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‘Divorced, beheaded, died; divorced, beheaded, survived’: this saying sums up the relationship Henry VIII had with his wives. Henry VIII’s wives were: Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr. Catherine of Aragon Soon after his accession, in June 1509, Henry married his brother’s widow, Catherine of Aragon. Their marriage was carried out in order to strengthen the relation between England and Spain. In fact, Catherine was the daughter of Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, and was born on December 16, 1485. During her childhood, the young Catherine travelled much around Spain since her parents were fighting against the Muslims in Granada (Lewis 2017). As a consequence, she was not able to officially engage her time studying and educating herself. Nonetheless, she was mentored by ‘European humanists’ (Lewis 2017). The young girl was able to speak in several languages including Latin, Spanish, English, and French; and was also instructed in theology and philosophy. In 1498, a marriage was arranged between Catherine and the Prince Arthur, and their union was officialised in November 1501. However, their marriage was never consummed, and therefore, she was able to marry his brother Henry VIII, in 1509. Queen Catherine gave birth to six children, yet, only one of them survived: Mary I of England. Catherine was desperate for a male heir, and not having obtained one by the end of their marriage, The marriage’s annulment was sought in order to obtain the papal Cardinal Thomas Wolsey attempted to gain the pope’s permission for divorce. However, Catherine didn’t want to divorce her husband and thanks to the ‘speech of her life’, the pope did not give such concession. As a consequence, Thomas Cromwell took the lead and suggested the king to break with the Church of Rome and become in control of the Church of England through the Act of Supremacy (1534). Thanks to Cromwell’s intervention, Henry VIII managed to divorce from Catherine of Aragon. They had been married for over twenty years. Anne Boleyn Born in 1501, Anne Boleyn is the indirect cause of the Reformation in England. She was the daughter of Thomas Boleyn, the Earl of Wiltshire. She carried out her education in the Netherlands and in France, where she became main of honour of Francis I’s wife. Although Anne was engaged to the 5th Earl of Northumberland, Cardinal Wolsey refused to marry them, and Anne was obliged to make her way back to her home in Hever Castle. In 1526, Henry VIII was struck by Anne’s ‘beauty and charm’ (Pettinger 2017). The king tried to seduce the young girl numerous times, but she refused his ‘advances’ since she did not want to become a mistress. Anne claimed she would succumb to his love only if Henry ended his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. The future queen of England supported the reform movement as well as William Tyndale’s translation of the Bible (it is necessary to remember, however, that Henry VIII was Catholic and strongly averse to Protestantism). In 1528, Anne contracted the sweating disease and almost died. On January 25, 1533, Henry VIII and Anne married, and she was crowned queen of England six months later. In September of the same year, the queen gave birth to Elizabeth I, and all her following pregnancies were miscarriages. The love affair between the two ‘quickly soured’ not only because Anne was not able to birth a male heir, but also because she disagreed with the religious reforms that the king was enacting (Pettinger 2017). In April 1536, Anne Boleyn was arrested for high treason: she was charged with the accuse of ‘adultery, incest, and plotting to kill the king’ (Pettinger 2017). Although Anne did not committed any of the accusations above, she was executed and her last words were ‘Jesus receive my soul, O Lord God have pity on my soul’ (Pettinger 2017). Jane Seymour Jane Seymour was born sometime between 1504-1509. She was Catherine of Aragon’s lady-in-waiting and also witnessed the relationship between the king and Anne Boleyn. Jane was known for her quiet and soothing manner’ (English History), and, although the king knew who she was, he became enamoured with her in 1536 and Henry provided her with expensive gifts. On May 30, 1536, the two married, and Jane was immediately able to give birth to the king’s greatest wish: a male heir, Edward. The birth of Henry’s son was greatly celebrated all throughout England. However, Jane did not live long, and ‘the christening ceremony had begun in her bed chamber’ (English History). Before dying, the queen suffered from weakness, exhaustion, high fever, and delirium. According to some historians, Jane died because of puerperal sepsis, i.e. childbed fever. At her death, Jane received a solemn funeral and her body was embalmed. Anne of Cleves Following Jane Seymour’s premature death, the king wore black until 1538, and did not marry for two years. One of the