

The Autobiography of Henry VIII: With Notes by His Fool, Will Somers: A Novel Study Guide

The Autobiography of Henry VIII: With Notes by His Fool, Will Somers: A Novel by Margaret George

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Plot Summary

The book opens with a series of letters between Will Somers - the "fool" from Henry VIII's court - and Catherine Knollys. The two are apparently well acquainted, and Will gives Catherine the news that she is the illegitimate child of Henry VIII. Catherine is angry and denies that it is true. Will counters that Catherine is "prejudiced and stupid." Though she says she doesn't want the journal, Will sends it anyway.

The journal begins with Henry's admission that someone had asked him to detail his earliest memory. He thinks back and is soon lost in the story of his life. He recalls being knighted at age three, which was his father's attempt to assure that the family has a strong hold on the throne. Henry knows that his older brother, Arthur, will some day reign while he himself will likely be relegated to a religious station. But Arthur dies and Henry becomes heir to the throne. Henry is soon betrothed to Katherine, Arthur's widow, who has sworn that her marriage to Arthur was never consummated. Though Henry's father swears the actual marriage will never take place, Henry weds Katherine soon after his father's death. The couple have one daughter who survives infancy, and Henry soon becomes enamored with another woman, prompting his attempts to have his marriage to Katherine annulled on the grounds that she was - in all senses of the word - his brother's wife. It's six years before that occurs and Henry immediately remarries.

Over the course of his life, he marries six times. His final marriage, to Katherine Parr, remains intact upon his death, though Henry makes a veiled reference that he couldn't hold Katherine. Henry also has several children, including an illegitimate son named Henry Fitzroy who dies as a young man and one legitimate son, Edward, by his beloved Jane. Jane dies soon after giving birth and Henry grieves for her always.

Of his wives, Anne troubles him most and he comes to believe her to be a witch. When Henry - always robust and healthy - develops a sore on his leg that leaves him paralyzed with pain and unable to function for months on end, he comes to believe that it's Anne's doing. When his first wife (now living as princess dowager) falls to a strange illness and dies, and two of his children fall strangely ill at the same time he battles the ulcer on his leg, Henry comes to believe Anne is poisoning them all. She is soon beheaded for treason.

Henry himself falls ill to a malady that makes it impossible for him to dispel fluids. It's noted by Henry's jester, Will, that Henry fell in and out of lucidity in his final months and was in such poor health that he had to be placed in bed with a special sling.



Chapters I through XIII

Chapters I through XIII Summary

The book opens with a series of letters between Will Somers - the "fool" from Henry VIII's court - and Catherine Knollys. The two are apparently well acquainted, and Will gives Catherine the news that she is the illegitimate child of Henry VIII. Catherine is angry and denies that it is true. Will counters that Catherine is "prejudiced and stupid." Though she says she doesn't want the journal, Will sends it anyway.

The journal begins with a detailed description of Henry's lineage and memories of his childhood, including the day he was knighted. Will notes that Henry's father was born January 28, 1457, and that Henry VIII died January 28, 1547. Henry recalls his siblings - Arthur who was slated to become king, then Elizabeth, then those younger than Henry including Mary, Edmund, and a girl who died within a couple of days. One of Henry's early memories is that of a Christmas when he was eight. He and his siblings traveled to celebrate the holiday with his parents. He watches his mother touch Arthur's face and says that there have been few times his mother paid any close attention to him. As they go to their private quarters later, Henry receives a book that indicates his mother's intention that he will enter the priesthood. As the children leave their parents' suite, they are under attack and the house is on fire.

At ten, Henry watches as his brother Arthur weds the Spanish princess, Katherine. Four months later, Arthur is dead and Henry promoted from second son to heir to the throne. Henry's initial reaction upon Arthur's death is that his father sent Arthur, always sickly, to a Welsh castle to die. His mother points out that death is "hungry" for the heir, and Henry admits that her statement colors his entire life. A short time later, Henry learns from his tutor that his mother is expecting a child. The daughter is stillborn and his mother dies nine days later.

Henry spends his days studying or alone in his room under his father's watchful eye though he does spend evenings at indoor exercise with a group of young men. He says the young men are barely aware that he is heir to the throne, but Will interjects a comment that Henry was deluding himself as is the tendency of most kings. Henry was the only one who ever forgot his position even for a moment during those exercise times. At eleven, Henry is betrothed to Arthur's widow. He is excited about the match, recalling his initial attraction to her, though he refers to her as his brother's "leavings." After the betrothal ceremony, Henry's father informs him that the wedding will likely never take place and that Henry is to have no contact with Katherine. Just before Henry's fourteenth birthday, he's forced to sign an annulment to the betrothal, based on his own statement that he believes a relationship with Katherine would be incestuous. When Katherine is moved to court to live, Henry manages to meet with her briefly and pledges that he still will find a way to marry her. When his father goes away for a summer retreat, Henry jousts, though he's expressly forbidden from putting himself in any mortal danger. He also sees Katherine and both activities are reported to the king



upon his return. Henry's father, coughing deeply, says that Henry will never make a king, and Henry leaves his father crying.

Henry watches as his father begins coughing chronically and is soon coughing up blood. The death watch continues for years, and Henry finds himself praying that his father will not leave him to face the responsibility of being king as he is not yet ready. As the king lies dying, he offers one final piece of advice - that a king can have no friends as friends often use their position for treasonous acts. Henry attends his father during those final days. Henry is seventeen and feels himself still not ready to take the throne but his father dies. All those in the death room turn their attention immediately from the deathbed to Henry, and he realizes he is king.

Henry is wildly cheered during his initial appearances as king-apparent. He says that he's then told he'll have to limit his public appearance because the people's enthusiasm for Henry would take away from the time of mourning for his father. Henry takes over the Privy Council and soon discovers that his father's two financial officers were extorting money from the people. Henry, citing the fact that they had put his father's immortal soul in danger, has them executed. Henry soon pours money into renovating the castles, has lots of money restored to people who were reportedly extorted by the finance officers, and offers major support to artists.

Henry notes that he's done many things his father wouldn't do and wouldn't allow. Now he breaks all the secret betrothals his father was arranging and asks Katherine to marry him. He pleads with her that they be wed privately prior to his coronation so they may be crowned together. Henry's initial response upon seeing Katherine after several years is shock. He says that she's aged and is dressed in rags. She's preparing to return to Spain, her parents finally deciding that she's never actually going to marry the young king. Henry writes that the ceremony is private with only a few family in attendance, and Will notes that all Henry's marriages were done in this manner. Henry says his grandmother is visibly relieved with the match and dies three weeks later. Henry says that Katherine wore pearls though he later learned they were a symbol of tears and that it rained, which was also a sign of tears. But the two are young and joyful and look forward to their lives together.

Chapters I through XIII Analysis

Henry describes his relationship with his brother, Arthur, who is slated to become king. They are both envious and fond of each other. Arthur believes Henry fortunate because he has freedom denied the future king and Henry believes Arthur fortunate because people look favorably on him as the future king. Henry notes that even when he has caught up in size, intelligence, and many skills with his brother, people "politely ignore it." Arthur and Henry age and when Henry is ten, he stands in Arthur's place at his betrothal to Katherine of Spain. Henry says he loves her at first sight, though he seems to accept - unquestioningly - that Arthur is to wed this lovely girl of fifteen and be king. Henry escorts Katherine on her wedding day and says that he lies awake wondering what is happening between Katherine and Arthur that night in the wedding bed. He



notes that "scores of learned men" would ponder that question for years to come. Henry is referring to the fact that there was always a question as to whether the marriage was ever consummated.

Henry tells his father upon learning of Arthur's death that Henry being king is God's will, which sends his father into an angry tirade. On his deathbed, his father says that Henry was right - that he was destined to be king. He doesn't elaborate and gives no indication of what it is that makes him believe Henry should be king, but says that he can see Henry is destined to nothing else. Henry slips away to the orchard immediately after his father's death but is soon found. As his subjects cheer "King Harry," he is appalled by the use of his nickname, likening it to a person's reference to a plaything. He quickly gets past that, telling his subjects that he hopes them always to be happy and calling for wine, effectively distracting them so he can escape back inside.

