



Who was Henry VIII?

Suzannah Lipscomb looks beyond the contemporary stereotypes that surround Britain's most infamous monarch to the truth behind Henry VIII's reign

We all think we know [Henry VIII](#) (r. 1509-47) and all there is to know about him. The Holbein portraits, the profusion of television dramas and films, the novels and histories set in his world make him ubiquitous. A whole set of clichés, truisms and fallacies accompany that famous silhouette. As a character, the king both repulses and fascinates us. His vast girth, larger than life persona, grandeur, pomp, arrogance and appetites make us strangely proud of this hyper-masculine, fabled monarch.

Yet much of what we think we know about Henry VIII is just that – fable. We think of him in stereotypes. In 2007, in her column in *The Observer*, Victoria Coren wrote with heavy sarcasm: 'If you type "wife-killing" into Google, the first listing is a reference to Henry VIII, of wife-killing notoriety. Oh, that Henry VIII.' Popular perceptions of Henry VIII, according to focus groups consulted by the market research agency BDRC for Historic Royal Palaces, are that he was a fat guy who had six, or maybe eight wives, and that he killed a lot of them. In April 2007, next to a tomb in Oxford's Christ Church cathedral, where the heads of female figurines had broken off, I heard one man comment to another, 'Henry VIII has a lot to answer for, hasn't he?'

"He has become a caricature, a cipher"

Myths and half-truths have accrued around Henry VIII through the distorted pictures given by filmmakers. Each film makes its own Henry and tells us far more about the preoccupations of each generation of filmmakers than they do about the king's character. Recent scholarship has shown that the Henrys of the 1930s, 1960s and 2000s differ wildly because they were designed to appeal to the different cultural imperatives of each era. Charles Laughton's Henry of 1933 in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* was an immature, sexually coy, sympathetic victim of his wives' machinations. Made for a culture that revered royalty, he is a comic, overly sentimental manchild, to be pitied and petted. By 1969, in *Anne of the Thousand Days*, Richard Burton could play Henry as a good-looking, suave, alpha male. He may have been arrogant and self-centred, but this was the pre-feminist, James Bond era – such a macho, lovable rascal was an unproblematic hero. In the 21st century, Henry VIII changed again. Still an alpha male, this time Ray Winstone played him as a gangster-king, 'the Godfather in tights', according to the television series' director Peter Travis. Winstone's Henry mixes sensitivity with aggression; he's easily led, has temper tantrums; and can be brutally aggressive, as in the disturbingly fictitious rape scene that writer Peter Morgan also added to the more recent film, *The Other Boleyn Girl*. As the critic Mark Lawson noted when the series came out, this Henry responds to sexual politics *after* the revolution – it is hard on Henry and soft on his women. *The Tudors*, a British television series made with more than one eye on the US market, plays into the zeitgeist in another way. Testament to a cultural obsession with male body image, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers' Henry VIII looks like footballer David Beckham, but is otherwise characterised very similarly to the infantile king of *The Private Life*. Henry VIII's screen appearances have seeped into the collective consciousness – but this does not make them any more reliable, or true, as representations of a historic figure.

Another thing obscuring our relative ignorance about Henry as an individual is that what we mistake for knowledge about the king is in fact knowledge of what was around him. This year will see a spate of biographies of Henry VIII to mark the 500th anniversary of his accession and coronation, but it is striking that hitherto it has been his wives, courtiers and children who have been constantly revisited. Even where the information was more specifically concerned with Henry, it is not rare to find a recap of his tumultuous marital history, a plethora of details about his court, or a catalogue of his activities substituting for a true understanding of his character and motivations. That Henry VIII was a warrior or jousting only sheds light on his personality when we understand the cultural significance of these activities. Henry VIII has seemed like a rather large void at the centre of a maelstrom of information about early Tudor society.

Finally, perhaps the greatest problem with the popular impression of Henry VIII's character is that it is immutable. To understand a king who reigned for 38 years through one clichéd snapshot that is not dynamic and does not



show change over time is hardly credible. Too often, we take our understanding of Henry in his last days and use it as a blueprint for the rest of his life and his reign, ascribing to him, for instance, character flaws in his early years that were not manifest until much later on. As such, he has become a caricature, a cipher.

