THE BOLEYN WOMEN IN CONTEXT

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"The whore, the witch and the bitch" is how three Boleyn women have gone down in history. I'm going to share with you my discoveries about these ladies: the result of, not only research, but also of much thought and reflection, extending over many years, even decades, inspired by my husband's descent from Mary Boleyn. You will be reminded of facts that are generally known and universally accepted, but my aim is to present them in a new, different light. As an author, I first chose to present my findings in an authentic play, performed last year at the Hever Castle Theatre Festival and also in a novel, published last year, under the name of *The Sphere of Light*.

What initially caught my interest was that a close look at the Boleyn story raises more questions than answers: Royal affection bestowed and withdrawn at random? A purportedly lecherous king spending seven years in celibacy – before he breaks with Rome and makes England Protestant – all to make Anne Boleyn his wife – only to have her beheaded three years later when his lust takes another fancy – on trumped-up charges, along with five of his own associates? And then another Boleyn lady – putting her head on the line and indeed losing it – for no apparent reason?

For half a millennium, apocryphal evidence, malicious slander, and political intrigue have obscured the truth of what really happened. Simplistic explanations like megalomania, sexual obsession, ruthless ambition, or just insanity, have survived into our day. They emanate from existing sources, but how do we know that these sources can be trusted? I don't accept that

they were written with the aim of leaving a truthful account for posterity, but more likely, to serve ulterior motives, each with its own hidden agenda.

As for Anne Boleyn – she is often portrayed as an ambitious young lady, pushed by her greedy, sycophantic family into the arms of a libidinous king, in a determined effort to get her to the throne of England. The myth has subsisted for close to five hundred years, appearing time and again, in prize-winning novels and TV series, even in documentaries and biographies claiming to be historically correct. In reality, this chapter of English history was driven by forces far beyond England's shores, far beyond royal passion, and far beyond any aspirations of the Boleyns.

At this time, England was in a politically feeble position, at risk of invasion by either of the two great European powers: France and the Holy Roman Empire, which included Spain. The country was in abject need of alliance with one of them as a shield against the other. In addition, civic unrest loomed at home. The Tudor claim to the throne was by many considered spurious, acquired as it was only through the defeat of Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth.

What England needed at this juncture was a strong, confident monarch. Henry VIII was neither. For one thing, he was never meant to be king. After the unexpected death of his elder brother Arthur, groomed for the crown, King Henry VII lamented publicly that his younger son did not have the qualities required of a king. Subjecting his offspring to such a judgement is the worst thing a parent can do. Henry never got over it, he remained insecure for the rest of his life, and most of his reign was spent in actions to disprove his father. With a weak ego that needed constant boosting, he did not take kindly to being challenged. Royal

power was quickly applied to stamp out any opposition, becoming increasingly ruthless as resistance to the crown mounted.

Once he had succeeded as king of England, at the age of seventeen, Henry was keen to foster an image of himself as an ideal Renaissance prince. He excelled at courtly pursuits: hunting and jousting, dancing and singing, and surrounded himself with courtiers who were elegant, clever and accomplished – such as Thomas Boleyn and his son George. The king affectionately referred to the pleasure-seeking young courtiers as his ‘minions’. But on occasions when their behaviour got out of hand, they were temporarily expelled. Henry did not tolerate immorality at his court.

Henry looked upon King Francis I of France, roughly his contemporary, as his arch rival. Impressing him was the whole reason for the senseless extravagance of the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, an exercise costing English taxpayers a fortune! No effort was spared to dazzle the French: the temporary palace had walls up to ten feet high, with huge expanses of glass, a profusion of golden ornaments, carved and painted decorations, and wine flowing from fountains. It covered some two and a half acres. Over five thousand royal attendants had been brought over from England, and nearly three thousand horses. In addition, some two thousand eight hundred tents were added for less distinguished visitors.