There are other aspects of Henry's personality shown in the initial chapters of the story. Henry admits that he is young when he takes on the throne and cries himself to sleep the night after his father's death. Will notes that Henry's fears never showed and seems to question whether the emotions truly existed. Henry also cites his sadness that his father had developed no lasting friendships and says that he is grateful to have done so himself. Immediately following the king's death, Henry discovers all the things he hadn't previously realized about his father's life - including the lack of privacy. He says that he's also amazed at the "web" that surrounds a king. He orders a monkey that had free run of the king's chambers be taken away and it is done. Using this as an example, he believes that all requests will be this simple. If he's hungry, he sends for food. While it sounds a simple matter, the reality is that someone leaves to get the food, which is prepared by someone, handed to another and yet another must be the servant who sets the place for the king. Henry hates the ritual attached to every movement but soon comes to realize that it's also a protection - that while he can't break out of this web, it's also true that no one else can break in. Will notes that it was never really evident the toll being king took on Henry, though it is apparent from his journal.

Henry himself professes to be a virgin on the night of his wedding to Katherine. He says that while he'd always been carefully watched there were serving girls who had offered. He hadn't been interested and says it's because they were so willing. He notes the situation - that he'd been too young to worry about it and then when he wasn't too young, he felt he was too old to admit to being a virgin. He feared that if he were to reveal his virginity to one of the serving girls, news of it would spread. Henry says that he believed Katherine to also be a virgin, but says that his inexperience meant he couldn't be certain. The controversy would rage forever as to whether the marriage between Arthur and Katherine had been consummated with Katherine swearing after Arthur's death that it had not. Henry says that when the controversy comes to a head, he kept his opinion to himself because any story he told would have included the information that he, as a virgin himself, couldn't be certain.



Chapters XIV through XXVII

Chapters XIV through XXVII Summary

Henry and Katherine are crowned on Midsummer's Day at Westminster Abbey. Henry takes the ceremony seriously, vowing to do everything he can for his country. A month later, Katherine is pregnant. The relationship between England and France is tenuous and Henry one day receives word that a French messenger is waiting to see him. The messenger has a letter for Henry from King Louis, a reply to a letter purportedly written by Henry begging for peace between the two countries. Henry, having not written any such letter but realizing that someone had forged his name, is outraged. He looks around at his council, trying to figure out who did the deed and soon realizes the reason his father didn't assign a man into the role "Protector." He is actually continuing to rule from the grave through several men who continue to act for the dead king, though Henry has been formally crowned. Henry, though angry, is rational enough to hope that he himself will someday inspire that same level of loyalty and begins looking around for someone to put on the council who will be only loyal to Henry, not to his father. He settles on Thomas Wolsey.

Wolsey soon becomes invaluable. He arranges for a concert when a new organist arrives at court and Henry notes that he does it well. Wolsey introduces Henry to Thomas More, and Henry and More spend the evening together on Henry's rooftop observatory. More, very learned about stars and constellations, provides information, and Henry tries to give More a gift of an astrolabe. More refuses, saying that if Henry presented him a gift, he would have to say, "Get thee behind me Satan," as is quoted in the scripture. More does later present Henry a copy of the scripture, and Henry comes to realize that More was insinuating that Henry, as king, was demanding worship. He's angry about the realization but has little time to fret over it. When Christmas comes, Henry does present More with an astrolabe, and More gives Henry a copy of his latest work, "Utopia." During the festivities that night, Henry also receives a gift from Louis, King of France. It's a meat pie and is - naturally - rancid. Henry requests that the pie be returned to Louis. He is angry over the situation but hides it from Katherine. During the Christmas season, Henry goes to Katherine's room disguised for a traditional game. As he dances with her, she goes into labor and the child - half formed and without a soul, according to Henry - is born dead, taken away and buried without benefit of service. As the anniversary of their coronation approaches, Katherine announces that she is again pregnant.

A son, Henry, is born January 1, 1511. He's healthy and robust but dies less than two months later. Will interjects that he (Will) was a child when the prince died and that the event rocked his own world. Henry spares no expense on the funeral. Henry's attention is quickly turned to the deteriorating relationship between England and France. Henry wants to go to war though his advisors aren't nearly so anxious to do so. Henry assigns Wolsey the task of coming up with the exact cost of outfitting an army and several days later discovers that Wolsey is not in the castle, but at an inn called Lark's Morning.



Henry goes there and discovers that Wolsey has been testing equipment and has the figures, but also learns that Wolsey - a priest - has had an affair with a girl at the inn and that they have two "sturdy sons." Henry is enraged, citing Wolsey's betrayal of his vows, and Wolsey promises that he will abandon the woman and his children for the king's favor. Henry leaves, saying that Wolsey must choose. Henry hates God for having taken his own son while the two bastard boys live in health.

Henry then takes his army to France, leaving behind Katherine to rule, though she is again pregnant and Scotland is making threats. Henry notes that he's warned not to put himself in danger because he is England's ruler and there is no heir. Henry takes Tournai and receives word from Katherine that the Scots have been defeated on English soil. Henry returns home to find that Katherine gave birth to a son who was too early to live. Henry promises that they will make another king but notes that it's desire for his wife, not desire for an heir, that prompts him to her bed.

Henry takes Bessie Blount as his mistress, though he is thoroughly ashamed that she is a virgin when he takes her to his bed. Katherine is in her eighth month of pregnancy. The birth is long and difficult and the child - hastily named Louis and baptized immediately for fear he wouldn't live - dies seven hours later. Henry pledges never again to argue with Katherine, and the people of England begin to worry over the lack of an heir. The following spring, another son is born early and dead. Henry continues to consort with Bessie and to lie with Katherine in an effort to produce an heir. Katherine gives birth to a healthy girl, and Henry names her Mary. Henry says that boys are sure to follow this healthy child. Will interrupts, saying that Henry's masculinity had been brought into question. Will points out that there are none who can attest to the truth of that question. Soon, Katherine is again pregnant but so is Bessie. Henry assigns Wolsey the task of arranging for Bessie.

Henry revels in Mary's presence and intelligence. Katherine gives birth to a badly-deformed daughter. Henry insists that the child be taken away by a priest and that he and Katherine be prayed over by a priest and cleansed. As this ritual concludes, he receives word that Bessie is in labor. She delivers a son and Henry admits to being confused. His mistress gives birth to a healthy son and his wife - the queen - to a deformed monster. Henry says he takes it as a blatant message from God but doesn't elaborate. He names the boy Henry Fitzroy, says the child binds the parents but says he has nothing to offer the boy or Bessie.

Chapters XIV through XXVII Analysis

Henry says that he and Katherine grieve together for the loss of their unborn child and that it changes things for them. The fact that they shared that loss brought them somewhat closer together and they seem more like friends. He says lust and friendship aren't compatible but that he and Katherine do lie together again. It's also during this time that Henry says it was politic that he chose Wolsey to serve him on the Council.



On Henry's christening, Henry throws a huge party, inviting even the common people onto the palace grounds. At the end of the evening, he invites them to have the gold from his clothing and they strip him down to his hose, then move to several of his friends before Henry calls the guards to put a stop to it. Katherine is angry at the scene and at Henry for allowing it. Will interjects his memories of that event. He says that his parents were eating near-rancid rabbit stew that night but are still proud that their king is wealthy. It's interesting that Henry says only that the morning after the christening party, he doesn't wonder about those people who tore at his clothing because he was busy arranging the funeral for his son. He says nothing else about it except that the death occurred thirty-five years prior to his writing the journal and that it was the beginning of Henry's split with Katherine.

When Henry and Katherine are arguing once, Henry threatens divorce. He says that the word came from nowhere and that he hadn't given it any thought at all before uttering it. Nonetheless, he turns to Wolsey for advice on the subject, asking if divorce were a possibility. Wolsey says that divorce would only be possible in the case of adultery, but notes that adultery is actually a traitorous act against her husband. Wolsey questions whether it could be extended to include the wife of a king who committed treason of some sort. He points out that it would then be an act that called for death, meaning the king would be widowed, not divorced. Henry says that it seems that a king who sought a divorce would be better served by simply having the wife executed. In the following years, he does make promises on several occasions that he will be kind to Katherine, though the love seems to have diminished between them.

