

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN, SEPTEMBER 11TH, 2024.

THE BOLEYNs AND THE FRENCH COURT.

Most people are familiar with the story of Anne Boleyn, perpetuated in more or less scholarly biographies, in novels, plays, films and TV documentaries. They all follow a similar template, of King Henry VIII falling in love with Anne, a commoner put forward by her ambitious family and encouraged to resist the king's advances until he offers to make her his queen. Already married to Katharine of Aragon and unable to obtain a divorce from the pope, Henry is so overcome by desire, he breaks with Rome and makes England Protestant, to get Anne into his bed. But after a mere three years, he has her executed, ostensibly because another lady has taken his fancy.

This is a myth, created at the time by powerful individuals in pursuit of a political agenda. Popular and simplistic, it has survived for five hundred years. But in reality, this is not what happened.

To get an insight into the prevailing dynamics, we have to look beyond England's shores, to Europe, where over a short period, three young men, while still teenagers, came into power over most of Europe.: first Henry VIII, who became King of England in 1509, aged seventeen. Then in 1515, nineteen-year-old Francis I, succeeded his uncle Louis XII of France, He was shortly followed by sixteen-year-old Charles, who found himself King of Spain and the Low Countries in 1516. And to top it all, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian died in 1519, leaving the empire to none other than his grandson Charles V of Spain, who then became ruler of an enormous European territory, with vast resources at his disposal.

In the decades that followed, the European battle for a balance of power between these three youngsters directed most of their actions, including the English king's great matter, as his divorce case came to be called. And the intricacies of the situation that evolved came to determine the life and death of four members of the Boleyn family.

So who were the Boleyns? Where did they come from? Well - they were originally a French, or Norman, family. The earliest record of a Boleyn in

England is from 1252, a Simon de Boleyne, settled in Norfolk. Boleyne is of course old French for Boulogne. The English insistence on calling Boulogne “Bouloin” is not due to their habit of anglicising French names, pronouncing Beaulieu as “Bewley” and Beauchamp as “Beecham”. Boulogne is the opposite: renamed from the original to sound more French.

Some English sources refer to the Boleyn surname as Bullen - B U L L E N. This has led historians to surmise that they were really an insignificant English family, who changed their name to the more refined, frenchified “Boleyn” to reflect their social advancement. More likely, it was the other way round, their name was Boleyn, but after their spectacular fall from grace, their name was anglicised to the more prosaic Bullen, for one thing easier to pronounce for the common Englishman.

As a new monarch, Henry VIII entertained notions of himself as a great warrior king, and he dreamt of conquering England’s of age-old enemy France. So he spent much time and money waging war on this country from 1513 onwards, without gaining much ground. Francis I was more worried by Spain’s expansion into an ever stronger and richer country through its links with South America, and he could see the advantage of maintaining friendly relations with Henry VIII.

Peace was negotiated and a treaty agreed in 1514, and this is where we come across Thomas Boleyn, father of Anne, Mary and George. He had attracted attention at the French court thanks to his excellent diplomatic skill. It was said that “there was no negotiator to equal him”. As a mark of the new friendship between the two countries, it was decided that the ageing King Louis XII would marry Henry VIII’s eighteen-year-old sister, Mary Tudor. A grand wedding was organised in Paris, and Thomas Boleyn was again very much involved in the arrangements.

He made sure that his two daughters, Mary and Anne, would accompany the royal princess as maids of honour on her journey to the French capital. The girls were still young, probably around twelve and thirteen, and it would be an ideal opportunity for them to learn court etiquette of the highest order. They were both pretty, gracious, mannerly and well educated. Anne, thanks to her proficiency in French, had already spent a year in Mechelen, at the court of Arch Duchess Margaret of Austria, who became very fond of the little English girl. And Mary Tudor took an instant liking to them both. When her French

husband ordered, shortly after the wedding, that her English ladies-in-waiting should be returned home, she persuaded him to let the Boleyn girls stay on.

