King Henry Viii Essay, Research Paper

King Henry VIII

Henry VIII (born 1491, ruled 1509-1547). The second son of Henry VII

and Elizabeth of York was one of England’s strongest and least popular

monarchs. He was born at Greenwich on June 28, 1491. The first English

ruler to be educated under the influence of the Renaissance, he was a

gifted scholar, linguist, composer, and musician. As a youth he was gay and

handsome, skilled in all manner of athletic games, but in later life he

became coarse and fat. When his elder brother, Arthur, died (1502), he

became heir apparent. He succeeded his father on the throne in 1509, and

soon thereafter he married Arthur’s young widow, Catherine of Aragon.

During the first 20 years of his reign he left the shaping of policies

largely in the hands of his great counselor, Cardinal Wolsey (See Wolsey,

Cardinal). By 1527 Henry had made up his mind to get rid of his wife. The

only one of Catherine’s six children who survived infancy was a sickly

girl, the Princess Mary, and it was doubtful whether a woman could succeed

to the English throne. Then too, Henry had fallen in love with a lady of

the court, Anne Boleyn.

When the pope (Clement VII) would not annul his marriage, Henry turned

against Wolsey, deprived him of his office of chancellor, and had him

arrested on a charge of treason. He then obtained a divorce through Thomas

Cranmer, whom he had made archbishop of Canterbury, and it was soon

announced that he had married Anne Boleyn.

The pope was thus defied. All ties that bound the English church to

Rome were broken. Appeals to the pope’s court were forbidden, all payments

to Rome were stopped, and the pope’s authority in England was abolished. In

1534 the Act of Supremacy declared Henry himself to be Supreme Head of the

Church of England, and anyone who denied this title was guilty of an act of

treason. Some changes were also made in the church services, the Bible was

translated into English, and printed copies were placed in the churches.

The monasteries throughout England were dissolved and their vast lands and

goods turned over to the king, who in turn granted those estates to

noblemen who would support his policies. In the northern part of the

kingdom the people rose in rebellion in behalf of the monks, but the

Pilgrimage of Grace, as it was called, was put down.

Although Henry reformed the government of the church, he refused to

allow any changes to be made in its doctrines. Before his divorce he had

opposed the teachings of Martin Luther in a book that had gained for him

from the pope the title Defender of the Faith–a title the monarch of

England still bears. After the separation from Rome he persecuted with

equal severity the Catholics who adhered to the government of Rome and the

Protestants who rejected its doctrines.

Henry was married six times. Anne Boleyn bore the king one child, who

became Elizabeth I. Henry soon tired of Anne and had her put to death. A

few days later he married a third wife, Jane Seymour. She died in a little

more than a year, after having given birth to the future Edward VI.

A marriage was then contracted with a German princess, Anne of Cleves,

whom the king had been led to believe to be very beautiful. When he saw her

he discovered that he had been tricked, and he promptly divorced this wife

and beheaded Thomas Cromwell, the minister who had arranged the marriage.

Henry’s fifth wife, Catherine Howard, was sent to the block for misconduct.

In 1543 he married his sixth wife, the tactful and pious Catherine Parr.

Catherine, who survived Henry, lived to marry her fourth husband.

During Henry’s reign the union of England and Wales was completed

(1536). Ireland was made a kingdom (1541), and Henry became king of

Ireland. His wars with Scotland and France remained indecisive in spite of

some shallow victories. Although he himself opposed the Reformation, his

creation of a national church marked the real beginning of the English

Reformation. He died on Jan. 28, 1547, and was buried in St. George’s

Chapel in Windsor Castle.