Henry learns that Katherine's father, Ferdinand, has betrayed England and Henry is enraged, blaming Katherine and forcing her to renounce her father and pledge herself to Henry and England. She does so, insisting that her father had betrayed her as well, but Henry remains angry. He comes to the conclusion that he must side with France against Ferdinand and convinces his younger sister, Mary, to agree to marry King Louis of France. She does but insists that she be free to choose for herself next, as Louis is old and not likely to live long. Henry reluctantly agrees, believing she'll change her mind. Mary points out that Henry is much changed, and he says it's because he is king but admits to himself that he has changed. Meanwhile, Wolsey has regained Henry's favor and remains a constant companion. Mary is married to Louis by proxy in England. When Louis dies, Mary is held in France until Henry sends Brandon to retrieve her. Mary and Brandon marry, which angers Henry but seems to make Mary happy. She also reveals that she is pregnant.



Chapters XXVIII through XLI

Chapters XXVIII through XLI Summary

Wolsey arranges for Bessie to marry the son of Lord Kyme, but Henry worries that Bessie's new husband will go mad as his father did. Henry also learns that the child is living with Bessie, and Wolsey agreed that it would be so until he is weaned. It will actually be several years before Henry calls for the child's presence at court.

Katherine accompanies Henry to a meeting between Henry and Francis, and Francis later remarks that Katherine looks old, a statement echoed by Will. Katherine is in constant pain from arthritis and, now forty, never again conceives. Henry meets Mary Boleyn while in France and has her return with him to England as his mistress. She is soon married off by her father, who realizes she is pregnant. Meanwhile, the peace between England and France deteriorates and the English living in France are called home - including Mary's younger sister, Anne.

Thomas More has been subtly drawn into court, and Henry seems to desire More's approval. Henry, faced with the fact that his daughter Mary is the only heir and, as a woman, will face constant turmoil from others trying to take her throne, decides to knight his son. At six, the two are strangers but Henry is pleased with the boy and his appearance. It's during the knighting festivities that he sees Anne Boleyn and orders Wolsey to break her betrothal, though months pass before Henry finds out she is now at Hever - a days' ride from London. He offers both Anne and her brother George a position at court, which both accept.

When Henry invites Anne to return to court, her father objects, saying that Cardinal Wolsey ordered her away. In fact, Wolsey had ordered both Anne and her betrothed away when Wolsey broke their engagement. Henry is angry at Anne's father's objection, but only because it drives home the point that many people respect the Cardinal's word above the King's. It's also interesting that Henry has tried to hide his interest in Anne from Wolsey. He says it's important that Wolsey not figure out that Henry intends to make her his mistress. To himself, Henry asserts that she will not be his mistress, but his friend, lover, and confidante. When he does arrange a tryst with her, she instead sends a page with a note saying she feared for her integrity, prompting Henry to send her back to Hever. He soon sends for her, but she refuses to become his mistress and Henry's attempts to attain an annulment from Katherine begins.

It's during this time that he overhears Will Somers - visiting with a group of wool merchants - offering crude observations to his fellow merchants while Henry is out of the room. Henry says that there's a place for Will at court, as a jester. He says that he later comes to discover that Will's observations are not always welcome by the court as a whole, but Henry keeps him close to his side. It's Will who presents Henry with a copy of a newspaper touting the marital issues between Henry and Katherine. Wolsey attempts to "sell himself" to the Emperor or Pope and his intercepted letters prompt a



charge of treason. He dies, likely by his own hand, before coming to trial and Thomas More agrees to become Chancellor.

Chapters XXVIII through XLI Analysis

Henry notes that Francis had purchased a picture drawn by Leonardo da Vinci in order to induce Leonardo to come to France. Henry calls the painting of the "half-smiling woman" an "ugly" work of art. It's obvious he's describing the Mona Lisa. Henry says he's glad Francis is to be stuck with the horrible piece of art. The animosity between Henry and Francis is such that the two agree to grow a beard but when Katherine complains of Henry's, he shaves it, which angers Francis. When the two men meet - a situation arranged by Wolsey at a city called Calais - the animosity continues. It's Will who describes the meeting place. Two cities were built - largely of paper mache - in the months leading up to the meeting. The workmen even removed a hill that was inconveniently located between the two cities so that the two kings would meet halfway on level ground. Will is astounded at the waste of time, money, and labor. Henry writes that while spending the night in the borrowed home of a wool merchant, he envies the man his simple, happy life. Will notes that the merchant is actually living with an unfaithful wife and is constantly in debt. Will says that it's human nature to desire something else.

When Henry begins trying to arrange a marriage for his daughter, Mary, there's a question as to her legitimacy because Katherine had been married to Henry's brother. The question includes a scripture, stating that a man who lies with his brother's wife will remain childless. Henry takes the issue to heart, or at least seems to. Anne agrees to marry him if he becomes a bachelor. Henry starts the process but says he remains celibate for the next six years as he waits for a determination from the church. There's a hearing but on advice from the Pope, no decision is made. Katherine is asked to go into a convent and Henry sees that as a workable solution, but Katherine refuses saying she'll take the vow of a nun only if Henry takes that of a monk. They come to a point at which Anne lives at court, and Anne and Henry often spend days together, sometimes walking together. She refuses to lie with him without benefit of marriage, and Henry is forever jealous of her suitors. While Henry is obviously attracted to Anne, he seems also to be truly worried by the fact that he has no legitimate male heir. He says that without one, England is certain to become embroiled in another civil war and that the country can't stand it.



Chapters XLII through LVI

Chapters XLII through LVI Summary

Henry physically separates from Katherine and orders her moved to Ampthill some forty miles from London. Meanwhile, Anne continues to refuse to go to his bed and confides that the people do not like her and that she's had at least one threat on her life from a mob of angry women. More resigns his position, saying Henry doesn't need anyone in his service who can't fully embrace his policies. Henry says that he and his daughter, Mary, become estranged as she berates Henry's treatment of her mother and the church. The Archbishop dies and Henry appoints Thomas Cranmer.

Henry travels to France again, this time taking Anne with him. She is not received but does finally give in to Henry's demands for sex. He tells her that he plans to elevate her to Marquess of Pembroke and describes a complicated plot that will lead from that point to the annulment of his marriage with Katherine. Henry says that on the day of this "elevation" ceremony, they lie together and he believes that to be the day Elizabeth was conceived. They are married secretly at Bridewell Palace in late January. Henry soon receives word from the Pope that he is to reunite with Katherine or face excommunication, but Henry declines to see the messenger so that the message is never delivered. He does accept a messenger who declares Thomas Cranmer Archbishop then prepares to make a full break with the Church at Rome, supplanting that role with authority vested in Parliament.

Mary, Henry's sister, dies, and her husband, Brandon, announces that he's to marry a young woman who had actually been betrothed to his son. The news angers Henry but Brandon says he's brokered the betrothal and will marry the girl for her money in three months - the prescribed time for deep mourning. Anne gives birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, and she and Henry are disappointed. Anne soon demands that Henry's daughter, Mary, serve Elizabeth but Mary refuses. Henry then develops a sore on his leg that continues to fester and pain him. Added to his continued impotency, he arranges a pilgrimage and takes along an array of men from court. They are caught in a violent storm and are forced to take shelter in a cave where extensive drinking makes them more talkative than is prudent. At one point, they discuss the fact that Anne's presence is hated by the people and will eventually lead to an uprising, and someone goes so far as to call Henry "mad."

Chapters XLII through LVI Analysis

On Easter, Henry announces that he and Anne have been wed privately, and when they are called on to pray for her at Mass that evening, the majority of those present simply get up and leave the church. Henry, who had thought of little except their first night together as publicly wed, finds himself impotent with her for the second time. He also comes to the realization that she knows nothing of how to act as queen, and that she is



truly a commoner. When she travels the streets of London, the people are present but silent, another show of their loyalty to Katherine and their hatred of both Anne and Henry's actions.