reasons he did not marry consisted in the fact that the king had gained a bad reputation amongst European women. Therefore, Henry assigned a mission to his closest advisors: that of travelling Europe with the intention of finding him a new consort. Thomas Cromwell suggested Anne of Cleves as a possible candidate: she was German and fully supported Protestantism. According to Cromwell, such union would reinforce the reformation in England. Therefore, on the January 6, 1540, the two officially married; however, Henry declared that he was not able to consume the marriage since he did not find her attractive. He was repulsed by her, and could not get over fulfilling his marital duties: in fact, when Cromwell asked the king ‘how liked you the Queen?’, he replied ‘I liked her before not well, but now I like her much worse’. Protestants, Henry VIII executed Cromwell on July 28, 1540. Henry VIII divorced from her only four months after their marriage. However the two remained on good terms. In fact, after the two consorts divorced, Henry VIII was incredibly grateful for Anne’s collaboration, and decided to reward her by offering her manors, estates, and an income of three-thousand pounds per year. The king also defined her as a ‘good sister’ and granted her ‘precedence over all ladies in England, except the Queen and his daughters’ (Hanson 2015). Furthermore, thanks to the financial stability that her divorce had brought her, Anne spent much of her money on gambling and beautiful gowns. She was also allowed to visit the king, spend time with his children and was always welcomed to his banquets. Katherine Howard Katherine Howard is perhaps one of the most controversial wives of Henry VIII. In fact, she is known to having had numerous love affairs. On July 28, 1540. On the same day of Thomas Cromwell’s execution, Henry VIII married Katherine Howard, a beautiful and very young woman: she was gifted expensive jewellery by her new husband, and she officially became queen on August 8. However, little did Henry know about her past: in fact, when she lived in her grandmother’s residence at Tilney, she entertained a love affair with her music teacher, Henry Manox; and subsequently with Francis Dereham. Moreover, she entertained an amorous liaison with one of her husband’s favourites, Thomas Culpeper, and brought to court her former lovers Manox and Dereham. On November 2, 1541, Katherine’s reckless behaviour was denounced by Archbishop Howard to Henry VIII. Howard was not forgiven by the king, and heavy charges were imposed upon her: in fact, she was accused of (I) ‘unchastity’ before her marriage; (II) the ‘concealing’ of sexual relations before her marriage (considered treason); (III) and engaging in adulterous behaviours (also considered treason) (Lewis 2019). As a consequence, Howard lost her title of queen on November 23, 1541. Culpeper and Dereham did not have a happy ending, and on December 10 of the same year, they were executed: their heads were exposed on London Bridge. On January 21, 1542, Katherine Howard was condemned to death with the charge of treason. Therefore, on February 10, she was brought to the Tower of London, and three days later, she was beheaded and buried in the chapel of St. Peter at Vintria. Catherine Parr Catherine Parr (1512, Catherine was the daughter of Sir Thomas Parr, who was a descendant of Edward III), and Edward Green, one of Catherine of Aragon’s lady-in-waiting. She was passionate about learning and had strong knowledge of French, Italian, and Latin. Throughout her life, Catherine married in Latin. Throughout her life, Catherine was educated under royalty in present-day Belgium and then France, and by the time she joined her family back in English court in 1522, her sister, Mary, had already become a mistress of Henry VIII. The sisters were both ladies-in-waiting to Catherine of Aragon, and Anne—a skilled dancer with an alluring French air about her—soon caught the king’s eye. They started courting around 1526, kicking off Henry VIII’s storied battle to make her his second wife. They married in secret in January 1533, before Henry VIII’s first marriage had even officially been annulled. That finally happened in May, and Anne was crowned queen the following week. She and Henry VIII welcomed their first child, the future Queen Elizabeth I, in September. But Anne’s two subsequent pregnancies ended in tragedy: She had a miscarriage in 1534 and a stillborn baby boy in 1536. With Henry VIII growing ever desperate for a male heir, his close advisor, Thomas Cromwell, began mounting an adultery case against Anne. She was imprisoned in the Tower of London in early May 1536, and convicted of adultery, treason, and even incest (one of her purported paramours was her own brother) during a trial that lacked any evidence of her alleged crimes. On May 19, Anne was beheaded.3. Jane Seymour (Died)A portrait of Jane Seymour by Hans Holbein the Younger, circa 