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Professor Tenure-Line

Communication Arts and Sciences

Title of your research project.

The Case for Katherine Howard: Reconstructing Public Memory of Henry VIII's Fifth Queen through the Musical Six

Description of research. Please provide a few sentences that explain the question and the methods employed in this research project.

Katherine Howard, Henry VIII's fifth queen, is remembered because of her tragic death: she was beheaded for having an affair while she was married to the king. Documented history and most popular culture depictions of Katherine Howard have represented her as promiscuous, unintelligent, materialistic, and careless; however, there have been some recent attempts at reconstructing the memory of her as a victim of sexual abuse. In this essay, I explore how the popular British musical Six contributes to the public memory of Howard as a woman who had been abused by the men in her life from a very young age. Through a rhetorical analysis of the script, vocal score, and two performances of the musical, I suggest that Six advocates for a reinterpretation of Howard as an intelligent, capable young woman whose previous sexual traumas influenced her actions and ultimately led to her downfall. I note how this counter-memory of Howard differs from previous depictions in other popular culture texts and in documented history, and I argue in favor of a revised public memory of this maligned historical figure. Finally, I suggest that musical theatre may provide one means of redemption for other historical figures who are remembered negatively due to the context in which they lived, especially those from marginalized communities, through the creation of counter-memories and the recognition of them as victims of their time, place, and circumstances.

Did this project include Penn State students as researchers?

No

If yes to the above question, please state where it was published.

Not yet

What problem do you address with your research?

How musical theatre, particularly biographical musicals, can provide counter-memories to accepted public memories of historical figures that may have been unfairly maligned or ignored throughout history - particular women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from other marginalized communities.