As Anne prepares to go into seclusion for the final month of her pregnancy, she's angry at the thought of being separated from men. The custom is designed to ascertain that the child isn't switched for some other at birth but Anne remains obstinate about it. Henry says that they've ignored so many dictates that they must observe this one. Anne insists that she have Mary's christening gown for her child, but Katherine refuses to give it up and Henry refuses to force the issue. Then, three days before Anne is to go into seclusion, the formal excommunication of Henry arrives from the Pope. He intercepts the messenger so as not to upset Anne.



Chapters LVII through LXXXVII

Chapters LVII through LXXXVII Summary

On the pilgrimage, Henry and the men soon arrive at St. Oswerth's, a small monastery with deplorable conditions. The men lie abed, drunk, and one is with a young girl who is introduced as the prior's niece. Henry takes the many jewels harbored by the prior and pledges to close the place down. They then travel on to see Mary, and Henry asks her to come to court but she declines. She begs to be allowed to go to her mother, but he refuses, saying that the malcontents who gather around Katherine would be stirred to action if Mary were with her mother. Henry feels better physically upon his return, though he now faces additional trials. An oath, declaring Elizabeth his one and only true heir to the throne is to be circulated. The insinuation is that Mary is not legitimate; therefore, Henry's marriage to Katherine not recognized; therefore, his marriage to Anne is legal. Anne questions whether he will remain firm in this task, including the fact that those who don't sign the oath will be guilty of treason and subject to death. Henry wants to warn More of the penalty for not signing the oath and goes to visit him on the night of a lunar eclipse. In the middle of the night, Henry sees a strange light in a small building on the grounds and discovers More there, flagellating himself. Henry realizes that his friend will never sign the oath, preferring the penalty of death with Henry as the one to administer the punishment. Henry seems saddened but resigned. Katherine refuses as well and is imprisoned where she refuses to bend to or acknowledge anyone who doesn't acknowledge her as Queen of England.

Bishop John Fisher and More are among those who decline to sign the oath and both are imprisoned. Henry vows to give them one year and a day to change their minds, and Fisher is the first brought to trial in 1535. He, along with the Carthusian priors are found guilty, torn limb from limb, but never signed. More is then tried and found guilty with his execution set for July 6, 1535. Henry says that the "marriage" of More and death is inevitable and that he knows of no way to stop it.

Anne says she is pregnant, but Henry discovers it's a lie. She has an extra finger, a "nub" that she hides with long sleeves. Henry now comes to think of that as the mark of a witch. He realizes that his sister, refusing to attend Anne's coronation, became ill and died. Wolsey, hated by Anne, fell from grace and died. Others who crossed Anne had met an untimely death. And Henry now realizes that the horrible sore on his leg that had appeared when he and Anne were at odds had mysteriously disappeared once he had agreed that Mary was to serve Elizabeth. He resolves to leave immediately for the country, away from Anne, to decide what to do.

Henry goes to John Seymour's home where he meets Jane and hunts for days. He is distressed to find John Seymour - a man who had fought with Henry against the French - a shell of himself with no memories of Henry and unable to perform the smallest task for himself. When Henry returns to London, he instructs Cromwell to find a way to arrange a divorce from Anne. Henry refuses to divulge the details, citing the fact that he



fears for the life of anyone who knows Anne to be a witch. Within days, he learns that Mary and Fitzhugh are both ill, Mary has fallen to a strange malady on Elizabeth's birthday, and Fitzhugh is coughing up blood. Henry has also learned that Katherine has written an appeal to the Pope to intervene in England's affairs on her behalf, which Henry calls treason.

Anne puts on an event that includes the lighting of torches that give off opium smoke which intoxicates all those present and Henry lies with her. He says that he realizes now that he "loved" Anne, but that the sadness lay in the fact that it was past tense. Then she announces that she is pregnant, and he knows it must be true because she would never dare lie again. Katherine dies, writing Henry a letter with a final sentence, "that mine eyes desire you above all things." Henry encounters Jane Seymour, now at court, as he prays after Katherine's death. He admits to being confused, saying that he knows she has already flown away from her earthly body to claim rewards much greater than any he could have given her, but worries that it might not be true. In this context, he hears Jane's own grief for Katherine's death and her request that she be allowed to leave court. He asks her to stay six months, saying that "court" needs her but admitting to himself that he needs her. Anne refuses to attend Katherine's funeral. Henry says that the vacant queen's chair shames Anne, not Katherine. After the funeral, Henry finds Anne dancing in the company of many others, as she says he should be. The embalmer tells Henry that Katherine's internal organs were healthy with the exception of her heart, which was totally black. Henry intercepts a letter from Anne to Mary's caregiver, saying to "go no further" until after her own child is born.

Henry participates in a joust but is injured and it's feared he is dying. Two days later, the sore on his leg is finally scabbing over, but he says he is not himself, forgetting why he came into a room and eating little. Then Anne miscarries and tries to blame it on her state of mind following Henry's accident. Cromwell soon has information regarding Anne's affairs, which is sufficient to execute her for treason. Among her lovers is supposedly her brother, George.

Henry believes that he, Mary, and Fitzhugh have grown no worse because four royal deaths in a month would raise suspicions. While he bides his time, he tests Jane Seymour, sending her a letter and money. She refuses both, saying she has no gift greater than her honor, which pleases Henry.

Anne, George and three others accused of being her lovers are arrested and tried, all found guilty. There is a moment when George seems to get the upper hand, claiming that his sister has declared Henry to be impotent. Cromwell, on behalf of Henry, counters with a statement by George's wife that she is aware of the incestuous relationship between George and Anne, effectively casting him into the light of liar. All are found guilty. Anne first rants against the charges, then accepts, saying that she would spare those who are wrongly accused if she had that power. Only one confesses of having had a sexual relationship with Queen Anne. Henry notes that he wishes all had confessed, though he has no doubt of the truth of the matter.



Henry arranges for a French swordsman to perform the execution and sends Will to watch in his stead. Will describes Anne's final actions and appearance, that she appeared as alive as any. Then she is beheaded. The swordsman holds up the severed head and the eyes shift from one side to the other, then the lips move as she tries to speak. Will says that no one will ever offer the details to Henry, and that his own descriptions will omit them as well. There is no coffin, so Anne's remains are placed in an arrow box, and George's grave re-opened so Anne's makeshift coffin may be placed atop his.

Henry quickly marries Jane Seymour and notes that the country doesn't deny him this happiness. Cromwell tells Henry that he believes Mary will be willing to reconcile, and Henry receives word that Fitzhugh has died. Mary does recite a statement agreeing that Henry's marriage to Katherine was incestuous and that Henry is head of the Church of England. Mary's relationship with Jane is more steady. Jane had been Mary's friend and Jane now welcomes Mary. Henry arranges for the closure of many small monasteries, mostly using with tricks such as a vial of milk from the Virgin meant to cure barrenness and a statue that cries. The lands and possessions are sold off with those dedicated monks moving to other monasteries, while the lazy ones are sent out to make an honest living. Henry admits that it's a difficult task, but that he's relieved for it to be completed. Meanwhile, there are uprisings that demand Henry's attention. They are put down or fall apart of their own accord, then Jane delivers a healthy boy. She rallies following the birth but dies a short time later with Henry holding her hand. Henry locks himself away, asking Mary to serve as mourner in his stead.

Henry continues to mourn but at last agrees that he should marry again. Cromwell points out that Henry's son, Edward, would carry a heavy burden as the only son and heir to the throne. Henry selects a woman named Anne of Cleves and is told she is beautiful. In reality, he finds her repulsive and seeks desperately some way to put the marriage agreement aside. He fails in that effort and comes to believe that this is what God wants of him. That resolve is soon also set aside as he seeks a way to avoid marrying the woman, who he calls "a horse."

