

Catherine Was Great. But Was She a Girl Boss?

In seeking to turn historical women into yassified contemporary heroines, pop culture creators are narrowing what female success can look like.

By Alexis Soloski

Published Dec. 26, 2021 Updated Jan. 13, 2022

Sign up for the Watching newsletter, for Times subscribers

only. Streaming TV and movie recommendations from critic Margaret Lyons and friends. [Get it in your inbox.](#)

Catherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII, enjoyed embroidery and fasting. Little in the historical record suggests that she was any fun at a party.

“Unfortunately, Catherine of Aragon just, like, loved church and was always praying and was kind of a bummer,” Dana Schwartz, a writer who hosts the podcast “Noble Blood,” told me recently.

Yet there Catherine is, in the Broadway musical “Six,” vibrating her vocal cords like a Tudor-era Beyoncé, in a thigh-scrapping miniskirt and studded boots — a girl boss, early modern style. “Six,” a giddy pop confection about the six wives of Henry VIII, joins recent works like “Dickinson,” the AppleTV+ comedy just concluding its final season, and “The Great,” the Hulu dramedy that recently released its second, in revamping notable women of past centuries as the cool girls of today. It’s history. With contouring.

For decades now, popular culture and media have made a concerted effort — mostly laudable, occasionally cloying — to reclaim forgotten or maligned women. Think of the “Rebel Girls” books, the biopics that glut the Oscar race, even the Overlooked obituary series in The New York Times.

Some of these works explore women’s lives mindful of particular historical contexts, acknowledging their achievements within the often oppressive systems of their times. Others, like “Dickinson” and to a lesser extent “The Great,” take a deliberately freewheeling approach to history, inventing counterfactual privileges and possibilities for their heroines. Still others, like “Six,” feed history through the YassifyBot, Facetuning women’s lives so that they seem fiercer, sexier, more aspirational — selfie-ready, way before cameras were invented.

This girlbossification nearly always puts women in competition with each other, rather than emphasizing shared struggle. It diminishes oppression and bias, suggesting that any woman can get ahead if she just puts on her big girl panties and rises-and-grinds hard enough, retconning the necessary fictions of our own cultural moment into the past.

In a moment when popular culture confuses fame and excellence, works like these also imply an inability to appreciate female merit absent of sex and glamour. The desire to zhuzh up women of history — Hey, it’s so super that you changed the world, but couldn’t you have done it in a bustier? — says a lot more about our own time than times past. When we reframe herstory as an Instagram story, what do we lose?

I should probably tell you that questions like these make me feel like a scold. I hate that. You know who’s really no fun at parties? Scolds. Besides, I love “Dickinson.” I admire “The Great.” The songs in “Six” are absolute bops. None of these works aspire to historical accuracy. “The Great,” in particular, has the cheeky tagline of “an

occasionally true story.” And even if they did, we probably shouldn’t be getting our history from prestige comedies and musicals.



Hailee Steinfeld, left, as Emily Dickinson and Wiz Khalifa as Death in “Dickinson.” Michael Parmelee/Apple TV+

Also, real life, even the real lives of great women, is mostly boring. Would you watch three seasons of a show in which Emily Dickinson sits alone at her desk, scratching out verse with a pencil? But there are telling emphases in these shows and equally telling excisions. This new breed of heroine is ambitious and sex positive, with impeccably modern politics. Rather than understanding these women as products of their time, we make them creatures of ours.

Schwartz told me that she understands the impulse to sex up historical women. It lavishes attention on them, correcting the dismissiveness of earlier historians.

Sign up for the Watching newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Streaming TV and movie recommendations from critic Margaret Lyons and friends. [Get it in your inbox.](#)

“But that then has the collective effect of making these women less interesting and less honest in who they were within their periods,” she said.



At least, “Dickinson,” created by Alena Smith, plays with this dishonesty purposefully and boldly, taking the wildness and desire that suffused Emily Dickinson’s poetry, if not her life, and externalizing it through scenes in which Hailee Steinfeld’s Emily twerks at house parties and takes carriage rides with Wiz Khalifa’s Death.

The real Dickinson was introverted and, despite her on-trend eyebrows, not a particular beauty. “In terms of being a cool girl, I don’t really know if she was,” Monica Pelaez, a Dickinson scholar who has advised the show, told me. “She chose to seclude herself.”

The historical Dickinson doesn’t seem to have dressed as a man or protested as an ecowarrior or taken multiple lovers or heaved her bosom in a daring red dress. But her poetry and letters conjure vivid emotional states, so “Dickinson” colors Emily’s life with this dynamism, colliding reality and fantasy.

“What the show does is bring that sensibility from her poetry and dramatize it,” Pelaez said.

The Emily who emerges is confident, career-minded, fascinating to men and women, a corrective to previous works (even recent ones like Terence Davies’s 2016 movie “A Quiet Passion”) that ignored the queerness her letters and poems suggest. But while “Dickinson” seems acutely aware of the sociopolitics of 19th-century New England, the show often argues for Emily’s exceptionalism by differentiating her — and to a lesser extent her sister, Lavinia (Anna Baryshnikov), and sister-in-law, Sue (Ella Hunt) — from the other women of Amherst.

Rather than looking for solidarity among the women of her progressive community, Emily emphasizes this difference. “I’m just not made for traditional feminine handicrafts,” she complains during a sewing circle scene, the implication being that women who are made for them don’t deserve a prestige TV series.