Then, only three months after the wedding, King Louis died, it was said, due to over-exertion in the royal bedchamber, though others, more prosaically, blamed gout. Mary, as soon as was permitted, married the man of her choice, the handsome Duke of Suffolk, and returned with him to England.

Thomas Boleyn was keen to see his daughters remain in France. The French court had no equal when it came to culture and sophistication. For style, taste and refinement, France was the world leader, and with a view to the girls' future marriages, he reckoned no place could be better for spending their formative years. He managed to secure a place for Anne in the household of Queen Claude, who was not much older than herself. Claude, the eldest daughter of Louis XII, had become Queen of France only a few months earlier, in a strictly dynastic marriage. Since Louis had no surviving son, only a marriage between Claude and Francis of Valois, the heir presumptive, would keep France in the family and also maintain French control over Brittany, which Claude had inherited from her mother.

Claude was kind and sweet-natured, hunchbacked by scoliosis, and living by a strict moral code, usually away from the French court, where Francis made the most of royal life. While cultured and refined, appreciative of Renaissance values in art and architecture, the French king was also highly promiscuous. He and his courtiers enjoyed a licentious lifestyle, surrounded by numerous pleasure-loving ladies.

While Anne Boleyn spent her days with Queen Claude, embroidering and reading edifying books at Blois or Chambord, her sister ended up at the Paris court, where she was soon discovered by King Francis and ordered, first into the royal bed, and then into those of his courtiers. He is quoted as referring to her as “*una grandissima ribalda, infame sopra tutte*”: a great whore, most infamous of all”. This about a young girl, left to fend for herself at a foreign court, in a country where, unlike her sister, she didn't even speak the language.

Thomas Boleyn was in Paris as English ambassador to France, and when he heard about his daughter's reputation, he immediately brought her back to England. A marriage was arranged with a courtier, William Carey, who was close to King Henry as a squire of the body. Before long, Mary was Henry's mistress. Their liaison lasted for several years, during which she bore two

children, at least one of whom, the future Lord Hunsdon, is presumed to be the king's.

While Mary took an active part in life at the Paris court, Anne was firmly settled at Queen Claude's court. The two of them became close friends, Anne acting as Claude's English interpreter when guests from England appeared. Life at Blois or Chambord was decorous but not dull; it attracted leading writers and intellectuals, and Claude encouraged courtly pursuits like dancing, singing, playing the lute and reciting poetry. Anne Boleyn's intelligence, impeccable French, excellent taste and courtly talents, secured a prominent position, and she was much admired.

The important alliance between France and England had to be maintained, and a summit to increase the bond between the two monarchs was planned for June 1520, in the pale of Calais, which was still owned by England. The mad extravaganza termed the Field of the Cloth of Gold, extended over a huge tract of land, was realised with the help of Thomas Boleyn at vast expenditure to the English taxpayer. Over five thousand English nobles, along with countless servants and horses, were shipped over the Channel to attend the event. Among the ladies chosen to entertain the French king were Anne and Mary Boleyn, and also Jane Boleyn, wife of their brother George. For Henry, this was an opportunity to impress his French counterpart, against whom he measured himself almost obsessively. But as far as Francis was concerned, he considered himself greatly superior to the English king, whom he saw as a naive upstart from a lesser country, without even a proper royal line behind him. And a wrestling match arranged between the two sovereigns turned sour when Francis won.

The relationship between England and France had been precarious for centuries, and in 1521, the peace came to an end, when Charles V declared war on France and Henry sided with him. His wife, Queen Katherine of Aragon, who was in fact Charles' aunt, was a determined advocate of this new alliance. As war with France beckoned, Anne Boleyn was called back to England, much to Claude's chagrin. Francis, too, expressed his disapproval in a letter to Henry. Skirmishes with France continued on and off for a couple of years, until 1525, when France and England entered a new alliance against the emperor.