Chapters LVII through LXXXVII Analysis

Henry gives Mary's former palace to George, Anne's brother, and orders Mary go to serve her half-sister, Elizabeth. George is delighted with the gift. Henry then arranges for Anne's cousin to study with Henry Fitzhugh, which angers Anne. She says that Henry continues to cleave to the bastard son. Henry says he has no intention of raising his son to the throne, but that he does recognize the child as his son and a young man in need of attention and affection.

Henry's son marries a relative of Anne's, and Anne creates a fairy land for the wedding reception. She ruins the effect by also arranging a tableaux with herself playing the part of a goddess which angers Henry. He continues to realize that she isn't "queenly" and their relationship deteriorates even as he craves her.



Henry says that he isn't certain whether it's full relief he hears when he speaks up after having been unconscious following the joust, but Will argues that it is. Will says that the people remember the good things about Henry and that most can remember no other king.

When Fisher was about to be put to death, Anne objected, saying that he should not face fire. Henry said it was already taken care of but is perplexed at Anne's seeming concern. She says that no one should face fire as a means of death and confesses that it frightens her. Now, with the understanding that Anne - as a convicted witch - was due to burn for her crimes, Henry realizes that it was "foreknowledge."

Henry describes the haze of the next eighteen months. He drinks to excess and overeats. When approached with offers of marriage, he delays the decision by sending a painter to create portraits, saying he can't possibly marry without seeing the intended bride but vows never to remarry. Will says that reading the journal explains much that he hadn't previously understood. He also says that Henry is judged largely by his actions during this time, which is unfair. When Henry learns of yet another treasonous situation - this one including the information of his leg sore that continues to be a problem - he learns that two long-time friends knew of the treason. With this knowledge comes the understanding that his father had been correct in his death-bed statement that a king can never have friends. Henry continues his rage-filled actions, going so far as to hold trial for a long-dead saint and remove the title of, "saint," from his name. He admits that at the end of this time, he is simply tired and peeved that God seems to have ignored his tantrum. Cromwell tells him that Henry's actions have to change, and that some have begun to wonder if Henry is mad.



Chapters LXXXVII through CXIV

Chapters LXXXVII through CXIV Summary

Henry discovers that Anne of Cleves is not young as she had purported and has apparently had a child. Will says that what Henry hadn't realized is that he was no longer the person a princess would want to marry, feeling that to do so would be to take her very life in her own hands. She is quickly learning English and has dismissed her own ladies, taking on an English staff. Henry admits that he feels some level of affection for her. Meanwhile, he sees young Catherine Howard and admits to Will his love for this young woman. Will chastises him, saying that Henry is predictable. When the household prepares to move to Windsor, Henry finds Catherine alone and she agrees to marry him when he sets aside his current wife, Anne.

Henry begins the process of setting aside his marriage to Anne, presenting testimony to the Council that upon discovering that she was no young maiden, had not consummated the marriage and that he wishes to consider Anne "sister." She agrees and Henry soon turns to his next task - convicting Cromwell of treason. Cromwell is beheaded on July 28, 1540, and Henry and Catherine married later that same day. She soon makes the announcement that she is pregnant but then says that she isn't, and Henry takes it to mean that she miscarried. He calls for the physician who produces a pebble that had been in Catherine's womb, which he says has acted as a contraceptive. Henry doesn't question her about it but takes it to mean that she has been misused herself. That Christmas, they celebrate at Hampton, and Henry writes that he is out hunting while Catherine lies with her cousin, Thomas. Henry is soon again battling the infirmity of the leg and spends his final days of the Christmas festivities trying to hide the pain and affliction from all, especially Catherine.

There is a masque, and Henry is appalled that Catherine masquerades as Jezebel, complete with an outfit that reveals a great deal of her body. He doesn't berate her for it and at the end of the evening presents her with his Christmas gift, a special minting of coins with her image. Henry's leg continues to be a problem with the sore openly oozing. Then it seems to heal over, but a few days later Henry has a tremendous attack. It's some days before he regains consciousness and he finds he's been stricken dumb, a situation that lasts days more. The physician says that it appears the poison festered within, causing the attack and assumes that it affected the vocal chords. During that time, an uprising occurs, and Brandon prepares to go put it down. Then Henry turns to a page and asks for a cloth to wipe the frost from a window and his voice miraculously returns.

Henry and Catherine embark on an annual trip known as the "Progress." This time they visit the northern part of England, expecting to meet Henry's nephew, James, King of Scotland, but James never shows up and sends no message, which angers Henry. Then Henry learns that his son, Edward, is ill. He arrives at his bedside to discover the child unhealthily fat and orders that the child's life be altered to that of a young prince,



rather than that of a dowager. Edward rallies and Henry returns to Hampton Court. Thomas Cranmer is waiting with accusations against Catherine. Cranmer, a music teacher testifies that he had known a young Catherine who had promised him her "maidenhead," but that he had not taken advantage of the offer. Others testify that Catherine had been among young girls who entertained older men in the evenings. A man Catherine had introduced as her cousin, Dereham, says that he and Catherine had lived as man and wife, though he had been out of the country when Catherine married Henry. The final accusation is that Thomas Culpepper, Henry's faithful servant who slept at his bedside, was among Catherine's lovers. Henry goes mad with grief, is taken to bed and tied lest he hurt himself, and several days pass before he is able to communicate coherently. Upon his recovery, arrests are made of Catherine, Culpepper, Dereham and several of Catherine's family and friends, who apparently helped dupe Henry and were planning to eventually take control of the throne.

Henry soon holds audience with foreign ministers, seeking the person who produced a book about Catherine's life, depicting Henry as a horrid husband. The Spanish minister, Chapuys, had been in England many years. He points out that there's nothing he could do about the book even if he wanted. He also says that Henry himself, by objecting to the Papal rule, had created a situation in which there is "no respect for authority." Henry knows Chapuys will soon leave England and is beset by the sudden realization that the men who had surrounded him in his youth are all but gone. Before Chapuys leaves, he urges Henry to find a husband for Mary. At twenty-six, she is but past her prime, and Henry admits that he'd been waiting to offer her in marriage until it was convenient for him.

Chapters LXXXVII through CXIV Analysis

At the heart of all Henry's actions are his efforts with the Church of England. He now fears that Cromwell is trying to promote Protestantism. He also has to consider that the Howards - Catherine's family - have not been supportive of his endeavors regarding the Church issue. Henry's case against Cromwell takes on a life of its own once he discovers an array of "heretic" literature in Cromwell's rooms. Henry has long accused Cromwell of not diligently pursuing heretics in the realm, and now Cromwell says that he holds the literature only as evidence against others, but Henry isn't swayed. Cromwell writes Henry from his place of imprisonment, but Henry refuses to even read the letters.

Henry seems quickly disappointed with Catherine. He is vague about his displeasure of her actions in bed but says that she seems anxious to find her pleasure. He also says she is like a child in many ways, demanding to know what it is he got her for Christmas, for example.

When Henry recovers, he sends Cranmer to accept Catherine's confession. She includes the information that she was overtaken by her desire to own the jewels and trappings that came from being queen. Henry thanks Cranmer for doing his duty, which Cranmer obviously found repulsive. Henry says that the worst is now over and reminds Cranmer that a faithful servant is one willing to do the odious tasks as well as the



pleasant ones. Henry, in a moment of weakness, gives Catherine the opportunity to say that she had been married to Dereham, therefore had committed bigamy but not treason. Henry notes that this would allow her to live out her life. Catherine refuses, and Henry says that he grants her what she wishes - death as Queen. Henry spends the day of her death with his children, all in their favorite pursuits. Mary plays music; Elizabeth makes Valentines, and Edward plays with his pet snakes while Henry composes a ballad. Henry later hears that Catherine's final words were that she dies a queen, but would rather have been the wife of Culpepper. Lady Rochfort, widow of George who was Anne Boleyn's brother, was also executed for her role in helping Catherine arrange her trysts. Lady Rochfort says that her only crime is in the fact that she lied about the incestuous relationship between Anne and George. Henry notes that even without that fact, Anne remains a witch. He puts the statement down to the woman's desire to follow Anne's lead to hurt Henry with her final statement.

