Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil the plot, consider skipping this section.

A prologue cautions that this is not a happy tale for nobles whose “mightiness meets misery.” One such noble, Buckingham, learning of Henry’s extravagant meeting with the French monarch, complains of Cardinal Wolsey’s sway over the King. He denounces Wolsey as “corrupt and treasonous” and promises to accuse the Cardinal before Henry. Norfolk cautions Buckingham against challenging Wolsey’s power, but it is too late: Buckingham is arrested and sent to the Tower of London.

As Henry prepares to receive Buckingham’s confession, he is confronted by Queen Katherine, who is unsettled by rising complaints resulting from new taxes imposed by Wolsey on the people. The King knows of no such taxation, and the Cardinal denies responsibility. When Henry orders Wolsey to cancel the tax, the Cardinal obeys, but then takes credit for the repeal in order to gain favor among the commoners. Katherine voices her suspicions regarding charges against Buckingham, but Henry still orders a trial.

At York Place, Cardinal Wolsey hosts a masked ball. Among the guests is one of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting, Anne Bullen. Henry arrives in disguise and invites Anne to dance. Even in this short exchange, it is clear that he has taken a particular liking to her.

Being found guilty of treason on the testimony of his surveyor, Buckingham speaks movingly and warns against being too liberal with one’s trust, before being taken away to his execution.

Meanwhile, rumors spread that the King has separated from Katherine; Henry believes he cannot in good conscience remain married to his brother’s widow, an issue he claims explains why Katherine has not been able to produce a male heir. Wolsey would have him marry the French king’s sister, but Henry has a different idea and gives Anne Bullen the title of Marchioness of Pembroke.

Back at court, Katherine pleads her case before the King, insisting that she has always been a faithful and loving wife to Henry. She also claims that Wolsey has laced the King’s mind with misconceptions about her and, in part, helped to orchestrate her demise. After Katherine departs, Henry praises her nobility but...
again justifies his reasons for divorcing her. Frustrated by the Pope’s lack of reply regarding his divorce, Henry recalls his former advisor Thomas Cranmer, who was exiled by Wolsey.

Plunged into gloom, Katherine (no longer Queen) is visited by Wolsey who advises her to surrender to the King’s protection. She rebukes him and accepts her fate.

In the palace, Suffolk recounts that the King has intercepted a letter from Wolsey urging the Pope to withhold approval of the divorce, and it is discovered that the King has already married the young Anne Bullen. Henry arrives, confronts Wolsey, and questions him about the Cardinal’s loyalty to the crown. Wolsey claims to be forever faithful, and Henry plays along with the lie, but as he leaves, he gives Wolsey the Cardinal’s incriminating letter. Realizing he has fallen out of the King’s favor, Wolsey is informed that he must forfeit all of his lands and possessions to the crown and leave the Kingdom. Sir Thomas More replaces Wolsey as Lord Chancellor, and Thomas Cranmer (a favorite former advisor to the King) is named the new Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anne Bullen’s extravagant coronation takes pace as Katherine lies ailing. When Katherine hears of Wolsey’s demise, she criticizes his maliciousness toward her, but she cannot help but feel some pity for the broken man. Katherine has a strange dream in which she is visited by “spirits of peace,” and she seems prepared for death. She sends a word to the King asking him to care for their daughter Mary and her servants. After imparting this information, Katherine leaves soon to seek her final resting place.

Gardiner, the Archbishop of Winchester (an appointee from Wolsey to the King), expresses his great hatred for Cromwell and Cranmer, who are in high favor with the King. He plans to bring accusations against Cranmer, painting him as disloyal to the crown. When the King arrives and hears of the accusations against Cranmer, he confronts the Cranmer and finds him faithful and devoted to God and crown. Henry warns him of the accusations against him from powerful members of the court, and then encourages him to remain steadfast, handing him his seal (on a ring) to signify his favor of Cranmer and signifying his protection as well. A lady of the court rushes in and announces that Anne has given birth to a daughter.

Presented before the King’s small counsel, Cranmer hears the specific charges against him and is informed that he is to be sent to the Tower. As guards prepare to lead him away, Cranmer displays the King’s ring and the lords realize they have overstepped their authority. Henry arrives and chastises the counsel, ordering them to make peace with Cranmer, which they all do. The King then invites Cranmer to baptize his daughter and serve as her godfather. The King and all the lords gather for Princess Elizabeth’s baptism. Cranmer prophesies that Elizabeth will be a powerful and beloved Queen but will die a virgin, without an heir to her crown.

Synopsis adapted from THE ESSENTIAL SHAKESPEARE HANDBOOK