Elle Fanning as Catherine in the second season of the Hulu series “The Great.” Gareth Gatrell/Hulu

In this way Emily resembles Catherine, of “The Great,” which slid its 10-episode second season onto Hulu a few weeks ago. Created by Tony McNamara (who also co-wrote the lightly counterfactual battling-British-royals comedy “The Favourite”), the series stars a luminous Elle Fanning as a German princess who arrives at the Russian court as a teenager and promptly claims the tsardom for herself. Liberated from chronology and fact, the comedy-drama twiddles the timeline of Catherine’s career and marriage. (Let’s just say that the real Peter struggled to consummate their relationship and the Peter of “The Great,” played by Nicholas Hoult, does not.)

02historical-women EDIT

ARTS&LEISURE

Bright, colorful and cruel, like a dish of poisoned candies, the show occasionally portrays Catherine as naïve. But she learns fast and her emergent politics and commitment to hustle are beautifully modern. She wants to end Russia's wars, free its serfs, teach women to read, inoculate her subjects. (This is more or less true of the historical Catherine.) And in her ball gowns? An absolute smokeshow.

The legacy of the real Catherine, who came to the throne not as a dewy teenager, but as a more seasoned 33-year-old, was of course more complicated. "She actually increased serfdom," said Hilde Hoogenboom, a professor of Russian who has translated Catherine's memoirs.

Hoogenboom describes "The Great" as the "Disneyfication" of the real Catherine. To make her a fairy tale princess, the series also insists on differentiating Catherine from the other women at court, representing her as a savvy It Girl, more beautiful and more powerful than her peers.

"Bitch," one noblewoman sneers.

"Empress bitch," Catherine corrects her.

The real Catherine *was* different. (And as someone who routinely elevated her lovers and male allies, not so big on sisterhood.) But she was one of several 18th-century female heads of states, including the Empress Elisabeth, her immediate predecessor, a fact that "The Great" conveniently elides. Instead it presents Elisabeth (Belinda Bromilow) as a dithery nymphomaniac, raising Catherine up by pushing Elisabeth and her underwear down.

"Six," created by Lucy Moss and Toby Marlow, puts its women in competition even more explicitly, structuring the show as an "American Idol"-style vocal contest. A blingy take on trauma porn, it demands that each woman sing not about her character or integrity, but about the wrongs she suffered at Henry's meaty hands. Here are the rules, as detailed in the opening number:

The Queen who was dealt the worst hand
The Queen with the most hardships to withstand
The Queen for whom it didn't really go as planned
Shall be the one to lead the band.





From left: Andrea Macasaet, Adrianna Hicks and Anna Uzele in the musical “Six.” Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Before ending in a mostly empty gesture of solidarity, “Six” simplifies and updates many of these women, turning Anne Boleyn, an astute political player, into a foxy good-time-girl, framing Katherine Howard, a blatant victim of abuse, as a barely legal tease. (“Lock up your husbands, lock up your sons/ K-Howard is here and the fun’s begun.”) The costume design, in a nod to pop norms, sexualizes each woman, coupling their worth with their hotness.

In her song, Katherine Parr, Henry’s widow, reminds listeners of her accomplishments:

I wrote books, and psalms, and meditations,
 Fought for female education
 So all my women could independently study scripture
 I even got a woman to paint my picture
 Why can’t I tell that story?

Well, why can’t she? Instead, the songs from “Six” center the women’s relationships to Henry, emphasizing his attraction to them (or rejection of them) over any of the wives’ accomplishments. “The things that these women were doing should be of historical interest, regardless of whether or not they were all married to this [expletive]

02historical-women EDIT
 ARTS&LEISURE

dude,” Jessica Keene, a history professor who studies the Tudor period, said.

This substitution of sexuality for excellence can extend even into more enlightened shows. That sewing circle episode of “Dickinson” includes a dynamic cameo from Sojourner Truth, played by the writer and talk show host Ziwe. Because “Dickinson” remains exquisitely self-aware, it jokes about Ziwe’s youthful appearance (“I’m roughly 66, but I look good as hell”) and Truth’s 19th-century sex bomb vibe (“Oh, they’re going to know I’m a woman in this dress”).

But the real Sojourner Truth, who came to public life in middle age, didn’t lead with sex. Corinne T. Field, who has written on Truth, described her as a figure who critiqued girlish beauty and sexuality. “Her whole public career is built as someone who had already aged beyond youth and was occupying a position of power and charisma that did not rely on girlish beauty,” Field said.

I asked Field what we miss when “Dickinson” depicts a woman like Truth this way. “An investment in intergenerational networks of mutual care,” Field said without pausing. “We need to think about how you sustain female empowerment over the course of a whole life.”

If creators, even creators with explicitly feminist aims like Smith and Moss, believe that audiences won’t pay attention to female protagonists absent of youth and beauty, they will likely frame empowerment narrowly. And maybe that’s necessary on some level. The recent and more accurate versions — like “A Quiet Passion,” 2019’s “Catherine the Great” and this year’s “Anne Boleyn” — tend to be less fun.

“If girlbossification is the price to elevate female historical figures to the mainstream consciousness, so be it,” Schwartz said.

That consciousness could then encourage viewers to seek out what Schwartz called “actual historically accurate sources.” And in these sources they might find that sometimes women changed the world in flats or with split ends or in common cause with other women or when they weren’t especially sexy or young. A few of them must have had a really solid grasp of traditional feminine handicrafts. Where is the absolute bop for that?