Henry holds a banquet on Valentine's Day, the day after Catherine's execution. The meal is made of foods in various shades of red and white, and Henry suddenly loses sight of what's real. He cries out when he believes the food is of blood and then throws his goblet at an apparition of Catherine. When he is thoroughly agitated, the Widow Parr takes him gently by the shoulders, says that he needs rest, and urges him to his rooms. That night he sees Catherine's ghost again and soon learns that she had briefly escaped her guards and run into that very hallway, screaming out for Henry. Henry worries that people believe him mad but soon agrees that having them think him filled with grief is preferable. He then sends for the Widow Parr to share Mass and a meal with him and is calmed by her presence, though he fears she is Protestant. He notes that her presence makes his fears of madness "an absurdity." Over the coming days, Henry continues to fear what he terms "confusion." At one point, he takes to his bed and refuses to call out for anyone, fearing that he'll call for one thing when he means another.



Chapters CXV through Epilogue

Chapters CXV through Epilogue Summary

Henry comes to learn that Jamie, his nephew and King of Scotland, who has lately come to be his enemy on the battlefield of minor skirmishes, has died at thirty-one, leaving behind only a one-week-old daughter who was christened "Mary, Queen of Scots." Henry immediately plans the marriage of Mary to his son, Edward, but Francis comes to the aid of Scotland and refutes Henry's claim. Mary is then pledged to one of Francis' sons.

Henry arranges for a family portrait. A painter named Holbein is assigned the task, using the effigies from Henry's parents' funerals as their likeness and adding Jane to the family portrait as well. It's stiflingly hot and Holbein collapses, dying later that night of the plague. Henry plans to leave immediately with Edward and orders the rest of the Council to scatter. He does reveal that he plans eventual war against France and promises to stay in touch via messenger. He orders Lady Latimer - Kate Parr - who had attended Mass with Henry after Valentine's Day - go to Wolf Hall with Edward, though she objects that she wants to return to her own stepchildren at Snape Hall. One evening, Henry visits the barn where he and Jane held their wedding reception and finds Kate there, telling young Edward about the event. Henry asks her to marry him and she agrees. Later, they are picking strawberries together when he faints from the combination of trying to bend his overweight body and trying to cosset his weak leg. When he wakes, he is mortified that she has seen him thus weakened and knows he'll break the engagement. She says that she already knows of his weaknesses and has agreed to marry him because she is fond of him. Will is upset at the notion of Henry marrying again, no matter who the woman is. Henry himself says that this affection is something new that was lacking in all his wives except Jane. The plague ends; they are married, and Henry notes that Jane accepts the duties of queen easily. Henry and Jane do not come together as husband and wife in the bedchamber.

Henry learns that France is invading, the first invasion in four-hundred years. He and Katherine are on hand as one of his warships, the "Mary Rose," sinks for no apparent reason other than the hand of God shoving it aside as a drunken man falls. Henry and Katherine, having just celebrated their second anniversary, then depart for London with this apparent divine judgment on their minds. Henry soon learns that Charles Brandon, widow of his sister Mary, has died. Brandon's death hits Henry hard. He is forced to arrange the royal funeral and calls forth those who should honor Brandon, though it means the realm is virtually undefended. Henry says that he simply trusts God to defend England that day while those who should honor Brandon one last time do so.

Henry ends his entries on a hopeful note, that he's regaining his health and hopes to soon regain his youthful size. Will presents the true version of those final weeks, which includes Henry's bouts of melancholy that never abate after Brandon's death. Henry's health quickly deteriorated so that his heartbeat was erratic; his kidneys stopped



functioning, and there were periods of time in which he was suspicious to the point that he called for the arrest of those closest to him, though he always rescinded the order when he came to his right mind. Will notes that Henry managed to put both Mary and Elizabeth back into the line of succession but without being forced to declare either of them legitimate.

Cranmer arrives and calls for Henry's final words but Henry is beyond speaking. Will says there are two versions of Henry's death - that he arranged for Mary to care for her brother and made all sorts of requests, and that he called out that "all is lost" because of his dealings with the monks. Though both are "fetching" stories, both are untrue. Will says that there is immediate chaos when Henry dies with all looking for the will that he has kept hidden and has apparently constantly altered in his final days.

Will recounts an event during the time Henry lies in state at Syon Chapel. A Hell Hound arrives and laps at blood that has mysteriously flowed from Henry's coffin. The hound refuses to be driven away until daylight and then simply vanishes. Will says it was decided that the rift in the coffin occurred during all the jostling as it traveled around the kingdom. Will is then to leave the royal quarters, and he finds that he has nothing personal of Henry's. It angers him that he has no memento, but he reminds himself that he has memories and that those are his with or without any tangible object. Then, as he's checking his packed bundles one last time, he discovers Henry's small harp - the one he'd used for composing. Will says that no one had been in his rooms and cites the fact that love - or something like love - can obviously survive death, just as evil can.

Chapters CXV through Epilogue Analysis

Henry describes his discontent, his longing for Catherine, and his own struggles in the summer following her execution. Will notes that Henry showed little sign of these inner struggles.

Henry tries to write an elegy for Brandon but admits that his "Muse" has left him. It seems to disturb him that he can't put the words to paper that would adequately honor his friend. The impact of Brandon's death on Henry is somewhat unexpected. It seems that he is suddenly well aware of his own mortality, though he briefly bounces back with plans that include getting himself fit and making a list of those men suitable to help Edward reign.

Henry says that he sees Kate talking to Tom Seymour and knows that she loves him. He doesn't say how he knows this and doesn't mention it again. In his final entry, he says that Boulogne was sold to the French for a fraction what it was worth to the English, but that it was worthwhile to the English only if they could find a way to protect and care for it. He likens Boulogne to a wife that one has to give up. Then he says, "Wife. Kate ... ah, Kate. A wife I could not keep. Well, no more of that." The entry then moves to his health which he calls "much improved." Henry notes that he's feeling better, that his leg no longer pains him and that he's soon going to be able to exercise

sufficiently to regain his youthful figure. It's Will who notes that those are among the last words Henry wrote.



Characters

Henry VIII

Henry is the second son and as a child has no expectations that he will become King of England. He actually expects a religious office and that his older brother, Arthur, will reign. But Arthur, always slave to a fragile constitution, doesn't survive his teen years and dies soon after his marriage to the Spanish princess Katherine, leaving Henry heir to the throne. Even then, Henry's life is geared toward preparing him for his eventual ascension to the throne but never for the actual event. When it occurs, Henry - at seventeen - feels unprepared. He does take the throne and soon makes himself felt as a ruler. He marries Katherine, an act that was against the express wishes of his father. When Katherine fails to produce an heir and Henry's eyes wander to a younger woman in court, he spends six years on a legal and religious battle to have his marriage annulled.

Over the coming years, Henry reigns England with an iron fist. It's noted that he led his people into a foreign situation and that they fear living without him. He marries a total of six times and becomes jaded with the fact that so many women were willing to take his hand in order to be Queen of England, but few were willing to remain faithful to him. He claims to have loved Jane Seymour, mother of his only legitimate surviving son, but Jane dies shortly after giving birth. Henry himself eventually succumbs to some unnamed sickness which leaves him bloated and suspicious of those around him. In his final journal entry, he poses the thought that it would be wonderful to simply be a man.

Katherine

Katherine was a young Spanish Princess when she came to England to marry the heir to the English throne, Arthur. She does go through with the marriage and is then sent by the King to the northern regions of England where her job is apparently to "practice" at ruling with her husband. But Arthur dies and Katherine returns to London, now a widow. She is soon betrothed to Arthur's younger brother Henry VIII, the new heir to the throne. Katherine waits patiently for years as Henry grows to a young man and continues to wait as his fourteenth birthday - and the date of their wedding - passes. When Henry's father dies, Katherine is preparing to leave England, but Henry announces that they'll quickly marry. There is a double coronation ceremony for Henry and Catherine and the two learn to be rulers together. Katherine has a natural way that makes her an instant success in her role.