1536. | Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wikimedia Commons // Public DomainThe day after Anne’s death, Henry VIII got engaged to Jane Seymour, who had served as a lady-in-waiting to Anne Boleyn and Catherine of Aragon before her. Jane was devout, docile, and very virtuous, once even turning down money from Henry on the grounds that “she had no greater riches in the world than her honour, which she would not injure for a thousand deaths.” Her moralistic streak appealed to Henry, and they married on May 30, 1536.Jane’s motto was “Bound to obey and serve,” which she carried out in a big way by giving Henry his much-coveted male heir: the future Edward VI, born on October 12, 1537. She’s also credited with convincing Henry to reconcile with Mary Tudor, who had been ousted from court along with her mother. Jane and Mary, only about eight years apart in age, remained close throughout Jane’s tenure as queen.Jane Seymour is often cited as Henry’s favorite wife, and he definitely did love her. But we have no way of knowing whether their relationship would have soured in some way had she lived longer. She died from childbirth complications less than two weeks after Edward was born.4. Anne of Cleves (Divorced)A portrait of Anne of Cleves by Hans Holbein the Younger, circa 1539. | Heritage Images/GettyImagesHenry soon began to worry that the Holy Roman Empire and its fellow Roman Catholic ally France were plotting against England, which compelled him to marry a woman who could earn him some allies of his own. Thomas Cromwell chose the bride-to-be—Anne of Cleves, from the powerful German Protestant House of Cleves—and court painter Hans Holbein headed to Germany to paint a portrait of her. Henry agreed to the union after seeing the image, and 24-year-old Anne met her 48-year-old future husband in England in January 1540. Though Henry was much less impressed with her appearance in person, he went through with the marriage for political reasons anyway. But they never consummated their union, and when the threat of war fizzled out, Henry decided to divorce her. Their annulment was finalized on July 9, 1540. Anne didn’t protest—a shrewd move that set her up to live out the rest of her life in luxury and comfort, free from all the queenly pressures that had led to the downfall of three wives before her. Henry VIII gave her a liberal annual stipend, two houses in England, and several other properties to rent out. She remained in the country, stayed on good terms with her ex-husband—they even called each other “brother” and “sister”—and ended up becoming friends with Elizabeth I. Though Anne was only 41 years old when she died in 1557, she had already outlived Henry by a decade, and she’s the only wife of his to be buried at Westminster Abbey.5. Catherine Howard (Beheaded)A portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger believed to be of Catherine Howard, circa 1540. | Royal Collection, Wikimedia Commons // Public DomainFor wife number five, Henry VIII returned to his M.O. of selecting from the pool of his current queen’s ladies-in-waiting. One of Anne of Cleves’s attendants was Catherine Howard, a niece of the powerful Duke of Norfolk and a first cousin of Anne Boleyn. Catherine’s exact birth date is unknown, but she may have been born as late as 1524—meaning she was likely still a teenager when the middle-aged monarch married her on July 28, 1540, mere weeks after the ink had dried on his and Anne’s annulment papers.During her (even) younger years, Catherine had been sexually abused by her music teacher—in her words, she “suffered him at sundry times to handle and touch the secret parts of [her] body”—and later had sexual relationships with her grandmother’s secretary, Francis Dereham, and one of Henry’s courtiers, Thomas Culpeper. In short, Catherine hadn’t entered her marriage to Henry as a virgin, and she’s also believed to have continued her affair with Culpeper during her marriage.When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer—who generally had it out for Catherine’s Catholic family—clued Henry into his wife’s history in October 1541, the king launched a full investigation, and Catherine herself copped to the accusations the following month. She was stripped of her title and beheaded at the Tower of London on February 13, 1542.Modern historians have pointed out that Catherine’s young age essentially makes it impossible to hold her accountable for her relationships, all of which were with significantly older and more powerful men. But at least Culpeper and Dereham didn’t live happily ever after: They were executed for treason a couple months before Catherine’s death.6. Catherine Parr (Survived)A copy of a portrait of Catherine Parr by Master John, circa 1545. | Historical Picture Archive/GettyImagesCatherine Parr, born in 1512, was the daughter of one of Henry VIII’s advisors, Sir Thomas Parr, and one of Catherine of Aragon’s ladies-in-waiting. Maud. (In fact, she was actually named after the