Tournaments, banquets and masques were presented, but the attempts to impress the King of France with all these entertainments had little effect. The highly sophisticated and grossly licentious Francis looked down his long nose upon Henry as a naive upstart from a culturally inferior country. And a wrestling match between the two monarchs turned sour when Henry lost.

Contrary to a common view, King Henry VIII was not libidinous. Strictly brought up by his deeply religious grandmother Margaret Beaufort, he had been prepared for priesthood and a life of chastity. He remained prudish, impressed with purity. There is no evidence that he was anything but faithful to his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, for a number of years – for as long as she could support his favoured persona as a romantic, chivalrous knight.

Henry’s first acknowledged extramarital affair was with one of the queen’s maids of honour, Bessie Blount. It may have started around 1515 and ended in 1519, after she bore him a son. The king gave the boy land and a dukedom. He was proud to be seen having fathered a healthy son – he reckoned it proved that the failure in producing a male heir lay with Queen Katherine, not with him. There was even talk of this young man succeeding him, if all else failed. However, the boy died of consumption in 1536.

The king was still attractive, physically in his prime, when his eye fell on Mary Boleyn. Married to a member of the king’s inner circle, she was conveniently at hand. During the years their liaison lasted, Henry handed out generous royal favours for her and her family. And he made no secret of the fact that he was deeply attached to Mary.

In the only existing portrait of Mary Boleyn, she is referred to as Mary Bullen. A common theory is that ‘Bullen’ was the family’s original English name, and that it was amended, along with the family’s social advancement, to the more sophisticated, frenchified ‘Boleyn’. Another theory suggests the opposite, that the family was originally French, or perhaps Norman, stemming from the town of Boulogne, or Boleyne, as it was formerly called. So Boleyn may have been their original name that was later anglicised to Bullen. This theory is

supported by the fact that the name written on the portrait is from a later date than the painting itself.

Mary became conspicuously absent from late 1525. The prevalent facile reason for this is that "Henry got bored of her, fancied a change." But that does not explain why her father and brother lost their elevated positions in the royal household at the same time. They were reinstated again after a few months, but Mary was not seen at court again until more than seven years later, when Anne was queen. When Mary's husband died, she did not get her rightful window's pension. She had two young children to support, but even her father wouldn't help her out.

While married to a courtier named William Carey, Mary had given birth to a daughter named Katherine, born around 1523, and a son called Henry, born in February 1526. There is doubt about the paternity of both children, but Henry is generally assumed to have been the king's son. He was never officially recognised like Bessie Blount's son, but even so, the boy was taken from his mother at a tender age. As a ward of his aunt Anne, he was brought up by Cistercian monks at Syon Abbey and then educated by Nicholas Bourbon at Hunsdon Manor along with his first cousin and, probably, half-sister Princess Elizabeth, later Elizabeth I.

So what was the reason for Mary's apparent downfall? I have observed that the timing of it coincides with the so-called Eltham Ordinances, a cost-cutting exercise by the Lord Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey: a golden opportunity for him to rid the court of officials he considered a threat to his own authority. The high-ranking Boleyns topped the list – but their positions were secure as long as Mary was in favour. To top it all, Mary at this time was

seven months pregnant, presumably with the king's child. If she bore him a son, it would make her position even stronger. So how about creating doubt about paternity?

Further help to discredit Mary came from the French king, who claimed to have known Mary during her early days at the Paris court. He is on record as referring to Mary Boleyn "as a very great whore, the most infamous of them all". This may have been a ruse by the snide Francis I to bait Henry, who he knew measured himself almost obsessively against his French counterpart. Highly sensitive where his manhood was concerned, not to mention his royal honour, King Henry would have found it hard to stomach boasts by his arch rival about casual sex had with the lady known to have won his own heart. Even more humiliating would be to have his sweetheart openly disgraced, in the streets of London. So how could a person's reputation be publicly destroyed in 16th century England? There were no social media, no influencers, no TV or radio, no newspapers, no cartoons, not even pamphlets. But They did have ballads. Ballads to be performed wherever people gathered, to be repeated and sung all over the country.