When Henry puts her aside for another, Katherine refuses to be referred to by any name other than "Queen." With the patience she'd shown as a young princess waiting for marriage to Henry, she continues to wait, though there is no happy ending for this term of waiting. She lives out her days in England, little noticed. She dies, leaving only one heir, a daughter named Mary. Henry notes that the embalmer said that Katherine's



organs appeared to be in perfect health with the exception of her heart, which was totally black. Henry puts it down to poisoning by his current wife, Anne.

Anne Boleyn

Anne was another of Henry's wives, and perhaps the most colorful. Anne supposedly poisons several people, including Henry, Katherine, Mary, and Fitzhugh. Henry says he was bewitched by Anne to the point that he couldn't know what he was doing. He comes to believe she is a witch, though he doesn't share all the details with those who investigate her for treason. She is found guilty and is sentenced to execution. When the swordsman picks up her head, her eyes supposedly dart back and forth and her lips move as if she's trying to speak.

Jane Seymour

Jane is the young woman Henry marries after the execution of Anne Boleyn. Jane is gentle and kind and completely wins Henry's affection. Henry, worried that he is again being duped, sends Jane a passionate letter and a bag of coins prior to their marriage. She sends both back, unopened, with a message that her virtue is beyond purchase, which pleases Henry. Jane and Henry have a son named Edward but Jane quickly fails and dies. Henry mourns her for the rest of his life, though he does marry again.

Anne of Cleves

Anne of Cleves is reportedly a beautiful woman who is brought to England to marry Henry. When she arrives, he discovers that she is as ugly as a horse. As she learns to speak English, he notes that he'll now have a "talking horse." When Henry proposes that they annul the marriage with Anne to receive a settlement and be allowed to remain in England but as Henry's "sister," she readily agrees.

Catherine

The woman Henry marries after the annulment of his marriage with Anne of Cleves. Catherine is lowborn and is never able to fit in as queen. She is unwelcome by the people who never accept her. Henry soon learns that she had actually lived as man and wife with a young man who'd left the country to seek his fortune. Catherine is also accused of having had sex with one of Henry's closest servants. Catherine and her current lovers are all executed.

Katherine Parr

"Kate," as Henry calls her, is the one who calms Henry when he sees visions on the day after Catherine's execution. Henry calls her a calming influence. When there's a plague



outbreak in London and Henry has his Council scatter to avoid a mass death of leaders, he orders Kate to go with his entourage to the country so she can take over the job of tutoring his son, Edward. Kate's calm influence soon wins Henry's heart and they are still married when Henry dies, though he sees her talking with Tom Seymour and knows that she loves him.

Will Somers

Will comes to court as Henry's jester. Henry encounters Will by chance during a very boring meeting with wool merchants. Will, who had been apprenticed to a wool merchant since childhood, talks openly in a derogatory manner about current events at court, though he had not realized that Henry is within hearing distance. His sarcasm catches Henry's attention and he invites Will to court. Will and Henry share an interesting bond and Henry notes that Will's role in his life changes from that of mere jester to a personal friend and confidante.

Thomas Wolsey

Wolsey inserts himself into Henry's life immediately after the death of Henry's father. Literally as Henry is trying to return to his own room, Wolsey interjects, asking for instructions and offering to make arrangements. Henry accepts Wolsey's offers and soon begins to call on Wolsey to handle details of all sorts, including arranging parties and other events. With his attention to detail, Wolsey quickly ingratiates himself to Henry. When Henry realizes he must have some of his own people on the Council, he calls on Wolsey. Wolsey rises to the rank of Archbishop and is arrested for treason at Henry's command. He dies before he is executed.

Charles Brandon

Brandon marries Mary, Henry's sister, in France. In actuality, Henry had sent Brandon to retrieve his sister but had no indication that there would be a match between the two. Mary's life was in danger because of eroding political ties and Henry is taken by surprise to find that Brandon had married Mary. Mary explains that she loves Brandon and that she's willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary in order to be his wife. Brandon remains among Henry's trusted confidantes long after Mary's death and his next marriage. Brandon's death is difficult for Henry, and Will notes that Henry never quite gets past his melancholy state.



Objects/Places

St. Paul's Cathedral

Where Henry walks Katherine to be wed to Arthur.

Greenwich

Where Katherine gives birth to Mary and to the deformed daughter. It's also where Henry VIII was born.

The Priory of St. Lawrence

Where Henry Fitzhugh is born to Bessie Blount.

Hampton Court

The elaborate palace of Wolsey and the place Henry wherein often spends time.

Caiais

The city where Will lived while serving as an apprentice to a merchant and where Henry met King Francis of France.

Leicester Abbey

Where Wolsey dies.

The Tower

The place where prisoners are held, typically those who are awaiting execution. This is also where Anne spends the night prior to her coronation.

Syon Chapel

Where Henry's body lies in state and where the Hell Hound comes to lap up the blood that flowed from the coffin.

The Great Matter

The name given Henry's attempts to divorce Katherine.

Whitehall

One of the palaces of Henry's realm. Henry spends his final months in Whitehall and this is where he dies.



Themes

The Desire for Power

The desire for power is a recurring theme, which is seen through the actions of many of the characters. Henry VIII is naturally one of those and it's he who tells his father that it was ordained that he should rule England. Though Henry seemed to accept his role as second son, he readily embraces his new role as heir to the throne. He does show moments of doubt in his ability, but eventually comes to relish most of the powers he wields as king.

There are those who also seek to share in Henry's power. Most notable are the women who share his bed or take on the role as Queen of England opposite Henry. Anne Boleyn is among those, as is Catherine Howard. Both snared Henry in their quest for the ultimate power a woman of the day could have. There were others who were less successful, including Bessie Blount, who was sent away to give birth to her illegitimate child. Henry notes that there are those who talk to him of love, though he has no desire to share in their love. It seems that early in life he is jaded toward women, expecting that all are using him to further their desire for power, though he always seems to hold out hope that there would be one who was able to love him for himself.

The women weren't the only ones who sought power. Men put themselves in Henry's path, often trying to interject themselves into his good graces, and always with an eye toward the power he could bestow. Henry himself notes that he exalted Brandon to one of the highest offices in the land. In Brandon's case, it seems he was less interested in the power associated with the office than in being a true and loyal servant to Henry and to England.

Love of Country

While Henry's love - and lust - for women is an important part of his makeup, it's his love for England that seems to motivate him. While it's believable that Henry wants badly to have a son, he also realizes that the country will likely erupt in a civil war unless there's an undisputed heir to the throne. Henry wasn't alone in this. His own father saw the need for an undisputed ruler. When Henry is a child, he's taught that he'll hold a religious office. It's an effort not only to have Henry play an important role, but also to ascertain as much as possible that Henry doesn't come to question his brother's power and cause a war for the throne.

Henry's family aren't the only loyal subjects who love England. Charles Brandon, who is aging just as Henry is and who is likely not in any condition to wage a battle against invaders does just that. Brandon's death is difficult for Henry, but that's at least partly because Henry has suddenly come face-to-face with his own mortality.



Faith

Henry talks often of his own faith, which is interesting considering his actions in creating the Church of England and breaking ties with the Roman Church. While Henry obviously had some problems with church itself, he was also obviously a believer in God and often showed his faith in divine intervention and leadership. For example, when Henry is traveling and hears of the death of Brandon, he seeks to be alone and goes to the chapel where he prays for some time. He refers often to his prayer times and his need for them.

Henry himself orders the closing of a number of monasteries around England after discovering that many were being run poorly or were filled with liars and cheaters. When Henry is given a statue said to cry real tears, he is shown that it's merely a trick. The statue includes a receptacle which can be filled with salt water, causing the statue to "weep." Henry is angry at this trick and seems doubly so because the monks used it to extort those seeking religious help of one kind or another. At one point, he asks a monk whether he has prayed for the people who gave him gifts of great wealth. To Henry's way of thinking, those given the task of handling the religious affairs of the country are under a great obligation to do so. It could be that these attitudes can be traced back to Henry's childhood when his own parents were preparing him for a life of a religious officer.