So how can we get at a more profound understanding of this enigmatic man? There are obviously problems with putting historical figures on the psychiatrist's couch. Even ignoring the fact that the approach could, at worst, be thoroughly anachronistic, historians lack the sort of evidence that would most helpfully inform such a study. We have limited access to Henry VIII's thoughts, motivations and emotions – there are, for example, no helpful confessional diaries for the period of

Anne Boleyn's arrest and execution. The historian Eric Ives has called Henry's psychology 'the ultimate unresolvable paradox of Tudor history'. Yet, we do have many contemporary reports of the king's behaviour and speech, such as those of the Imperial ambassador, Eustace Chapuys. We also have some of Henry's letters and the theological treatises he worked on and we possess a whole panoply of state papers, royal proclamations and Acts of Parliament. We can also situate the man in his time. Together, such evidence allows us to make cautious judgements about Henry VIII's character.

My research for Hampton Court Palace in the run-up to the 500th anniversary has suggested one fruitful way of getting to know the king. This is to recognise, and seek to understand, the stark differences between the early and the later king.

Henry VIII's accession in 1509 was received with rapturous praise. William Blount, Lord Mountjoy wrote in a letter to the great humanist Desiderius Erasmus on May 27th:

When you know what a hero [the king] now shows himself, how wisely he behaves, what a lover he is of justice and goodness, what affection he bears to the learned, I will venture that you need no wings to make you fly to behold this new and auspicious star. If you could see how all the world here is rejoicing in the possession of so great a prince, how his life is all their desire, you could not contain your tears of joy. The heavens laugh, the earth exults, all things are full of milk, of honey, of nectar. Avarice is expelled from the country. Liberality scatters wealth with bounteous hand. Our King does not desire gold or gems or precious metals, but virtue, glory and immortality.

It is not difficult to understand the tendency to such hyperbole in the inaugural period of the new reign. Nevertheless, as a young man, and for at least the first 20 years of his reign (he was just weeks away from his 18th birthday when he became king), Henry was consistently and unequivocally judged to be peerless in appearance, aptitudes and accomplishments.

For a start, Henry was clearly good-looking. The Venetian ambassador Sebastian Giustinian described him as 'the handsomest potentate I ever set eyes on' and remarked on his 'round face so very beautiful, that it would become a pretty woman'. The chronicler Edward Hall rhapsodised that:

The features of his body, his goodly personage, his amiable visage, princely countenance, with the noble qualities of his royal estate, to every man known, needs no rehearsal, considering that, for lack of cunning, I cannot express the gifts of grace and of nature that God has endowed him with all.

Henry was gifted in other ways too. He demonstrated great intelligence and mental acuity. Erasmus wrote glowingly that even

'when the King was no more than a child ... he had a vivid and active mind, above measure to execute whatever tasks he undertook ... you would say that he was a universal genius.'

As a skilful linguist, Henry spoke French, Spanish and Latin. He was a talented musician and composer. To entertain a visiting embassy from France in July 1517, Henry sang and played on every musical instrument available. In his report on the event, Francesco Chieregato, the Apostolic Nuncio in England, remarked that Henry was 'a most invincible King, whose acquirements and qualities are so many and excellent that I consider him to excel all who ever wore a crown.'

Henry's achievements also extended to physical activities. Ambassadors noted how beautifully he danced, while an



observer of the 1513 campaign against France recalled the king practising archery with the archers of his guard, and how 'he cleft the mark in the middle, and surpassed them all, as he surpasses them in stature and personal graces.' He was fond of tennis, 'at which game it was the prettiest thing in the world to see him play; his fair skin glowing through a shirt of the finest texture', and was also 'a capital horseman, and a fine joustler'. Henry delighted in hunting, tiring eight or 10 horses a day before exhausting himself. Ambassador Giustinian judged Henry in 1515 as:

not only very expert in arms, and of great valour, and most excellent in his personal endowments, but ... likewise so gifted and adorned with mental accomplishments of every sort that we believe him to have few equals in the world.

This energetic attitude towards sports was an essential part of his character and his youthful ebullience was sustained throughout his 20s and 30s. Contemporary reports suggest that Henry was spirited, mirthful and exuberant, 'young, lusty and courageous ... [and] disposed to all mirth and pleasure'. He devoted his time to the pursuit of fun and revelled in entertainments, masques, banqueting and merrymaking. Court festivities were held on an astonishingly grand and lavish scale. To mark May Day in 1515, the king and his guard gathered at a wood near Greenwich Palace dressed all in green as Robin Hood and his Merry Men. Attended by 100 noblemen on horseback who were 'gorgeously arrayed', singers and musicians playing from bowers, and sweetly singing birds amassed for the occasion, Henry's court enjoyed a sumptuous open-air banquet, before processing back to Greenwich for a jousting tournament.

