in turn as a teenager, still a girl, who fell victim to sexual harassment from men around her. Katherine Howard's song "All You Wanna Do" is packed with sexual innuendos – "We spent hours strumming the lute" referring to female masturbation, "blowing the flute" referring to fellatio, to give only two examples – , however it never explicitly uses the term "sex". The closest it gets is using adjective "sexy" – instead the phrase "[you] bird and the bees me" is used, referencing the euphemism for explaining sex to

⁴ Spelling based on the musical's book

children. Here it gains a dark meaning: Howard's sexual vocabulary is not one of an adult, but that of a child. That only underlines the abusive character of the relationships she had with men: she was a child abused by men who groomed her, not the "whore" historians such as Loades portrayed her to be.

Narratives taking history as a loose basis for fantastical or comedic plots to be built on, are by no means new. *My Lady Jane* directly alludes to the film *Monty Python And the Holy Grail*, by having a character quote a famous line from the movie "Your mother was a hamster, and your father stank of elderberries!"⁵ (300). The film plays with the Arthurian legend, and is a pastiche of a knight errant's quest, poking fun at the conventions of how historical cinema portrays the past. By alluding to Monty Python, the authors of *The Lady Janies* place the novel in the context of a familiar tradition of parodying history. This clearly signals that the series ought not to be treated as a serious account but rather as a play on conventions. Additionally, it adds legitimacy to the *Lady Janies* series: as Monty Python had gained a great following and appreciation the credibility of the group's work now can potentially be extended to *The Lady Janies*. Moreover, using allusions to Monty Python is a clear indicator of how the novel does not simply change history only for comedy sake, but also to comment on traditional depiction of history.

Six invites the listeners to wonder why they are so interested in any flaws of the wives of Henry the VIII as reasons for the unhappy marriages instead of examining the traits of the king himself ("funny how we all discuss that [Anna of Cleves's appearance] but not Henry's little - / prick"). Despite the fact that Henry is the common denominator in the lives of his ex-wives, he is absent from the musical, as are other men: the only characters present on the stage are the queens (with the exception of "Haus of Holbein", which is also performed by the actors playing the

⁵ The line in the novel is slightly changed from the movie: "smelled" becomes "stank".

queens). Having only female characters present does not necessarily mean that *Six* is a feminist musical. One of the popular measurements that determine the presence of active female characters is the Bechdel-Wallace test. The test states that a work needs to have more than one female character, the female characters come into a conversation with each other and the conversation is about something other than a man (Jusino “Alison Bechdel Asks You...”). While *Six* passes the first two requirements, the entirety of the musical seems to be centered around the characters talking about a man. The musical still shows women as fully rounded and their lives only dependent on men because of the social reality of the times and not out of their own volition. The fact that the queens focus so much on Henry is presented not as aspirational or healthy but rather as something they are forced into by conventions, and their eventual rejection of him is a moment of triumph. The musical additionally subverts the common trope of women turning on one another because of the man, though at first it seemingly plays right into it. Already in the second song Catherine of Aragon sings about how betrayed she is by Henry wanting to replace her by a “pretty young thing” and right after that comes “Don’t lose your head” sang by Anne Boleyn focused on competing with Catherine of Aragon (“He doesn’t wanna bang you/ somebody hang you”). It starts off from the idea that the queens compete against each other in sort of oppression olympics comparing how they were wronged by Henry. However, by “I don’t need your love” by Catherine Parr, the queens realise they ought not to compare each other. Parr sings about how “without him ... we all disappear” and other queens join her. In the final song the queens embrace and support each other in their newly chosen ways of living. Moving into a nunnery is a dream equal in value to having a family, and both are not worse than being a lyricist. The queens are not pitted against each other as in the common, stereotypical, misogynist narrative about catfighting over a man, but purposefully reject such a

narrative, and how history makes the women “fixed/ as one of six” and “disappear” without a man. As they sing the final song together, they identify as a new group: no longer “ex-wives” but simply “six”. As Catherine Parr finally admits “I don’t need your love,/ All I need is six” she and other queens rip themselves out of the Henry-centric narrative.

Thanks to their loose and comedic portrayal of history as well focus on female characters, both *Six* and *My Lady Jane* can be viewed through the lens of feminist epistemology. Feminist studies have defined feminist epistemology as a study of how gender influences knowledge, and the analysis thereof is engaged in from a feminist perspective. One of the principles of the study “situated knowledge”, coined by the philosopher Donna Haraway, is the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth because all knowledge is created from a specific point of view. Furthermore, Haraway calls the way in which certain perspectives are prioritised over others the “god trick”: objectivity is “impartiality ... a perspective that under the guise of neutrality ... hides a very specific position”(Rogowska-Stangret). Sociologist Ramon Grosfonguel describes as follows: “[t]he pretension is that the knowledge produced by men of [Italy, France, England, Germany and the USA] has the magical effect of universal capacity, that is, their theories are supposed to be sufficient to explain the social/historical realities of the rest of the world.” (74) In the historical context the “god trick”, that “universal capacity”, relates to how certain narratives are shaped by the focus on primarily white, male, able-bodied and cisgender (or cis-assumed) individuals.

Feminist epistemology also looks at how knowledge acquisition relates to gender – how certain fields are promoted to some genders and not others – and to how certain demographics choose knowledge they would like to pursue, for example how women might not be interested in studying history when the focus of historical texts is on men. That is perfectly described by

Catherine Morland, a character of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*: “[history] tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. ... the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all ... I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.”