Mary Boleyn was barely in her teens, when she and her sister Anne arrived at the French court in 1514. They came as maids of honour to Princess Mary Tudor, who was to marry King Louis XII, some thirty years older than herself, to mark a new alliance with France. The king died less than three months after the wedding, purportedly having overexerted himself in the marriage bedchamber. Mary Tudor returned to England after remarrying her husband of choice, the Duke of Suffolk.

The Boleyn girls stayed in France, Anne as a protégée of the virtuous Queen Claude in her household at Blois, while Mary was left at court in Paris, lonely, without friends or family.

She did not even speak French. If she was ordered into Francis's bed and then passed round his courtiers, as has been alleged – who was she to refuse? What records suggest is that rumours of Mary's loose behaviour at the French court reached her father in England and that he travelled to Paris in 1520 to bring her back to England, where she was married off to William Carey, an inveterate courtier.

With Mary gone from his life, how come Henry settled shortly afterwards for her sister Anne? Perhaps he saw her as a replacement for Mary, someone like her but with a stainless reputation. A gifted child, Anne had been chosen ahead of her older sister to join Margaret of Austria's court in Mechelen, before joining Queen Claude. With a French war looming, Anne was brought back to England in 1522. She arrived at the court: stylish, cultured and sophisticated and, above all, with a high price on her virtue.

A husband had been lined up for her: James Butler of Kilkenny. This marriage was intended to solve a dispute over the Boleyns' Irish heritage. However, Anne refused to be part of the scheme. She had her aims set on a good marriage with a man of her own choosing. And she remained impervious to the king's early overtures, determined not to follow in the footsteps of her by now discarded sister. Henry had to hold out the prospect of a crown to sway her, and even then, she would not come to his bed until their wedding was imminent.

Henry was prepared to wait. His prime concern was not to have a sexy new mistress, but a male heir to secure the Tudor succession! With Queen Katherine of Aragon already post-menopausal and barren, a new queen was needed.

With a talent for massaging facts to suit his aims, King Henry managed to fabricate an excuse on religious grounds to declare his marriage to Katherine of Aragon invalid. She had been married to his brother and according to the Bible, Leviticus 20-21, this made the union "blighted in the eyes of God". That, Henry concluded, was the reason why the marriage had failed to produce the necessary male heir! Having convinced himself of the righteousness in his reasoning, Henry fully expected the pope to grant an annulment.

But Pope Clement VII was wary of aggravating the powerful Emperor Charles V, who was firmly against an English royal divorce – not, as is often suggested, because Queen Katherine of Aragon was his aunt. He had never even met his aunt. His determination to keep Henry's marriage to her intact was to make sure that Henry would die without a male heir. This, he reckoned, would make England wide open to Spanish invasion and conquest. And following the brutal sacking of Rome by imperial troops in 1527, when the pope ended up the emperor's prisoner, there was no question of Pope Clement moving on an annulment for the English king. On the other hand, he had no wish to create a rift, in case England's support was needed in future. So he did pretend to help by sending his legate Cardinal Campeggio to London for a trial. After endless procrastination, it eventually took place at Blackfriars in 1529. It ended, as fully intended, inconclusively. Pope Clement's only option was to remain on the fence – indefinitely, up until his death in 1534.

What was generally referred to as "the English king's great matter" became part of an ongoing battle for supremacy on the European continent. With no hope of support for divorce coming from Spain, Henry depended heavily on France as his ally. Years passed, as Henry pursued ways and means to achieve the royal divorce: first on religious ground, then legally, after that academically, and above all, politically. His determination to marry Anne Boleyn

was not due to blind affection or untrammelled lust, but to a dogged refusal to be thwarted by his enemies. Their romance remained unconsummated.