Such flamboyance was also reflected in the magnificent finery of his wardrobe. The records unlocked by the costume historian Maria Hayward include frequent references to brocade, ermine, satin, velvet and huge, conspicuous jewels, including a round cut diamond that was described by one observer as 'the size of the largest walnut I ever saw'. As Henry was extremely charismatic and had great stage-presence, this combination of boisterousness and opulence was strangely compelling. Perhaps most surprisingly of all, commentators almost universally described his nature as warm and benevolent. In 1519, summing up four years at the English court, Giustinian enthused about how Henry was so 'affable and gracious', a man who 'harmed no one'. Ten years later, Erasmus would call him 'a man of gentle friendliness, and gentle in debate; he acts more like a companion than a king.' Henry appears in his early years to have been friendly, affectionate and generous in gifts and attention.

What a contrast this is to reports of Henry VIII in later life. The most obvious change was in the king's appearance. Between the ages of 23 and 45 his waist and chest measurements increased gradually from 35 to 45 inches. After his 45th birthday in 1536, he quickly became gross – by 1541, his waist measured 54 inches, his chest 57. But this was the least of the changes. Instead of being known for the ease of his companionship and gentle graciousness, the older Henry was reputed to be irritable, capricious and capable of great cruelty. Comments were made about his increasing irascibility and *mal d'esprit*: 'The King was irritated and ... his ministers were at a loss to account for it.'

Others commented on his mercurial unpredictability: 'People worth credit say he is often of a different opinion in the morning than after dinner.' His volatile moods were a source of anxiety for his counsellors. He was violent with some – he would 'beknave' his erstwhile closest confidant and chief minister [Thomas Cromwell](#) twice a week, hitting 'him well about the pate'. Others he berated – after Cromwell's execution in 1540, Henry blamed his advisers for having 'upon light pretexts, by false accusations ... made him put to death the most faithful servant he ever had'. Some of this stemmed from the inflamed condition of a varicose ulcer in the king's leg, probably reopened by a jousting accident in 1536. This ulcer brought him constant and debilitating pain, together with infections, fevers and discharges that produced a putrid smell. This undoubtedly had an impact on his temper, although cannot in itself explain its violent capriciousness.

"The condemned Countess of Salisbury was so infirm and weakened by interrogation that she had to be carried to the scaffold in a chair"

By 1540, Charles de Marillac, the French ambassador, would describe Henry VIII as fearful, inconstant and 'so covetous that all the riches in the world would not satisfy him'. According to Marillac, Henry's inability 'to trust a single man' meant that 'he will not cease to dip his hand in blood' and 'every day edicts are published so sanguinary that with a thousand guards one would scarce be safe'. Such savagery was a particular feature of the reign after 1536. There are some notable exceptions from early in his reign, but Henry's tendency towards the cruel

dispatching of those who had wronged him – including those very close to him – reached its apogee in his last decade. The method of dealing with miscreants also changed. After 1536, of all the high-status individuals executed at the king's behest, only the leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace and the conspirators of the Exeter plot were tried and executed by judicial process. Everyone else of high status accused of high treason was convicted and executed on the basis of parliamentary attainder – that is, an act passed through Parliament that declared the accused guilty and condemned them to death without recourse to a common law trial. Attainders did not need to cite specific evidence or name precise crimes. Victims of this method included Thomas Cromwell, his fifth wife, young Catherine Howard, and the septuagenarian Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, whose death on charges of treason when 'so infirm and weakened by interrogation that she had to be carried to the scaffold in a chair', the historian Greg Walker has called 'the nadir of royal vindictiveness'. Despite her royal blood, she was clearly no real threat to the realm.

Henry had become a misanthropic, suspicious and cruel king, and his subjects began (discreetly, for such words were illegal) to call him a tyrant. In his early years, Henry's charisma and egoism had been directed into a little showing-off while jousting (on one occasion he presented himself before the queen and the ladies with 'a thousand jumps in the air'), but the ends to which these qualities were now deployed had changed. Now they fuelled a vastly more repressive and harsh regime.

