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Henry VIII

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In third-year college, I took a two-semester course called History of English-speaking Countries. In the first semester, the teacher focused on England. In the second semester, on the United States of America. I remember clearly liking English history more than US history, and I think that this was probably because I found monarchies much less ethical—and therefore much more exciting—than modern democracies. For me, the most memorable English monarch was Henry VIII.

Born in 1491, Henry VIII's life could be divided into six chapters, one chapter for each of his wives. Indeed, Henry had six wives, one after the other. The first of them was Catherine of Aragon, the youngest daughter of Isabella I of Castille and Ferdinand II of Aragon (and, therefore, the sister of Joanna the Mad). Catherine had, in fact, married Henry's older brother Arthur in 1501. But, a year later, Arthur died of an infection. His father, Henry VII, and Catherine's parents were so interested in keeping their alliance that they wanted Catherine to marry Henry. As he would be marrying his brother's wife, they needed a papal dispensation which, thanks to the pressure of the very pious Isabella, was quickly granted by Julius II.

Henry and Catherine were a happy couple for almost two decades, despite the fact that Henry was not a faithful husband. Catherine got pregnant several times, but only one daughter, Mary, grew up to be an adult. Mary would, in fact, become a future queen of England, but that was not Henry's will. He yearned for a male heir. As Catherine was approaching menopause, Henry thought that it would be best to annul his marriage to Catherine and to marry somebody else.

In 1527, Henry asked Pope Clement VII for an annulment. But that was against Catherine's wishes. Her nephew, Emperor Charles V, had conquered Rome, so even if the Pope had accepted to annul the royal marriage, Charles, for the honour of his aunt, wouldn't have let him. What solution to this problem could Henry find?

In January 1533, Henry secretly married Anne Boleyn, one of Catherine's ladies-in-waiting. Four months later, Henry had his marriage to Catherine annulled by Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury. To protect himself from the Pope (who readily excommunicated him), he had Parliament pass the Act of Supremacy, making the king of England the head of the English Church. It goes without saying that this way, aside from legalising his divorce from Catherine and his marriage to Anne, Henry also became the owner of all the wealth that the Church had amassed in England since the 6th century.

Catherine was separated from her daughter Mary, who was declared illegitimate, and was sent to live in humble conditions in isolated castles, in the hope that she would accept the divorce. She never did. As for Henry and Anne's marriage, it wasn't a happy one, either. Anne was beheaded only three years after marrying Henry, who quickly re-married. His third wife was Jane Seymour. But this is material for another Weekly Letter...

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