

2009 Study Guide for *Henry VIII* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Who was King Henry VIII? How did he come to the throne? What was he like as a young man? Who was his first wife? How did she come to be his wife? What objections might have been raised to their marriage? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.tudorhistory.org/henry8/>
<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/tudor.htm>
2. Who was Queen Katherine of Aragon? Anne Boleyn (called Anne Bullen in the play)? Cardinal Wolsey? Archbishop Cranmer? These and other websites provide information:
<http://tudorhistory.org/aragon/>
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/anne-boleyn.htm>
<http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/wolseybio.htm>
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/cranmer_thomas.shtml
3. What power did the Catholic Church have over King Henry VIII at the beginning of his reign? At the end of his reign? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/Homework/tudors/religion.htm>
4. What was the Field of the Cloth of Gold? How much did it cost (in modern terms)? Who planned and executed it? What was it intended to accomplish? What was in fact accomplished? What became of the treaty agreed to there? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/clothofgold.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field_of_the_Cloth_of_Gold
5. What was the 1534 Act of Supremacy? What did it change? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Act_of_Supremacy

6. In the time of Henry VIII, what value was placed on royal sons? On royal daughters? Why were women not considered suitable heirs? Why were women not considered capable rulers? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Succession_to_the_British_Throne

7. What unfortunate event took place during a performance of *Henry VIII* at the Globe Theatre on June 29, 1613? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.wardsbookofdays.com/29june.htm>

8. Research the stage history of *Henry VIII*. How do you account for its relative lack of popularity now as opposed to the great popularity it enjoyed in earlier centuries? Name some of the famous actors who have played Katherine and Wolsey. These and other websites provide information:
<http://shakespeare.emory.edu/playdisplay.cfm?playid=8>
[http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_VIII_\(play\)#Stage_history](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_VIII_(play)#Stage_history)

9. Research the practice of collaboration in playwriting during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. On which plays, other than *Henry VIII*, is Shakespeare thought to have collaborated, and with whom? Who is generally believed to have been Shakespeare's collaborator on *Henry VIII*? What position did he hold with Shakespeare's company, the King's Men? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.fbrt.org.uk/pages/essays/essay-shakespeare%20collaboration.html>

10. What elements comprise a masque? When were masques customarily presented? Who were the performers? These and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masque>
<http://www.the-tudors.org.uk/masque.htm>

Resources

Books:

A Life Diarmuid McCulloch by Thomas Cranmer
Cardinal Wolsey: A Life in Renaissance Europe, by Stella Fletcher
Henry VIII, The King and His Court by Alison Weir

Katherine of Aragon by Julia Hamilton
Katherine of Aragon: The Wives of Henry VIII by Jean Plaidy
Shakespeare's English Kings by Peter Saccio,
The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn by Eric Ives
The King's Cardinal: Rise and Fall of Cardinal Wolsey by Peter Gwyn
The Lives of the Kings and Queens of England by Antonia Fraser
The Six Wives of Henry VIII by Antonia Fraser
The Six Wives of Henry VIII by Alison Weir
The Tudors, by Antonia Fraser

Films:

A Man for All Seasons, Robert Bolt
The Six Wives of Henry VIII, BBC

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>
<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>
<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>
<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. From popular culture, what are your expectations of King Henry VIII? In what ways does the Henry of the play live up to your expectations? Defy your expectations?
2. Why does the play deserve to be called *Henry VIII* when the audience must divide its attention among Henry, Cardinal Wolsey and Queen Katherine? Why might the play deserve to be named after another character?
3. Read the Prologue to *Henry VIII* aloud. What promises do the playwrights make to the audience? What do they expect the audience to do in return? From the Prologue, what kind of play do you expect?
<http://www.readprint.com/chapter-8128/King-Henry-VIII-William-Shakespeare>