queen.) By spring 1543, she was twice widowed, working in Mary Tudor’s household, and looking forward to marrying Thomas Seymour (brother of the late Jane Seymour). Unfortunately, Henry VIII wanted her for himself, and Catherine, knowing that becoming queen would benefit her loved ones, eventually agreed to the union. They said “I do” on July 12, 1543. Catherine was only about four years older than Mary Tudor, and the two stayed close once Catherine became a member of the family. She was also a wonderful stepmother to Henry’s two younger children, Elizabeth and Edward, and an eager student of theology. In 1545, she even published a book called Prayers or Meditations—England’s first English-language book plainly credited to a female author. Her Protestant faith skewed radical, according to the standards of the era, and English conservatives did try to get her executed for heresy in 1546. But Catherine convinced Henry that she was innocent, and he ultimately did away with the warrant against her.Overall, Catherine was a dedicated partner and pretty successful queen. Henry VIII died on January 28, 1547, following a period of deteriorating health, and Catherine married Thomas Seymour later that year. Their marital bliss was short-lived. For one thing, Thomas caused a public scandal by trying and failing to woo the teenage princess Elizabeth, who he thought would be a more strategic match for him. Then, after Catherine gave birth to their daughter in late August 1548, she fell ill with puerperal fever and died within the week. The simplest answer as to what Henry wanted from women may be the most obvious: a son. But a rational response to desiring and not receiving a legitimate male heir, even in the 16th century, wasn’t to form your own religion or behead your wife. Furthermore, Henry went through three more wives after his son, the future Edward VI, was born in 1537. Clearly “a son” wasn’t the only factor at play in Henry’s motivations for taking and discarding wives. So, what was going on? A primer for those that aren’t familiar with the history: Catherine of Aragon: a princess of Spain, Henry married her in 1509 just before his 18th birthday. Despite several pregnancies, the only living child she delivered him was a daughter, the future Mary I, in 1516. By 1520 her childbearing years were behind her, her figure and looks had long been lost due to the physical toll of “sweating sickness” and the aqueduct in 1521. Arthur, her only son, died of 15th-century bubonic plague in 1520. Catherine was desperate for a male heir, and not having obtained one by the end of their marriage, Henry VIII managed to divorce from Catherine of Aragon. They had been married for over twenty years. Anne Boleyn Born in 1501, Anne Boleyn is the indirect cause of the Reformation in England. She was the daughter of Thomas Boleyn, the Earl of Wiltshire. She carried out her education in the Netherlands and in France, where she became main of honour of Francis I’s wife. Although Anne was engaged to the 5th Earl of Northumberland, Cardinal Wolsey refused to marry them, and Anne was obliged to make her way back to her home in Hever Castle. In 1526, Henry VIII was struck by Anne’s ‘beauty and charm’ (Pettinger 2017). The king tried to seduce the young girl numerous times, but she refused his ‘advances’ since she did not want to become a mistress. Anne claimed she would succumb to his love only if Henry ended his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. 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Howard was not forgiven by the king, and heavy charges were imposed upon her: in fact, she was accused of (I) ‘unchastity’ before her marriage; (II) the ‘concealing’ of sexual relations before her marriage (considered treason); (III) and engaging in adulterous behaviours (also considered treason) (Lewis 2019). As a consequence, Howard lost her title of queen on November 23, 1541. Culpeper and Dereham did not have a happy ending, and on December 10 of the same year, they were executed: their heads were exposed on London Bridge. On January 21, 1542, Katherine Howard was condemned to death with the charge of treason. Therefore, on February 10, she was brought to the Tower of London, and three days later, she was beheaded and buried in the chapel of St. Peter at Vintria. Catherine Parr Catherine Parr (1512, Catherine was the daughter of Sir Thomas Parr, who was a descendant of Edward III), and Edward Green, one of Catherine of Aragon’s lady-in-waiting. 