The Life & Times of King Henry VIII

Henry, the second son of King Henry VII, was born on June 28, 1491, a little over one year before Christopher Columbus sets sail to discover the New World. After the death of his elder brother Arthur in 1502, Henry became heir to the English throne.

Henry's father, Henry VII, died in 1509. Instantly, England's popular eighteen-year-old prince became King Henry VIII. He was widely known for his love of hunting and dancing. Soon after becoming King, Henry was given an exemption from the Pope in order to marry his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon.

Early in Henry's rule he relied heavily on Thomas Wolsey to assist him. Wolsey originally served as the King's liaison to help the lower classes, but by 1515 Henry had elevated him to be Lord Chancellor, the highest role in government.

In 1517, a reformer named Martin Luther shook the church when he protested against the teachings of the church. Luther argued that nobody, not even the Pope, could interfere with one's personal relationship with God. King Henry VIII gained strong favor from Pope Leo X in 1521 when he refused Luther's teachings and reaffirmed the Pope as the supreme authority of religious life. In fact, the Pope went so far as to call him the "Defender of the Faith."

Militarily, Henry was a superb leader. In fact, Henry VIII became known as the "father of the Royal Navy" because of his commitment to expanding England's might on the seas. When he gained the throne England had five warships, and by his death in 1547 there were over fifty.

Like all kings, Henry felt immense pressure to father a male heir to keep the royal bloodline in tact. Henry's marriage to Catherine had produced just one child -- a girl, Mary -- and this strained their marriage. Henry feared that Catherine, now in her 40s, was near the end of her child-bearing years. So, King Henry VIII sought a second exemption from the Pope -- this time Henry wanted permission to divorce his wife, something strictly forbidden by the Catholic church. Pope Clement VII refused to allow the divorce, mainly because Catherine's nephew was the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Allowing the divorce would certainly anger the emperor, and this was a fight the Pope did not wish to start. Henry was stuck in a bind, but he was not about to give up.

King Henry VIII responded to the Pope's denial in a historic way; he ignored him. In 1533, Henry officially broke from the church. While the Catholic Church refused to recognize it, in Henry's mind his marriage with Catherine was over. Then, in a secret marriage, Henry married his second wife, Anne Boleyn. The Pope responded to these events by using his greatest power: King Henry VIII was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. How would the King respond to being thrown out of the Catholic Church? He simply created a new church, one that he would lead. This church would be called the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church.

excommunicate: officially exclude someone from participating in the church
Despite making an entirely new church, Henry's own religious beliefs remained Catholic. However, the creation of the Anglican Church, along with Martin Luther's condemnation of Catholic practices, sparked the event known as the Reformation, or the movement to reform the practices and abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. Once a man who condemned Luther, now Henry was essentially agreed with him on the evils of the church. Slowly, the people would adopt protestantism.

While not acknowledging Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn, this did not stop his pursuit of a male heir. However, Henry soon grew dissatisfied with Anne; her first child, born in September 1533, was a girl (the future Queen Elizabeth I), and she unfortunately had two other pregnancies end in miscarriages. Tired and furious, Henry had Anne arrested in 1536 on charges of adultery and publicly beheaded at the Tower of London. Today, most believe that Anne was innocent, and that Henry's Lord Chancellor, now Thomas Cromwell, was the one responsible for stirring up this trouble. Cromwell likely received this order from Henry, in order to continue Henry's pursuit of his desired male heir.

Soon, Henry married a third time. It was Henry's marriage to Jane Seymour that produced the male heir that would keep the bloodline in tact. Edward was born in 1537, however Jane Seymour died during childbirth. While gaining a son, Henry lost his wife.

King Henry VIII married a fourth time to a woman named Anne of Cleves. Anne was a German princess and this marriage was seen as a political alliance. Henry was worried the Pope might try to rally strong Catholic countries, such as France and Spain, to go with war with England for the King's religious actions. So, the King sought to gain allies of his own. Cleves was a wealthy, Protestant region in Europe (modern day Germany), and the King hoped his marriage with Anne would solidify this relationship. The marriage was a disaster, however, and Henry divorced Anne after only a few months.

Just sixteen days after his divorce from Anne, Henry took his fifth wife, Kathryn Howard. Henry was 49 while Katherine was 19. Katherine did much to raise the King's spirits in his later years, evening earning the nickname "a rose without a thorn." Katherine's fate, however, was similar to that of Anne Boleyn; she was accused of adultery and executed at the Tower of London. This claim had more merit, though, than that of Anne Boleyn. After an investigation in 1541, there was enough evidence that Katherine had a relationship with her personal secretary.

In 1543, Henry took his sixth and final wife, Katherine Parr. Katherine was a very religious and determined woman, and acted like a nurse to Henry in his final years. She would outlive Henry by over a year.

King Henry VIII died on January 28, 1547, and his only son to reach past infancy was named Edward. Edward, son of Henry and Jane Seymour, was just nine years old when he became king. Due to Edward's young age, Henry specified in his will that Edward be assisted by sixteen executors known as the Regency Council until he reached eighteen years old. Unfortunately, Edward died just six years later at the age of fifteen. His death caused England's monarchy to fall into turmoil over who had the right to the throne.
Directions: Using the text, “The Life & Times of King Henry VIII”, complete the three parts below! In Part 1 you will take the role of a historian, in Part 2 you take the role of a poet, and in Part 3, you take the role of an interviewer!

**Part 1:** King Henry VIII is one of England’s most memorable kings. After reading the text, what 3 events do you think he is most memorable for?

1.)
   Why would this make him memorable?

2.)
   Why would this make him memorable?

3.)
   Why would this make him memorable?

**Part 2:** The poem below has been popularized to describe King Henry VIII’s six wives. After reading the poem, try to solve the rhyme! Which wife fits where?

“King Henry the Eighth, to six wives he was wedded. One died, one survived, two divorced, two beheaded.”

One Died: ______________________

One Survived: ______________________

Two Divorced: ______________________

Two Beheaded: ______________________
Part 3: You travel back to 1547, just before the death of King Henry VIII, and you have been granted a rare interview with this historic king. Create the transcript from that interview! Be sure to elaborate, and no simple "yes" or "no" questions or answers are allowed!

Q: __________________________

A: __________________________

Q: __________________________

A: __________________________

Q: __________________________

A: __________________________

Q: __________________________

A: __________________________

Q: __________________________

A: __________________________

Q: __________________________

A: __________________________