This quote not only points to how the field of history being focused on men might be not particularly attractive to female thinkers, but also underlines the conventionality of historical texts that may not convey the reality of past events. The masculine-focused historical studies may do several dangerous things: firstly, because of the dogmatism of historical truth they may create an illusion of irrefutability. Secondly such studies may cause female figures to be forgotten or simplified and through that they may lead female pursuers of knowledge to be less interested in historical texts. Because of the assumption of irrefutability they may seal the picture of historical women as passive and their importance only dependent on their relationships with men. Scholarship on the Tudors provides many such examples, even among works written in an attempt to present more active and positive pictures of female characters. For example the book *Mary Boleyn: the Mistress of Kings* by ? while being a nuanced biography still makes being “the mistress of kings” the most recognizable and defining characteristic of Anne Boleyn’s sister by giving the book such a title.

Six engages with feminist epistemology directly in relation to historical studies. In the first song – “Ex-Wives” the queens sing of how they tell a story “you *think* you’ve heard before”⁶ already pointing to how the view of history is highly subjective. The queens sing about how they “add the prefix” which at first seemingly might mean the prefix “Ex” in “Ex-Wives” – which could be read as a separation of the queens from Henry. However, the lyrics are repeated in “Six” changed into “we changed the prefix” which could be read as an allusion to the term “herstory”. The term, originating from the second wave feminism of the 1970s is a play on the word

⁶ Emphasis added

“history”. “History” is here seen as literary “his story” – study of history primarily focused on men –, the term “herstory” was therefore coined, meaning study of history focused on the feminine perspective (*Morgan Sisterhood Is Powerful*). It is important to note that the original form of the word “history” had nothing to do with gender, as the word comes from Greek “historia” meaning “inquiry”. That being said, the discipline of herstory does point to the problem of masculine superiority in epistemology. The allusion to the term in the lyrics of “Six” – even clearer if one considers another line from the song: “too many years lost in history” – makes the musical clearly connected to the herstory phenomenon.

My Lady Jane comments on that in two ways: firstly its narrators openly admit to changing history from the very beginning as part one of the novel is titled: “Part One in Which We Revise A Bit Of History” (V). Secondly, it makes Jane an avid reader, which relates to the true historical records of her (Edwards), but which serves an additional role: “Books were Jane’s great love: history and philosophy and religion” (12). It seems that Jane reads about fields dominated by men, however, the book Jane carries around everywhere is on the history of the beet, which demonstrates great hunger for knowledge about common life and social history which were usually on the peripheries of mainstream historical studies. Moreover, “most of all, [Jane] loved stories of Eðians and their animal adventures” (12). Reading, then, might be seen as Jane’s first contact with the Eðian culture – one that she realises to be her own when she turns into a ferret for the first time. That mirrors the familiar experience of many members of marginalised communities and minority identities. Queer people, for instance, often recall recognition of their own often not even yet fully realised identities in media long before meeting other members of their communities personally (*Thorn Identity...*). Jane’s fondness for Eðian culture serves as an illustration of how important seeing one’s culture is. This strengthens the

point the novel makes about the importance of portrayal of history from diverse points of view. Jane's affinity for reading about the Eðians and beets additionally foregrounds non-human lives. The Eðian unique human-animal perspective is considered important: all three main characters are Eðian and their animal experiences are underlined as important – shapeshifting saves them on many occasions – and beautiful – Gifford is a poet, and as the novel plays to the theories of Shakespeare not being the author of his texts, Gifford according to *My Lady Jane* is the author of the famous “Sonnet 18”. Moreover, it is his experiences as an Eðian that often inform his work: the “work-in-progress” versions of the sonnet refer to his and Jane's animal forms (485, 487). Such portrayal of non-human lives: as ones worthy of describing in historical records – the beet –, and ones that can be creative and worthy on their own in separation from value to human prosperity – the Eðian's in animal form – falls in line with the idea of posthumanism. The theory first popularised by Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg's Manifesto* is rooted in the idea of rejection of species-based boundaries between humans, other animals and machines. Haraway claims that feminism needs to adapt to include non-human agents and encourages affinity between all kinds of living organisms. This inclusion then, of appreciation for non-human experience in *My Lady Jane* makes the novel not only a feminist one, but also a posthumanistic one.

My Lady Jane and *Six* share the humorous approach to their source material. History is a playground on which the creators come up with their own rules, not out of lack of respect, but for the purpose of bringing attention to how study of history is always biased. Biased towards the human, the male, the powerful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Six* and *My Lady Jane* allow their female characters to take centre stage. The narrative of both works gives voice to the Tudor women whose stories, while often quite different from accurate accounts, now have deeper nuance, because the goal of those works is invoking imagination and questioning of the monolithic model of history.

The female characters of *Six* are portrayed as their own women, with dreams and agendas, that they were forced to give up because of the patriarchal society they lived in. *My Lady Jane* provides a perspective on history that puts animal and plant life in the foreground, proving that there are many ways of looking at historical events. Through their genres, the novel and the musical clearly cut away from pretenses to accuracy, but at the same time make powerful statements about how history is written from a place of privilege, and therefore its accuracy itself can be debated. They prove that minor genres can engage with complex issues such as balance of power under the patriarchy. Moreover, as *Six* and *My Lady Jane* had achieved success among musical and YA fans, their example shows that the modern audiences are hungry for representation of a nuanced female experience. Finally, the narratives of both works are humorous and tongue-in-cheek. They present history as a relative, malleable story that can be told over and over again foregrounding the importance of different peoples, one that has no one definite version, one that is biased.

My Lady Jane and *Six* provide not a new version of history, but rather a reason to question the fixed ways in which female historical figures have been portrayed. The importance of works such as these two does not lay in new facts that they might uncover, but in how they cause their young audiences to keep on challenging the fixed historical truths.

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