4. Which character in the play is most admirable? Least admirable? Why?
5. Which characters rise during the play? Which characters fall? Chart the events that lead to the rise and fall of each character. What does each do to contribute to his or her fall?
6. His rivals accuse Cardinal Wolsey of ambition. What are his ambitions? Which are realized? Which are thwarted? Which contribute to his downfall?
7. Identify the trial scenes in the play—those presented onstage and those that happen offstage. What is the role of Henry in each? What is the outcome for the individual on trial? What is the difference for you in the audience between seeing a trial for yourself and being told about it?
8. Chart the relationships of the principal characters in the play. Historically, how and why did each die? Why would Henry VIII consent to the deaths of close relations?
9. List the rivalries in the play. Who opposes whom? What is the source of their rivalry? What actions do they take against each other? In each case, who wins?
10. Compare the characters of Katherine of Aragon and Anne Bullen. In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different? What does each want for herself? What options are open to them in this male-dominated world? How is each at the mercy of Henry?
11. Given the rivalry between Katherine and Anne, an audience member might expect to have to choose between them. How do the playwrights make it possible to respect and even like both women?
12. Referring to your research, why does Henry feel his divorce from Katherine is necessary? Why does Henry call his marriage to Katherine “incestuous”? What are his feelings toward Katherine at the beginning of the play? At the end? What does he hope to achieve by divorcing her?

13. The word “divorce” occurs frequently in the play. Find each instance and define its shades of meaning at that moment. How do the assorted meanings reinforce the play’s action? Which characters are divorced and from whom or what?
14. The play is full of invective and unflattering epithets. Find a dozen or so examples. In each instance, who is doing the name calling? Who is being insulted? On what grounds (e.g., because of his parentage or his greed)?
15. What important events are narrated rather than shown? What are the dramatic advantages of this technique? The disadvantages? In a play so rich in spectacle, why might Shakespeare have chosen *not* to show these particular events?
16. Refer to your research on masques .What masques are staged in *Henry VIII*? How are they similar? How do they differ? What significant action occurs in each? What supernatural elements are present in each?
17. The play is filled with “onlooker” scenes. In each case, who is watching? Which individuals are known to be watching? Which are watching secretly? What use does each make of the knowledge acquired as an “onlooker”?
18. Chart the level of King Henry’s involvement in state affairs through the play. In what matters is he a looker-on? An interested bystander? An active participant?
19. What is the role of the common people in the events of the play? How are they abused? Who defends them? How are they entertained?
20. How is the birth of the child who will become Queen Elizabeth presented as the result of a series of providential, even supernatural, events? What aspects of her reign do the playwrights celebrate in Cranmer’s prophecy at the end of the play?
21. Although *Henry VIII* is technically a history play in that it deals with historical events, it was written 12 to 13 years after Shakespeare wrote his other history plays. In the interim he wrote comedies, “problem plays,” tragedies and romances. Find elements of each of these genres in *Henry VIII*.

22. The play was originally titled *All Is True*. Refer to your historical research on the characters in the play. In what ways is the play historically accurate? In what ways have the playwrights altered the events to tell the story they want to tell? Why might they have made these revisions?
23. Describe the historic falls of the real Duke of Buckingham, Queen Katherine, Cardinal Wolsey, Anne Boleyn, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, Thomas Cromwell, the Duke of Norfolk and Thomas More. In each case, what factors caused the fall?
24. If you are seeing *Much Ado About Nothing*, compare the “eavesdropping” scenes and their results in *Much Ado* with the “onlooker” scenes in *Henry VIII*.
25. If you are seeing *All’s Well That Ends Well* and/or *Much Ado About Nothing*, compare the instances of forgiveness in these plays to those in *Henry VIII*. Who has committed the wrong? Who has been wronged? Why does the wronged person choose to forgive?

Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s Education department created the “2009 Study Guide for *Henry VIII*.” These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

© Oregon Shakespeare Festival. No part of the “2009 Study Guide for *Henry VIII*” may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, for professional or commercial purposes without permission in writing from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s Education department.