While the king had to be held above reproach, Anne came in for much criticism. Depictions by her many enemies have tainted her character ever since. Denigrating reports by the emperor's ambassador Eustace Chapuys, referring to her only as "the concubine", were designed to humour his employer and play on jealousy and envy to turn her own people against her. It was easy enough to portray her as a temptress, a threat to the sanctity of marriage, on which most English women depended.

Throughout, the alliance with France remained absolutely essential. In 1532, Henry took Anne to Calais, still an English possession, where Francis was royally entertained to ensure his support did not wane. But then, to his dismay, Henry learnt that Francis had entered an alliance with Pope Clement, arranging for his son Prince Henri (later Henri II of France) to marry Catherine de Medici – who was the pope's niece! It is at this point in time that Henry decides to break with Rome – a highly relevant co-incidence, though I have never seen it quoted anywhere. But it explains why and when Henry gave up on political manoeuvring and simply awarded himself the right to divorce Katherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn.

Relations with Emperor Charles V deteriorated further after Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn, but imperial diplomacy was maintained by blame being apportioned to Anne and her family. His envoy in England, Eustace Chapuys, expended much ink blackening the name of Anne Boleyn and her family, both at home and abroad.

In May 1533, the pregnant Anne was crown Queen of England in a ceremony as extravagant as the crowning of a king. But in September, the birth of Princess Elizabeth was a huge setback for the king, who had been counting on a son. Much as he expected a son to follow, all that Anne achieved was miscarriages.

With Cardinal Wolsey dead and gone, Henry's first minister, the ruthless Thomas Cromwell, was now the running of the country. He regarded Anne as an undesirable presence. Politically, he took the view that, in the face of new French hostilities, a fresh alliance with Emperor Charles V was imperative to protect the country. But that could not be attained with Anne as Queen of England. She had to go – had to be eliminated, drastically and definitely, by execution.

There was only one problem. If Anne was removed from the throne, there would be pressure from the emperor to reinstate Katherine, who was lingering, banished at Kimbolton Castle. This would leave England, once more, without any chance of a legitimate male heir. However, in early January 1536, Katherine died, instantly removing Anne's only safeguard.

There was no denying the fact that Anne had failed in her main duty: to provide a male heir. When Henry was thrown from his horse and gravely injured during a tournament and Anne shortly afterwards gave birth to a stillborn son, it brought home the necessity of exchanging her for another, fecund wife. Meek and amenable Jane Seymour beckoned – but again, this was not a simple case of a lewd King Henry "being tired of one woman and fancying another". It was about the survival of England as nation.

But how to get rid of Anne and the rest of the Boleyn family?

What is not generally noted is that Cromwell was close to Lord Morley, who was the father of Jane Boleyn, now Lady Rochford, wife of Anne's brother George. Lady Rochford was a member of Anne's inner circle! It is highly likely that she was approached through her father and instructed to find evidence to discredit Anne. We know that she was called to a private meeting with Cromwell shortly before Anne's trial.

Evidence suggests that Jane co-operated willingly with the prosecution. The trial against George heard from evidence given by Jane that Anne had confided in her about the king's impotence. George, calling this "maliciously contrived lies", is said to have lost his composure hearing of Jane's active involvement. Further evidence from Jane seems to have contributed to the execution of, not only her her sister-in-law Anne, but also her own husband and four of the king's close associates. Historians dispute Jane's part in this, on the basis that she could not possibly have had a motive for acting against her own family. But what if she had a good reason?

Let's go back to another question: What drove George Boleyn to marry Jane Parker when he was barely out of his teens? She was the daughter of a minor, impoverished aristocrat, with no status worth mentioning, no inheritance beckoning. The Boleyn men were normally ambitious in their choice of wife, marrying well above their station: George's paternal grandmother was the daughter and heiress of the wealthy Earl of Ormond and his mother was a daughter of England's premier duke, The Duke of Norfolk!