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But Anne’s two subsequent pregnancies ended in tragedy: She had a miscarriage in 1534 and a stillborn baby boy in 1536. With Henry VIII growing ever desperate for a male heir, his close advisor, Thomas Cromwell, began mounting an adultery case against Anne. She was imprisoned in the Tower of London in early May 1536, and convicted of adultery, treason, and even incest (one of her purported paramours was her own brother) during a trial that lacked any evidence of her alleged crimes. On May 19, Anne was beheaded.3. Jane Seymour (Died)A portrait of Jane Seymour by Hans Holbein the Younger, circa 1536. | Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wikimedia Commons // Public DomainThe day after Anne’s death, Henry VIII got engaged to Jane Seymour, who had served as a lady-in-waiting to Anne Boleyn and Catherine of Aragon before her. Jane was devout, docile, and very virtuous, once even turning down money from Henry on the grounds that “she had no greater riches in the world than her honour, which she would not injure for a thousand deaths.” Her moralistic streak appealed to Henry, and they married on May 30, 1536.Jane’s motto was “Bound to obey and serve,” which she carried out in a big way by giving Henry his much-coveted male heir: the future Edward VI, born on October 12, 1537. She’s also credited with convincing Henry to reconcile with Mary Tudor, who had been ousted from court along with her mother. Jane and Mary, only about eight years apart in age, remained close throughout Jane’s tenure as queen.Jane Seymour is often cited as Henry’s favorite wife, and

named with her older sister Mary, and it would be another four years before his gaze would land on Anne, Lipscomb points out, too, that Henry likely became enthralled by her intelligence, charm, and the worldliness she'd acquired through travel, rather than by her looks, which records suggest weren't the stuff of Tudor legend.8. Henry VIII was related to all of his wives...Henry VIII and his wife Jane Seymour, Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Catherine Parr, Anne of Cleves, and Catherine Howard were all cousins by different degrees, each being descended from King Edward III.... Many of whom had been looked upon as others prior to marrying Henry VIII, and some of them even more so. The fact that they were all related to him was not recognized at the time, but it may have played a role in how he viewed them, especially those who were known for their odd or to his bizarre behavior as he aged). During that time, he sentenced an unusually large number of people to imprisonment in the Tower of London or to death, typically by beheading. According to some estimates, upwards of 72,000 people were executed during his reign.11. Henry VIII executed Thomas Cromwell after the minister's matchmaking efforts failed. For many years, Thomas Cromwell was Henry's ruthless right hand (and a bit of a party animal himself), but not even he was immune to Henry's temper. When Cromwell, aiming to build up relations with the German Protestant alliance, set up Henry's marriage to the German princess Anne of Cleves, the marriage was so disastrous that it ended in annulment just a few months later. As punishment for the bad match, Cromwell was executed for treason.12. Henry VIII loved spending money ...Unlike Henry VII, Henry VIII loved to spend money," according to the UK's National Archives. He dished it out in huge sums for ordnance, armor, and "extravagant displays of wealth." He was famous for his love of games, particularly card games, and he owned the finest playing cards in England. He enjoyed playing dice, card games, dog races, and anything with an uncertain outcome. Weir writes, Henry VIII was the leader of the pack. Any given evening, the Knight Marshal of the Household, who also served as bookie, would delight the group by instigating card games such as Click-Clack, Munchance, Gleek, Imperial, or Henry's favorite, Primo, said to be the immediate ancestor of Poker (and which Henry was reportedly very bad at). Records show only losses for Henry—sometimes of hundreds of pounds per day—and suggest he gambled away almost a million pounds between 1529 and 1532. In his lifetime, these high-rolling losses ate away a large portion of his kingly inheritance but never affected his gusto. Many moral figures took issue with the royal gambling scene, however, and Henry attempted to make concessions to this group on several occasions. For example, in 1541, Weir explains, "Henry himself forbade anyone with an income of less than £20 to "play any game of money," making it clear he preferred such people to work hard and earn their money. This legitimate child is Henry's only brother, however. Henry had two documented affairs with women outside of his marriages. One was with Elizabeth Blount, who bore him the illegitimate son, Lord Henry Carey, Anne's older sister. Some historians believe that Mary's children Catherine and Henry were fathered by the king, which would mean that her many notable descendants—including H.R.H. Elizabeth II and Princess Diana of Wales—are also illegitimate descendants of Henry VIII himself. According to the *Spectator*, "Henry VIII is almost certainly Kate Middleton's great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather," too, through the same family.A version of this story originally ran in 2016; it has been updated for 2021.