

# TUDOR WOMEN

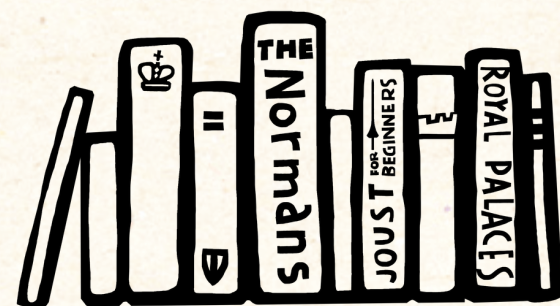


## Who tells the story?

Until the second half of the twentieth century, historians did not focus much on the role of women in history. Even where women were written about, for example if they were queens, they were written about from a male perspective. For example, the six queens of Henry VIII were considered only as his wives and became little more than the famous rhyme. Women's history began to be studied in the 1970s, but still tended to focus on notable women. It was not until the 1980s that ordinary women began to be studied in detail.

## Before the Tudor period

Women's lives in the Middle Ages were quite similar to women's lives during the Tudor period. They were subject to the authority of their fathers or husbands, were expected to marry, but could act as regents or become independent as widows. Before the Tudors, some women had power as Abbesses. An Abbess was the head of a convent and was in charge of the community and its finances. However, when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, these roles no longer existed.



## Education

Education for girls was not a priority in Tudor England. Girls from wealthier families would be taught by private tutors and would be literate, instructed in music and dancing and some might learn languages. It was common for girls from richer families to go to another noble household to learn etiquette and how to behave in society, as Catherine Howard did. However, less than 10% of women in Tudor England were literate and poorer girls often got no education at all. By the time they were teenagers, poorer girls would be sent out to work as servants or to be apprentices, for example to a seamstress.

## Marriage

Most women were expected to get married. Remaining single risked a life of poverty, especially for poorer women. Single women were seen as an oddity in society. Women had



few rights and once married, their property belonged to their husbands. Marriages often did not last very long because one partner often died relatively young due to sickness or disease, so it was not unusual for people to marry several times during their lives. Marriages were not usually made for love but for money or power, especially for the wealthy. Even poorer women, who had more freedom in choosing a husband, would still look for someone who could provide a good life. The rich often married for the first time in their late teens, while poorer people waited until their 20s, when they were more financially secure.

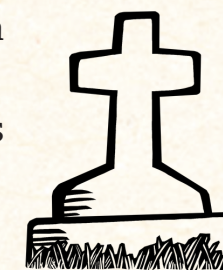
## Families

Women were expected to be obedient wives and mothers. Large families were common and, without contraception, many women spent a lot of their child-bearing years pregnant. Childbirth was extremely dangerous for women and accounted for a high number of premature deaths in adult women, as we see from the stories of Jane Seymour and Katherine Parr. Poorer women would support their husbands in their work, whether it be in farming or a trade. If a woman was widowed, she might take on her husband's business or she might remarry for financial security.



## Life expectancy

Average life expectancy was about 35 years old. However, this figure is affected by very high child mortality rates. Around 20-30% of children did not reach their 7th birthday. However, if a person survived childhood, they had a good chance of reaching their 40s or 50s. Disease was a threat as was death in war for men or childbirth for women. Poorer women were more likely to suffer the hardships of malnutrition and poverty, affecting their health.



## After the Tudor period

Little had changed by the Stuart period. Women were still expected to remain in their domestic roles, and while some high-status women might have greater power and influence, the majority left few marks on the historical record, with many women signing parish registers with an 'X'. Female literacy reached approximately 25% by 1710 (compared to 50% for men). Older, single women made up a high proportion of those accused of witchcraft in the Stuart period, although some of the religious sects that flourished during the interregnum, such as the Quakers, were beginning to give ordinary women more of a public role. Even more radical groups, like the Diggers, wanted equality for women with men in education and law, but they had very few supporters.

## Women outside England in the 16th Century

### Western Europe

In western Europe, the experience of women was broadly similar to the experience of women in England, because of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and similar political structures. In the late fifteenth century Isabella of Castile ruled a combined Spanish kingdom with her husband Ferdinand of Aragon. She was a queen regnant, meaning she had power in her own right, 50 years before England had its first queen regnant, Mary I.

### Eastern Europe

In some parts of eastern Europe, such as the Byzantine Empire and Bulgarian Empire, women generally had a higher level of education and status than women in western Europe. However, in areas of Russia, women had an inferior status. Of course, a lot depended on your position in society and there were enslaved women across Europe, such as Catalina of Motril, who was possibly an enslaved Muslim woman with north African heritage. She travelled to England as part of Katherine of Aragon's household.



### East Asia and Africa

A patriarchal system was common in many parts of the world. In China, men were dominant and only a few elite women such as empresses or concubines wielded power in their influence over the emperor. In Ndongo and Matamba (now Angola) in the 17th century, Queen Njinga ruled and led armies, but she did so by calling herself 'king' and insisting on being addressed as a man.

### Power

A few women in sixteenth century Europe held power in their own right, such as Isabella of Castile, the mother of Katharine of Aragon or Christina of Denmark, who governed the Duchy of Lorraine. However, these women were in the minority.

It was more common for women to deputise for their husbands. This could be by acting as a regent when a king was away fighting. For example, Katherine of Aragon acted as regent in England 1513 when Henry was away in France. The Scottish king James tried to invade England, so she left the safety of London to ride north while pregnant and take more than 1500 sets of armour to her troops. After the Scottish king was defeated, she sent King James' cloak, covered in blood, to Henry to show that she had won. Katherine Parr also acted as regent for Henry VIII when he led another campaign to France in 1544. We know



that Katherine signed five royal proclamations during this time. She was attended by her younger stepdaughter, the future Elizabeth I, who was inspired by this example of female sovereignty. Noble women would act in a similar way for their husbands, if they were away at war or on other duties. They would manage estates and even defend their lands if necessary.

Women could have authority within marriage. They were responsible for managing the household, servants and children. Although women's property was given to her husband on marriage, a widow could have independence and manage her own affairs, much like Anne of Cleves did after the annulment of her marriage to Henry VIII.

### Sources and the absence of them

Millions of ordinary women left no historical record of their existence. They were not considered important enough to be written about, so finding out about the experiences of the majority of women across the world is much harder.

Even for women who were remembered, evidence is incomplete. We know about the six Tudor queens because they were important enough for an historical record to have survived. We have some contemporary portraits of the queens as well as records

made by others of what they said, for example the record of Katherine of Aragon's statement to the Papal Court. However, many sources are what men, such as ambassadors, were writing about them as in the case of Jane Seymour. We do have a few surviving letters, such as those from Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, which give us the queens' real voices. We also have Katherine Parr's own writing as well as household accounts from Anne of Cleves which can give an insight into their lives. However, much evidence has been lost. Henry VIII ensured much evidence of Anne Boleyn's life as queen was destroyed. We have no accurate record of the birth date of Catherine Howard and the voice of Jane Seymour has all but disappeared from History.

