

PLOT SUMMARY OF

HENRY VIII

Following the King's triumphant summit-meeting in France, organized by his ambitious minister Wolsey, there is factional unrest back home at court. Wolsey's arch-rival Buckingham suspects corruption – but Wolsey is a dangerous enemy: after bribing his "Surveyor" to give false evidence, Buckingham is arrested for treason. Praised by the King for thwarting Buckingham's "conspiracy", Wolsey's schemes are opposed by Queen Katherine, who joins Norfolk in condemning him for the savage taxation he has introduced. Of this policy the King knows nothing, and when he orders its cancellation, Wolsey privately seeks the political credit for doing so. The Surveyor testifies that Buckingham intended to murder the King.

Wolsey celebrates by throwing a riotous banquet, which is interrupted by a group of masked revellers – among them the King himself, who is smitten with his dancing-partner: Anne Boleyn by name. Love and politics now begin to intertwine. Buckingham forgives his enemies, and dies nobly; Wolsey's schemes continue. Next on his agenda is the divorce between the King and his Catholic Queen, but this is opposed by Norfolk and others, whose appeals to recognize Wolsey's intrigues Henry ignores, instead welcoming Wolsey and the papal legate Campeius, and instructing his unscrupulous secretary Gardiner to initiate formal divorce proceedings. Henry has meanwhile sent an expensive gift to Anne Boleyn...

Despite Katherine's spirited defence against Wolsey, Henry expresses doubts over the sanctity of their marriage (she is the widow of his dead brother Arthur): she is persuaded to accept the divorce to avoid scandal. Wolsey's political success is nevertheless short-lived: he has inadvertently included some incriminating documents in some papers sent to the King, and when Henry returns them, Wolsey realizes the game is up. Arrested and charged by Norfolk, he stoically accepts his fate, advising his deputy, Cromwell, faithfully to serve the King – now newly married to Anne Boleyn. The factionalism continues, though, even on Anne's Coronation Day, this time between Gardiner and Cromwell's friend (and Henry's close adviser) Cranmer.

When word of Wolsey's execution is brought to the ailing Katherine, she forgives him, honouring his Christian repentance after a symbolic dream. From Queen Katherine's death-bed we move to news of Queen Anne's child-bed – she is enduring a dangerous labour. Amidst this uncertainty, King Henry gives Cranmer a signet-ring, symbolic of his royal protection – and then news arrives that Anne has safely given birth to a daughter. When Gardiner accuses Cranmer of heresy in the next day's cabinet-meeting, and orders him to prison, Cranmer reveals the King's ring – whereupon Henry himself emerges to denounce Gardiner's faction, requesting Cranmer to preside over the ceremonial baptism of his new daughter – the future Queen Elizabeth I.

