

In Good Company with Henry VIII

Musical Narrative for The Wandering Bard by Ricardo Alves Pereira

“Divorced, Beheaded, Died. Divorced, Beheaded, Survived”, so it is said in English lore to describe the macabre love life of the notorious King Henry VIII. This musical narrative describes the history of the composer king and his six wives, and their often deadly ends as King Henry moved onto each new conquest.

Prince Henry, and the Earthly Delights

King Henry VIII (1491-1547): If Love Now Reigned

Young and free, prince Henry of England could enjoy his royal life. He favoured the goodly sports, the outdoor feasts, and of course, the sweet affairs of love. His father ruled the kingdom and his older brother Arthur was ready to be the next king, so the little prince came into this world destined to forever be a poet and a musician.

Catherine of Aragon, Divorced

King Henry VIII: Pastime With Good Company (“The King’s Ballad”)

Yet there came a tragedy that shook the family and subsequently the entire kingdom. Arthur passed away with a deadly cold and the untrained prince became King Henry the VIII, and wed the widow of his own brother, Catherine of Aragon. For years she showed him the ways of the kings and for years they tried to create a male heir to the throne, but luck was not on their side. The heirless King Henry made himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England so that he could divorce Catherine and start searching for a younger, more fertile queen.

Anne Boleyn, Beheaded

Anonymous (attributed to King Henry VIII): Greensleeves

By now King Henry had already fallen in love with the beautiful Anne Boleyn. She, a fine woman of arts and culture, would not accept the status of a mere mistress; he had to marry her so he could have her. But the headstrong Anne quickly gained too much power over the kingdom, and to cast her aside, the king unfairly accused her of having an incestuous affair with her brother. Imprisoned in the Tower of London, Anne looked from her window bewitched by a burning red sky. She was to be beheaded the very next morning. Thinking of her past, she gently whispered the love song that Henry used to sing to her.

Jane Seymour, Died

King Henry VIII: Wherto Should I Express

The very next day the king married Jane Seymour. Pure and respectable, she quickly won the love of the people. Finally, she gave him a son, but the labour lasted for two and a half days and led to her tragic and unexpected death. Henry was shattered and filled with grief. He summoned the whole kingdom to his queen's funeral. At a time where speech failed him, he engraved above Jane's tomb these mournful words: *“Here lieth a Phoenix, by whose death another Phoenix life gave breath. It is to be lamented much. The world at once never knew two such.”*

Anne of Cleves, Divorced

King Henry VIII: O My Hart

One day the king was sent a painting of the gorgeous Anne of Cleves. The king needed more sons to guarantee his kingdom so he immediately sent for her. However, when they met, he found himself disappointed with her unrefined personality and was not at all attracted to her plain physical features. He had made a mistake and he felt the heaviness on his chest. He smoothly offered her her own palace and economical liberty, and gradually she became known as the king's sister.

Catherine Howard, Beheaded

King Henry VIII: Helas Madame

Henry then found the love in the arms of the young Catherine Howard, and took her to be his wife. The juvenile queen had the flourishing beauty of youth. The king soon learned that Catherine had secretly kept a relationship with a more appropriately aged boy (the king at this point was in his 50s while the young Catherine was only 17 years old). Burning with jealousy, the king went on a rampage and declared the immediate execution of the young queen and her lover. And so, without giving a son to the king, the naive life of Catherine was ended, with the call of the drum and the sharp edge of the headsman's axe.

Catherine Parr, Survived

King Henry VIII: Though Some Say That Youth Ruleth Me

The king's search for the heir had brought him nothing but disease and misfortune, but as he looked back on the glory days of youth he did not regret a single moment he spent on his search for love. He waited for death to come in the company of his sixth and last wife Catherine Parr, who did her best to nurse him. The room was so still that the king's last heartbeat could be heard. Then Henry felt the chilling embrace of his past wives as everything went black.

The Song of the Bard, History Re-written

Anonymous: King Henry

Now you have heard the true tale of the Henry VIII, the most infamous king of England, but he is such a well known figure that many a more fantastical story has been told of him. One of these was sung by a wandering bard, and it tells the story of the king meeting a strong and independent woman but with a happier ending.

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