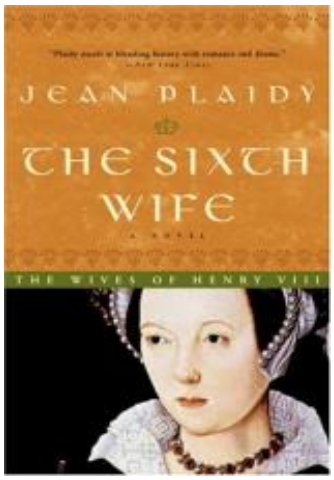
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The Sixth Wife: The Wives of Henry VIII

by Jean Plaidy



About the Book

Dangerous court intrigue and affairs of the heart collide as renowned novelist Jean Plaidy tells the story of Katherine Parr, the last of Henry VIII's six queens.

Henry VIII's fifth wife, Katherine Howard, was both foolish and unfaithful, and she paid for it with her life. Henry vowed that his sixth wife would be different, and she was. Katherine Parr was twice widowed and thirty-one years old. A thoughtful, well-read lady, she was known at court for her unblemished reputation and her kind heart. She had hoped to marry for love and had set her heart on Thomas Seymour, the dashing brother of Henry's third queen. But the aging king --- more in need of a nurse than a wife --- was drawn to her, and Katherine could not refuse his proposal of marriage.

Queen Katherine was able to soothe the King's notorious temper, and his three children grew fond of her, the only mother they had ever really known. Trapped in a loveless marriage to a volatile tyrant, books were Katherine's consolation. But among her intellectual pursuits was an interest in Lutheranism --- a religion that the king saw as a threat to his supremacy as head of the new Church of England. Courtiers envious of the Queen's influence over Henry sought to destroy her by linking her with the "radical" religious reformers. Henry raged that Katherine had betrayed him, and had a warrant drawn up for her arrest and imprisonment. At court it was whispered that the king would soon execute yet another wife. Henry's sixth wife would have to rely on her wits to survive where two other women had perished. . . .

Discussion Guide

1. Katharine urged her second husband, Lord Latimer, to downplay his religious convictions in order to avoid the king's punishment. How far does she follow her own advice to keep dangerous opinions quiet from the court? Does she become bolder as her years with Henry pass? Why?

2. Katharine and her sister Anne agree that the wedding ring around Katharine's finger is akin to a noose around her neck. Does this overstate the case? Does Katharine also derive benefits from the throne? Based on Katharine's experience, is marriage to Henry a survivable state?or was it luck that saved her in the end?

3. In describing Henry's style of leadership, Plaidy says that Henry threatens the nobility and courts the commoners. The reader experiences Henry's reign through the eyes of the court. How do you imagine a commoner would view Henry VIII?

4. When Katharine asks the king for favors, Henry is pleased to be able to grant her that which he himself quietly wants, allowing him to feel at once benevolent and relieved. Do you think Katharine is aware of this dynamic? Does she orchestrate this dialogue to any degree, or is she sincerely appealing for favors on her own behalf?

5. Do Mary, Elizabeth, and Edward?bound by their relationship to the king but by little else?consider themselves a family? How would you describe their life in the palace? Having seen Henry's queens come and go, why do you think the royal children allow themselves to become so attached to Katharine Parr?

6. Discuss Katharine's friendship with Jane Grey. Why is the queen so fond of the young girl? Is Katharine a good role model for Jane? If Jane were to become Edward's queen, what lessons from Katharine would help her in her role? Are there any ways in which Katharine's example would be detrimental to the pair?

7. Dr. London's plot to forge documents implicating Katharine as a heretic is foiled when Katharine takes a hand in her own fate, sending a message to those who would destroy her that this queen will not easily be put away. Does this bold and intelligent image ring true throughout Katharine's reign as queen consort?

8. The author often takes us inside Henry's head to witness the suspicions, longings, and justifications that lead him to act so unpredictably. Does this narrative device work to make him more sympathetic as a character, or more dangerous? Do his feelings about conscience and fraternity with God sound like insanity, or are they understandable as the musings of a man accustomed to great power?

9. Elizabeth has many of the characteristics that made her father a strong and respected ruler. Does she also have qualities that could lead her to repeat Henry's cruelty? What do you see as weaknesses?

10. Anne Askew is in many ways a dangerous friend for Katharine to have. Why does Katharine risk so much to help her? Does Katharine relate to her friend's religious zeal, or is she just trying to help a friend in need? Is she in any way responsible for Anne's fate?

11. Henry VIII is described as a man of many moods and a fierce will. Henry himself repeatedly declares, "A king is still a man." Amid his many personas?sensualist, sovereign, diplomat, conqueror, husband, patient, father?can you identify one "real" Henry? How would he describe himself? What might Henry the man have been like if he were not king?

12. After reading Wriothesley's warrant for her arrest, Katharine despairs until Thomas Seymour urges her to fight for her life. Why does she not fight before this? Does she realize her advantage in having found the lost scroll, or could she have made more of the opportunity?

13. What does Thomas find so alluring about Elizabeth? How big a part of the appeal is her place in line for the throne? Without her political stature, would Thomas have risked so much to seduce her? How do Katharine and Elizabeth compare in his eyes?

14. Why does Surrey deliberately provoke the king with his words and actions? Is he motivated by the same kind of reckless delirium that Katharine sometimes feels?or is something else driving him? Does he harbor a real desire to take power from Henry, or does he court danger out of restlessness?

15. By her fourth marriage, Katharine is an experienced wife?but naïve in the ways of romance. Why does she not see hints of Thomas' indiscretions earlier? Is she foolish to trust him? If she had known about his proposal to Elizabeth, do you think she would have married Thomas? How could she have saved herself?

Author Bio

Jean Plaidy, one of the preeminent authors of historical fiction for most of the twentieth century, is the pen name of the prolific English author Eleanor Hibbert, also known as Victoria Holt. Jean Plaidy's novels had sold more than 14 million copies worldwide by the time of her death in 1993.

Critical Praise

"Plaidy excels at blending history with romance and drama."

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