At this time, the English king's marital situation attracted some attention, not only in his own country. Katharine of Aragon had not produced a live male heir and was now beyond child bearing. This suited Charles V, because he had his eye firmly set on England. The English Channel was the only seafaring route to connect Spain with his territory in the Low Countries, and therefore of immense strategic importance to him. As long as Henry stayed married to his aunt Katharine of Aragon, he would die without leaving a male heir. And that would leave England vulnerable to Spanish invasion and conquest. That was the reason why Charles V insisted that the royal divorce should not be allowed. After the sacking of Rome by imperial troops in 1527, Pope Clement VII was left a prisoner of the emperor, and that ruled out any chance of him going against the orders of his captor.

In other words: family ties between Charles and Katharine of Aragon had little to do with it. The pope's resistance to the royal divorce had no religious connotation, and Henry's long-drawn-out struggle for a new wife was not driven by lust for Anne Boleyn. The king's great matter was an issue of huge international concern and wholly determined by political interests.

One who viewed it all with trepidation was the King of France. Anxious to limit the imperial influence in Europe, he saw it as essential that the English succession was secured, so that the country could continue as an independent buffer zone between his own country and Spain, which had been further reinforced by the merger with the Holy Roman Empire. For this reason, Francis came out as a firm supporter of Henry's divorce from Katharine of Aragon.

George Boleyn, Anne's and Mary's brother, followed his father as English ambassador to France in 1529. There were those who considered him far too young for such an important post. He was only in his mid-twenties. But fostered by his father, George was very personable; he spoke excellent French and had the ideal qualities required by a leading diplomat. Considering the youth of King Francis himself, George may have been a good choice, for the two of them soon developed a warm friendship. Perhaps the dissolute lifestyle of the French court appealed to George, who had been forced into a dysfunctional marriage and was without his wife in Paris.

George had no difficulty in getting Francis to act on behalf of the English king. With support, not to say pressure, from their king, a number of French universities ruled in favour of Henry's divorce. Having failed to persuade the

pope to allow for the divorce, Henry reckoned that academic support was the best route forward. And over the years, he won over more and more institutions, mainly in France, but also elsewhere in Europe. The pope did his best to delay the process by pretending to be amenable, whilst having no intention of going against the emperor.

It was obvious to Henry that support from France was essential if he was to remarry against the pope's express prohibition to do so. To copper fasten the French alliance, a summit meeting in Calais was arranged for the autumn of 1532. For this occasion, Anne Boleyn was created a marchioness, a remarkable social elevation to ensure due support of French court ladies. However, Queen Claude had died, aged only twenty-four, and Francis, again presumably for dynastic reasons, had remarried Isabella, the Emperor's sister, a niece of Katharine of Aragon. She made it perfectly clear that no way was she going to pay court to "the concubine", as Charles's envoy had termed Anne, although the relationship between Henry and Anne remained unconsummated. In consequence, all the French court ladies refused the invitation to attend. Even Marguerite of Navarre, Francis's sister and Anne's old friend from Blois, pleaded illness as an excuse to get out of it.

Anne's humiliation was further increased when Francis offered to bring one lady, Madame de Vendome, his own paramour. Anne put her foot down. She was definitely not going to receive a royal mistress.

With all this to-do going on, it was decided that the two monarchs would meet privately on French territory, some distance from Calais, with no ladies present. Then the following day, Francis would be regally received at the Exchequer in Calais. Anne made sure there was no lack of postprandial entertainment for him. She and Francis danced together, and afterwards the two of them retired for an intimate tete-à-tete. As to what was agreed, opinions differ. Somehow Francis must have seemed amenable about intervening with the pope on their behalf, because it was later, when they were delayed in Calais by bad weather, that Anne and Henry, after seven years of courtship, finally shared a bed. They must both have been confident then that their marriage was imminent, as they could not risk a possible heir being anything but legitimate.