Style

Point of View

The book is written largely in first person from two different characters, King Henry VIII and Will, the jester. The majority of the journal is written by the hand of King Henry VIII. Those sections are written with a limited first-person point of view, that of Henry VIII. There are, however, interjections by Will Somers. These are written in third person and are limited to Will's point of view. It should be noted that much of Will's notes are directed to specific points that Henry made; therefore, most of the sections written by Will's hands seem less limited. It may even be difficult for the reader to realize that it is limited because of the change from Henry's perspective to that of Will.

The fact that the perspectives are limited to these two people rather than to a single person adds greatly to the information provided to the reader. For example, Henry is knocked unconscious while jousting. As he begins to regain consciousness he hears concern in the voices around him. He writes that he has to wonder whether they are truly concerned for him. Will interjects at this point. Will notes that Henry's leadership had taken the people of England into an unknown place and that only Henry seemed to have any clue as to where the country was headed and how to get there. Having had only Henry as a leader for so many years, the people were frightened at the thought of being without him. The use of Will's comments adds a level of understanding that would not otherwise be possible, and this is an effective means of imparting information and details.

Setting

The story is set in the 1500s in England. The basic story line, the places, and the majority of the people are real. The fact that these are real lends a level of credence to the story. Because of the truth in the basis of this story, there are details that are not true or that have not been proven as such that most readers will likely come to accept as fact or at least as believable. For example, Henry's execution of Anne has historically been accepted as a way for him to rid himself of an undesirable wife. Henry himself says that he comes to believe her to be a witch and that his fear of her is real. While it may be impossible to accept Anne as a witch, it does seem reasonable that she was working to poison members of Henry's family prior to her death.

Another of these details is the fact of Henry's virginity at the time of his marriage to Katherine. There has been a debate among historians (and undoubtedly among the people of Henry VIII's lifetime) who question whether Katherine and Arthur had consummated their marriage. Henry explains that the question arises and that he doesn't enter into the debate because to do so would have been to admit that he himself was a virgin. That seems a fitting explanation to his silence on the topic, though it could be argued that Katherine was a virgin and that prompted his silence. In any case, the



author provides an alternative explanation that, taken in the context of this real series of events, could be taken as a possible truth.

Language and Meaning

The book, for the most part, is written in the past tense. There is a notable transgression from that style. When Henry describes Wolsey's arrest and death, he uses the present tense. Henry says that Wolsey "is laid upon a pallet" at Leicester Abbey and there "he utters his last words." The change of tense is very effective, bringing additional emphasis on the passage, which is obviously important to Henry, though all he says about the matter is that Wolsey managed to "cheat the wolves" who cried out for a public trial and execution.

The book will be easily understood by any reader with an adequate vocabulary. There are some words and phrases that are period-specific and some readers may not immediately understand those. For example, Henry attends a "masque." This is a party in which the attendees disguise themselves. While there are a few of these words and phrases, the majority of the story is presented in modern-day English.

The book also skips over some details. For example, the sexual encounters are written in very general terms for the most part. The same is true of some other situations, though the execution of Queen Anne is very detailed, and some readers may find those details disturbing. Will describes those, saying that Anne's eyes moved in the seconds after she was beheaded and that her lips moved as if she were trying to speak. The crowd was appalled at the display and some readers may also be.

Structure

The majority of the story is presented as a journal with an introductory prologue that consists of letters between Will Somers and Catherine Carey Knolleys. Somers was the court "fool" in the court of King Henry VIII and Catherine - according to Will - is an illegitimate child of Henry VIII. The letters set the stage for the story told by Henry VIII in his journal. The journal is written as if Henry VIII himself put the words to paper. There are occasional notes inserted by Somers, typically small details or his own opinion of what Henry wrote. These interjections are set apart with the writer's name - Will - at the beginning of each, so that there is no confusion. Henry's name appears when his own journal resumes. Henry's death occurs, according to Will, just a few days after Henry's final entry into the journal. Will himself provides the final details of the story.

The book includes a detailed genealogical chart of Henry VIII's family, ranging back several generations. The structure - at least on the surface - seems historically correct. The journal also includes a detailed account of Henry VIII's lineage.



Quotes

"Should he ever become King' - he paused, then lowered his voice to a whisper as he spoke the unspeakable words - 'the House of Tudor would not endure. Just as the House of York did not survive Edward. He was a handsome and great soldier - I grant him that - but at bottom stupid and insensitive. And Henry is the same. England could survive one Edward, but never two.'" Henry VIII's father, speaking of his son, Chapter I, Page 16

"In spite of this - now that I think of it - Harry was abnormally fastidious about this subject. He never allowed me to make any references to those functions (a crippling injunction for a jester), nor even to use the good old words 'piss' or 'fart,' or - as he used to say - 'the word that rhymes with hit.'" - Will Somers, Chapter VIII, Page 64

"I had taken command of the Privy Council and the Board of Green Cloth. I had married. When Katherine told me, a month after the Coronation, that she was with child, I laughed outright. It was all so easy, this business of being King. What had I feared?" Chapter XIV, Page 114

"Katherine was very devoted to Henry; Katherine was very competent and loyal; Katherine was very stupid in crucial ways." - Will Somers, Chapter XX, Page 154

"I had created this moment, this event, as I never had my own Coronation. Mine was the will of God; Anne's was the will of Henry VIII." Chapter XLIX, Page 361

"I am the King's good servant, but God's first." The final words of Thomas More, Chapter XLIII, Page 468

"Henry had been King for so long that no one remembered anything else, and he had led his people out into a confusing landscape from which only he promised a map for deliverance. They were terrified at the thought of his leaving them in that place." Will when Henry is injured jousting, Chapter LXX, Page 513

"I was no saint, although I had felt like on in the early dawn. Real saints remained saints all day, through the ups and downs of real weather, real people, real pain - not the wraithlike ones of a dreamy dawn. They did not fall into bed querulous and disappointed in themselves." Chapter LXXXVI, Page 624



"By the fourth morning, she was able to say, 'Good morning;' by that evening, 'And you as well, husband;' and before many more days were out she was inquiring solicitously about my state business, my Council meetings, and the forthcoming nuptial tournaments and celebrations. Soon I would have a talking horse." - Henry on Anne of Cleves, Chapter LXXXVIII, Page 634

"O, I had loved a stupid harlot. Bad enough a harlot, but a fool as well. A girl too unschooled to write a grammatical letter, and too unclever not to insult the very one from whom she was begging mercy!" Henry on Catherine, Chapter CVIII, Page 969

"It was an unusually hot and humid May, wherein to be indoors was stifling, and to pose in my heavy ceremonial robes, trimmed with fur, took the constitution of a Lowlands plough-horse. I was obliged also to keep my velvet hat on at all times, as I combined sitting for the portrait with holding interview and audiences. I never went without the hat nowadays except when at long last I drew the curtains around me at night. I was almost completely bald now, and would not shine my pate in public. But the hat was so hot; like having a weasel curled up on top of one's head." Chapter CXVIII, Page 839

"It is time-consuming, making up for the voices in the head. But they are growing less and then I will have more time to attend to the things dear to my heart. I have waited all my life to do so. At last it is almost at hand. O, to be just a man." The final words of Henry's journal, Chapter CXXX, Page 914

"There were only a few genuine mourners for the King. By that I mean anyone who felt sad, weak, out of sorts, and disinclined to participate in daily activities. I was one." Will, Epilogue, Page 931

Topics for Discussion

How does Henry come to be heir to the throne? What are his reactions to his change of position? How is Henry prepared for his reign over the coming years?

Describe Henry's relationship with his parents. How does that compare to his relationship with his own children?

List Henry's wives. List three traits of each. List how each of the marriages came to an end.

What is it that Henry comes to suspect about Anne Boleyn? What clues are there that this is true? What does Henry do to counteract Anne's actions?

What is it about Will that attracts Henry? Name two other men who are considered among Henry's confidantes and/or friends. What do these have in common? How do they differ?

What is it that Henry's father tells him about kings and friendships? What is Henry's initial reaction? What does he eventually come to believe on this subject?

Which of Henry's wives is the most loved by the people? Which is least loved? Support your claims.

Name Henry's children who survived their first days of life. How were his children similar? Different?