And why did King Henry give the insignificant Jane Parker a generous dowry out of the royal coffers, as well as a mansion, Grimston Manor in Norfolk, as a wedding present to the young couple?

No records are known of Jane and George Boleyn ever appearing together as a married couple. George is on record expressing himself deprecatingly about the marriage shortly after the wedding. One official event that saw them both present: the christening of Jane's niece has been mooted as proof that their marriage was valid and working. However, George had his own reason to be present – the father of the child being christened was actually his own first cousin.

More poignantly, why is there no record of a younger George Boleyn, ever being born or being present anywhere as a child? George and Jane are considered to have been childless, again on the basis that no records exist to suggest otherwise. One George Boleyn, born not long after George's and Jane's wedding and recorded later in life as being Dean of Lichfield, has traditionally been dismissed by historians as "some distant relation". But I am convinced that George and Jane had a son. There is a record of Jane's father, the impecunious Lord Morley, making a payment to Thomas Boleyn in 1526 amounting to £33 6s 8d. This huge payment most likely came from the crown as payment for the upkeep of the child. Lord Morley passed it on to the Boleyns, for taking over the child when it was rejected by Jane.

This George Boleyn the Younger, who became Dean of Lichfield, was favoured by Queen Elizabeth I, the way she favoured Mary's offspring. There is evidence of strong personal links between all the Boleyn first cousins. The Dean of Lichfield is named as executor in the will of Mary's son Lord Hunsdon, and the executor of his own will is none other than Queen

Elizabeth herself. Historians have claimed that the queen's good will towards the Dean was due his pestering her, using a very tenuous link with the Boleyns to pressurise her. I don't believe Queen Elizabeth would have allowed an impostor to put undue pressure on her. She supported the Dean because she knew him as one of her three first cousins.

A lecturer in archaeology at Galway University, hearing about my interest in the Boleyn family, alerted me to a 17th century tombstone at Clonony Castle in Co. Offaly, Ireland. I went to see it, still in the grounds of the castle, and though the inscription is by now faded, it had been deciphered in time and read as follows:

"HERE UNDER LEYS ELISABETH AND MARY BULLYN DAUGHTERS OF THOMAS BULLYN SON OF GEORGE BULLYN THE SON OF GEORGE BULLYN VISCOUNT ROCHFORD SON OF SIR THOMAS BULLYN ERLE OF ORMOND AND WILLSHEERE"

This shows beyond doubt that George had a son after all.

There are extant records of these two Boleyn sisters living at Clonony Castle in the seventeenth century. They are said to have had a pact that, when one of them died, the other one would throw herself to her death from the top of the keep, which is what happened. There is also a record of a third Boleyn sister named Anne, who married a local farmer. Assuming that the tombstone is authentic, it is interesting to note that George Boleyn's grandson named his daughters after his female forebears – but excluded his grandmother Jane.

And this brings us to my personal theory that provides the answers to numerous questions. Author George Cavendish, best known for his biography of Cardinal Wolsey, accused Anne's

brother George of “forcing widows and deflowering virgins”. This may well have been true of his younger days, when the royal ‘minions’ took such liberties that they were banished from court until they agreed to mend their ways. My theory is that Jane was raped by George and probably also by the other courtiers whom she falsely named as guilty of adultery with Anne. The rape may have been on George’s conscience when, on the scaffold, he confessed to having sinned.

If young Jane Parker was indeed one of the virgins forcibly deflowered by George and, as it looks, impregnated, her father Lord Morley would no doubt have filed a complaint with His Majesty. Having served in the household of Henry’s pious grandmother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, Morley would have known Henry as a child and been well aware of the strict moral code that had been impressed upon him. The most likely response to an accusation of rape by one of his courtiers would have been for the king to order the guilty party, in this case George Boleyn, to marry his pregnant victim; this would serve to punish the perpetrator and, at the same time, safeguard the Parker’s family honour.