The idea of a king whose life was a tale of two halves helps enormously in reaching a more accurate understanding of Henry VIII's character. The next challenge is to work out how, when and why this change occurred. Scholars have suggested a variety of psychological turning points. Miles F. Shore, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, plumped for 1525-27, when he hypothesised that Henry had experienced 'a crisis of generativity' caused by the reality of middle age and his inability to live up to his youthful narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence. Arthur Salisbury MacNulty suggested around 1527 and linked this to a head injury sustained by Henry in 1524. He cautiously reasoned that a cerebral injury could explain Henry's shift in behaviour and character from Jekyll to Hyde. The psychologist J.C. Flügel positioned the change around 1533, when he thought that Henry had undergone 'a marked transformation' and become 'vastly more despotic'.

To me, the evidence suggests that we should consider a slightly later date. Although the change was partly the result of a cumulative process, the year 1536 contained all the ingredients necessary to catalyse, foster and entrench this change. It was Henry VIII's *annus horribilis*. In the course of one year, the 45-year-old king suffered threats, betrayals, rebellion, disappointments, injury, grief and anxieties on a terrific scale. A near-fatal fall from his horse in January 1536 left this great athlete of the tiltyard injured and unable to joust again, when for Henry the pursuit of physical masculine activity was strongly linked to his sense of self. This injury was also the key to his later obesity.

Henry's wife, Anne Boleyn, suffered a miscarriage of a male child on the same day as his first wife's funeral. In March 1536, Parliament passed an Act that was to have enormous repercussions – the Act for the Dissolution of the Smaller Monasteries. At the same time, Henry received a book, written by Reginald Pole, his own cousin, which viciously attacked Henry's role as the Supreme Head of the Church of England. In May, Anne was 'discovered' to be an adulteress with a number of men of the king's privy chamber and the confession of a key defendant provoked her rapid arrest, trial and execution on May 19th. Almost immediately, Henry remarried to Jane Seymour (Hans Holbein's famous head and shoulders portraits of the pair date from this time and this portrait of Henry strongly influenced Holbein's full-length portrait of a year later.)

In July, soon after Henry had forced his daughter Mary to swear to her own illegitimacy, Henry's only son, the illegitimate Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond and Somerset, died aged 17, leaving the king entirely heirless. The summer of 1536 saw a number of defiant religious innovations, including the publication of the Ten Articles, the first doctrinal statement of the new Church of England. These religious changes led, in October, to a series of linked uprisings that formed the largest peacetime rebellion against an English monarch, which Henry's small armies could not have defeated if it came to battle, and the pope issued a bull which threatened to make the invasion and overthrow of Henry's throne legitimate. Henry responded to all these blows by extreme reaction – decisively reasserting his power and raging against his enemies – but he was, nevertheless, broken by the tumultuous events of

this one year. Looking at how and why Henry VIII changed will help us better to understand this mysterious and inscrutable king.

The Henry VIII Talks

History Today in conjunction with Historic Royal Palaces is hosting a series of debates in the magnificent setting of Hampton Court Palace's Great Hall to mark the 500th anniversary of Henry VIII's accession to the throne. The first in the series of six debates begins at 7pm on May 30th with *Who Was Henry VIII? His Biographers Discuss* . . .

The panel that evening includes the historians Suzannah Lipscomb, Derek Wilson, John Guy and Eric Ives, and the historical novelists Margaret George and Philippa Gregory. The discussion will be chaired by Paul Lay, editor of *History Today*. Tickets are £22 per talk and can be purchased by calling 0844 482 7795 or booked online at www.hrp.org.uk where further details about *The Henry VIII Talks* can be found.

Further Reading

For further *History Today* articles on the subject, visit [our Henry VIII page](#)

- Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Henry VIII: The Mask of Royalty* (Academy, 1987)
- Thomas S. Freeman and Susan Doran, *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives* (CUP, 2009)
- Maria Hayward, *Dress at the Court of King Henry VIII* (Maney, 2007)
- David Starkey, *Henry: Virtuous Prince* (HarperPress, 2008)
- Greg Walker, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (The British Film Guide 8, BFI, 2003)
- Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court* (Vintage, 2001)
- Derek Wilson, *In the Lion's Court: Power, Ambition and Sudden Death in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Hutchinson, 2001).