A secret church wedding did indeed take place in January 1533, with a view to having their marriage ratified by the pope, once he was served by the fait accompli. However, Francis's presumed support of their case, necessary for this

to be attained, was not forthcoming. Henry discovered to his dismay that Francis, behind his back, had made overtures to the pope, even agreeing to a marriage between one of his sons to the pope's niece, Catherine de Medici. The reason for this new friendship was, as always, political and economic interests. Francis was concerned about Northern Italy, another buffer zone, this one between France and the Holy Roman Empire.

For Henry, Francis' alliance with the pope constituted betrayal of the highest order: his one ally, whose friendship he had so carefully cultivated, and on whose support he depended, had sided with his worst enemy!

It is interesting to note the timing when Henry goes all out and breaks with Rome. It wasn't overwhelming desire, not untrammelled lust for Anne Boleyn that caused him to take this decisive step that was to determine the course of English history for centuries to follow. It happened when news reached him of an impending marriage between a French prince and Catherine de Medici.

George Boleyn was dispatched to Paris to inform King Francis that Henry's wedding had taken place. Francis is reported as being not pleased to hear it. George pleaded with him to interact with the pope on England's behalf, to have the marriage ratified, with a view to international acceptance of future heirs to the throne. Whatever Francis agreed or did not agree to do, no result came of it, and Anglo-French relations suffered in consequence.

Henry and Anne did not give up trying to get Francis back on their side. Following the birth of Princess Elizabeth, they were due to travel to a new summit meeting in France in 1534, but it was cancelled at short notice due to Anne being pregnant. Again, George was sent off to the French court to offer apologies for the changed plans. Anne's pregnancy ended in a miscarriage, but relations with France deteriorated to a point that saw no plans for a new meeting.

In 1535, George Boleyn travelled to France once more, this time to negotiate a marriage between a French prince and the English Princess Elizabeth, Anne Boleyn's baby daughter. This was to prevent a previously agreed match between the French dauphin and Princess Mary, daughter of Katherine of Aragon and Henry VIII. A French royal marriage would serve to validate Mary, who had been declared illegitimate by the king her father, on the grounds that his marriage to her mother had been made officially invalid.

All Francis was prepared to offer England was a marriage between his third son and Princess Elizabeth, and that only against a massive dowry, which could only be interpreted as a royal insult. More French treachery, as far as Henry was concerned.

For some time, the emperor had had his hands full controlling the Turkish Ottoman Empire on the Eastern fringes of his own territory, and in 1535, he was dismayed to learn that Francis had suddenly entered an alliance with the Turks. Again, the balance of power in Europe was at stake, and an imperial alliance with England was suddenly on the cards. Thomas Cromwell, who was now Henry's chief minister, was firmly in favour of a new Spanish alliance – certainly a better alternative than risking a Spanish invasion. But he was well aware that no such alliance could take place with Anne Boleyn as Queen of England.

For in order to maintain diplomatic relations, the emperor had laid all blame for Henry's dissolution of the marriage to his aunt at the door of the Boleyn family. His envoy in London, Eustace Chapuys, had spent much ink blackening the names, not only of Anne but of all the Boleyn family, with a view to vilifying them, both internationally and at home. He is mainly responsible for having created the myth still widely entertained. By contrast, the French sources, by French ambassadors such as Jean de Bellay, paint a much more favourable picture of Anne Boleyn, known as she was to be totally French-orientated.

As far as Henry was concerned, Anne had failed in her main task: to produce male heir. He agreed with Cromwell that to save England's future, she had to go, drastically and definitely. For good measure, Cromwell saw to it that the trumped-up charges preferred against her also included her brother. And so they were both executed, along with four others falsely accused, in May 1536.

With that, the Boleyn presence at the French court came to an end. Thomas and his wife Elizabeth, socially and emotionally devastated by the wrongful death of their two children, died shortly after this event. Mary, disowned by her family and blissfully married to a commoner, survived a little longer, but her links to France were never revived.