The one who ended up the loser was Jane: chained for life to a husband who resented her; member of a family who held her in scant regard; and mother of a child she appears to have rejected.

After her husband’s death, Jane Boleyn, Lady Rochford, was rewarded for her help in Anne’s downfall with a position as an elevated Lady of the Privy Chamber to a succession of queens: first Jane Seymour, then Anne of Cleves. Lady Rochford was the one to spread the news that the marriage to Anne of Cleves remained unconsummated – a fact that the king quickly put down to, not his own impotence, but to the ugliness of his new wife.

Lady Rochford is in fact a signatory to King Henry's divorce settlement with Anne of Cleves, jointly with another court lady, surprisingly my namesake – Ann Jocelyn. I have identified her on the Jocelyn family tree taking up a twelve-feet long wall in my home. Dr Damien Duffy has identified her as a lady-in-waiting close to Anne Boleyn as queen. This early link between the Boleyns and the Jocelyn family came as a surprise to us. All we knew was that they had intermarried in the late 18th century.

Jane's final appointment was as chief lady of the bedchamber to King Henry's fifth wife, the teenage Katheryn Howard, actually a first cousin of the Boleyn sisters. And this appointment became the end of her. Revealed as having enabled the young queen to take in secret lovers, Jane was beheaded along with Katheryn. So what could have driven her to do something so dangerous – and foolish? The usual answer is that she was mad – and perhaps she was.

It was plain to everyone at court that Henry was besotted with his young fifth wife. As a narcissist, he depended on others to confirm his worth, and little Katheryn Howard, well groomed for pleasing older men, played along with him. Henry's manhood had suffered badly with Anne of Cleves who, according to Holbein's portrait, was not at all ugly – just repelled by her obese, smelly and revolting husband Henry. Unable to hide her disgust, she had rendered him impotent. Now, young Katheryn Howard made him feel a man again.

In spite of her royal favours, Lady Rochford may well have been possessed by obsessive hatred against the king, who had ruined her life by condemning her to a life of misery, whilst the perpetrators of her crime were let off scot free. And here was an irresistible opportunity to destroy him, even at the cost of her own head.

Both Boleyn parents, Thomas and Elizabeth, broken socially and probably emotionally, died within years of the execution of Anne and George. Elizabeth was so disenchanted with the family she had married into, she chose to be buried in the Howard family chapel at Lambeth. Thomas Boleyn has his grave in St. Peter’s church at Hever with his name given as Thomas Bullen.

The one survivor of the family was Mary Boleyn, who had been banished from court for a second time after marrying a commoner, William Stafford, in 1534. She is quoted as saying that she would “rather beg her bread with him than be the greatest queen in Christendom”.

Thomas Boleyn’s mother, Lady Margaret Butler, was the daughter of the prosperous Earl of Ormond. Unusually for a woman at the time, she had inherited one half of her father’s considerable wealth. And when she died in 1539, shortly after her son Thomas, she left her fortune to Mary, who thus ended up having it all, riches as well as love. Sadly not for long, as she died, possibly of plague, in 1543. Her wealth was divided between her husband William Stafford and her son Lord Hunsdon, enabling them both to establish themselves as Members of Parliament.

During the violent reign of the Catholic Bloody Mary, Lord Hunsdon managed to stay safe in England, in spite of being Protestant. Mary Boleyn’s husband William Stafford took refuge in Geneva with his and Mary’s two children. He died there in 1556. What happened to the children is not known. They may have died of the disease that took their father’s life, or else they stayed on the continent, living in obscurity.

Mary Boleyn’s two Carey children both had very large families, and so her line survives to this day. Her descendants, through the late Queen Mother, include King Charles. Princess Diana also descended from Mary, so princes William and Harry have the Boleyn genes from both their parents. While Anne’s only daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, was childless, it is not impossible that rother George’s line survives to this day, as his great-granddaughter Anne is said to have married a farmer in Co. Offaly, Ireland.